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THE GRAMMAR OF EQUALITY IN BRAZILIAN EVERYDAY LIFE

Meanings, Tensions, and Practices in Contemporary Pluralism

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Abstract

This article examines the tensions between abstract equality and the recognition of diversity in pluralist democracies by analyzing how the very idea of equality is mobilized in Brazilian public life. Drawing on an analysis of eighteen focus groups discussing racial quotas, the article treats utterances as situated discursive practices. In doing so, it contributes to debates about the conditions of possibility of "deep equality" in plural contexts, as proposed by Lori Beaman.

Keywords: *equality*; *pluralism*; *metapragmatics*; *indexicality*; *race*

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Resumo

O artigo examina as tensões entre igualdade abstrata e reconhecimento da diversidade nas democracias pluralistas, analisando como a própria ideia de igualdade é mobilizada na vida pública brasileira. Com base na análise de 18 grupos focais sobre cotas raciais, o texto trata os enunciados como práticas discursivas situadas, contribuindo para o debate sobre as condições da "igualdade profunda" em contextos plurais, tal como proposto por Lori Beaman.

Palavras-chave: *igualdade*; *pluralismo*; *metapragmática*; *indexicalidade*; *raça*

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Introduction

In this article, we adopt a semiotic-metapragmatic approach to equality, treating it not as an abstract normative principle but as a product of regimes of enunciation that shape legal, moral, and interactional categories. In this sense, equality does not exist prior to social life; rather, it is continuously created and reshaped through discursive practices that govern coexistence amid difference. To speak of a semiotic approach here is to analyze how specific terms, categories, and modes of speaking come to organize accepted meanings of equality, making some interpretations socially obvious while rendering others difficult or inappropriate.

As an empirical-conceptual point of departure, we reconstruct the shift from the image of a syncretic Brazilian nation to that of a plural one. We show that this shift did not entail abandoning abstract equality but rather a reordering of its semantic field, in which formal equality coexists with equity at the relational level of social life. These two forms of equality differ not only as ideas but also as distinct ways of linking language to moral positions and expectations of conduct – what we call indexical logics in this article. We then argue that the friction between these two logics configures the discursive space of equality in Brazil.

Building on this analytical reconstruction, we place Lori Beaman's (2017) theoretical proposal of "deep equality" within the international debate on equality and outline the analytical shifts needed to reframe it in light of Brazil's multiracial experience.

From the Syncretic to the Pluralist Framework

Until recently, the Brazilian nation's imagination was structured as a system of rules and expectations that encoded cultural, religious, and racial diversity through syncretism and racial mixture (*mestiçagem*). This system of signs, organized around the national ideology of racial mixing and conventionally referred to as "racial democracy," framed the idea of the nation by presenting the assimilation of racial differences into an abstract mixed-race citizenship as a model of social cohesion (Montero, 2012, p. 88-9). It also established the conditions under which racial difference could be legitimately articulated in public.

As Antônio Sérgio Guimarães's (2001) genealogy shows, however, racial democracy did not always function solely as an ideology of concealment imposed by dominant groups.

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In the 1940s and 1950s, Black intellectuals and activists also appropriated the term as a political ideal: the demand that the formally proclaimed absence of racial barriers be converted into effective integration and equality. Even in the 1980s, sectors of the Black movement still claimed to struggle for an "authentic racial democracy." It was through the experience of the military dictatorship – when racial democracy became a state dogma mobilized to deny discrimination and suppress the public formulation of racial conflict – that the Black movement progressively recategorized the term as a myth and a racist ideology.

According to the implicit rules governing this mode of speaking, racial differences were displaced into the cultural and symbolic domains and reinterpreted as peaceful coexistence and cultural synthesis. Rather than treating racial democracy solely as a false description of Brazilian racial relations, it can be analyzed as a historically changing device of semiotic regulation: an arrangement of implicit rules that organized the boundaries of what could be said as appropriate and true about racial differences. Its persuasive power did not lie in the empirical truth of racial harmony but in its moral authority – that is, in the social force of a sign that linked the idea of a "mestizo Brazil" to a plausible and legitimate way of imagining the nation (Gal, 2015; Silverstein, 2003). Within this regime of meaning, equality was realized through the recurrent association of the idea of mixture with values such as cordiality, coexistence, and the erasure of conflict. These linkages rendered national unity natural and self-evident by recasting social, religious, and racial differences as equivalent variations of a single whole.

This arrangement began to destabilize in the final quarter of the twentieth century, when new forms of legal, political, and media debate introduced alternative ways of talking about equality rooted in differentiated rights, recognition of specific groups, denunciation of discrimination, and the explicit naming of racism. These changes created a new framework for citizenship that emphasized pluralism, thereby redefining what was considered legitimate in the public sphere. As Nilma Lino Gomes (2017) argues, the Black movement did not merely denounce preexisting inequalities; it also produced knowledge, generating new categories through which Brazilian society could perceive and interpret racial relations. The growing public circulation of a vocabulary centered on racism, Black identity, reparation, and affirmative action must, therefore, be understood as part of a broader transformation in the conditions under which racial difference could be perceived and articulated.

