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DISCRIMINATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN FRANCE: OBSERVING, MEASURING, UNDERSTANDING

LA DISCRIMINAZIONE NELL'ISTRUZIONE SUPERIORE E NELLA RICERCA IN FRANCIA: OSSERVARE, MISURARE, CAPIRE

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Abstract

This article explores the institutional and political issues related to conducting research on discrimination in French higher education, and more specifically on racism. French sociological and socio-anthropological research on education has used the prism of social class, largely relegating analyses on universities' users (staff and students) in ethno-racial terms. This contribution highlights the role of field research in understanding discrimination in higher education. It shows how analyzing both structural and micro-social levels of discrimination can help overcome the sterile opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods. To support this argument, the article presents preliminary results from the ACADISCRi survey.

Questo articolo esplora le questioni istituzionali e politiche legate alla conduzione di ricerche sulla discriminazione nell'istruzione superiore francese, e più specificamente sul razzismo. La ricerca sociologica e socio-antropologica francese sull'istruzione ha utilizzato il prisma della classe sociale, relegando in gran parte le analisi sugli utenti delle università (personale e studenti) in termini etno-

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razziali. Questo contributo evidenzia il ruolo della ricerca sul campo nella comprensione della discriminazione nell'istruzione superiore. Mostra come l'analisi dei livelli strutturali e micro-sociali della discriminazione possa aiutare a superare la sterile opposizione tra metodi qualitativi e quantitativi. A sostegno di questa tesi, l'articolo presenta i risultati preliminari dell'indagine ACADISCRI.

Keywords: Discrimination, student, staff, inequality, university, France.

Parole-chiave: Discriminazione, studenti, staff, disuguaglianza, università, Francia

The ACADISCRI research team is currently composed of Tana Bao, Géraldine Bozec, Marguerite Cognet, Fabrice Dhume, Camille Gillet, Christelle Hamel, Hanane Karimi, Cécile Rodrigues, Pierre-Olivier Weiss.

Introduction

According to the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research, in 2019, approximately 41% of baccalaureate holders will enter university (MESRI, 2021). For an ever-growing fraction of young people, university is becoming a mandatory step in their career path. What are the conditions under which this growing fraction of young people study? Higher Education is the last step of the educational process and is therefore dependent on selection processes that happen beforehand and reinforce race, class and gender inequalities. Higher education is also a workplace for many people of various occupations (teaching, research, and administrative professionals). Official data shows that foreigners represent 12% of students in 2015 and about 15% of teachers-researchers (EESR-10, 2017). How is higher education experienced by university campus users? Where and how do they experience discrimination?

Our argument in this contribution is that educational experience is framed both by structural, institutional discrimination and by its manifestation in daily lives. Structural discrimination affects hiring or admission processes, income and work or study conditions. Micro-level, interactive discrimination manifests itself in daily interactions, through stereotypes, hostility, micro-aggression, direct discrimination, or violence. As we will present, fieldwork studies suggest that French university campuses are not free of class, race, and gender discrimination, in its structural dimension in terms of access to education or employment and in its interactive dimension in terms of daily interactions within the campus, with university staff, or with other students. Most French sociological and socio-anthropological research on education has primarily used the lens of social class. The study of class discrimination in education is fairly well developed in terms of access to higher education but neglects everyday classist interactions and their potential impact on academic and career paths. Similarly, while some studies highlight inequalities in orientation and in income, gender discrimination and micro-aggressions remains little explored. Contrary to other national contexts, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, ethnic and racial discrimination is a relatively recent topic in French research, and large-scale statistical studies about the university are lacking. Moreover, research on university's professionals (educational, research and administrative staff) are scarce, especially regarding daily experience of class, gender, and race discrimination (Blassel, Gillet, Dhume, Weiss, Bao, 2022).

This contribution highlights the role of research terrain in understanding discrimination in Higher Education. The literature review explores the institutional and political issues related to research on discrimination in the French academic environment. We show that contrary to political discourse, research highlights the extent of discrimination in Higher Education. Rather than distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative research, our contribution presents both a structural lens and a micro-sociological lens on everyday racism, sexism, classism, ableism and LGBT-phobia experienced by students and staff. We illustrate our proposition with preliminary results from the ACADISCRI Survey (Hajjat *et al.*, 2022).

1. Assessing Structural Discrimination's Effects of Educational Experience

Analyzing structural discrimination means comparing minority groups' conditions of living with that of majority groups on particular sectors, such as higher education. Data on race and ethnicity is mostly collected through self-identification. Whereas this part of the research is quite common in countries with a so-called ethnic census, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, Canada, or Australia, it generates tension in the French context.

