

STUDENT PERCEPTION ABOUT DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Percepción estudiantil sobre la discriminación y el racismo en la educación superior

*PATRICIA CECILIA BRAVO-MANCERO**

Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, Riobamba, Ecuador
patybravom@hotmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4671-8611>

*TANIA MARÍA GUFFANTE-NARANJO***

Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, Riobamba, Ecuador
tguffante@unach.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4903-8694>

*MARTHA YOLANDA FALCONÍ-URIARTE****

Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo, Riobamba, Ecuador
yfalconi@unach.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9027-6902>

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* PhD in Education. Professor at the Faculty of Education. Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo.

** PhD in Educational management. Professor at the Engineering Faculty. Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo.

*** Master in Local Development. Post-graduate studies analyst. Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo.

Abstract

This article examines the perceptions of discrimination and racism among college students. The guiding question is: What perceptions do students have about discrimination and racism in the university context? Racism is regarded as an ideology that engenders inequality. The ideology is based on biological particularities to establish differentiation. Consequently, discrimination refers to situations of exclusion, segregation, and restriction based on stereotypes that limit the rights of a group of individuals. The study combines quantitative analysis with descriptive analysis and cross-sectional design. 263 students from four Faculties of the National University of Chimborazo participated. In order to collect the necessary information, a survey titled "Perception Questionnaire on Racism and Discrimination in Higher Education" was drafted. The results indicate that 29.9% of students have experienced racism and discrimination, 89.7% have never engaged in such behavior, and 57.7% have witnessed its various manifestations in social interactions. The primary causes of discrimination include race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and/or disability. Exclusion manifests itself in explicit and covert ways, with psychological, verbal, and physical violence being the most egregious forms of its exercise. Finally, there is a denial and normalization of the phenomenon that is rooted in institutional dynamics.

Keywords

Racism, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, exclusion, inequality.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la percepción estudiantil sobre discriminación y racismo en la educación superior. La pregunta que orienta el estudio es: ¿Qué percepciones tienen los estudiantes sobre la discriminación y el racismo en el contexto universitario? El racismo es considerado una ideología que naturaliza la desigualdad y que toma como base las particularidades biológicas para establecer situaciones de diferenciación social. Así, la discriminación se refiere a circunstancias de exclusión, segregación, restricción debido a estereotipos que limitan los derechos de las personas. El estudio fue de carácter cuantitativo, descriptivo y transversal. Participaron 263 estudiantes provenientes de cuatro facultades de la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo. Los datos de la investigación fueron recogidos mediante el Cuestionario de Percepción sobre racismo y discriminación en la Educación Superior. Se evidencia que el 29,9% de estudiantes manifiesta haber experimentado racismo y discriminación; el 89,7% afirma que nunca lo han ejercido y el 57,7% aduce que ha observado diversas manifestaciones en las interacciones. Los principales focos de la discriminación son: etnia, género, identidad sexual, situación socioeconómica y/o discapacidad. Las manifestaciones de la exclusión son explícitas e implícitas y las formas más evidentes de ejercerlos son a través de violencia psicológica, verbal y física. Finalmente, existe una negación y naturalización del fenómeno que se encuentra enraizado en la dinámica institucional.

Palabras clave

Racismo, discriminación, estereotipos, prejuicios, exclusión, desigualdad.

Introduction

Racism and discrimination are complex phenomena that have been addressed through various studies which show that, despite their nature, they are present in social dynamics as they have the capacity to reinvent and express themselves in multiple ways. Higher Education institutions are not different because manifestations of segregation, exclusion and se-



paration in different university spaces are lived and observed. Although there are several proposals to minimize their impact on coexistence, concrete actions that have been implemented in the university environment are sporadic, mainly because the existence of the problem is denied.

For understanding the problem at the university, the article entitled: “Student Perception of Discrimination and Racism in Higher Education”, whose objective is to describe the perception of students about racism and discrimination in the institution of higher education is presented. Hence, the idea advocated in the study is that racism and discrimination have been naturalized in the university environment and show different manifestations, actors and actions.

Due to the impact and validity of the problem on the well-being and coexistence of the actors, it is necessary to investigate the problem so that people be aware of the existence and deeply reflect about its manifestations and forms of expression, in order to work on guidelines and intervention mechanisms that ensure a climate of respect and healthy coexistence for all members of the university.

