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Strategies of racial identity negotiation of Brazilian immigrants in the United States

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Resumo: O presente artigo aborda alguns aspectos do processo de negociação da identidade racial dos imigrantes brasileiros nos Estados Unidos, tendo em vista o contexto sociocultural daquele país em relação à realidade brasileira. Os estudos sobre identidade têm ganhado atenção considerável de pesquisadores de diversas áreas do conhecimento, motivados pela crescente relevância do tema nas últimas décadas. O cruzamento de fronteiras representa o encontro com novas realidades e culturas, as quais exigem que os indivíduos embarquem num constante processo de negociação de suas identidades. Neste processo de redefinições identitárias deve-se levar em conta o caráter relacional característico do conceito de identidade. Assim, este trabalho se baseia numa análise bibliográfica sobre o tema para apresentar uma síntese das estratégias de negociação da identidade racial dos brasileiros no contexto americano, discutindo-as à luz dos aspectos socioculturais envolvidos no processo.

Palavras-chave: Identidade. Identidade racial. Negociação identitária. Imigração. Estados Unidos.

Introduction

The study of identity has had considerable attention from communication scholars and researchers of related fields due to its increasing importance in contemporary society. Being a fundamental component of communication, identity helps us to make sense of ourselves, of others, and of the world in which we live. Motivated by advances in communication technology, the phenomenon of globalization has contributed enormously to rapid transformations in the contemporary world. Additionally, globalization has also facilitated the circulation of people, goods, and so on. As people move to other cities or countries, they are presented with new realities and are required to embark on a constant process of identity negotiation. This is a challenging and difficult process because we have to redefine ourselves in accordance with the different social dynamics of the new environment.

This paper discusses how the process of identity negotiation works for Brazilian immigrants in the United States, focusing specifically on their strategies of racial identity negotiation within the context and dynamics of race relations in the United States. Through a bibliographical analysis, I attempt to systematize some of the strategies of their 'racialization,' considering some of the social and cultural aspects involved in the process.

1. Racial identity negotiation

Identity represents a fundamental component of communication. The critical perspective on identity conceptualizes it as a dynamic process, which is shaped by social and historical forces but is also negotiated (MARTIN; NAKAYAMA, 2004). As a result, identity is communicated through an interactive, reciprocal, and relational process (GUDYKUNST, 1993). Then, for the effectiveness of communication, individuals are required to know who they are in relation to others in the community or to groups to which they belong. That is, this sense of self and 'other', through which we make sense of ourselves and the world in which we live, gives us the boundaries for the way we communicate with each other.

Hall (1992) argues that the individual of the contemporary world has faced an identity crisis due to cultural transformations that occurred mainly on and after the second half of the twentieth century – late-modernity or post-modernity. In his words, “... the argument is that the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject” (p. 274). That process has led to an ‘identity crisis,’ mostly motivated by the displacement of individuals from the cultural and social boundaries provided by traditional institutions and from themselves. And this series of changes is ‘de-centering,’ ‘dislocating,’ or ‘fragmenting’ the post-modern subject. The post-modern subject is then characterized as “having no fixed, essential or permanent identity... It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’”(p. 277).

Within the perspective of post-modernism, it is important to think about how each person manages his or her ability to deal with their self-identification and that of others, especially because individuals can assume different, and sometimes concurrent, identities. In this sense, the identity negotiation theory represents a useful framework because it helps to explain some of the constitutive elements that influence the communicative process in terms of how individuals create and secure their self-image toward an efficient interaction with others. In that framework, identity is conceptualized as “the mosaic sense of self-identification that incorporates the interplay of human, cultural, social, and personal images as consciously or unconsciously experienced and enacted by the individual” (TING-TOOMEY, 1993, p, 74).

