



**ACCESS AND PERMANENCE OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AT AMAZONAS
FEDERAL UNIVERSITY: ANTI-INDIGENOUS RACISM IN QUESTION**

***ACESSO E PERMANÊNCIA DE ESTUDANTES INDÍGENAS NA UNIVERSIDADE
FEDERAL DO AMAZONAS: O RACISMO ANTI-INDÍGENA EM QUESTÃO***

***ACCESO Y PERMANENCIA DE ESTUDIANTES INDÍGENAS EN LA UNIVERSIDAD
FEDERAL DEL AMAZONAS: EL RACISMO ANTIINDÍGENA EN CUESTIÓN***



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ABSTRACT: Indigenous students face numerous challenges during their university studies, such as devaluation of their cultural, linguistic, and epistemological background, but especially anti-Indigenous racism. The article aims to understand the experiences of anti-indigenous racism among students at Federal University of Amazonas and its impacts on their persistence in higher education. Five Indigenous students participated in open narrative interviews, followed by content analysis, and three categories emerged from the analysis: educational path (schooling trajectory; adaptation to the city and university); anti-indigenous racism (discrimination, prejudice; shame); coping strategies (financial mobility and support; self-esteem). The results demonstrate that anti-indigenous racism in the academic environment is a significant factor that hinders students' adaptation and social relationships, reinforcing prejudice and exclusion. The desire for personal and collective transformation, along with the support and recognition of their communities, serves as a coping strategy for students to remain in higher education.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education. Schooling. University. Anti-Indigenous Racism.

RESUMO: Estudantes indígenas enfrentam muitos desafios durante a permanência na universidade, como a desvalorização e a inferiorização cultural, linguística e epistemológica, mas, sobretudo, o racismo anti-indígena. O objetivo deste artigo é compreender as vivências de racismo anti-indígena de estudantes da Universidade Federal do Amazonas e seus impactos sobre a permanência no ensino superior. Foram entrevistados cinco estudantes indígenas por meio de entrevistas narrativas abertas, com posterior análise de conteúdo, que indicou as seguintes categorias: percurso educacional (trajetória de escolarização; adaptação à cidade e à universidade); racismo anti-indígena (discriminação, preconceito e vergonha); estratégias de enfrentamento (ascensão financeira e incentivos; estima). Os resultados demonstram que o racismo anti-indígena no ambiente acadêmico constitui um fator significativo que prejudica a adaptação e as relações dos estudantes, reforçando preconceitos e exclusão. O desejo de transformação pessoal e coletiva, aliado ao apoio e ao reconhecimento de suas comunidades, funciona como estratégia de enfrentamento para a permanência desses estudantes na universidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação Superior. Escolarização. Universidade. Racismo Anti-Indígena.

RESUMEN: Estudiantes indígenas se enfrentan a muchos desafíos durante su estancia en la universidad, como la devaluación y el menosprecio de sus culturas, lenguas y epistemologías, pero sobre todo el racismo antiindígena. El objetivo de este artículo es comprender las vivencias de racismo antiindígena de estudiantes de la Universidad Federal del Amazonas y los impactos en su permanencia en la educación superior. Entrevistamos cinco estudiantes indígenas con entrevista narrativa abierta, con posterior análisis de contenido, que indicó las siguientes categorías: trayectoria educativa (trayectoria escolar; adaptación a la ciudad y a la universidad); racismo antiindígena (discriminación, prejuicio, vergüenza); estrategias de afrontamiento (avance financiero e incentivos; autoestima). Los resultados demuestran que el racismo antiindígena en el entorno académico es un factor significativo que perjudica la adaptación y las relaciones de los estudiantes, reforzando los prejuicios y la exclusión. E deseo de transformación personal y colectiva, junto con el apoyo y reconocimiento de sus comunidades, funcionan como una estrategia de afrontamiento para permanecer como estudiante universitario.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Superior. Enseñanza. Universidad. Racismo Antiindígena.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to understand the experiences of anti-Indigenous racism among students at the Federal University of Amazonas and the impacts of this phenomenon on their persistence in higher education. Despite persistent economic, social, and racial inequalities, Indigenous peoples have collectively organized to gain access to the material and symbolic resources of Brazilian society, including higher education institutions, which are regarded as strategic spaces for the legitimization of knowledge (Neves & Silva, 2024). The growing presence of Indigenous students in Brazilian universities is largely the result of Indigenous movements, whose advocacy has emphasized the need for closer dialogue in the education and training of professionals and researchers (Amado, 2020).