Regarding the methodology, it corresponds to a quantitative, descriptive, explanatory and transversal research. The sample was composed of 263 students from four academic units: Political and Administrative Sciences, Education Sciences, Health Sciences and Engineering, during the academic period 2021-1S.

The information was collected through the Perception of Racism and Discrimination Questionnaire, which was composed of 19 items distributed as follows: seven items that study lived racism and discrimination; six discrimination or racism exercised; five discrimination and racism observed in the center and one item that questioned the actions carried out by the University to address this problem. The instrument presented five response options. Prior to its implementation, the study participants accepted the letter of informed consent.

The results indicate that some students have experienced situations of racism and discrimination, a minority group accepts that it has exercised it and others accept that they have observed certain actions of exclusion. There are two main manifestations of their presence in coexistence: explicit and implicit. At the same time, explicit violence has two forms of expression: verbal and physical violence, while implicit violence is manifested through psychological violence. The most significant of the findings is the naturalization, denial and invisibility of the problem and, therefore, the scarce intervention for its eradication.

The paper presents the following structure: state of the art in which the problem and its implications are described; theoretical framework in which the main conceptualizations are presented; methodology that refers to the steps and procedures; results obtained in the field work; and, finally, discussion and conclusions about the findings.

State-of-the-art

Racism and discrimination are concrete actions that are manifested in the daily life of relations in Ecuadorian society and that assume different forms of expression to reveal segregation and exclusion towards others, those considered “different” or “minorities”. Following Wieviorka (2009), racism is the personalization of discrimination based on innate characteristics, which, according to this way of understanding differences, establish intellectual, physical and moral particularities. From these peculiarities, practices of denial, inferiorization and exclusion are justified. Saltzman (1992) argues that in order to understand what happens in higher education, it is necessary to recognize the validity of patriarchy and the capitalist system, which configure certain mechanisms of hegemony and power in institutions, in which separation and exclusion are concretized based on characteristics of the subjects, such as sex, gender identity, social class, disability and ethnic condition.

Regarding ethnicity, Walsh (2007) points out that the history of the so-called conquest of America is an example of domination, classification and stigmatization, since through what Anibal Quijano (2000) called “coloniality of power”, race was used as the reason to classify the population in castes, spaces, functions, and on the basis of which work was divided and work roles were assigned. These actions created the prospect of superiority of one race over another and, according to Zapata Olivella (1998), led to the exploitation of Indians and blacks in the Americas. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that, despite not being institutionalized, racism is far from disappearing, since new ways of expressing it have been introduced and therefore it remains in force in the idiosyncrasy.

Higher education institutions reproduce different mechanisms of discrimination within their academic spaces that are crossed by negative mental constructions regarding individual differences. These perceptions result in acts of violence that affect institutional coexistence. In this sense, Troyano (2010) points out that the University must offer mechanisms to eradicate and break down the mental barriers that separate, and generate



spaces for dialogue and the construction of new forms of relationship, sustained in the respect and valuation of others.

Conceptions on racism and discrimination

For Knauth (2000), racism is a word that justifies differences in consideration of physical characteristics. In this respect, Taguieff (2001) affirms that racism is articulated to the theory of inequality of human races, whose main postulate is based on biological determinism, which translates into discriminatory practices linked to preconceived ideas and attitudes of segregation. For his part, Wieviorka (2009) states that racism establishes categories of people based on phenotypic traits, the same that become in intellectual and moral characteristics. This is a conception that is based on the biological characteristics of the subjects.

Hence, racism is an ideology that naturalizes inequality based on the biological characteristics of the subjects, to justify situations of social differentiation. Over time it has been used to defend supremacy over the other, which places him in a state of disadvantage. Denial of diversity is meant to set in motion, homogeneous models of citizenship, uniform standards of being and acting. Thus, racism becomes one of the main causes of inequality, which seeks to make invisible and/or deny the other, as a result of a classification system in which the biological foundation defines it, and at the same time generates conditions of political, economic, cultural, environmental, legal order that preserve inequality, marginalization and exclusion.

Likewise, Mato (2021) states that racism classifies human beings into upper and lower castes. The author argues that this trend founded European colonialism, and likewise, has served as a basis for the structuring of racist policies and practices that persist in social coexistence. Therefore, higher education institutions are key systems for breaking the reproduction of racism and violence in society (Mato, 2021).