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Brazilian scholarship has extensively demonstrated that the ideal of racial democracy not only misrepresents racial relations but also makes their constitutive hierarchies difficult to name. More recently, the concept of structural racism provides a systematic account of this process by showing that racism is embedded in the ordinary functioning of social relations and institutions rather than confined to individual attitudes or exceptional acts (Almeida, 2019). Taking this diagnosis as a point of departure, this article shifts the scale of analysis to examine the semiotic conditions under which these hierarchies can be recognized, named, or denied in ordinary interactions. More specifically, it investigates how people position themselves in relation to the available categories for speaking about these asymmetries and how formulations such as "we are all equal," "color does not matter," and "talking about race produces racism" acquire the moral force to exclude race from the field of legitimate accounts of their production.

The 1988 Constitution marks a peak in this reordering: by including in its preamble the ideal of a "fraternal, pluralist, and prejudice-free" society, the constitutional text establishes new moral standards – such as the "dignity of the human person" and "political" and "fraternal" pluralism – that came to guide the criteria for recognizing difference as a legitimate value in public life and law (Montero, 2006; Agha, 2007). From this regulatory framework onward, diversity ceased to be seen merely as a sociological fact and began to serve as a sign of a legal requirement of Brazilian democracy – that is, a principle legitimizing the rule of law itself.

In the decades that followed, as the ideology of pluralism circulated through legal, media, and political discourses, it reordered the semantic field of equality. It gradually displaced syncretism as a model of coexistence by shifting the focus from the fusion of traditions toward "respect for diversity," and by replacing racial democracy as an ideal of social harmony with a discourse centered on the recognition of differences and the redress of past injustices. The contemporary rejection of the term "syncretism" by Afro-religious leaders and Black activists, as well as the critique of the expression "racial democracy" in academic and political debates, demonstrates that the pluralist discursive position has consolidated its authority as a regulatory norm (Guimarães, 2001). As pluralism became an organizing principle of public life, it came to require that religious and racial differences be named and presented as autonomous, equivalent, and delimited identities.

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Pluralist Equality as Friction: Legal Principle and Everyday Life

In this new pluralist arrangement of public life, the value of "equality" operates on two interconnected yet distinct levels. At the legal level, it is maintained as a formal and abstract equivalence among citizens, representing the political community of citizenship that underpins modern democracy. However, at the discursive and moral level, equality takes on a new meaning: its normative ideal is no longer to make everyone the same but to ensure fair conditions for the existence of differences.

Pluralistic frameworks therefore reshape the semiotic and moral infrastructure that enables an ideal of equality to circulate publicly. Within this sociocultural context, pluralism becomes a sign-operator of diversity – that is, a value that guides the legal and political recognition of collectivities previously subsumed under a unifying matrix. In Brazil, this shift is evident in the drafting of the 1988 Constitution and in the constitutional recognition of new subjects and rights, as documented by João Alberto Lima, Edilenice Passos, and João Rafael Nicola (2013). In doing so, the meaning of equality circulates through the tension between the semantic field of abstract equivalence and the valorization of difference.

Although "equality" has a relatively stable legal and moral meaning, its use in public debates and daily interactions produces effects and associations that vary by context: each statement activates social roles, hopes for social mobility, expectations of coexistence, and emotional regimes of recognition. This new way of speaking shifts the relationship between law and society and redefines what counts as legitimate ways of valuing difference.

At the discursive and relational level, equality is realized in practices of speech and moral judgment through which speakers assess persons and situations. It signifies a form of equity that recognizes others as deserving of attention, respect, and consideration without effacing their distinct positions and experiences. The friction between this relational logic and the juridical principle of abstract equivalence constitutes the discursive space in which speakers negotiate the law's universality in relation to lived differences.

Deep Equality and the International Debate

Beaman's (2017, 2020) concept of deep equality intervenes in international debates about the limits of liberal models centered on non-discrimination, state neutrality, and the

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accommodation of fixed and manageable differences. By shifting attention from legal mechanisms to everyday practices of copresence and recognition, her critique creates space to examine equality as a practical grammar produced and negotiated in interaction.

Developed in response to Canadian multiculturalism and primarily concerned with religious diversity, deep equality emphasizes the affective and relational dimensions of everyday coexistence. For Beaman (2017), it becomes observable in situations in which difference ceases to generate conflict or require exceptional regulation – the non-event. In this formulation, the unobtrusiveness of difference may become a moral expression of equality.

The concept offers a comparative vocabulary for thinking about Brazil's pluriracial condition, provided it is used not as a moral ideal of coexistence but as a semiotic form of regulation embedded in the legal-pluralist framework. By applying this approach to the discursivity of racial diversity, our analysis aims to assess how its effects on meaning operate, especially through the idea of the non-event. In this context, silence and the avoidance of naming difference are not only ethical choices but also normatively regulated ways of speaking, shaped by class inequalities and public systems for evaluating equality.

