

Race, health, and discrimination: historical and contemporary perspectives from Brazil and the United States

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This *Supplement* of CSP is the result of an interdisciplinary international conference *Race, Health, and Discrimination: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in August 2015. The Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) and the University of Michigan collaborated to bring together approximately 40 scholars from Brazil and the United States to examine the status of current research and knowledge around race, health, and discrimination. This conference was one facet of a larger collaboration between Fiocruz and the University of Michigan that encompasses research areas in health, human rights, maternal and infant care, epidemiology and the history of medicine and public health.

From the outset, we envisioned this as an interdisciplinary gathering – a type of academic meeting that is all too uncommon in academia. With this goal in mind, we brought together epidemiologists, historians, clinical researchers, anthropologists, geneticists, and sociologists to present diverse approaches to studying race/color, racism, and racial formation in relation to health and disease. The three co-organizers recognized the importance of race/color – as categories and lived experience – in studies of health and society around the world, and increasingly in Brazil. We also recognized that foregrounding race/color in Brazil can often require swimming upstream, given both the influences of longstanding conceptions of “racial democracy”, and the challenges associated with classifying race in a country where racial and ethnic survey categories vary regionally and over time. Despite this fluidity, ethnic and racial inequalities in health have been documented and reveal that black, indigenous and brown people face undisputable health inequalities.

The disciplinary backgrounds of the three co-organizers – Dóra Chor, Alexandra Minna Stern, and Ricardo Ventura Santos – exemplifies our interest in interdisciplinary cross-fertilization. Chor, an epidemiologist, has been at the forefront of a new wave of epidemiologic and public health research that demonstrates empirically the existence and profound implications of racial health inequalities in Brazil. Stern, a historian, has focused on changes and continuities in racial regimes and stereotypes in relation to health and illness in Latin America and the United States. Santos, an anthropologist, has written extensively on the complex relationship between racial/ ethnic identities, health and technoscience in Brazil. In addition to topics of race and health, the three editors have worked purposefully

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and collaboratively to develop methods and heuristics to “see” race and racial formation, through close readings of historical sources, consideration of empirical results, and attention to the discursive registers that can traverse humanities and social sciences.

The articles in this special issue exemplify the multidisciplinary research presented at the “Race, Health, and Discrimination” conference and are representative of the fields of history, social sciences, and epidemiology. Taken as a whole they illustrate both how far studies of race, health, and discrimination have advanced, and suggest future avenues for further inquiry. The contributors to the special issue cover a broad and innovative diversity of topics.

Comparative analyses of race and racial relations in Brazil and the United States have been very much part of the history of social sciences since at least the mid of the 20th century. That research agenda not only has helped us to reflect on the social, cultural and historical contexts under which racial identities have been forged in both countries. The Brazilian case is particularly illustrative in this regard. Awareness of racial inequalities and historical legacies of racism have influenced public policies in recent years, as shown by ongoing affirmative action initiatives. As the studies in this special issue demonstrate, at the same time that social scientists and epidemiologists are developing investigations that continue to help us to map and characterize patterns of racial inequities in health and related fields, both in historical and contemporary contexts, we are starting to better understand how the multilevel factors that mediate how race and related forms of belonging and identity might influence patterns of discrimination in health.

At this very historical moment, in the transition from 2016 to 2017, we experience in Brazil and in the United States specific, yet resonating, political configurations involving issues such as democratic participation, racial identities, and migration, as well as pressing questions about the future of health care systems. Despite the many differences, in both countries there is strong a concern among scholars and in the social movements about the possibility of reversion of public policies in a multitude of areas, including the health field, which, in recent decades, have emphasized inclusion and initiatives aimed at the poor and ethnic/racial minorities. We hope that the publication of this special issue, in a moment when the debates are so intense, and often heated, might help us to gain a broader and nuanced understanding that might lead to the preservation and, hopefully, advances in public policies in the areas of health and human rights.