On the other hand, the Inter-American Convention against All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance (OAS, 2019), in article 1, states that discrimination represents any act of exclusion that has the purpose of restricting the right to equality and the exercise of fundamental human rights of an individual or group. Hence, discrimination is seen as an act that affects the human rights of those affected by unequal treatment and limits personal and social development.

Every act of separation involves a set of prejudices and stereotypes, which show the exclusion of certain people or groups, arguing that differences



are the cause of rejection. In this sense, Puertas (2004) argues that the stereotype is translated into a set of ideas that serve to value positively or negatively the particularities of a group or person, while prejudice, in a concrete action on individuals or groups, based on stereotypes that have been built on direct or indirect experiences.

For Jiménez *et al.* (2019), differences are not the cause of inequalities, rather they are the product of asymmetrical social and cultural relations and have been institutionalized by groups that hold power and maintain relations of racism and discrimination towards people with socially valued characteristics in a negative way.

In Ecuador, as in other contexts, the characteristics that determine segregation are combined in the aspects mentioned before. As in other countries of the region, the Ecuadorian population is diverse in terms of its ethnic structure, due to the process of Spanish colonization and subsequent mixes. However, the footprint of the Spanish conquest remains in force (SENESCYT, 2015, p. 21). These facts alone explain the social origin of inequality and the mechanisms of domination and segregation.

It should be noted that the Political Constitution of Ecuador (2008, p. 11), in article 11, paragraph 2, of its normative text, states that all citizens have the same rights, duties and opportunities and are therefore equal. The provision states that there should be no personal distinction for any differentiation that impairs the fulfillment of citizens' rights. However, measures and actions to enforce compliance remain weak because manifestations of discrimination exceed the possibilities for intervention. Thus, it is necessary to know the complexity of the factors that cause it, as well as the weak interventions at the governmental and institutional level.

In accordance with the above and in response to the provisions of national legislation, the Higher Education Council CES (2013) proposed a social and educational project based on interculturality and mainstreaming of the principles of equality and equity. This proposal incorporated in the different moments of curricular concretion the aforementioned constructs, with which it was intended, according to Larrea (2014), the execution of a curricular model based on the inter and transdisciplinary organization of knowledge and learning, that offers solution to problematic situations of reality and that at the same time allows a contextualized and flexible organization of the theoretical-methodological and procedural contents addressed in the different professional fields. This curricular model left behind, for a period of time, the disciplinary treatment of the contents, addressing them through the integrative projects of knowledge in a holistic way and with a better understanding of reality.



About Stereotypes and Prejudices

For Barrera *et al.* (2021) a close relationship between stereotype, prejudice and discrimination is evidenced because its production is basically based on diversity as the basis of differentiation and, therefore, separation. So, what is different is the subject of ideas, imaginaries, subjective constructions of reality, so a stereotype always seeks a social reference group to make comparisons. Although they share some common elements, the three terms are expressed differently.

Huici (1999) argues that stereotypes involve cognitive and rationalized elements that are expressed in beliefs about the traits that define the group. They are standards that simplify reality to establish parameters of action or similar ways of thinking. On this basis, Del Olmo (2005) argues that stereotypes emphasize how subjects relate. Stereotypes therefore consist of simple ideas that divide and pigeonhole individuals or groups. According to stereotypes, people belonging to certain groups act in accordance with what is expected of them, given their situation and origin.

In this study, stereotypes are considered as ideas shared by members of a group and that justify ways of acting against people or groups belonging to certain categories such as sex, ethnicity, gender identity or origin. Thus, they include preset mental representations that can be positive or negative. In addition, they are determined by the social context and justify actions of violence, exclusion or indifference. They are linked to prejudices as they are the basis for their manifestation.

As for prejudices, Huici (1999) asserts that they are more linked to practical manifestations of pre-established ideas about the group, i.e., they are the result of a negative perception. For Del Olmo (2005), the two categories analyzed are related because the two are culturally learned and can be both negative and neutral or sometimes even positive. The author argues that once they are acquired, it is difficult to change them.