Beaman contrasts legal-normative ideas of equality – grounded in rights, non-discrimination, and the accommodation of differences – with common views and practices of coexistence, in which equality is understood as an unspoken attitude of recognition and shared presence. Our approach begins with this displacement but then shifts focus to examine, through our empirical data, the semiotic processes by which these everyday perceptions are created, maintained, and rendered socially understandable through language. Rather than treating ordinary life as existing before language and public discussion, we analyze how the rules that guide the concept of equality operate within both legal discourse and common speech, shaping what can be expressed, avoided, or silenced about racial differences.

To this end, we selected two types of discursivity as empirical focal points. On the one hand, a typical media case in which the categories of racial "prejudice" and "discrimination" circulate as stable moral and legal typifications; on the other, the speech of ordinary people, in which statements about "color" emerge when they are prompted to think

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and speak about different forms of state protection, particularly racial affirmative action in higher education.

Theoretical-Methodological Approach

To examine how constitutional values circulate in discursive practices, we take as our empirical corpus statements produced in two distinct speech situations. The first concerns an episode of racism widely covered by the press – the Jamara case – which we mobilize here as a paradigmatic event that makes explicit the modes by which public speech about race is regulated. The second consists of accounts in which ordinary people are prompted to comment on issues of "color" and "race" in response to questions that invite reflection on the appropriateness of affirmative action policies for access to higher education.

The empirical material was drawn from 18 focus groups conducted in Recife, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, involving 180 participants recruited by a specialized recruitment firm. In each city, six focus groups representing different income strata were held, with ten participants in each group. Recruitment aimed to diversify group composition across key demographic and social characteristics – sex, age, educational attainment, region, religious affiliation, voting preference, and income. The demographic profile of the Brazilian population served as a general reference for diversifying group composition, rather than statistically reproducing it.

The discussion guide was organized around three thematic blocks: (1) conceptions of the state's role, particularly the opposition between a protective state and a minimal state; (2) authority and order; and (3) family, sexuality, gender, and reproduction. The focus groups were conceived as a qualitative device for identifying explanatory patterns, schemes of judgment, and recurring ways of framing the proposed topics.[1] Rather than eliciting isolated individual opinions, the procedure made it possible to observe how arguments were formulated, negotiated, challenged, or reaffirmed in interaction, thereby revealing shared frames of interpretation and judgment.

From the full set of discussions, this article selects dialogues from the thematic block on the state that addressed racial quota policies for admission to public universities. More

[1] This discussion guide was developed by Graziela Castelo, Ronaldo Almeida, and Paula Montero, and the interviews were moderated by Graziela Castelo and Ronaldo Almeida, with support from Priscila Vieira and Monise Picanço, researchers at Cebrap.

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specifically, the analysis focuses on statements concerning color and racial classification that participants invoked when invited to take a position on this policy. We examined both the terms used to name racial differences and the hesitations, reformulations, justifications, and disagreements through which these classifications acquired meaning in interaction.

In both cases, the statements are treated not as transparent expressions of individual opinions or identities but as situated discursive acts through which speakers appropriate, challenge, and reformulate legal and moral categories such as prejudice and discrimination. Their utterances construct narratives of self and others in which experiences, sensibilities, constraints, and ways of naming equality and racial difference become visible.

To reconstruct the denotations and meanings of these categories and to make visible the semiotic infrastructure that informs them, we examined the current definitions of the terms “prejudice” and “discrimination” as they are stabilized in widely circulating public devices, such as digital legal databases and encyclopedias of meaning. This procedure does not aim to establish normative or conceptual definitions but rather to reconstruct the meanings associated with these terms by making explicit the moral and legal criteria by which certain behaviors come to be recognized as prejudicial or discriminatory.

Our analysis focuses on how situated utterances negotiate legal, moral, and affective regimes of value, linking merit, justice, recognition, and coexistence in ordinary ways of speaking about racial difference. This approach allows us to examine how the language of equality becomes intelligible and persuasive while remaining open to hesitation, displacement, and contestation.

This perspective resonates with Brazilian scholarship on the articulation of language, racialization, and power. Joana Plaza Pinto (2015) demonstrates the analytical importance of situating linguistic forms within the circulation of racialized representations and bodies, and in their critical uptake. Extending this concern to language ideologies, Pinto (2018) shows how ways of speaking, discursive genres, and notions of competence participate in the institution of racial hierarchies by authorizing certain forms of knowledge and embodied speakers differently. Kassandra Muniz (2016), in turn, emphasizes the performative, political, and contingent character of racial identifications. From a metapragmatic perspective, judgments about what may be said, how it should be said, and who is authorized to say it regulate the public recognizability of racism. We align with this scholarship by

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treating race not as an attribute that precedes interaction, but as a difference that is socially produced and reflexively interpreted through language practices.

