

Racial discrimination and its effects on the well-being and university trajectory of Black students

Discriminação racial e seus efeitos no bem-estar e na trajetória universitária de estudantes negros

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ABSTRACT This study investigated the experiences of racial discrimination faced by Black university students and their impacts on academic trajectories and psychosocial well-being. It represents the second phase of a sequential research project, whose initial quantitative stage involved 829 students from five higher education institutions in the state of Ceará, Brazil. In this qualitative phase, conducted between January and March 2024, 37 students who had previously reported recurrent experiences of discrimination on the scale used were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually and analyzed using Descending Hierarchical Classification, supported by the IRaMuTeQ software. The analysis revealed five main categories: Social and political context; Impact on mental health; Individual responses and reactions; Academic experiences and contexts of discrimination; and Recurring and family experiences. The findings highlight that racism and racial discrimination negatively affect students' self-esteem, mental health, and academic persistence, generating feelings of insecurity, devaluation, and exclusion. Although students adopt coping strategies, there is a clear need for effective institutional support. The study underscores the importance of anti-racist policies in higher education that foster inclusive and equitable environments, ensuring not only access but also the dignified and healthy retention of Black students.

KEYWORDS Racism. Perceived discrimination. Students. Universities.

RESUMO *Este estudo investigou as experiências de discriminação racial vividas por estudantes universitários negros e seus impactos nas trajetórias acadêmicas e no bem-estar psicossocial. Trata-se da segunda fase de uma pesquisa sequencial, cuja etapa quantitativa inicial envolveu 829 estudantes de 5 instituições de ensino superior no estado do Ceará. Nessa fase qualitativa, realizada entre janeiro e março de 2024, participaram 37 estudantes que relataram vivências recorrentes de discriminação na escala utilizada previamente. As entrevistas semiestruturadas foram conduzidas virtualmente e analisadas por meio da Classificação Hierárquica Descendente, com o apoio do software IRaMuTeQ. A análise revelou cinco categorias principais: Contexto social e político; Impacto na saúde mental; Respostas e reações individuais; Experiências acadêmicas e contextos de discriminação; e Experiências recorrentes e familiares. Os resultados evidenciam que o racismo e a discriminação racial repercutem negativamente na autoestima, na saúde mental e na permanência dos estudantes, gerando sentimentos de insegurança, desvalorização e exclusão. Apesar da adoção de estratégias de enfrentamento, observa-se necessidade de suporte institucional efetivo. O estudo reforça a necessidade de políticas antirracistas no ensino superior, que promovam ambientes acolhedores e equitativos para garantir não apenas o acesso, mas também a permanência, com dignidade e saúde, dos estudantes negros.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Racismo. Discriminação percebida. Estudantes. Universidade.

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Introduction

Structural racism is deeply rooted in historical processes such as colonization and the development of capitalism, which established racial hierarchies that still today sustain social, economic, and symbolic inequalities¹. Racial discrimination, as a concrete expression of racism, refers to differentiated behaviors directed at individuals belonging to certain ethnic-racial groups, and can manifest itself directly or indirectly. Direct discrimination involves explicit attitudes of hostility or exclusion based on race, such as refusing service to Black people in commercial establishments. Indirect discrimination occurs when seemingly neutral norms or practices produce disproportionate effects on racially marginalized groups, often going unnoticed due to the absence of an explicit intention to discriminate². This subtle form of exclusion, often silent and invisible, has significant impact on the mental health and well-being of those who experience it, revealing the complexity and persistence of racial inequalities in various social spaces, including higher education.

Historically, the model for knowledge production and validation in universities has been based on exclusionary logics, marginalizing ethnic-racial and social groups. However, the struggle for civil rights and the strengthening of agendas in defense of diversity and equity have brought about significant changes in this scenario. The implementation of affirmative action policies in higher education, initiated in Brazil in the 2000s, represented and still represents a milestone in this process. These affirmative action policies helped break with the historical pattern of ethnic-racial segregation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), expanding access for Black, Indigenous, and working-class students³.

Despite progress, the university environment remains a stage for multiple forms of racial discrimination, reproducing inequalities historically imposed on the Black population. These discriminatory processes reflect

a structural legacy of social exclusion, manifesting as barriers to access, retention, and recognition for Black students. Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities persist evidently, with a significant portion of this population living in precarious conditions. This reality highlights the presence of structural racism, naturalized and often rendered invisible, which sustains and perpetuates injustices over time⁴.