Gordon Allport (1979, p.7) was also concerned with studying the subject of prejudice. What was important in his contribution was not the concept of prejudices but the explanation that prejudices are not part of the personality, as was considered until now, but were ideas sustained about something or someone and therefore learned in the interaction with others.

For Del Olmo (2005), we consider mental images that facilitate the structuring of predictive categories of the behaviors of individuals based on pre-established ideas about them.

In this way, prejudices represent concrete acts of violence in the presence of minority groups, considering them a threat to preserve the

rules of social coexistence established and in force in society. Their development requires, first, erroneous and generalized beliefs, i.e., stereotypes and, second, unfavorable attitudes. It should be noted that prejudices have different forms of expression, including visible and invisible ones. The former result in direct, hostile and close attitudes, while the latter admit expression forms of indifference and distancing.

Forms of racism and discrimination in higher education institutions

According to Collins (2012), structural or systemic racism is rooted in social and institutional dynamics. In this sense, ethnicity is not the only indicator of their existence. On the contrary, there are other elements that structure it today such as the sociocultural context, the increase in economic inequalities, globalization, the migratory phenomenon, among others. Hence, more subtle forms of expression are evident in the institutions, but equally dangerous, since this phenomenon has been transformed according to contexts and situations and has even been naturalized, so that it is part of the relations between actors. According to Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), there are multiple ways to express racism, as many as the myriad interactions in which it occurs.

As in all other organizations and institutions, racism and discrimination are problems present in the higher education institutions or in universities and polytechnic schools. In many of them, they have been naturalized and are strengthened to the extent that these institutions do not at least have statistical data to recognize the diversity existing within the institutions. This situation undoubtedly affects the determination of policies and actions aimed at ensuring the fulfillment of universal rights such as access to education. Mato (2020), confirms the above when saying:

In Latin America, educational policies, systems and institutions do not guarantee all population groups equal access to education, let alone higher education. While the existing rules do not explicitly exclude any of them, several population groups are excluded in practice, due to various types of factors. Among others, the location of educational centers,... ends up excluding... indigenous peoples and people of African descent from their educational rights, and... from access to higher education...; the curricula of professional careers do not usually contain contents or educational paths oriented by the objective of promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship between the ethnic groups of the respective countries... it is evident... because these principles are not part of



them,... moreover, these curricula do not include knowledge, ways of producing knowledge, languages and other elements specific to the respective cultures (pp. 238-239).

This is observed in the limitations that young people have to access university careers, because the system far from reducing the gaps, has deepened the levels of exclusion, with emphasis on applicants from rural and marginal urban sectors, who do not even apply for quotas to enter universities.

Likewise, Larrea (2014) points out that the study programs at the university level lack training fields that articulate knowledge, research or methods, with ancestral knowledge, denying the possibility that this cultural richness is part of the curriculum.

This shows that the training of future professionals is framed in a single curriculum, without admitting the possibility of building a diverse university, where new knowledge emerges and is built from the approach and valuation of ancestral knowledge, scientific, formal and non-formal, cohabiting in the territories, violating one of the rights recognized in the United Nations Declaration, Article 4 (UN, 1992, Rodríguez, 2015) that establishes the need for states to promote knowledge and recognition of all cultures that inhabit a geographical space and provide the opportunity for all citizens to have the same opportunities to access an education that they value and respect their ways of learning.

The consequences of the implementation of a single educational model, which ignores or denies the existing epistemologies and world-views, language and history of minority groups of the population as indigenous and Afro-descendants, affecting their possibilities of access, permanence and graduation, interferes in the quality of training offered by the Universities and, therefore, in the achievement of academic objectives. For Mato (2019) it limits the possibility of the exchange of knowledge and experiences that, on the one hand, strengthen learning, and on the other, improve the understanding of social problems.

Problems such as those mentioned require the urgent response of the Universities to achieve the construction and implementation of inclusive and intercultural educational models, which are mainly concerned with the individual, the subject and their subjectivity, to promote support and accompaniment programs for students with diverse educational needs and abilities as a result of situations of exclusion or marginalization that they have faced during their lives.

On expressions of racism and discrimination in the classroom

Higher education institutions are spaces in which relationships are woven, denoting the cultural and social representations entrenched in university actors: authorities, teachers, students and administrative staff (Aguayo and Piña, 2016). In academic coexistence, professors play a key role since they are those who are in the most direct contact with students both in classrooms as in other training scenarios, being these the spaces where those relations of inequality and exclusion present in society occur.

