

“Marrying in a Racial Democracy: Does race matter?”

The Case for Brazil

For many decades a myth prevailed that Brazil was a land free of racial conflict. This ideology stemmed in part from the popularity of the writings of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, in which he deemed the country a “racial democracy” in his novel *Casa Grande e Senzala* published in the early 1930s (Telles 2004). He based his argument on Brazil’s Portuguese colonial heritage, focusing on the miscegenation that took place between Portuguese male colonizers and their African slaves, as well as the nature of the Portuguese, whose culture experienced more contact with darker-skinned peoples of Africa throughout its history, and therefore were more accustomed to interacting with them. The writings served the interest of promoting an inclusive Brazilian national identity, and placed Brazil in stark contrast with the imperial power of the United States, where Freyre believed racial tensions pervaded social relations.

Starting in the 1950s with studies carried out by UNESCO, social science research began to dismantle this myth, revealing great racial inequalities in Brazilian society. Telles (2004) claims these differences between Freyre and UNESCO arise from the emphasis of the research. For Freyre, the emphasis focused on horizontal relationships- those of friendship and family. The UNESCO studies emphasized vertical relationships, those of labor markets and employment. In examining different social phenomena, opposing conclusions were drawn on the state of Brazilian racial relations.

In dividing forms of relationships between horizontal and vertical types, Telles seeks to explore racial relations in which some forms of inclusion were permitted, such as miscegenation, while other forms of exclusion were exercised, such as slavery, in

Brazilian society. Social science can not examine racial relations only in the terms of exclusion, as this dichotomous view of being either totally in or out is inadequate in the case of Brazil. Vertical relations capture the economic exclusion that consistently places nonwhites at the bottom of the class structure. Horizontal relations capture levels of sociability, in which a country with a history of miscegenation demonstrates low levels of social distance (Telles 2004).

Current social research on race relations in Brazil continues to uncover great inequalities in the vertical relationships of the labor-market (Lovell 2000, Telles 2004). However, this does not imply that the same persistence of discrimination and prejudice would exist in personal “horizontal” relationships. Through the focus of labor market inequality, these studies can not assume that racialized ideas and prejudice of the labor market would transfer to personal relationships of friends and family. Therefore, Freyre’s argument of racial harmony may still hold reason in other contexts, such as intermarriage. In comparison with the United States and South Africa, Anglo-Brazilians and Afro-Brazilians intermarry more frequently (Telles 2004). These contrasting pictures necessitate further research on Brazilian racial relations. The study undertaken here explores intermarriage to access Freyre’s argument as well as Telles’, to uncover how social ideas of race have meaning for the actors in the marriage market, promoting an equal or unequal field in the search for a partner.

One problem that remains difficult for social science to grapple with is that of racial classification. Recent research has shown that when asked how they described their complexion, non-white Brazilians generated a list of 136 colors. Popular discourse for many years has held on to the idea of racial democracy, and issues of race/racism are

rarely discussed. When these issues do arise, they quickly turn into discussions of class inequality or generate anger and close the discussion (Costa-Vargas 2004). However, as Costa-Vargas explains, the denial of racism in Brazilian society and the resistance to racial classification systems permits the myth of racial democracy to continue unchallenged, void of a US-style Civil Rights Movement based on identity politics. Brazilian racism perpetuates itself by denying its own existence.

For many years the Brazilian government has resisted any state policy on racial classification, vehemently defending the racial democracy myth (Htun 2004). This defense holds in the white elites' interest, maintaining the racial status quo and their power. However, in 2001, the Brazilian government enacted an affirmative action policy of quotas in Brazilian universities in a measure to address racial equality. This responds to an emerging Brazilian Black Movement, influenced by transnational discourses of civil rights. This movement has achieved some political gains, however the politics of race still evokes discomfort and opposition, and most hold on to the racial democracy ideal (Costa-Vargas 2004).