1.1. Naming the problem

In France, the question of racial discrimination is rather recent. It emerged in the early 2000s, with the legal recognition of discrimination by the European parliament through the "Race Equality Directive" implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin (Fibbi, Midtbøen, Simon, 2021). This directive is a milestone in the political awareness of racial discrimination in France. Nonetheless, research on race is still relegated to the category of "sensitive issue" (Dhume, 2010). Despite the numerous evidence of the persistence of racism in France, for instance in housing and employment, but also in education (Beauchemin, Hamel & Simon, 2016; Brinbaum, Chavel, & Tenret, 2013), research on racism in general, and on racism in education in particular, is still lacking and suffering from academic minorization. To better understand this lack, we have to explore the categories by which France analyzes its society.

In countries with an ethnic census, systematic ethnic or racial data collects information about people's ethnic group, religion and national identity based on self-identification measures reflecting how people define themselves (Piketty, 2022, p. 42-27). The opposition to a systematic ethnic census (Simon, 2014) in France is politically explained by the idea that the 1958 Constitution states that there shall be no distinction based on origin, race, or religion. Even though what is at stake in survey are differences in treatment, access to opportunities and justice, this is often used to justify a "color-blind" policy. Ethnic data is blamed for "ethnicizing" the French society. Moreover, French integration policies are supposed to lead to an assimilation process resulting in the disappearance of differences and the conformance to an imagined French culture. Hence, France does not officially recognize minority groups within the nation. This political and academic discourse linking "republican discourse", universalism and colorblindness (Hajjat, 2021b, p. 419) has been used to justify the absence of ethnic census in France. Nonetheless, in practice, some elements that can be associated with ethnic census have been produced in colonial and post-colonial France. For instance, A. Hajjat (2021a, p. 27) shows that in the judiciary system, database collect information on victims or suspects with 12 racial types (such as "White or Caucasian", "Mediterranean", "Gypsy", "Middle-Eastern", "Mixed", "Black" and "Polynesian")³. No matter its daily social use, and its scientific necessity, talking about race remains a sensitive topic in France, including in the academic space (Hajjat & Larcher, 2019). The resistance to considering the existence of ethnoracial social relations prevents "the recognition of discriminatory facts, tending to dissolve them in the traditional analysis grid of social inequalities" (Simon, 2000, p. 6). Racial discrimination is analyzed either through the paradigm of integration, imputing inequalities to immigrants' lack of integration, or through a social link paradigm, emphasizing integration measures for students from French suburban high schools. In this context, what statistical data is nonetheless available to describe France's diverse population?

Before 1989, French national statistics only collected nationality, through a binary categorization (foreign or French), since a so-called "soil law" enables foreigners to acquire

³ Despite recommendations from institutions like the National Commission for Information Technology and Civil Liberties, those categories are still in place, and influence racial perception

French nationality after a given period of presence. In 1989, the French statistical authority introduced the category of “immigrant”, based on the place of birth, in a context of intense political debates on integration policies. The category “immigrant descent”, being children born in France to parents themselves born outside France also appeared. This shift from the legal category of nationality to the demographic category of the place of birth shows a paradigmatic shift (Spire, 1999). From then onwards, migration background based on one’s place of birth or their parent’s is considered as objective data (Simon, 2014) and is often used as a proxy to analyze racialized minorities. But because it only measures two generations, we are deprived of tools to systematically analyze the situation of racialized minorities.

Compared to the UK or the US, France therefore does not have systematic data on how people identify in terms of race or ethnicity, and higher education makes no exception in this respect, as official statistics produced by the Ministry for Higher Education and Research mainly differentiate between international foreign and national students or academics. What do we know about class, gender and racist structural discrimination in higher education, and how do they affect students and staff?

1.2. Class, gender and racist structural discrimination in higher education

The field of French higher education and research is rather well analyzed under the prism of social inequalities and their evolution (Jaoul, 2004; Duru-Bellat & *al.*, 2011; Jaoul-Grammare, 2016). Since the famous work from Bourdieu and Passeron (1964)⁴, research has shown inequalities in orientation suffered by students based on social background (Beaud & Convert, 2010; Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, Reimer, 2011), emphasizing how social practices of educational orientation produce inequalities during and after the school system. Research also shows the subjective perception of inequalities and their internalization by individuals. Such research on academic staff is however lacking.

Gender inequalities in orientation for students and in academic careers for university staff have become a specific field of study in France over the last twenty years (Musselin, Pigeyre, 2008; Rogers, Molinier, 2016; Pochic, 2018) with several major surveys accompanying the implementation of public policies in favor of gender equality in the civil service (Perrier & *al.*, 2018). Research shows that the recruitment systems produce gender-based discrimination against women in the French university, as well as on the labor market in general.