Racism and other forms of discrimination are expressed primarily in two forms: visibly or explicitly and invisibly or implicitly. In general, visible racism is defined by being open, most often violent. It manifests as physical assault, insults, or psychological intimidation. At the same time, it promotes prejudices and stereotypes; it regularly seeks to demonstrate physical, cultural and social aspects of individuals or groups. In addition, it involves not only negative perceptions of others, but also behaviors of rejection, violence and aggressiveness (Castellanos, 2001, p. 608). The aggressors use these resources to exercise power, advantage and superiority over others.

These explicit manifestations are also evident in university classrooms. The low expectations of professors are reflected in the academic performance or development of students. These expectations are based on ethnicity, abilities, social status, gender identity, age, among others. Aguayo and Piña (2016) consider that they are latent when the knowledge, actions or ways of thinking of the students are validated or invalidated. In addition, they are visualized in the classification of the group in “the most” or “the least able”; in the number of opportunities to improve academic performance; the possibility of speaking, dissenting or expressing their opinions; in the types of tasks that are assigned; in the complexity of team work; in the overlap of the dominant culture through the use of Spanish without considering the students’ language of origin.

It is also evident in the relationships among the students themselves. At the same time, it can be seen in the structuring of working groups and in the assignment of team members. From this perspective, the criterion of “affinity” to develop collaborative activities is considered. Behind these elections, however, is the segregation of certain actors by the ideological assumptions underlying minority cultures.

Regarding the hidden forms of racism and through which discrimination and racism have been naturalized in the relationships between teachers-students, it is evident in situations such as: the homogenization

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of groups where the diversity present in educational spaces is not recognized or at least not considered; their history, culture, worldview, language or knowledge, which leads to an education based on the approach of scientific-Eurocentrist disciplinary contents and the implementation of unique methodologies that do not know the ways of learning, thinking and understanding the reality of students

Coelho and Silva (2020) consider that one of the causes of racism is, first, the denial of its existence. For this reason, the problem is minimized to a situation of racial discrimination, ignoring other forms or attributing its origin to a difficulty in interpersonal relations, i.e., simplifying the problem. In this respect, Vergara (2022) ensures that prejudices are not only present in the personal reading of reality, but have close relationship with the context to which the subjects belong. Hence, racism is not an individual personal interpretation of difference, but a social, historical and cultural construction of diversity.

This shows that racism in the university context is current and is reinvented daily because it has less explicit forms of manifestation. For example, social pressure does not let students to express to avoid rejection by their peers or teachers. Therefore, they do and say what is expected of them in exchange for being socially accepted.

It should be noted that racist attitudes and discrimination in the classroom are standardized by actors and, in most cases, undetectable. At the same time, they are dynamic, transforming and reinventing themselves along with social changes. Some of these subtle expressions can be seen in treating a professor or classmate differently, criticizing their physical appearance, how they dress or speak, and taking them away from jobs or conversations. These attitudes stigmatize, separate or classify, in an underhand way and as a result cause psychological difficulties for those affected as well as a climate of tension in the university environment.

According to Agüero (2022), it is expected that a culture of collaboration and work will be generated within the university to improve the environment in which they develop. The author also points out that mutual understandings create bridges for a more assertive communication, based on respect as the primary value of interactions between institutional actors.

Materials and methods

This section describes the process for conducting this research. First, it presents the population that participated in the study; second, it explains

the way in which the data were collected; and finally, it exposes the process for treating the data.

Participants

A sample of 265 students from four faculties of the National University of Chimborazo was recruited. The participants were selected considering that the elements represent the academic units of the institution and were distributed as follows: 97 (36.60%) of Engineering, 76 (28.68%) of Political and Administrative Sciences, 76 (19.62%) of Education, Human and Technology Sciences and 40 (15.09%) of Health. Two participants who did not consent to participate in the study were excluded from the results. The mean age of the participants (n=265) was 21.9 years. Regarding gender, 110 (41.5%) identified with male gender, 154 as female (58.11%) and 1 (0.38%) LGBTI. The ethnic distribution of the population was conformed as follows: 238 (89.81%) students recognized themselves as mestizos, 23 (8.68%) as indigenous, two (0.75) as Afro-descendants and two claimed to be white. We also established the presence of four (1.51%) participants who had motor, hearing and myopia disability.