Access to and persistence in higher education continue to present major challenges both for Indigenous students and for higher education institutions. Ensuring the quality of education while valuing Indigenous knowledge systems and subjectivities, grounded in Indigenous worldviews, cosmopolitics, epistemologies, and ontologies, remains essential (Peron & Cella, 2021). The inclusion and presence of Indigenous students in universities continue to be constrained by colonial structures, as Brazilian universities were historically developed according to hegemonic and Eurocentric models that perpetuate social hierarchies by privileging certain forms of knowledge and maintaining unequal access to higher education (Silva, 2023). Neves and Silva (2024) argue that this *modus operandi* of higher education institutions is grounded in epistemic racism and epistemicide, perpetuating the devaluation, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward the intellectual production of Indigenous, African, and Afro-Brazilian peoples.

An important milestone in securing Indigenous peoples' access to rights was the promulgation of the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution, which recognized their right to a specific and differentiated school education, primarily focused on basic education. Since then, several legal frameworks have been established to strengthen these guarantees, including the National Curriculum Guidelines for Indigenous Schools (RCNEI) (1998); Law No. 10,558/2002, which established the *University Diversity Program*; Law No. 11,096/2005, which created the *University for All Program (PROUNI)*; Law No. 11,645/2008, which mandates the teaching of Indigenous culture in schools; Law No. 12,711/2012 (Quota Law); and, subsequently, CNE/CEB Resolution No. 1/2015, which established guidelines for the education of Indigenous teachers (Menezes et al., 2021).

Despite these advances, Indigenous peoples' access to higher education continues to

reveal significant contradictions. According to the 2022 Higher Education Census, conducted by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP), Indigenous students accounted for only 0.4% of undergraduate admissions, followed by Asian students (1.3%), Black students (6.5%), and Brown (mixed-race) students (26.7%). White students represented 35.9% of admissions, while 29.1% of entrants did not report their race or ethnicity (INEP, 2022).

Neves and Silva (2024) argue that racism is the primary factor hindering Indigenous students' persistence in higher education, as this phenomenon permeates multiple dimensions of Brazil's social and political relations. Addressing this issue requires diverse strategies and broader understandings capable of supporting more effective institutional responses. The racialization of peoples produces relations of domination and exploitation that are legitimized through Eurocentric structures such as universities. Racism is rooted in historical processes, particularly colonization, and emerged as a means of classifying humanity by establishing hierarchies and subordinating individuals and groups based on perceived physical or cultural differences associated with the notion of race (Lima & Vala, 2004; Ribeiro, 2022). This ongoing process of racial discrimination is also reflected in restricted access to essential social goods and services, including basic and higher education. Racism functions as a sociohistorical norm that regulates privilege and defines positions of power within society (Lima, 2020).

The literature has identified a specific form of racism directed at Indigenous peoples, referred to as anti-Indigenous racism. According to Calegare and Santos (2025), this phenomenon is characterized by portraying Indigenous people as less than human, demonizing their religious beliefs, sexualizing them (by blaming Indigenous women for nudity and sexual violence), depicting them as uncivilized (lacking culture or civilization), infantilizing them (as though they required state tutelage and guidance toward development), denying their existence (within academic research, national society, the country's history, and everyday Brazilian life), portraying them as primitive through frozen colonial stereotypes, and demanding that they speak an Indigenous language and live exclusively on officially demarcated Indigenous lands. These practices are rooted in attempts at extermination and genocide initiated during colonization and continue today through the multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination that constitute anti-Indigenous racism.