Marco Antônio Lima do Bonfim (2016), drawing on a performative conception of language oriented toward an antiracist critique, likewise stresses the need to analyze bodies and texts together, showing that racial identities are not simply represented in discourse but are also produced through socially situated language practices. While remaining close to this performative perspective, our analysis shifts from the discursive constitution of racial identities to the comments, hesitations, corrections, and refusals through which ordinary speakers reflexively regulate the relevance of race as an explanatory category. The analysis proceeds at two scales – the legal and media circulation of the categories of prejudice and discrimination, and their appropriation in the focus groups – to examine the formation of a regime in which social asymmetries may be acknowledged provided that they are not directly attributed to race. Silence is thus treated neither as the absence of discourse nor as mere lack of knowledge, but as the positive outcome of metapragmatic work that turns the non-naming of race into an index of equality, civility, and moral correctness.

From this perspective, we aim to contribute to the global debate on the tensions between the principle of equality and respect for diversity that structure the pluralist frameworks of contemporary democracies, as well as to the reworking of a *grounded theory of deep equality*. By analyzing equality from a semiotic standpoint, our approach shifts the focus from moral content to the observation of language, showing that "equality," as a circulating sign rather than merely a normative value, operates through situated negotiations among different regimes of signification: legal, moral, and affective. In these uses, equality may be anchored in the formal equivalence among citizens while simultaneously being reinscribed as an operator of diversity in everyday practices and discourses, thus becoming an object of appropriation and contestation in the contexts in which it is mobilized.

The Infrastructure of Racial Equality: Prejudice, Discrimination, and the Jamara Case

Within the constitutional framework of equality, the 1988 Constitution establishes the promotion of the well-being of all, without prejudice based on origin, race, sex, color, age, or any other form of discrimination, as one of the fundamental objectives of the Brazilian state. It also explicitly defines the practice of racism as a non-bailable and imprescriptible

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crime. Law n. 7.716/1989 subsequently specified the acts legally classified as crimes resulting from racial prejudice and discrimination.

To understand the denotations and associations invoked in everyday use of the terms "prejudice" and "discrimination," we examine the definitions that circulate in the media and in online communities such as Jusbrasil and Enciclopédia Significados. These definitions explicitly outline the moral and legal criteria by which certain behaviors and subjects are identified as "prejudiced" or "discriminatory." Therefore, the following analysis does not focus on the lexical meaning of these terms but rather on their function of typification – that is, how they shape the moral and legal figure of the egalitarian person and the transgressor of equality in the public sphere.

The commonly used definitions on these platforms highlight a distinction that indicates the coexistence of two types of value attribution: one moral and the other legal. The term prejudice is usually defined as a set of opinions or personal judgments that, in an anticipatory way and without "critical" or "reasonable" reasons, dismiss the characteristics of certain individuals or groups (Bezerra, n.d.). Because it is considered a subjective attitude – belief, feeling, or judgment – the justice system does not regard prejudice, on its own, as a specific practice and therefore does not treat it as grounds for criminal charges.

Discrimination, on the other hand, is defined as a social and relational act stemming from "ignorant" or "stereotyped" judgments that limit rights and freedoms by promoting the exclusion or segregation of others. Unlike prejudice, discrimination is subject to legal regulation: it was classified as a crime by Law n. 7.716/1989, which defines "crimes resulting from racial prejudice" (Novo, 2019).

This distinction between moral inner life and legal outer actions appears in two ways of valuing equality. The first concerns cultivating a virtuous person – someone who overcomes bias and upholds ideals of tolerance and respect; the second concerns the legal subject, whose actions can be punished or corrected. Therefore, the language of equality serves as both an ethical principle to be cultivated and a legal standard, aligning moral expectations with legal rules.

Let us now examine how the distinction between prejudice and discrimination – as moral and legal forms of categorizing behavior – serves as an analytical framework for understanding the Jamara case, which received extensive media coverage. This case reveals

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underlying regimes of public expression – namely, how the moral and legal domains negotiate racial equality. Through acts of justification, denial, or redefinition of the meanings of "color" and "racism," actors explicitly reveal the moral frameworks that uphold the social imagination of equality in contemporary Brazil. What is at stake, as we will see, is a clash between personal moralities and the legal regime governing racial insults.

The Jamara Case: An Episode of Public Speech

A widely reported media episode reveals how the categories of prejudice and discrimination operate in the public sphere as moral and legal signs that typify both conduct and persons. In an account circulated by the press as an illustration of the persistence of what was described as the "prejudiced mindset of Brazilians," a magistrate, Mylene Ramos Seidl (58), accused Jamara de Oliveira Moretti, owner of the company Capital do Mosaico in Santo Amaro (São Paulo's southern zone), of calling her a "preta desgraçada" ("wretched Black woman"). The incident reportedly occurred after one of Mylene's employees contacted Jamara to demand delivery of a contracted service that had not yet been provided. The case's broad public resonance cannot be attributed solely to a personal dispute but rather to its persuasive force: it activates a normative repertoire in which racially derogatory expressions are immediately linked to legal categories such as racial insult and discrimination, producing, within the media sphere, a form of anticipatory moral judgment. This is, therefore, an event in which language itself becomes the object of contention, triggering explicit processes of naming, correction, and moral valuation of utterances.