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Assessment

The evaluation was carried out by applying the Perception Questionnaire on Racism and Discrimination in Higher Education, which was written to collect information on the situation of the phenomenon investigated in the university context. The instrument was composed of 19 aspects, distributed as follows: seven items addressed discrimination and lived racism; six discrimination or racism exercised; five discrimination and racism observed in the University and an item that dealt with the actions carried out by the University to address this problem. Depending on the aspect consulted, the response options varied. In addition, prior to the application of the instrument, two content validations were performed, which contributed to improve the drafting of the items.

Procedure

The participants answered the online questionnaire, for which they were sent an access link. All participants included in the study responded to the letter of informed consent, accepting or rejecting their participation in the research. First, demographic information was collected. Several questions were then asked concerning discrimination and racism expe-

rienced, exercised and/or observed. With the obtained data, the results were processed, analyzed and interpreted.

Analysis and results

The results are distributed by sections, and relate to the basic questions that were constructed for the study. First, demographic data are presented, then the results on racism and discrimination exercised, lived and finally on those perceived by students.

Demographic data

265 students from four faculties of the National University of Chimbo-
razo participated, of which 97 (36.6%) belong to the Faculty of Enginee-
ring, 76 (28.6%) to Political and Administrative Sciences, 52 (19.6%) and
40 (15%) to Health Sciences. In terms of gender identity, 110 (45.5%)
students identified as male, 154 (58.1%) as female and one (0.38%) as
LGBTI. In relation to ethnicity, 238 (89.8%) are recognized as mestizos;
23 (8.68%) as indigenous; two (0.75%) said they are montubous; two
(0.75%) said they are white. When asked whether they have any condition
of deficiency, 261 (98.4%) participants said that they did not, while four
(1.51%) answered affirmatively. Out of the four students, two have motor
impairment, one visual and one hearing impairment.

Discrimination and racism experienced

It was observed that 29.9% of participants said they experienced various
forms of racism and discrimination. These actions involved various mem-
bers of the institutional community, such as authorities (1.64%), profes-
sors (16.39%), administrative staff (4.92%) and classmates (44.26%) and
students from other semesters (19.67%).

Students place the main causes of discrimination and racism in
variables such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic situation,
gender identity or having a condition of disability. Regarding the situa-
tions in which these actions have been developed, 32.6% said that during
classes, 18.8% stated that during tasks/group work, 18.8% said that in in-
stitutional events and 15.8% indicated that in programs planned by class-
mates. In relation to the manifestations of discrimination and violence,
the population under investigation considers that in the university com-
munity, it occurs in the following ways: psychological aggression (38.4%);

low expectations of professors regarding their academic performance (30.7%); threats, contempt, indifference and/or attitudes of rejection (26.9%); verbal aggression, through insults, threats, appellations (26.9%) and finally, physical aggression (1.92%) with the use of blows. As for the frequency these situations are experienced, 13.4% state that sometimes, while 3.1% consider that always. In addition, students who were violent respond that they reported on the situations they experienced to professors (43.7%), authorities (31%) and student representatives (18.7%).