Studies have identified a range of challenges experienced by Indigenous students, including difficulties in understanding and appropriating the Portuguese language and

scientific discourse; institutional shortcomings resulting from the lack of preparedness among university staff to engage in intercultural relationships; bureaucratic barriers to accessing student support services; limited access to information; insufficient financial assistance and academic support; and the challenges associated with relocating from Indigenous territories to urban centers, reflected in differences in culture, purchasing power, urban infrastructure, and social relations (Bergamaschi et al., 2018; Calegare & Sales, 2023; Calegare & Santos, 2025; Gomes & Nina, 2024; Peron & Cella, 2021; Silva, 2023). These challenges stem from the devaluation of Indigenous cultures, the subordination of Indigenous peoples, and ongoing processes of marginalization. Consequently, one of the principal barriers to students' persistence in higher education is the devaluation of Indigenous identity, particularly when it is associated with assumptions about limited academic, intellectual, and cognitive ability.

The historical exclusion of Indigenous peoples is rooted in the restrictions imposed by coloniality/modernity, which structure Eurocentric capitalist power. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Indigenous collective action has made possible new forms of resistance, political contestation, and achievement within the context of coloniality (Silva, 2023). One such achievement is access to higher education, understood as a strategic space through which Indigenous peoples can participate in dialogue and knowledge production while advancing their educational, territorial, health-related, and political demands in relation to non-Indigenous society (Molina & Ribeiro, 2024; Machado, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2024).

Understanding the everyday challenges experienced by Indigenous students and their influence on persistence in higher education is therefore fundamental to advancing anti-racist and intercultural education. Intercultural dialogue within academic debates emphasizes the diversity of social groups by recognizing alternative forms of knowledge and subjectivity through the struggle against racism (Neves & Silva, 2024). In this sense, interculturality constitutes a social, political, and epistemic project of resistance that challenges coloniality (Machado, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2024; Silva, 2023). Indigenous students' access to higher education exposes structural problems arising from the hierarchical organization of universities, making the experience of belonging within academic institutions particularly challenging. Universities must therefore also become Indigenous territories—spaces in which Indigenous students can appropriate the academic environment, establish meaningful relationships, and understand how higher education functions through interactions that enable them to experience university life with dignity and quality (Gomes & Nina, 2024).

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach (Gerhardt & Silveira, 2009). Data were collected through open narrative interviews designed to explore participants' educational trajectories and their experiences of anti-Indigenous racism, with particular attention to the challenges they encountered in the academic environment, their lived experiences, and the coping strategies they developed to gain access to and persist in higher education.

The study included five Indigenous students (four women and one man) enrolled in the undergraduate programs of Law, Fisheries Engineering, and Psychology, as presented in Table 1. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique, a method based on participants' social networks rather than a formal sampling frame (Dewes & Nunes, 2013). The study complied with all applicable ethical standards by ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity, in accordance with Brazilian National Health Council Resolutions No. 466/2012 and No. 510/2016. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee under Protocol No. 3,516,303.

Table 1
Profile of the Indigenous student participants

Participants	Ethnic Group	Age	Degree Program
Beatriz	Sateré Mawé	21	Law
Hélio	Kokama	21	Law
Elora	Tikuna	18	Fisheries Engineering
Diana	Sateré Mawé	23	Psychology
Rute	Apurinã	18	Psychology

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Federal University of Amazonas and audio-recorded using the following opening prompt: "Tell me about your educational trajectory up to the moment you entered university." The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were subsequently transcribed, and analyzed using Bardin's (2011) content analysis, which comprises three stages: (1) pre-analysis (preliminary reading and identification of initial categories); (2) material exploration (coding interview excerpts into thematic units and final categories); and (3) data treatment, including inference and interpretation (presentation of the findings through participants' narratives).

RESULTS

Content analysis identified the following thematic units and their respective categories: (I) Indigenous students' educational trajectories (schooling trajectory; adaptation to the city and university); (II) anti-Indigenous racism (discrimination and prejudice; shame); and (III) coping strategies for persistence in higher education (financial mobility and support; esteem).

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES

This thematic unit examines Indigenous students' educational trajectories up to their entry into higher education, focusing on the main challenges encountered throughout this process. Based on participants' narratives, the following categories were identified.

Schooling Trajectory

The category "schooling trajectory" refers to the challenges and enduring impacts experienced throughout participants' educational journeys, from life in their Indigenous communities to their entry into university (Calegare & Sales, 2023). This trajectory encompasses a wide range of experiences (Gomes & Nina, 2024), and participants' narratives revealed a reality marked by social inequalities and socioeconomic barriers that have shaped their educational experiences since basic education.