In her statement to the newspaper's column, Jamara said she regretted what had happened.

> *My mother is Black, my father is white; I happened to turn out white. I was not raised in a racist environment, and I have no history of racism. I have never told a daughter in my home, "Don't bring a friend here because they're Black," or "don't date a Black person." I have never said that.* (Bergamo, 2024)

The function of this utterance is readily apparent. An analysis of the statements shows how "racial consciousness" is constructed, affirmed, or denied within the discursive interaction. Jamara does not deny that the incident occurred; rather, she reframes its semiotic

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qualification by replacing the category of discrimination – subject to legal sanction – with that of involuntary prejudice or a moral misunderstanding.

In the phrase "I have never said that," she makes visible the process by which subjects mobilize repertoires of moral and legal legitimacy when commenting on or justifying episodes of racial conflict. Multiple operations of justification, valuation, and categorization publicly structure her way of speaking about "color," "racism," and "inter-racial coexistence". In her statements, we observe the performance of a moral grammar that seeks to reconcile distinctions of color with an ideology of familial and affective sociability. This discourse does not deny the social existence of racism; rather, it reformulates the conditions under which color can be spoken about, shifting the conflict from the legal domain (racial insult) to the moral domain of intentions and familial inheritances – "I have no history of racism".

Jamara's testimony mobilizes a discursive repertoire in which the categories Black, white, and racism function as moral signs of belonging rather than as markers of social structure. Her utterance reinscribes the model of *mestiçagem* as evidence of innocence and harmony, drawing on rhetoric inherited from the ideology of racial democracy. The self-defense – "I was not raised in a racist environment" – reflects the internalization of a pluralist regime in which racism functions as both a moral and a legal prohibition.

What is at stake here is not merely a cognitive or moral deficit on the part of the subject, nor merely an attempt to conceal the association between her conduct and racism, but rather a complex enunciative operation: an act of repositioning. Interpreting this operation solely as a failure to recognize the structural character of racism or as a lack of racial literacy would leave untouched precisely the phenomenon we seek to understand: the discursive work through which a person who publicly acknowledges racism as reprehensible may nevertheless deny its relevance to characterizing their own act. The analytical problem, therefore, is not to measure the distance between the utterance and a sociologically adequate understanding of racism, but to reconstruct the resources of justification, reframing, and attribution of intention that allow speakers to distance themselves from the position of a racist subject. Jamara's utterance aligns with the pluralist grammar insofar as it recognizes racism as reprehensible, but resists its accusatory force by recasting the insult as a moral misunderstanding. Through references to feelings, intentions, and family origins, she

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attempts to reinscribe her act within a grammar of personal virtue and to guide how it should be interpreted and judged. The episode thus exposes the negotiation among legal, ethical, and affective regimes through which speakers position themselves in relation to racism.

By mobilizing the behavioral typifications available within the juridical-moral order to reinterpret her position and preserve an image of conviviality, Jamara reveals the referent of "equality" as it circulates in the public sphere. Her use of language produces effects of positioning, alignment, and moral valuation. The ordinary value that emerges here is not racial "equity" as such, but rather good coexistence and good intentions – moral indices that continue to structure the Brazilian social imagination of difference.

Regarding the alleged act of discrimination, the choice of words that constitute the insult is particularly striking: the expression "preta desgraçada" associates color with misery, poverty, and abandonment. Here, we see a clear overlap between racial and class hierarchies. Verbal violence erupts precisely when a Black woman, occupying the position of client and rights-bearing subject, demands that a contractual obligation be fulfilled. The insult therefore leaves little doubt about its target: it performatively re-establishes an imagined social order by fixing the subject in the place deemed "proper" to her.

It is also important to note the conditions that enabled this circumstantial event to be transformed into a public fact, legitimized as "true" by the media. The visibility and social recognition of the victim – magistrate Mylene Ramos Seidl, a professor and activist involved in committees and projects aimed at combating racism – confer moral and institutional authority on the episode, inscribing it within the public circuit of equality. In this context, the Jamara case is particularly revealing: it not only stages a racial offense but also establishes a space for public negotiation between the moral and legal registers of racial equality.

It is within this field of tension – between legal normativity and moral affect, and between the ideal of racial harmony and the persistence of hierarchies – that the narratives analyzed below should be read. They are part of the set of social expectations that shape how equality is understood and mobilized.