In comparison, the processes of structural racial discrimination within the academic space, as well as the experience of racialized students and staff, remain under-explored (Dhume & Cognet, 2020). Statistical analysis studies attest that students are being “stigmatized as being of Arab origin from the patronymic point of view” or as having a Muslim-sounding first name are discriminated against in their access to selective programs (Grivillers, 2005; Decharne & Liedts, 2007). More recent field experiments highlight discrimination experienced by North African origins’ students in the selection process of master’s degree candidates (Chareyron, Erb & L’Horty, 2022).

This scarcity of data contrasts with countries in which ethnic data is available. In the UK for instance, data shows that Black and Minority ethnics are “less likely to access high-status contracts or occupy senior managerial positions, less likely to be professors and less likely to be on the highest pay range compared to their White colleagues” (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019 p. 18). Racism intersects with gender in professional academic life in terms of contract, as women are more likely than men to be on a fixed term rather than an open-ended contract. Indeed, “in professional and support services contracts, 79.6% of all employees on part-time contracts were women. In academic staff, 55.6% of employees on part-time academic contracts

⁴ For an English translation, see Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, vol. 4, Sage.

were women, representing a smaller but nevertheless significant difference in modes of academic working between men and women” (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019, p. 13). Moreover, women are 5% more likely than men to occupy teaching only contracts and 5% less likely to occupy research-only contracts, and “17.8% fewer of all teaching and research contracts were taken by women than by men”, in a context in which teaching-only contracts are the least prestigious of contract types. Women and Black and Minority ethnic occupy the majority of lower-ranked contracts, and the minority in higher status contracts associated with research. Those differences lead to differences in pay range.

Literature shows how large-scale data on university’s users can improve our understanding of structural discrimination operating in Higher Education. Another aspect to explore in understanding the experience of education is daily interactions within Higher Education institutions.

2. A closer look at daily experiences

Daily experiences within Higher Education institutions affect student’s and staff’s experience on the campuses and reinforce structural inequalities. Field research, both qualitative and quantitative, help us understand how everyday racism⁵ (Essed, 1991), sexism, or classism is experienced in France. Collective initiatives need to be conducted across institutions to better understand the situation and help improve educational policies.

2.1. A segmented body of research

Up to now, literature on daily experiences of discrimination rarely considers multiple universities users (students and staff), multiple discrimination grounds, and multiple situations where discrimination could take place.

Daily experience of sexism is hardly analyzed specifically. One of the rare exceptions is Gender violence Virage-Universités Research (Lebugle & Dupuis, 2018), which shows that about half of female respondents declare sexism at university or sexual harassment in pedagogical relationships (Cromer & Guillopé, 2018). Procedures make it difficult for victims, especially when faced with a hierarchical power imbalance (Hamel, 2008; Delzangles, 2017). Regarding gender and sexual orientation, there are still very few academic research and data mainly comes from students’ activists’ initiatives (Wargon & Le Bellec, 2020, OVSS, 2020).

Regarding racism, studies depict international students’ exposure to discrimination at work and in housing in particular (Borgogno & Streiff-Fénart, 1999; Foegle, 2014). Qualitative studies have shown that students (Blassel 2021; Weiss, 2021a; Druez, 2016; Quintero, 2013; Poutignat & Streiff-Fénart, 1995) as well as staff (Blassel, 2018; Weiss, 2018) experience racist discrimination on a daily and repeated basis, in France as well as in other European countries (Swim, Hyers & Cohen, 2003). The incidents reported are verbal expressions of prejudice, poor service, stares and difficulties in interpersonal exchanges, and significantly impact students emotionally, resulting in discomfort or feelings of threat.

In France, the ideological opposition to ethnic data mentioned in the previous section leads to the idea that statistical surveys on racial discrimination “would undoubtedly be ‘unwelcome’ and especially by students” (Acadie 2004, p. 29). Yet, exploratory surveys conducted mainly in one institution (GRERI, 2018) show that these issues are welcomed by the student

⁵ This notion highlights how hostility, undermining attitudes, and other forms of direct discrimination reinforce structural inequalities.