Participants described distinct educational trajectories that nonetheless reflected the particular circumstances of those growing up in the interior of the state of Amazonas:

My mother realized that the quality of education in the interior wasn't good. If you really want opportunities, you have to leave [...] My parents took my siblings and me to the city so we could study [...] there were six children [...] we went through many difficult situations because of our financial circumstances. (Beatriz)

I started school when I was five years old. I attended four or five different schools before entering UFAM [...] I repeated the seventh grade twice because my parents were separating and my mother was studying Law. She had to complete an internship, and then she became pregnant. I was responsible for taking care of my younger sister, so there were days when I had to miss school because my mother had to go to her internship, and I ended up failing because of my absences. (Rute)

I attended a riverside school, and my home was a floating house [...] I changed schools several times because we were always looking for better opportunities. Since our house wasn't permanently located in one place, boats would tow it to different locations [...] Later I moved to Manaus, but I spent about two years without attending school. (Hélio)

Participants reported experiencing numerous difficulties resulting from the poor quality of basic education in municipalities located in the interior of Amazonas, which led many families to migrate in search of better educational opportunities. These challenges were compounded by limited financial resources and the effects of diverse family circumstances.

Calegare and Sales (2023) argue that Indigenous students' schooling trajectories are shaped by migration, socioeconomic vulnerability, and barriers that delay the completion of basic education. These circumstances place Indigenous students at an academic disadvantage and expose them to experiences of discrimination and prejudice.

These challenges are further intensified by the predominance of Western culture, which imposes economic, social, and cultural barriers throughout Indigenous students' educational trajectories. Such discrimination persists within higher education, manifesting itself in both overt and subtle ways that reinforce feelings of not belonging and social isolation in the university environment. As a result, it significantly undermines students' persistence in higher education while reinforcing the exclusion and marginalization they experience (Herbetta & Nazareno, 2020). Participants' narratives demonstrate that these challenges begin in childhood, while students are still living in Indigenous communities in the interior of Amazonas, owing to the lack of public policies that ensure access to high-quality Indigenous school education. This reality underscores the urgent need for structural changes capable of promoting equity throughout Indigenous students' educational trajectories, preventing these difficulties and their associated traumas from being continually reproduced during their experiences in higher education.

Adaptation to the City and University

Adapting to both urban life and the university environment presents significant challenges to Indigenous students' persistence in higher education, including health-related problems, long commuting distances, limited financial resources, delays in accessing student support services, and insecurities associated with navigating everyday university life (Calegare & Sales, 2023). In this study, this category explores participants' arrival in the city,

the challenges arising from their transition to the urban environment, and their initial experiences upon entering university. The following excerpts illustrate these experiences:

I had to move to Manaus [...] I started living on my own [...] every month there was rent, electricity, water bills, and study materials [...] adapting was the hardest part for me. When I arrived at the university, I couldn't even study. I cried all the time and just wanted to go back home [...] I kept fighting to receive the Permanent Scholarship [...] and I only got it after more than a year. (Beatriz)

When I moved here, it was very difficult for me [...] I spent my entire first year struggling with the move and the adaptation process [...] It's remarkable how moving from the interior to the capital city makes such a huge difference. (Diana)

When I first arrived at university, I felt completely out of place [...] we think everyone will experience the program in the same way, but not everyone has the same opportunities [...] especially Indigenous students who come from the interior [...] it's not only about academic support, but also about whether the university will provide any kind of support, including assistance in their own language. (Hélio).

Only one participant reported experiencing no difficulties adapting to either the university or life in the city, as she already lived in the state capital. The remaining participants described significant challenges, including housing difficulties, adjusting to life away from their families, obstacles in obtaining financial assistance, administrative barriers, and the demands of academic life. The period immediately following admission proved to be particularly critical, as it is during this stage that dropout rates among Indigenous students are highest.