Race in Everyday Life: Enunciations of Equality and Difference in Focus Groups

Whereas the Jamara case shows how the juridical and moral grammar of equality is mobilized to reclassify an alleged racial insult, the focus groups allow us to observe how ordinary

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speakers appropriate, adapt, and resist that grammar when invited to discuss racial quotas in public universities. The analysis examines both what participants say about color and equality and how their utterances regulate what may – or may not – be said about race. As previously indicated, the juridical-political language of pluralism establishes the criteria by which certain experiences are recognized, felt, and evaluated as just or equal. We will also observe how this framing of equality is mobilized from differentiated social positions, particularly with regard to race and income, and, secondarily, to gender. These positions do not determine statements, but they do modulate the conditions of what can be said. The analysis will attend to what utterances say, what they do in interaction, and how they regulate saying itself, following the approach proposed by Elizabeth Mertz (1985).

Let us begin with a selection of four statements from women, both white and Black, from middle- and low-income brackets:

> *I think [quotas] are the biggest form of racism there is […] White, yellow, blue – regardless of color – everyone has intelligence just as good as anyone else. Racism.* (Woman aged approximately 40-55, white, income class C).

> *From what I see, it's like quotas are saying this: that a Black person won't be able to achieve the position they want. So, come on – just because someone is Black, they're not capable of getting into university without a little help? […] the real issue is: "go study, come on," go study.* (Woman aged approximately 20-29, white, income class D/E)

> *I think there's no way everyone can be equal. […] In my opinion, you have to fight to get where you want to be. Because it's no use saying everyone is equal. That person fights, gets somewhere in life, says "I want this," and fights for it – regardless of the situation in the world, they'll fight to achieve it. The other one doesn't want to fight – how can everyone be equal?* (Woman aged approximately 40-55, Black, income class D/E)

> *There should be equality for everyone […] this is already a form of prejudice. There are some who want to fight, pursue things, and make an effort to get something. Others just want to sit there waiting for some opportunity.* (Woman aged approximately 40-55, brown (*parda*), income class D/E)

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Regarding the explicit content of the statements, we observe that equality is mobilized in different ways depending on the speakers' declared racial positions. Among white women, equality tends to be invoked as a positive, universal value, articulated as a potential quality inherent in all individuals – such as "intelligence" or "ability" – regardless of color. In these statements, racial difference is not denied but displaced outside the field of moral evaluation and neutralized through an emphasis on attributes understood as common to the human species.

Affirmative action policies are thus regarded as unjust and even racist – "the biggest form of racism there is" – because they draw a distinction deemed illegitimate between people. By asserting that state policy "demeans Black people" by suggesting they are "not capable," the statement reconstructs equality as a moral value grounded in the rejection of any form of public differentiation. The perceived injustice is attributed not to historical or structural conditions but to the very act of naming difference, which comes to be seen as a form of moral disqualification.

Among Black interlocutors, equality is likewise reiterated as a positive and desirable value – "there should be equality for everyone" – yet it is also presented as difficult to realize in practice. Here, too, unequal outcomes are attributed not to social or racial structures but to the moral evaluation of individuals, particularly their effort and sense of responsibility. What differentiates people in these statements is individual striving and will, expressed in terms such as "going after it" and "fighting to achieve it."

Although their points of reference differ – white speakers invoke equality as a matter of natural attributes, whereas Black speakers emphasize individual attitudes – all these statements remove color from explanations of unequal outcomes. Racial difference becomes irrelevant to the moral evaluation of persons. By including fantastical colors such as "yellow" and "blue," the first speaker empties racial classification of substantive meaning; similarly, by stressing struggle "regardless of the situation in the world," the third reaffirms a logic of neutrality that excludes color from legitimate causal accounts.

The uses of this language of equality do not vary significantly when low-income men, regardless of race, comment on the issue:

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> *I think it's wrong because anyone can get into university – you just have to study. […] I think it's a matter of focus; if the guy wants it, he can achieve it.* (Man aged approximately 40-55, white, income class D/E)

> *that's where the most critical point lies – the fact that society itself, the educational institution itself, makes this division.* (Man aged approximately 20-29, Black, income class D/E)

Once again, these statements mobilize the same grammar of equality, reappropriated in two complementary ways: as an individual moral framework centered on capacity and personal effort, and as a critique of affirmative action, which is portrayed as introducing an illegitimate racial division. This pattern cuts across the statements of both men and women, with gender producing no substantive differences in how equality is formulated. In all cases, race does not appear as a legitimate explanation for unequal access to higher education. By asserting that "everyone has equal capacity," speakers institutionalize racial erasure as a rule and shift moral judgment onto individual effort, encapsulated in the maxim that "if you want it, you can achieve it."

Let us now examine variation in statements about equality from the perspective of higher-income positions, drawing on two interlocutors, a woman and a man:

> *But if you make a quota system for students from public schools, I think that's fine – whether they're white, Black, Japanese, Martian, whatever. They didn't have an opportunity; maybe they won't pass the USP entrance exam because they didn't have prep courses or whatever else, but they have intelligence and reasoning.* (Woman aged approximately 40-55, white, Catholic, income class A/B1)

> *What we're talking about here is opportunity. When you set a quota, you're giving the guy an opportunity – some people will make it, others won't.* (Man aged approximately 40-55, married to a Black person, no religion, income class A/B1)

Once again, these statements emphasize individual capacities as the central criterion for evaluation and signal that using race as a lens for reading public policy is inappropriate. In doing so, they construct a position of racial neutrality that acknowledges unequal access

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but attributes it primarily to disparities in material resources. Within this framing, speakers position themselves in the moral register of "support for the poor," rather than in the register of antiracism.