According to Ting-Toomey (2005, p. 217), negotiation refers to “a transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images.” Negotiation is then an intrinsic element of the communication process itself, within which language plays an essential role. A good example of that is the way people make use of personal pronouns in order to position themselves in their discursive practices. Thus, any individual in a conversation situation considers himself/herself an ‘I’ as opposed to a ‘you.’ In other words, the referent of these words changes whenever a different person takes the turn of the conversation. As personal pronouns function as empty categories –deictic– their referents are filled with the attributes or elements that form the identity of the participants of the conversation (BENVENISTE, 1971/1966).

Interestingly, while negotiation is an essential aspect of communication in general and of language in particular, identity negotiation competence requires training in a sense that it is learned or 'acquired.' Following this line of thinking, Ting-Toomey (2005, p. 217) states that identity negotiation competence is "a learned process of attuning to self-identity reactive issues plus engaging in intentional attunement to others' salient identity issues." She goes on by saying that "in the context of the identity negotiation theory, competent identity negotiation focuses on ways to obtain accurate knowledge of the identity domains of the self and others in the intercultural encounter."

Along with the theorization just described, it is also important to define race and racialization. The first point to be made is that I am working with those terms as socially constructed meanings at play in society. As Hall (1992, p. 298) puts it, "race is a *discursive* not a biological category." [emphasis in original]. Corroborating with that, Omi and Winant (2007) state that,

Race is indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies (p, 15).

In Omi and Winant's definition it is evident that understandings of race vary from society to society and from different groups within a given society. Within this perspective, racialization is seen as an ideological and historical process and represents "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (OMI; WINANT, 2007, p. 18). In other words, "racialization is the process of attaching racial meaning to individuals, sub-populations, and social phenomenon, making what could be subtle and fluid, for example, racial identity, into a relatively fixed category" (SILVERSTEIN, 2005, quoted in McDONNELL; DE LOURENÇO, 2009, p. 239).

In summary, it is important to see how Brazilian immigrants deal with the negotiation of different values and systems of classification in the United States. In the case of this group, due to the way race relations are structured differently in both countries, race represents one of the most complex issues with which Brazilian immigrants have to negotiate. The central objective of this paper is to discuss how Brazilian immigrants deal with the dynamics of race relations in the United States, considering more specifically their process of racialization.

2. Brazilian immigrants in the United States

A close look at the available literature on the racialization of Brazilian immigrants in the United States led to the conclusion that, despite the fact that each individual finds different strategies to negotiate their identity as they cross the border to a new country, there are some trends in the way this process occurs. In the case of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, the main characteristics of their racial identity negotiation is that: (1) Brazilians are usually racialized by other groups as Hispanic or Latino, although they resist accepting these labels; (2) Brazilians usually use their national identity to replace what would be their racial identity, as they lack a sense of belonging to the ethno-racial hierarchy of the United States; and finally, (3) Brazilian immigrants tend to self-identify as White even though they are racially categorized as Black or Non-White. My intent in this section is to address these patterns and try to discuss their motivations and possible implications.

According to Beserra (2005), due to the fact that Brazilians are *transformed* into Latinos, they must go through a profound questioning of their racial identities. With that in mind, it is important to understand this process in relation to some elements that constitute Brazilians' integration into American society. The first situation that they have to deal with is the fact that they are immigrants. Indeed, some of the women interviewed in the study by McDonnell and De Lourenço (2009) recognize that mistreatment or discrimination toward them is more associated with their status as immigrants, *per se*, than with their status as (Latino) women. Yet, because there is a socially constructed set of meanings for the terms Hispanic and Latino other than geographical location, Brazilians express some resistance to accept those labels. About this strategy of identity negotiation, McDonnell and de Lourenço (pp. 239-240) argue that,

For immigrants in the United States, racialization often leads them to identify with a sub-population in which they have no 'organic' membership. As a result, racialization may provoke a response by the people being racialized including resistance, acceptance or, for some people, re-negotiation of their identity to give them greater distance from what may feel like a false identity.