population. At Paris-Nanterre University, the RACUNIV-ETU survey reveals that, among 905 ethnically minority students, 54% report having experienced one or more racist microaggressions, 27% racist insults, and 4% racist violence⁶. A survey conducted Aix-Marseille University shows the prevalence of victimization and discrimination in particular (Weiss, 2021b). At Lorraine University, a study (n = 4,020) on seven discrimination criteria (age, disability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, origin and religion), shows that 46% of students report witnessing discrimination, primarily related to origin, and 19% being a victim of it (Mission égalité diversité, 2017). Among victims, the most common form is sexual harassment, mostly reported by women (88% of cases). At Bordeaux University, a similar study (n=4,309) shows 21.7% of students said they had witnessed discrimination, mainly on 5 criteria (foreign origin, real or assumed; physical appearance; gender; skin color and disability), and 9.5% said they had been personally discriminated against (Collective, 2019, p. 7). Finally, at Angers University, a survey administered among students (n=1756) and staff (n=716) shows that 16.1% of students and 32.4% of staff stated that they had witnessed discrimination, differential treatment or violence, while 10.3% of students (plus 12.3% saying they were unsure of the qualification of the facts) and 17.5% of staff (plus 11.2% saying they were unsure) stated that they were direct victims⁷. Comparing French-speaking regions, an online survey (Bergeron, Blanchet & Lebon-Eyquem, 2019) conducted among 552 students on various forms of discrimination experienced in three French regions (Brittany, Provence, La Réunion) and in Ontario, Canada indicates that one third of respondents declared having been a victim of discrimination based on sex and gender, skin color, age, religion, or surname during the last three years; one quarter acknowledged having experienced a difficult situation without being able to determine if this situation was discrimination. Interestingly, the 2016 “Student living conditions” survey conducted across several universities reveals intersecting grounds for unequal treatment: 15% of students who enter two criteria for unequal treatment in their course of study attribute it to their “skin color” and their “origin and nationality”, 9% listed “their origins or nationality and their religion”, 7% “their origins or nationality and their age”, and 6% “their gender and their age” (Ferry & Tenret, 2017, p. 6). The survey also shows differences based on gender and social class, as women more frequently report less favorable treatment in dealing with peers, while men more often question grading or guidance decisions, and students from working-class or immigrant background who have to work alongside their studies are “also more likely to consider that they have been treated less favorably than their peers on all of the proposed dimensions” (Ferry & Tenret, 2017, p. 3).

This literature shows the existence of daily discrimination in higher education, but also the difficulty of comparing across time and institutions as data differs. This literature highlights the need for large-scale investigations of both students’ and staff’ multiple experience of discrimination in higher education and research. This is why the ACADISCR⁸ research project

⁶ https://www.inshs.cnrs.fr/sites/institut_inshs/files/download-file/lettre_infoINSHS_61.pdf

⁷ These results are presented online: <https://www.univ-angers.fr/fr/universite/strategies-et-grands-projets/egalite/enquetes/enquete-egalite-ua.html>

⁸ The ACADISCR⁸ research team came together after a [conference](#) organized in September 2018. The project was initiated by scientists specializing in the study of discrimination, including sexism and racism. It is based on exploratory investigations conducted by M. Cognet and F. Dhume at Paris Diderot

was created, with the aim of better understanding the study and work conditions of students and staff in higher education and research.

2.2. ACADISCR I preliminary results

The ACADISCR I research is a large-scale project conducted in several institutions in metropolitan France and overseas. It consists of a quantitative survey and post-survey qualitative interviews. The survey is distributed to all staff (permanent and contractual) and students (from Bachelor to Doctorate level), and records the experience of various forms of discrimination (micro-aggressions, discrimination, insults, violence), their various contexts (location, duration, perpetrator(s), witness(es), etc.) and various grounds (gender and gender identity, race and ethnicity, religion, social class, health, disability, political opinion), separately and intersectionally.

For this paper, we focus on one of the universities in which data was collected (Hajjat *et al.*, 2022), in which 2034 complete questionnaires have been collected (1733 from students, 305 from staff). This preliminary data shows the extent of discrimination students and staff face daily on campuses. The most common form experienced by respondents is micro-aggression⁹ (40% of staff; 10% of students), then harassment (24% of staff 5% of student); insults (21% of staff; 3.6% of students), and discrimination (22% of staff; less than 7% of students). These consistent differences show that University as a difficult labor environment is having less impact on students. The gap between students and staff is reduced when it comes to physical violence or threat (8% of staff; less than 3% of students). Staff are more likely than students to declare all motives of discrimination: sexism, racism, class-based discrimination, political and union discrimination, health discrimination and LGBTphobia. These differences can be explained by three elements: first, staff might be better equipped to identify discrimination and declare them in the survey; second, professional relations might enhance discrimination, compared to study relations; third, being longer in an institution might imply being more exposed to discrimination.