Avoiding the association of race with class-based arguments that are deduced from social research on labor market inequality, one can re-examine the horizontal relationships in Brazil already explored by Gilberto Freyre. Due to the difficulty in discussing issues of race in Brazilian social relationships, racist attitudes may be examined through people's actions where one can see the social construction of race/color in Brazil. One way to examine this is through the private lives of intimates. How are social constructions of race present during the process of mate-selection? By looking closely at women's experience in the marriage market, racist attitudes and

actions should emerge more clearly. Afro-Brazilian females typically spend more time being single than their white counterparts, being passed up by both white and Afro-Brazilian men (Telles 2004).

Without official racial boundaries, marriage markets still largely remain racialized in Brazilian society. Despite higher levels of out-marriage in Brazil than in the US or South Africa, they are still not as high as would be expected if given to random chance of selecting a partner regardless of race. Marriage markets act as a social mechanism that perpetuates the separation of white and black in Brazilian social relations, despite no official consensus of what white or black is.

Sociological Perspectives on Race

No consensus of the meaning of race exists for any society, but popular concepts of race are used everyday and almost everywhere. Nations and cultures vary in their understanding and enactment of these racial concepts and meanings; however the global hierarchy of the white, European in the dominant position and the dark-skinned African at the bottom of the social structure remains constant (Winant 2000).

Recent sociological theories have approached racial inquiry from three directions, each critiqued for reducing the meaning of race to an objective, real social structure.

Ethnicity-based theories view race as a culturally grounded framework of collective identity. This perspective argues that racial differences can be ameliorated through contact, integration, and assimilation. However, not all minorities groups will see assimilation as desirable and structural integration has proved difficult (Winant 2000).

Class-based theories see race as terms for group-based stratification and economic competition. Problematic to these accounts of racial relations is growing inequality within minority groups, preventing racial cohesion within one class, as well as the lower-class whites’ interest in maintaining white supremacy, resisting interracial solidarity based on class (Winant 2000).

Nation-based theories of race have been discredited due to the lack of a nation-based racial solidarity in recent decades. Diasporic identities arose due to transnational correspondence, and these identities generally lack political commitment (Winant 2000).

Today we find ourselves in an era committed to the ideals of multiculturalism and racial equality in which a new theoretical approach must grapple with a continuance of racial classifications and racial stratification. Winant (2000) argues in favor of “racial formation theory,” which has three components: the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested, racial formation happens at the intersection of racial “projects” combining discourse and social structure, and these intersections are differing interpretations of the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global (Winant 2000).

Race serves as an important concept for how we divide ourselves socially, although there are many conflicting ways of looking at it and theorizing over it. Much social inquiry based on race relations in Brazil has demonstrated clearly that Brazilian society consists of racial ideologies that perpetuate stratification along racial lines. However, racial beliefs and practices often differ as demonstrated by Costa-Vargas’s research. The prevailing ideology of racial democracy, now finding itself in an historical

era committed to racial inequality, has prevented open racial discrimination, but a long history of a racially stratified society continues to shape social interactions, especially among people of differing racial groups.

For the symbolic interactionist, society consists of individuals interacting with one another. Through these interactions, meanings of the world around them are derived, and then through a process of interpretation by the individual actor, the use of these meanings arises in their action (Blumer 1969).

Social life requires our interaction with other people, institutions, and a social structure. Through this account of interaction, our individual identities are constructed; making us racialized, gendered, and sexualized beings. These interactions are all affected by our racial, class, gender, and sexual identities. Who we think we are, and who we are talking to, shape our interactions. The use and negotiation of these identities, particularly race, may be salient in interactions on the marriage market.

According to Simmel, individuals are differentiating entities (Frisby 1984). We focus not on the contents of life which always and everywhere exist, but on the contents through which we can distinguish ourselves from others. One way this can be done is through the social construct of race, which divides human beings, groups, and societies by physical characteristics that are determined by our biology.

A large group creates social institutions which help pattern interactions of individuals in this group. The functioning of the large group therefore depends on distinguishing between certain status groups in order to distribute tasks and responsibilities. By this differentiation of groups and distribution of tasks, large groups, or societies, become stratified. Racial groups qualify as status groups, and historically,

biologically-based arguments justified the placement of dark-skinned people into exploited positions in society. These positions were consistently economically disadvantaged, and prevented upward social mobility. In Brazil, the mass importation of millions of African slaves from the 1600s until the mid- 1800s placed them at the lowest tiers of the social hierarchy (Andrews 2004).