In the case of Brazilians being classified as Hispanic or Latino, there are some other aspects to be considered. Studying a group of Brazilians in Massachusetts, Martes (2003) concluded that they provided three main reasons for refusing the term Hispanic: language, geography, and history/culture. First, the fact that Brazilians speak

Portuguese appears to be a clear dividing point between them and the whole population of Spanish-speaking immigrants and their descendants. Second, the term Hispanic encompasses immigrants from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, with which Brazil shares few points of identification. Finally, the historical and cultural component of the debate has to do with the fact that Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese, rather than the Spanish.

As seen in the literature, compared to the term Hispanic, Latino seems to be more acceptable, but only in some circumstances. The unquestionable acceptance of the term Latino is primarily conditioned by the relationship it has with Latin America. Hence, Brazilians seem not to have any problem with being labeled as *latino-americano* [from Latin America]. This is because Brazilians grow up learning that Latin America (South America and Central America and Mexico) and Anglo-Saxon America (United States and Canada) are geopolitical categories. In this sense, Latino is a more inclusive term (SAFRAN, 2008). On the other hand, Brazilians and other immigrants tend to react against the labels Hispanic and even Latino when one makes any association with the ideological meanings or negative connotations these terms have in American society, specifically stigmas related to socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, and disempowered immigration status (BESERRA, 2003, 2005; MARROW, 2003; MARTES, 2003; McDONNELL; DE LOURENÇO, 2009).

The negative reaction to the way Brazilians are usually racialized in the United States represents one of the reasons they claim their national identity. Such a strategy seems to reinforce the idea that to be Brazilian is better than to be Hispanic or Latino. As Martes (2003) points out, the affirmation of the national identity and that of *latino-americano* also represents the denial of the term Hispanic because of its exclusiveness. Safran (2008, p. 438) highlights the fact that “ethnic self-labeling may be a reflection of a group’s positive or negative image of itself; or it may be a reactive insofar as it responds to the challenge created by others.” Then, claiming their Brazilianess represents “the device that allows some Brazilians to pre-empt negative judgment and slotting that they know is associated with being non-white, immigrant, and even Latin American or Latino” (McDONNELL; DE LOURENÇO, 2009, p. 249).

A discussion on how race relations have evolved in both Brazil and the United States can provide a clearer understanding about the reasons Brazilian immigrants prefer to negotiate their racial identity using their national one. Moreover, addressing

this point also helps us to comprehend the third aspect of their racialization process in this country, which is related to the tendency of self-identification of Brazilians as White even though they are racially categorized as Black or Non-White in the United States.

In terms of comparison, the institutionalized segregation, officially banned in the 1960s in the United States, is among the main differences of how each country dealt with the former enslaved population. Far from considering one situation better than the other, it is worthy noting that Americans' socialization process led them to a rigid racial system where every individual must know his/her own slot in the black-white color line. On the other hand, Brazilian elites used different mechanisms of exclusion, spreading out the belief that there was no racism and all Brazilians citizens were equal. That fallacious idea, usually referred to as the *myth of racial democracy*, was documented in and widely disseminated by Gilberto Freyre (1963) and others. Nevertheless, this ideology has been challenged for many decades by the black movement, and more emphatically by several scholars since the 1970s (GUIMARÃES, 1999; HASENBALG, 1979).

Munanga's (1999) interpretation supplies additional elements to this discussion. According to him, racism in American society was rooted in the constant reaffirmation of difference [*racismo diferencialista*]. In that model, segregation represents a mechanism that helps to accentuate the characteristics that identify both the dominant and the dominated groups, making their differences even more explicit. On the other hand, it also facilitates the construction of ethnic and racial identities by oppressed groups. Within that perspective, as Munanga says, the anti-racism that comes out of this model seeks to build an equal society based on the respect for the differences among its groups. It is then that differences are seen as positive values.