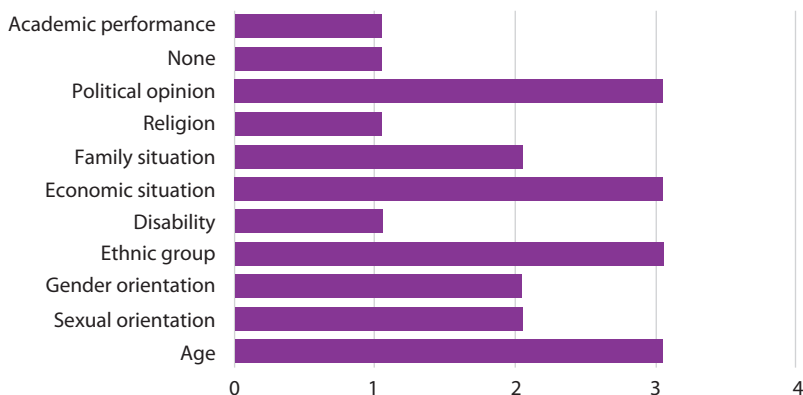
Discrimination and racism

In the second phase of data collection, 97 of the initial 265 participants responded because the questionnaire presented the option of moving to the next section, in case they had not engaged in violence or were unwilling to respond. Thus, 89.7% of participants said they have never done so, 8.2% stated that rarely, while 3.2% stated that many times. Regarding those who have been the object of their attitudes, as shown in Figure 1, 39% indicated that they do it to their classmates, 20.9% to professors, 20% to students of other semesters, 8.5% to the authorities and 6.6% to the administrative staff of the institution. As for the causes of discrimination, 36.5% of participants stated that they had ethnic conditions, 15.3% because of their socio-economic situation, 13.7% because of their sexual orientation, 13.7% because of their gender identity, 10% because of their religious beliefs, while 7.4% said they had some kind of disability.

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Figure 1
Causes of discrimination and racism



Source: Higher Education Discrimination and Racism Questionnaire
Own elaboration 2022.

Observed discrimination and racism

In the third stage of data collection, 57.7% of respondents observed manifestations of discrimination and racism, 28.9% never did, 9.35% said that many times and 4.1% said that always. According to the data obtained, the students state that 39% of the situations of discrimination and racism occurred by classmates, 20.9% by professors, 20% by students of other semesters and 8.5% by the authorities of their academic units. When asked about the causes of attitudes, 20.6% of the respondents consider that because of ethnicity, 15.6% because of socio-economic situations, 14% because of sexual orientation, another similar percentage because of gender identity, 10.2% because of religious beliefs, 7.9% because of differences in political positions, 7.4% because they have some type of disability, 6.3% because of economic situations, 3.7% because of age and 14.3% because they do not respond. Regarding the situations in which they noticed the manifestations of violence, 31% observed during the development of classes, 23.8% during institutional events, 17.4% during the performance of group work and/or tasks, 14.6% during social events planned by peers, 11.9% when performing administrative procedures. The types of discrimination observed vary, with psychological assaults (37.7%) being the most frequent, followed by low professor expectations (28.5%), verbal assaults (27.5%), and physical assaults (4%). The majority of students asserted that they never reported the violence they observed (69.5%), while a smaller group reported that they ever did (30.4%). When they reported situations, they did so first to their student representatives (44.9%), second to professors (21.7%) and DEBEYU (21.7%) and finally to the authorities (11.5%). They also report that the authorities sometimes acted (47.4%) to counter these situations. Among the measures taken by the authorities to counter discrimination and racism, it is mentioned that they implemented strategies to strengthen relationships among students (22.5%), calls for attention (19.3%), conversations about the problem (18%), talks by DEBEYU (14.8%), do not give importance (12.9%) to the application of sanctions (14.8%) and did not make decisions (3.8%).

Discussion

The results show that most students do not perceive the existence of racism and discrimination in the university context (70%). Coelho and Silva (2020) argue that the denial of the problem, contrary to evidencing its absence, leads to think that the problem has been naturalized or made invisible. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze the results of those who

recognize their presence and identify the way in which it is presented, the contexts, its manifestations, representations and actors, since in some cases they experienced it directly, in others they were those who exercised discrimination actions on different actors and in other circumstances, acted as passive observers of segregation acts.

The relationships among the members of the university context are constructed from sociocultural and historical assumptions that educational actors have about diversity. For Robles and Ortiz (2017) these interactions can lead to the assessment of the other, but also to its exclusion. The denial of the other, considering it different, with its own characteristics and needs, leads to disagreements, disputes, divergences and discrepancies.

Teacher-student and peer interactions can become difficult, depending on the positive and negative mental constructions existing in the face of the cultural complexity of educational actors. These mental constructions determine the exercise of power, authority, discrimination and/or control. As stated by Foucault (1979), power is dynamic, it is not possessed, it is exercised in different ways. Therefore, it produces a permanent struggle of forces. The subjects are not neutral actors in this coexistence either, since they express and assume different roles such as responding, resisting or neutralizing the actions of professors and their own peers.

Discrimination brings with it negative ideas and subordination of some to the supremacy of others, marking limits, distances, and in contrast to the rights of equality that allow the possibility of establishing a climate of respect in the classroom.