This thesis intends to further our knowledge of how Brazilian society divides itself along a color line which favors “whiteness” over “blackness” and how this division is seen and interpreted by individual actors in their pursuit of a partner on the marriage market. In addressing the marriage market, I will discuss problems of racial classification in Brazil. I also intend to analyze the racial composition of the city of Belo Horizonte and the intermarriage rates of those who live in the favelas and those who do not.

The thesis will address the following questions:

- How do women, ages 19-29, perceive romantic pairings among individuals of diverse racial backgrounds in Belo Horizonte, Brazil?

This question seeks to address the popular discourse of Brazilian society in regards to race. It is hypothesized that, according to a Guttman scale, that respondents will typically not respond with racist beliefs, and only will in the most extreme circumstance, which would be if their son/daughter married someone of another race. This extreme response will still be minimal, the majority denying any racist attitude. Our knowledge of race, in general, in the context of an era that embraces racial equality, leads to the prediction that no one will openly admit to racial prejudice, and only bend in the most extreme situations, such as interracial romantic pairings of their sons and/or

daughters. Specifically for Brazil, this links to the research done by Costa-Vargas, in which the discourse of racial democracy is so pervasive that it prevents Brazilian society from acknowledging any racial discrimination.

- How do women ages 19-29 in Belo Horizonte differ in their perceptions of the marriage market by race and class?

The purpose of this part of the research will explore the difficulties women express in finding a marriage partner, and if this differs between black and white women and socioeconomic status. It is hypothesized that both groups will express difficulty in finding partners, and race will be a more important factor for white women in the selection of a partner.

- Is racial inequality perpetuated by the marriage market in Belo Horizonte?

This question will examine how social constructs of race influence people’s selection of a marriage partner and how marriage serves as either a social mechanism of maintaining distance between races, or a chance for social mobility amongst groups.

Data and Methods

Data comes from two focus groups which took place in July of 2006, one in a private home and one at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, both located in central Belo Horizonte. I conducted the groups with the focus populations of young women, aged 19-29, of either a mid-education level, defined as having 6-10 years of schooling, or advanced education, having at least entered into a university program of study.

The research method of focus groups does not get to private perceptions and ideas; however, it is an effective method to gain data based on groups and public

perceptions through interactive discussion. Morgan (1996) argues that past research has demonstrated the richness of data obtained through the method due to participants' ability to agree and disagree with one another, adding depth to the conversation. One speculated weakness is the fear of self-disclosure within the group; however, no empirical investigations support this claim.

I employed a snowball sampling technique to find potential participants. My local contacts assisted in the recruitment process. Some participants filled out an initial survey through email, which asked for demographic characteristics to place them into the appropriate focus groups. Those who did not have email available filled out a written form of this initial survey, which was then used to place them into the appropriate groups. To avoid a selectivity bias, university students in the field of sociology or demography were not able to participate. Specifically, the sampling was to generate 8 groups, divided by education levels and self-classification of race. Due to time and financial constraint, only 2 groups were completed; one with white women with some level of university education, and women who did not self-classify as white with low-level of education, between the equivalent of 5th - 9th grades in the United States. The separation of education level was designed to analyze the variance produced by social class. The separation of racial groups was designed to analyze the variance produced by racial categories.

Both groups had one moderator and one person that recorded notes. The moderator lead the groups, and sat at the head of the table, with participants surrounding the rest of the table. I acted as note-taker and remained quietly in the back of the room. I made this decision to attempt to minimize the affect the presence of a white, American male, who is of the age of the participants, would have on the conversation. The

moderators were selected due to their experience with previous focus group research, and for personal characteristics of being women, and white for the group conducted with white participants, and Afro-Brazilian for the group conducted with Afro-Brazilian participants.

The moderator used the interview guide to direct the conversation towards issues of mate selection, without mentioning how someone’s skin color affects this process. The design of the interview guide attempted to follow the myth of racial democracy and an avoidance of the discussion of race, allowing the participants to address the topic freely. However, halfway through the discussion, the guide purposefully directs the discussion towards race, to assess how participants view skin color as a factor in finding partners, and Brazilian social views of interracial relationships.