Within this context, Coulon (2008) conceptualizes the university experience as comprising two dimensions. The first, the intellectual dimension, concerns learning the university's norms and codes, including academic vocabulary, reading, writing, concentration, and organizational skills. The second, the relational dimension, refers to the quality of interactions with peers and faculty, which is essential for building relationships that foster collaborative learning. The lack of adequate support and limited understanding of Indigenous students' specific needs across these two dimensions can reinforce prejudice and further hinder their academic experience. Continuous support throughout students' academic trajectories is therefore essential for the successful education of Indigenous students (Bergamaschi et al., 2018).

ANTI-INDIGENOUS RACISM

This thematic unit focuses on manifestations of anti-Indigenous racism within the academic environment. Candau (2003) argues that the various forms of discrimination reveal a dialectical relationship between ethnic and social discrimination, such that one cannot be reduced to the other. Within the university context, these forms of discrimination may become more pronounced, reinforcing what the author refers to as a “culture of discrimination”. For Indigenous students, this culture is expressed through a persistent division between “us” and “them”, characterized by the refusal to recognize those perceived as different and, consequently, regarded as inferior because of their identities and ways of being. The following categories comprise this thematic unit.

Discrimination and Prejudice

This category highlights participants’ accounts of prejudice and discrimination experienced by Indigenous students. These manifestations often take ambiguous forms, which may lead to an underestimation of their severity or make it difficult to recognize the violence they entail, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

We are so excluded [...] he told me to go back to my hut [...] It’s as if you don’t exist, as if you belong nowhere. They won’t even consider your opinion. (Rute)

You notice other people’s prejudice when they ask, ‘Who here is an Indigenous student?’ [...] I was the only one who raised my hand, and everyone started looking at me [...] Then I overheard someone saying, ‘She’s an Indigenous student, she’ll probably struggle, so let’s not invite her into our group.’ That was devastating. I was already having difficulties, and hearing that made everything even harder [...] I’m afraid of being excluded even more. (Beatriz)

People treated me differently, but not in a positive way. It was the kind of treatment that made me uncomfortable. (Elora)

Participants described experiences that reveal multiple manifestations of racism and prejudice. Over time, these forms of discrimination have evolved, occurring primarily through interpersonal relationships and everyday discriminatory practices (Lima & Vala, 2004). Marinho (2021) argues that identifying ethnic-racial prejudice and discrimination has become increasingly complex because these forms of discrimination intersect with other

discriminatory practices and are often expressed in subtle ways.

In the case of Indigenous peoples in Brazil, anti-Indigenous racism manifests itself in multiple forms. These include derogatory public statements made by political authorities, explicit acts of violence against Indigenous communities and individuals, the fossilization of Indigenous cultures, and the denial of Indigenous existence (Milanez et al., 2019). Although frequently subtle, expressions of racism and prejudice remain evident within the academic environment and reflect deep structural inequalities. Consequently, universities are still not adequately prepared to embrace Indigenous cultural diversity or recognize it as a fundamental dimension of Indigenous students' persistence in higher education. Moura and Matos (2022) support this perspective, emphasizing that discrimination remains an ongoing reality and reinforcing the need for more effective strategies to promote inclusion and provide continuous support for Indigenous students.

Shame and Social Humiliation

Shame, as an expression of social humiliation, also affects the academic and personal lives of Indigenous university students. Shame is understood as an intimate and personal experience characterized by a negative moral self-evaluation that occurs when individuals feel unable to meet their own expectations or maintain a positive self-image (La Taille, 2004). Social humiliation, in turn, manifests itself through situations of exploitation and exclusion that are characteristic of capitalist societies, where individuals are subjected to discriminatory and unjust treatment (Fernandes et al., 2016). Such experiences violate the dignity and honor of individuals and groups, as illustrated in the following accounts:

When I was admitted to university, I didn't like talking about it because I felt ashamed [...] You notice the way people look at you. I wear Indigenous accessories, and whether I want to or not, they attract attention [...] We fight so hard to preserve and honor our heritage precisely so that other Indigenous people won't feel ashamed of their customs [...] Those looks make you wonder: Why did they wrinkle their nose? Why did they turn away? Why did they laugh? It frightens me. Here at the university, it makes me feel ashamed. (Beatriz)