As for the forms of discrimination and racism, it is evident that the deployment of visible and invisible devices to demonstrate power is common. This power is observed in some cases by professors who establish vertical relationships with students, invalidating or expressing indifference towards their living conditions, beliefs, practices or ways of learning. This hegemony is expressed through the formation of the working groups according to their apparent capacity, the evaluation system that does not consider the individualities of the students, the opportunities and spaces for action, the predominant language used in the teaching-learning process, the way they refer to them, the low or high expectations on their academic performance, depending on the group of belonging, among others.

For Puertas (2004), mental constructions about others, on the one hand deny their existence, and on the other, are expressed through discriminatory behaviors, which focus on homogenizing those who are recognized as different or excluding them from academic groups. This demonstrates the existence of power relations also among peers, detected



in the development of curricular and extracurricular activities executed in different university scenarios, granting as the main cause of these behaviors the rejection of students from ethnic groups.

The problem described is present in the social and academic interactions that occur in the university educational context. However, they are not reported (56%), which reveals the low importance and at the same time the naturalization of the phenomenon. Due to the low level of complaints, interventions to reduce their impact are scarce. This shows the urgency of implementing strategies to reduce the practices of racism and discrimination in the IES. In this context, it is necessary to strengthen the implementation of an intercultural curriculum model oriented to the integral and inclusive development of all members of the university community, which allows improving personal and interpersonal competences for their subsequent performance in the social sphere. Finally, a deep reflection is required to deconstruct the myth of equality and strengthen the approach of diversity from an understanding of the encounter.

Because of these situations, education is based on the idea of homogeneity that builds stereotypes about what should be an ideal student and qualifying those who do not fit the established parameters. Thus, prejudices are established towards students who do not fit into the “normalized” model. Therefore, their academic capacity is judged, they are supposed to fail school because of their ethnic, social, economic, gender or other different way of being and acting.

Del Olmo (2005) argues that quality higher education should be responsible for promoting respect and attention to diversity; it should value individual skills and use them as an enrichment source of the academic experience of actors; it should build bridges to overcome tensions in relationships and difficulties in the educational process. Finally, it should be noted that the role of the professor in the classroom is decisive because positive expectations about their students are the gateway to guarantee an environment in which the rights and freedoms of students are respected.

Conclusions

It is concluded that racism and discrimination are part of an ideology woven as a result of socioeconomic-historical and cultural relations based on inequality. In this way, they have been naturalized in the university environment and despite the existence of a set of regulations, there are few efforts made to face the problem.

The analysis allowed us to determine that the expressions and forms of racism and discrimination are present in the institution of higher education, being significant the number of students who declare to be victims of these behaviors generated by various institutional actors and during the development of academic activities such as extracurricular; in the professor-student relationship, between academic peers or in the relationship with other university actors, which implies that these manifestations are not isolated, on the contrary they could be part of practices that have been naturalized and are present in the institutional dynamics. They impact on “others”, i.e., those who are considered minorities or different from the majority, and express themselves through physical or psychological attacks that undoubtedly affect all areas of life.

On the other hand, it was established that a group of students admitted having done discriminatory and racial actions against classmates, professors, students of other semesters, authorities and administrative staff of the institution (10%). The focus is on those considered different, whether because of their ethnic origin, socioeconomic situation, sexual orientation, gender, generational differences, religious beliefs, political position or because they have a disability. This shows that manifestations of racism and discrimination are not related to the role they play within the institution, but rather it constitutes a problem that comes from the family-social environment that is reproduced in university settings.

In addition, it was found that most students acknowledge having observed discriminatory and racist behaviors by classmates, professors, students from other semesters, as well as by academic authorities (58%). These psychological, verbal and physical aggressions occur in classes, during institutional events, in the performance of group activities, in social events, when they performed administrative procedures, which is extremely worrying, because in addition to the disadvantages faced by sectors of the population by a certain condition, they are in an environment of insecurity and instability that will undoubtedly affect not only their academic performance, but their personal growth.

Finally, most students do not report the observed acts of violence and when they do so they turn to different actors such as student representatives, professors, student welfare department and finally the authorities; however, it is concluded that the measures adopted do not have a significant impact, as they are limited to specific actions that do not solve this problem.



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