At the beginning of each group, participants filled out consent forms, acknowledging that the group’s conversation would be recorded and that information gained from the conversation would later be used to write a report of the research. Tape-recorders and digital voice recording devices were placed on the tables, and participants were instructed that they could stop the recording at any time if they felt the need, as well as exit the group.

First, issues of how women search for potential partners were explored. Participants were asked to speak about the places they go to socialize, the difficulties in finding a partner, and differences between marriage and living together.

During the second phase of the group we employed an exercise using photographs to elicit conversation about ideas of race and dating. I photographed 8 students of varying styles, ages, and races. I placed the students in front of a dull yellow painted wall, and

captured their image rather naturally, without forcing smiles or poses to increase their attractiveness. I developed the photos to be 4”x6”, and the moderator placed these photos in the middle of the table once we arrived to this part of the conversation.

The moderator asked the group to create couples solely based on the images in the photographs. The groups were given some time to put together their couples, as they discussed why each person should go with the other. Once they completed, the moderator questioned the participants on their reasoning for matching certain pairs. During this exercise, the moderator purposefully does not mention race. Race only enters in the discussion if the participants address it.

To provoke a conversation on race, if it had not been mentioned, the moderator creates an interracial couple from the pictures. The moderator then asks what the group thinks their family, their friends, and older people might think of this relationship. The conversation is also led to address the differences it may make if the couple were just going out, living together, or married.

To conclude, the focus groups briefly address celebrities and interracial dating, exploring why it may be easier for them to have interracial relationships over everyday people.

In order to enlighten what we know about racial discourse in Brazil and how it manifests itself in the process of mate selection and perceptions of interracial couples I intend to code both manifest and latent content of the group conversations, with a strong focus on the exercise involving the photographs. Comparisons will be drawn between the two groups and the ways in which they address the issue of race when creating couples. As stated earlier, this content may not be manifest in the initial stage of the exercise. This

result is still significant, as it follows previous literature on the pervasiveness of the racial democracy discourse in Brazil, which denies the existence of any form of racism. The data will be coded for the avoidance or denial of the factor race plays in mate selection, or the ease in which it is talked about.

The initial phase of the focus groups, in which general questions are asked about ways of socializing to find partners, perceptions of dating, living together, and marriage, will be analyzed to draw comparisons between the two groups, focusing on both differences and similarities. This element will explore the idea that racial relationships are harmonious socially, and that racial groups are found frequenting the same places and interacting cordially in social situations. As the argument of miscegenation has been used to support the idea of harmonious social relationships, the data collected here attempts to explore how the participants enter relationships and their expectations of these relationships, and how this may differ racially.

Initial Analysis

Data derived from the focus groups supports the view that the ideology of racial democracy prevails in the dating market in Belo Horizonte. In both groups conducted, race as a factor in choosing partners did not enter the group's conversation until it was brought in by the moderator during the photo exercise.

During the photo exercise, the group of white females constructed racially similar couples more quickly than the black females. They constructed a black couple, agreeing that they had similar styles, and looked good together. The white couples they constructed took 5-6 minutes longer to complete, but agreed that these couples also fit together better because of style and appearance.

During the same exercise, the group of black females also constructed racially similar couples in the end; however, they took a longer period to construct these couples and had more disagreement within the group as to why each person matched with whom. They reasoned that each couple fit due to style and appearance again, without mentioning the race of the persons in the photos.

When the moderator constructed an interracial couple from the photos, the groups differed in their reactions. The group of white females concluded that the couple would face more problems from family and older generations. The group of black females concluded that an interracial couple is easy to conceive of, but more difficult to actually find in reality, and the couple having success at staying together.

In the discussion of celebrity interracial couples, such as Xuxa and Pele, both groups concluded that their money and fame allowed them to choose more freely their partners, but also noted that most of these relationships do not last for many years either.

Conclusion

Preliminary analyses appear to support the pervasiveness of the racial democracy ideology in which race is not a debatable issue in Brazilian society. Neither group confirmed that race was an issue in matching couples, but instead spoke of the individual's style and look. Both groups used skin color and race in constructing couples, but did not openly discuss this as a reason why the individuals matched.

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