In opposition to that, Brazilian society developed a universalist model of racism [*racismo universalista*]. Rejecting the existence of difference, this model is characterized by fostering an ideal of assimilation or miscegenation whereby the ethnic and racial identity of dominated groups would be annihilated. Today's composition of the Brazilian population proves that such a project was not successful; however, it is easy to find evidence of how the universalist ideal provides the boundaries for the dynamics of race relations among Brazilians in Brazil. For instance, Brazilian immigrants' avoidance of racial or ethnic identity can be seen as one of the outcomes of the anti-racist ideology based on universalism. As Munanga explains, the universalist anti-racism goes hand in

hand with an integrationist project in which ethnic identities would be weakened and/or not encouraged simply because they represent a threat to the unity of the national society. Therefore, from this point of view, it makes sense to believe that all social groups live in harmony with no racism, under the principles of a racial democracy.

This theoretical framework is also useful for the understanding of the three aspects of Brazilian society that represented a dilemma faced by the Brazilian women interviewed in McDonnell and de Lourenço's (2009) study, especially in regards to how they deal with racialization and slotting. Even though the other studies analyzed for this paper did not emphasize those aspects, they did mention them as influencing factors in the process of racialization of Brazilian immigrants in the United States. The first aspect highlighted by McDonnell and de Lourenço was the fact that Brazilians bring with them a "normative class-based framework for explaining inequality." Indeed, this class reductionism represents the most powerful facet of the discourse against affirmative action policies in Brazil (DOS SANTOS, 2005; GUIMARÃES, 1999). The point here is that race alone does not represent a justification for the implementation of policies designed to meet the needs of segmented social groups. As they would argue, social problems can be overcome with more universalist policies.

The second aspect observed by McDonnell and de Lourenço has to do with the rejection of the existence of racism and the support to the discourse of racial democracy. As discussed previously, this point not only represents one of the motivations for the adoption of the national identity by Brazilian immigrants in the United States, but also explains why "class has become the prevailing analytical factor for explaining the mistreatment of sectors of Brazilian society" (p. 244). As the scholars point out, "if racism is rarely used to explain inequality, and in the Brazilian imaginary racial democracy precludes racism, something equally compelling must absorb even more explanatory power" (p. 243-244). In response to that argument, Dos Santos and Anya (2006, p. 43) add that "a frank public debate on racism in Brazil remains taboo, complicating tremendously any discussion of policies that would be specifically to address present manifestations of historical and institutional harm inflicted upon blacks."

The more nuanced character of racial identity in Brazil in comparison to the United States was the third aspect of Brazilian society discussed by McDonnell and de Lourenço (2009). Stated differently, while the racial system of Brazil can be described as a continuum in terms of color, in the United States it is characterized as a black-white

dichotomy. Moreover, Brazilian scholars usually demystify that color system's complexity by working with the polarization of black/white or negro[black]/white¹; on the other hand, "the popular self-representation utilizes a relational system based on the light/dark binary" (MUNANGA, 1999, p. 199).

With that in mind, it is worthy to reiterate the third aspect of racial identity negotiation of Brazilian immigrants, which states that they tend to self-identify as White even though they are racially categorized as Black or Non-White. As Nogueira (2006) explains, as a result of how Brazilians have been socialized accepting the myth of racial democracy, which promotes the ideal of miscegenation, *mestizos* are usually viewed as Whites. Because of that, Nogueira states that the passing phenomenon, as conceptualized by Bucholtz (1995), does not make sense in the Brazilian context. In contrast, because of the 'one drop rule' in the United States, *mestizos* are considered Blacks no matter how close in terms of phenotype they are to Whites.

In conclusion, the last point I want to make is about the fact that the literature analyzed for this paper does not address directly the case of Latin American Black populations immigrating to the United States. Stressing the idea that identity has become more politicized, Hall (1992, p. 308) defends that,

What these [black] communities have in common, which they represent through taking on the 'black' identity, is not that they are culturally, ethnically, linguistically or even physically the same, but that they are seen and treated as 'the same' (i.e. non-white, 'other') by the dominant culture.