Race is thus displaced from the causal account and replaced by poverty as the relevant social category. When racial differentiation is presented as an arbitrary enumeration – "white, Black, Japanese, Martian," as in the first statement – the category of "color" is stripped of evaluative meaning and explicitly dismissed as a relevant moral marker. Equality becomes sayable only as equality of opportunity or equity, rather than as racial equality or historical reparations.

By presenting themselves as "not racist," these statements reinforce an ideology of color-blind equality, in which discussing poverty is morally legitimate while discussing racism is often perceived as inappropriate or divisive. In this way, a discursive regime is naturalized in which inequality may be recognized and debated, provided it is detached from race.

Taken together, these statements detach educational disadvantage from race and recast it in terms of merit, will, discipline, and opportunity. This repertoire enables speakers across racial and income positions to present themselves as fair and morally neutral while rejecting racial reparations as unjust or paternalistic. Consequently, individualizing accounts become legitimate, whereas naming race as a causal factor appears inappropriate, excessive, or itself prejudicial. The silence surrounding the naming of difference is central to debates about deep equality. The analysis that follows examines how this silence is produced in conversations about race and how it affects the moral organization of equality.

> *[my cousin went] to enroll, and when she got there, I thought it was really heavy prejudice because her class was made up only of Black students.* (Woman aged approximately 20-29, Black, income class D/E)

> *I feel offended because it seems like I don't have the ability to study and get in.* (Statement by a Black woman, quoted by an interviewee aged approximately 40-55, white, income class D/E)

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> *that's where the most critical point lies – the fact that society itself, the educational institution itself, makes this division.* (Man aged approximately 20-29, Black, income class D/E)

These three statements reveal a discursive regime in which race is perceived and organizes experience yet cannot be named directly without risk. It remains absent at the declarative level, even though it decisively shapes how situations are interpreted and evaluated. Color thus emerges as a sensitive operator, capable of generating suspicions of prejudice and establishing a moral tension that tenuously separates "noticing" from "offending."

Speakers perceive race, but evaluate and mobilize it differently. The young Black woman explicitly associates it with the "racial composition of the classroom" and denounces it as "heavy prejudice"; the Black woman quoted avoids naming it, yet articulates its moral and affective effects by saying "I feel offended"; the Black man likewise elides it, yet criticizes the implicit racial division that structures the situation. In all cases, race constitutes the axis of experience, even though its name is displaced, avoided, or invoked only indirectly.

This invisibility does not signal a lack of perception but rather the operation of a norm that deems speaking about race morally risky and, socially, only weakly authorized as a legitimate linguistic resource. In interpretations of what the public agent does by "making a classroom only of Black students," "color" does not appear as an expression of equality but as a social marker that evokes humiliation and moral inequality – "it seems to say that I don't have the ability," "it makes this division." The problem lies not in the perception of race but in the meanings activated by its naming, which are associated with disqualification and illegitimate separation.

The difficulty of speaking about race points to a persistent unease and mistrust of state-produced classifications. In this context, naming race is not a neutral descriptive gesture: it entails moving between silence and explicitness, interpreting the moral effects of what has been done, and anticipating the relational risks involved. Speaking about race therefore requires careful moral evaluation, in which any formulation may be read as an accusation, an offense, or an unwarranted judgment.

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As we have seen, the regime of metapragmatic silence is not sensitive to the speaker's race. However, as will be shown below, in the four statements by white interlocutors from higher-income brackets, income reorganizes the production of this silence.

> *It's because, well, I was raised this way and I hold onto this: everyone, regardless of color, race, and so on, is a human being – so as human beings, everyone is equal.* (Woman aged approximately 40-55, white, income class A/B1)

> *It's very difficult. […] And this thing, for example, of defining race […] I think that already* is *defining, you know?* (Man aged approximately 20-29, white, income class A/B1)

> *But what I mean is that I think we should all think as a whole so that this doesn't become something – so that there doesn't need to be this division.* (Woman, aged approximately 20-29, white, income class A/B1)

> *because we have to live through the rest of our existence, because you can't change this concept – of good and evil, of what is more and what is less; nothing is white and nothing is black.* (Woman, aged approximately 40-55, white, income class A/B1)

These statements indicate that, whereas in the utterances of the D/E income brackets, silence about race tends to function as a defensive ellipsis, in higher-income brackets the mode of producing this silence shifts toward the terrain of an ideology of abstract equality, characteristic of the repertoires of more highly educated strata. In this case, silence does not appear as hesitation or self-protection but as an explicitly articulated normative principle.