You have your Portuguese name and the name given by your people [...] I don't even tell people my Indigenous name because it's a way of protecting myself from embarrassing situations [...] It's exhausting to go through these situations and all the questions [...] Sometimes it feels like you're an alien [...] People have a stereotyped view of Indigenous

people, as if we were somehow inferior. (Rute)

Indigenous students continually experience feelings of shame. According to Melo and Santos (2018), social humiliation, as a psychosocial consequence of racism, should be understood as a collective phenomenon, even though it is experienced individually, because it stems from relations of domination and oppression that affect not only individuals in the present but also their ancestry, ethnic-racial belonging, social group, class, nation, and people. As a setting in which power relations and hegemonic social structures become particularly visible, the university can intensify Indigenous students' experiences of shame and feelings of not belonging. This environment often leads them to feel inadequate or excluded, causing many to withdraw socially for fear of being judged or ridiculed. Calegare et al. (2017) argue that stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples in the state of Amazonas reinforce a derogatory image that remains widespread in the capital city. This stigma perpetuates perceptions of inferiority, directly affecting Indigenous students' academic and social experiences.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This thematic unit comprises two categories that illustrate how participants developed coping strategies to remain in university and complete their undergraduate degrees. Previous studies have emphasized the need for higher education institutions to adopt more effective mechanisms to support Indigenous students' integration into university life, combat racism, strengthen and empower Indigenous students, and, consequently, promote interculturality (Calegare & Sales, 2023; Gomes & Nina, 2024; Herbetta & Nazareno, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2024). The categories that constitute this thematic unit are presented below.

Financial Mobility and Support

In this category, participants described how the desire to improve their living conditions, together with the support they received, functioned as fundamental coping strategies, as illustrated in the excerpts below:

I've always wanted to be wealthy. That has been my dream since I was a child—not for

myself, but because I wanted to change my parents' lives [...] My mother immediately said, 'We're all going to help because this is for our people.' [...] She rented a house for me [...] I also asked one of my professors for help. She's the coordinator of my program and is always willing to help everyone. She encourages me and supports me whenever I have difficulties. (Beatriz)

I really want to write [...] about Indigenous protagonism [...] I think there are still very few publications, and although some have contributions from Indigenous authors, most do not [...] People who haven't lived these experiences can write about them in depth, but it's never the same as hearing from someone who has actually lived them. (Rute)

My motivation for going to university and continuing my studies has always been my desire to change my life and overcome the situation I'm currently living in. (Elora)

Whenever someone from our Indigenous communities is admitted to a university program, it's a huge celebration. We all celebrate together [...] My parents have always supported me, and my grandmother has always been there for me too. I've never lacked support in that respect. (Diana).

Participants emphasized the importance of both financial and emotional support provided by their families and by university faculty. This support proved essential for academic success and for overcoming the challenges associated with university life. They also highlighted the university's role in promoting scientific knowledge and valuing Indigenous cultures. According to Santos (2023), attending university represents a significant achievement for Indigenous students, particularly because they are supported by networks that include family members, Indigenous communities, professors, and friends. The university thus becomes not only a space for disseminating Indigenous knowledge but also a place where students gain access to specialized knowledge, including knowledge about their own histories.

Community Recognition and Self-Esteem

Recognition from their communities and positive self-esteem also functioned as important strategies for students' persistence in higher education. Participants described a source of motivation rooted not only in their individual life trajectories but also in the collective history of their peoples, shaped by longstanding experiences of struggle, resistance, and solidarity. The following excerpts illustrate this perspective:

Whenever I go back to my community, people call me ‘our doctor.’ That makes me happy because they see me as someone who has achieved something. They even say I’m their diva. I always try to encourage them, telling them to study so they won’t have to live the same life our parents did. (Beatriz)

Knowing that I can succeed and become an example of a dream fulfilled [...] We have a saying: ‘The future is ancestral; the future is youth; we are that youth.’ [...] Nothing about us without us [...] It’s easy to have Indigenous laws written by non-Indigenous people, but they won’t reflect our cultures. It would be much better if those decisions came from people like us. (Hélio)

I like showing people that we can achieve more [...] graduate, pursue any profession [...] People don’t imagine an Indigenous woman as a professor, a lawyer, a physician, or a researcher. They still associate Indigenous people with something purely folkloric. (Rute).