Total complete: N=2034	Students (N=1755)	Staff (N=279)
Discrimination	17,7%	50,9%
Sexism	4,8%	13,6%
Racism	4,7%	9,7%
LGBTphobia	0,9%	2,1%
Health discrimination	1%	4,2%
Political/union discrimination	2,6%	5,9%
Class discrimination	2,3%	5,9%
Other motives	9,7%	40,1%

Table 1: Discrimination criteria at the university

Source: ACADSCR I Survey- Pilot University, 2020.

University and by A. Hajjat at Paris Nanterre University. The team was reinforced by specialists in discrimination in education, sexual and gender-based violence, racism and islamophobia. It is now constituted of T. Bao, R. Blassel, G. Bozec, M. Cognet, F. Dhume, C. Gillet, A. Hajjat, C. Hamel, H. Karimi, L. Longuet, C. Rodrigues, and P.-O. Weiss. For more information on our survey and the team, please refer to the research project website: <http://acadiscr i.hypotheses.org>

⁹ The term microaggression refers to seemingly trivial behaviors or comments towards a marginalized group of people that are perceived as derogatory or insulting.

When declaring discrimination, most respondents did not choose a specific motive for these treatments, which shows that identifying a motive of discrimination is not an easy task, as other previously mentioned studies suggest, especially when discrimination is not explicit. This is why the survey helped respondents by giving examples of daily situations, and then suggesting discriminatory grounds, without using the term discrimination right away. Gender and race are the two main motives for discrimination. Racism is more reported by staff (9.7%) than by students (4.7%), and especially by technical and administrative staff (12.8%) and by doctoral or graduate students (11.9%) who are at the lower end of the academic staff scale in terms of status and working conditions, compared to researchers and teachers (6.9%). Experiences of racism, sexism and classism are more frequent among undergraduate students and doctoral students. Racism is reported by 15.1% of foreign or naturalized staff and by 21.3% of BME staff, and reported by 9.5% of foreign or naturalized students (compared to 2.9% of French students), by 18.7% of students born in Sub-Saharan Africa, by 16.2% of students who declare themselves black, by 10.8% of students perceived as Muslim, and 15.9% Asian declare having been victims of racism. This emphasizes the necessity of data of racial self-identification. If we consider several motives combined, we note that sexism intersects with power relations in 53.5% of sexist situations, meaning that respondents identified both their gender and their hierarchical position as grounds for discrimination. Racist situations intersect mainly with class relations (in 40.5 % of racist situations), meaning that respondents identified both their race and social origin as grounds for discrimination. This emphasizes the overlapping of power struggles.

Regarding the location where discrimination takes place, we see a difference based on the grounds for discrimination. While sexism occurs in public situations (group spaces, large group classes), racism occurs in more intimate settings (small classrooms, meeting rooms), as large group classes host 19.5% of sexist microaggressions and 5.8% of racist microaggressions. Other spaces appear to be less prevalent, such as student housing, union halls, research labs, libraries, university dining halls, or sports halls. Most of the situations declared take place within university campus. Most of the authors of these discriminations have the same status as the victims within university (about racism: 47% for students; 81.6% for teachers and researchers, and 64.5% for technical and administrative staff).

Few of the respondents engaged actions. Amongst the people who declared having been discriminated against and having informed university's administration, 68 % declared the appeal did not lead to anything, only 16,9 % lead to an internal inquiry preliminary for discipline action, 15.7 % on a conciliation, 4 % on a hierarchical action and 2.6 % on a disciplinary action. People who appealed to the police have mainly dropped the process (48.8%) or have been discouraged (14.3 %), only 29.1 % end up in a complaint and 7.9 % are to be logged in the police logbook. This suggests that policies still need improvement to protect and guide victims. Victims mainly share their experience with friends in between one fourth and half of the situations declared. Overall, victims of gender-based microaggressions and discrimination are more likely to share their experience with colleagues or classmates than victims of racist microaggressions and discrimination.

Conclusion

Studying discrimination in higher education is not an easy task (Blassel & *al.*, 2022) and proves to be a politically sensitive question. But the review of the literature presented here shows the necessity to conduct fieldwork research in order to better understand how higher education is experienced by students and staff. Rather than opposing quantitative and qualitative research, we presented the benefits both of a structural approach to systemic discrimination and of a micro-social analysis of daily interactions on campuses and their effects

on individuals. The ACADISCRi research highlights the need for an in-depth survey to analyze the different types and forms of discrimination and their consequences on the victims. This data can help improve existing actions on academic inclusion. We need in-depth standardized data to compare the extent of discrimination over time, across institutions and across countries, and to measure and improve the effectiveness of educational policies in addressing discrimination.

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