Although it is a speculation, I believe that these populations are primarily racialized as Blacks; Hispanic/Latino tends to be a secondary identity they are associated with in the United States. In any case, the literature analyzed for this paper indicates that the number of Black Brazilians in the United States is very small compared to the number of White Brazilians. Nevertheless, this brief study points to the need of an analysis focused on their perceptions and strategies of racial identity negotiation, not only in the United States but also in other diasporic contexts. In the case of White Brazilians, they may think of their identities as the norm and as such they do not need to "negotiate their identities in intercultural encounters" (JACKSON, 1999a quoted in SHIN; JACKSON, 2003, p.

¹ Even though there are still negative connotations related to the term 'negro' in Brazilian society, it is used by the black movement as an empowering word, assuming the same dimension it had in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in the United States. Additionally, the term 'negro' is used by race relations scholars and governmental organizations to denote the number of Blacks in Brazil. This term usually refers to the number of people who self-identify as Black and *Pardo* [mulatto] combined.

223) and continue to claim their “privileged and hegemonic identity” (JACKSON; SHIN; WILSON, 2003, quoted in JACKSON; SIMPSON, 2003). In short, even though White Brazilians are primarily seen as immigrants, their condition may offer more complexity than they might expect. Perhaps coming to the United States is the only opportunity some of them actually have to think about their racial identity.

Final Considerations

The present paper discussed the strategies of racial identity negotiation of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, focusing primarily on their process of racialization. The proposed research problem was approached by the framework of identity negotiation theory (TING-TOOMEY, 1993) along with the critical perspective on identity (HALL, 1992; MARTIN; NAKAYAMA, 2004). Based on a bibliographical analysis, I concluded that there are at least three main aspects of how this process occurs: (1) Brazilians are usually racialized by other groups as Hispanic or Latino, although they resist accepting these labels; (2) Brazilians usually use the national identity to replace what would be their racial identity, as they lack a sense of belonging to the ethno-racial hierarchy of the United States; and finally, (3) Brazilian immigrants tend to self-identify as White even though they are racially categorized as Black or Non-White. These findings should be seen as patterns often followed by a population that has a common past and faces similar situations when becoming part of new community. Thus, one should keep in mind that each individual finds different ways to negotiate her/his identities in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth.

Though the literature analyzed for the present study provided a comprehensive picture about the situation of Brazilians in the United States, some difficulties along the way limited the effectiveness initially expected. For instance, the unavailability of all documents listed as possible sources for this research made it difficult to base my arguments on a larger number of studies. Although I found a considerable number of studies published in Portuguese, others could not be retrieved with enough time to be analyzed for this study. Additionally, other documents were published as proceedings of conferences, which have a more restricted circulation.

In future research, it will be necessary to plan further in advance so that these limitations can be overcome. With more time and resources, additional aspects of

identity negotiation of Brazilians can be incorporated into the analysis, such as the study of *self-otherization* of Brazilians. As mentioned by some of the works studied, this refers to the fact that some Brazilians prefer to check the “other” box when asked to self-identify (McDONNELL; DE LOURENÇO, 2009). The remaining question then is whether this strategy represents a kind of resistance to the unavoidable process of racialization or it is just a refusal to participate in the battle for a negotiated identity. An ethnographic study will certainly supply arguments to answer this and other research questions.

Abstract: The present study focuses on certain aspects of the process of racial identity negotiation of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, taking into account the sociocultural context of the U.S. in relation to the Brazilian reality. The study of identity has had considerable attention from scholars from many research fields due to its increasing importance in the last decades. The crossing of borders brings about new realities and cultures, in which people are required to embark on a constant process of identity negotiation. In this process of redefinition of identities one also must consider the relational feature embedded in the concept of identity. Based on a bibliographical analysis, this paper presents a synthesis of the racial identity negotiation strategies of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, discussing them in light of the sociocultural aspects involved in the process.

Key-words: identity. Racial identity. Identity negotiation. Immigration. United States.

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