Participants emphasized the importance of recognition and appreciation from their communities, as well as their desire to improve the quality of life of their families and Indigenous communities. This perception is reinforced by the contrast between the sense of belonging and recognition experienced within their communities of origin and the feelings of invisibility and exclusion frequently encountered in academic settings. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples’ access to higher education represents a strategic step toward increasing Indigenous representation in spaces where political and institutional power is exercised, such as the judiciary, academia, and government institutions, enabling them to advocate for autonomy and culturally grounded practices (Amado, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2024; Silva, 2023).

In this sense, affirmative action policies in higher education constitute an important historical milestone by encouraging Indigenous peoples to occupy spaces within science as authors of knowledge and protagonists of their own histories, thereby strengthening their struggles for education, land rights, and health care (Molina & Ribeiro, 2024). At the same time, the persistent sense of exclusion within academic environments reveals the psychosocial barriers Indigenous students continue to face. They must constantly remain engaged in university life while navigating institutional environments that too often fail to recognize or value their identities and lived experiences.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study highlighted the complexity and significance of Indigenous students’ presence and participation in higher education, demonstrating the urgent need for practices

that promote academic equity. Such practices include differentiated access to student support services (scholarships, student housing, university dining facilities, and other assistance programs), social support (facilitating the integration of newly admitted Indigenous students into both university life and the city of Manaus), and the removal of psychosocial barriers through intercultural integration (preparing faculty members and students to welcome Indigenous students while respecting their customs, languages, and knowledge systems). Important advances have already been achieved through policies aimed at expanding access to and supporting Indigenous students, including the *Bolsa Permanência* program, affirmative action quotas for Indigenous peoples, and university initiatives that promote and value Indigenous cultures.

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that substantial challenges remain in ensuring equitable, high-quality higher education. Indigenous students' experiences at university continue to be shaped by profound structural and social inequalities rooted in anti-Indigenous racism. The Western and Eurocentric logic that underpins Brazilian universities continues to reinforce the marginalization of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems.

Indigenous students at the Federal University of Amazonas face challenges that begin with the denial of their right to a differentiated basic education guaranteed by the Brazilian State, resulting in educational delays and forced migration in search of better educational opportunities. Upon entering higher education, these challenges persist through difficulties in adapting to urban life and the university environment, bureaucratic barriers to accessing student rights and support services, and the continued influence of the dominant Western logic that characterizes Brazilian higher education institutions.

The transition to university and adaptation to urban life reveal a multifaceted reality in which financial obstacles and the lack of culturally appropriate support intensify feelings of exclusion, shame, and social humiliation. These factors not only hinder students' adaptation but also compromise their ability to engage fully in academic and social life. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of the coping strategies developed by Indigenous students to overcome these adversities. Family support, financial assistance, and the strengthening of both self-esteem and community recognition emerged as crucial factors for students' persistence and academic success.

Although these strategies are fundamental to students' persistence in higher education, the responsibility for adaptation—which should also be shared by universities—is often placed solely on Indigenous students, detached from the broader historical and cultural

processes that shape Brazilian society. Universities must therefore promote interculturality at every institutional level, including bureaucratic procedures governing access to higher education, the preparation of faculty, administrative staff, and outsourced personnel to engage respectfully with Indigenous students, the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems within the curriculum, and the promotion of anti-racist initiatives across the university community.

Finally, one limitation of this study is that the participants were predominantly Indigenous women. Future research should therefore further explore the intersections between gender and anti-Indigenous racism throughout Indigenous students' educational trajectories. Such studies may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how discrimination and exclusion are intensified by intersecting social identities.

At the same time, increasing numbers of Indigenous people are completing postgraduate education and assuming academic and university leadership positions. Future research should therefore investigate the psychosocial impacts of Indigenous faculty members joining universities as permanent academic staff. How do their non-Indigenous colleagues respond to this growing presence? What transformations does it bring about in university structures, both in administrative organization and in curriculum development? Furthermore, Brazil has recently witnessed initiatives aimed at establishing Indigenous higher education institutions, such as the Federal Indigenous University (UNIND), created in 2026. What new possibilities might this institution open, and what psychosocial impacts could it have on Brazilian society?

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