In the first statement, for example, the silencing of race is presented as a moral rule, grounded in the assertion that "we are all human," which bars race from serving as a legitimate criterion for evaluation. In the third statement, this interdiction is constructed through the totalizing category of "a whole," in which silence about race authorizes social integration. In the final statement, race is rejected as a descriptive category of experience and reappears only as a moral metaphor, associating white with good and black with evil, thereby replacing the concrete experience of racialization with a spiritualized ethics.

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Finally, in the second statement, the paradox of naming emerges: by asserting that "defining already is defining [discriminating]," the very act of naming differences is treated as symbolic violence, and silence is cast as the desirable ethical stance. In these cases, the erasure of race does not stem from difficulty in naming experience but from adherence to a moral principle that recasts silence as a sign of justice and ethical correctness.

We thus see that silence cuts across social positions and does not vary by speakers' race. Income, however, reshapes how this silence is produced and justified. In lower-income segments, it may be read as a protective strategy in the face of the moral risk of naming race, whereas in higher-income segments it appears as a normative position, sustained by discourses of abstract equality.

Asif Agha's work (2007) inspired us to treat the silence around race as a social norm – that is, a set of expectations about what is appropriate to say, in which terms, in which contexts, and with what moral risks. In the statements of higher-income groups, race appears framed as a form of moral learning – "I was raised this way, everyone is equal regardless of color" – but also as a doctrine of coexistence, as Beaman suggests, under which speaking excessively about "Black" and "white" would itself be a way of producing racism – "if you talk too much about Black and white, that's how racism is made."

In the statements of lower-income groups, by contrast, silence around race operates differently: not as an explicitly formulated normative principle but as a protective strategy against the possibility of offense and disqualification – "it seems like I don't have the ability."

Across juridical, media, activist, and everyday domains, abstract equality as formal equivalence coexists with a pluralist logic that legitimizes recognition, diversity, and reparation. Their intersection gives formulations such as "we are all equal," "color shouldn't matter," and "talking about race is what creates racism" their moral force. The silencing of race therefore emerges not from a single register but from the articulation of legally consecrated models of equality that render racial naming difficult or morally inappropriate.

Final Remarks

At the intersection of these two scales, silence emerges not as a direct expression of deep equality but as an indexical effect of competing models of equality. Beaman's non-event was formulated to describe situations in which religious difference becomes ordinary and no

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longer generates conflict or requires exceptional regulation. In the Brazilian racial field examined here, however, “nothing happens” only through continuous metapragmatic work: universalist formulas such as “we are all human” neutralize race as a relevant marker, while explicit racial naming becomes associated with conflict, accusation, and disruption. The racial non-event therefore designates neither the absence of racialization nor an intrinsically egalitarian form of coexistence, but the situated regulation of whether, how, and at what moral risk race may become a legitimate object of enunciation.

These perspectives do not offer competing explanations at the same analytical level: the former examines the interactional realization of equality, whereas the latter identifies the historical and institutional reproduction of racial hierarchies. Nevertheless, they assign opposing values to what may appear empirically to be the same phenomenon: the absence of an explicit racial formulation.

Our findings suggest that silence cannot be interpreted in advance as either evidence of equality or as the straightforward reproduction of racial hierarchies. Its meaning depends on the conditions under which racial difference becomes relevant, dispensable, or inappropriate to mention. Not naming race may prevent difference from becoming stigmatized, but it may also make structurally organized disadvantages more difficult to recognize publicly. The analytical task is therefore to reconstruct the metapragmatic work through which non-enunciation becomes recognizable as equality, civility, denial, or evasion. An interaction may be experienced as egalitarian while simultaneously restricting the language available for naming the hierarchies in which it is situated. The tension between equality and diversity within the pluralist juridical framework therefore requires a semiotic reconstruction of the concept of deep equality, shifting it from its original moral-hermeneutic positioning toward an indexical and metapragmatic approach. This indeterminacy does not, however, mean that all silences are socially equivalent. Racial silence takes on different meanings depending on social position and the regimes of valuation at stake. In some cases, this silence rests on denying the relevance of race (“color shouldn’t matter”); in others, it functions as a protective strategy against the risk of hierarchical typifications.

Silence may also serve as a strategy for social ascent among those seeking to distance themselves from racial marking, understood as a sign of “backwardness” or “poverty.” Among more affluent classes, it may be transformed into an ideology of racial coexistence,

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evoking the older grammar of mixture historically associated with cordiality, conviviality, and the erasure of conflict. Conversely, the same silence may be criticized as a "culture of erasure," particularly in accusations directed at people of color who do not recognize themselves as part of the "Black community."

In the case of race – at least in the Brazilian material analyzed here – the non-event emerges as a contingent effect of a semiotic regime that regulates the public intelligibility of racial difference. We therefore propose an analytical inflection in the debate on equality: deep equality should be approached neither solely as a moral disposition nor solely as a normative horizon, but as an interactional achievement whose meaning depends on the historical and metapragmatic conditions of its production. This approach allows us to examine how the same silence may perform equality among participants while simultaneously restricting their capacity to name the racial organization of the asymmetries in which they are situated.

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