The enactment of Law No. 12,711/2012, known as the Quota Law, represented a historic achievement for social movements in the fight for racial equity in access to higher education⁵. This measure was driven by increasing pressure from organized civil society, resulting in the implementation of affirmative action policies aimed at promoting social justice and democratizing access for Black, Indigenous, and working-class students to Brazilian universities⁵.

Despite this important legal advancement, numerous challenges persist that hinder the retention and academic success of the Black population in higher education. Among the main obstacles faced by these students are the need to reconcile studies with work activities, the scarcity of institutional support policies, and the daily experience of racial micro-aggressions. The latter, although often subtle, constitute expressions of structural violence and reinforce systemic racism, maintaining inequalities within institutions that should be spaces of inclusion⁶.

Racial micro-aggressions, as veiled forms of discrimination, have a significant impact on academic well-being. Such experiences have a negative impact on satisfaction with university life and reduce graduation expectations, primarily due to their effect on students' academic fondness, rather than on academic performance itself⁷. These findings reinforce the importance of considering not only access, but also the conditions of permanence and subjective experience of Black students in the university.

Although inclusion policies have broadened access and diversity in universities, episodes of

prejudice and discrimination remain frequent⁸. Research shows that the Black population is particularly affected by psychological challenges throughout life, such as anxiety, fear, and feelings of not belonging^{9,10}, which directly impacts their mental health. These effects reflect structural racism, which permeates multiple social domains, including the labor market, housing, and the education system¹¹.

In this context, racism is a major stressor capable of generating profound mental suffering and compromising the physical and emotional health of victims. In extreme cases, it can culminate in serious illnesses and even fatal outcomes. Daily oppression, symbolic violence, and direct aggression negatively affect the well-being of those discriminated against. Therefore, it is urgent to implement effective strategies to combat racism, aiming to ensure the dignity and well-being of the entire society⁴.

The persistence of racial discrimination in higher education reflects unequal social structures. Students belonging to minority racial groups experience discriminatory situations that compromise their mental health, motivation, and academic performance. In this sense, the growing interest in investigating the relationship between racism and mental health in the university context seeks to understand these impacts and foster strategies for building more inclusive and welcoming environments¹².

The relevance of this debate is intensified given the scarcity of publications and systematic discussions on racial issues in universities, which often are limited to isolated classroom approaches or courses. This gap contributes to the invisibility of the experiences of Black students, who frequently face episodes of racism, the marks of which are deep and, in some cases, irreversible. These experiences directly affect their self-esteem, mental health, and academic trajectory¹³.

Given this context, the present study aims to analyze the experiences of racial discrimination lived by Black university students and their impacts on academic trajectories and psychosocial well-being.

Material and methods

This article presents the second phase of the study entitled ‘Racial discrimination and mental health in universities’, funded by the Grant Program for Research Productivity, Incentive for Interiorization and Technological Innovation (BPI) of the Ceará Foundation for Support of Scientific and Technological Development (FUNCAP).

This research adopts an exploratory and comprehensive qualitative approach, grounded in the epistemological perspective of the Social Sciences applied to Health, as proposed by Minayo¹⁴. This approach seeks to understand the complexity of social phenomena based on the experiences, meanings, and perceptions of individuals, recognizing the value of discourse as an expression of the experience¹⁵.

The first stage of the study, of a quantitative nature, was carried out between September 2023 and January 2024 and involved 829 students from 5 public and private higher education institutions located in Sobral, northwest of the state of Ceará: Universidade Estadual Vale do Acaraú (UVA); Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC); Universidade 5 de Julho (F5); Faculdade Luciano Feijão (FLF); and Faculdade IEducare (FIED). The Discrimination Experiences Scale (EED), a validated instrument, was used to measure the frequency and impact of discriminatory experiences among university students.

Based on the results of the EED, 235 students were identified who reported recurring episodes of racial discrimination (two or more occurrences). These students were invited to participate in the qualitative phase, with contact made via WhatsApp®, using the data provided in the first stage. In total, 40 students agreed to participate, with 3 interviews being discarded for not presenting effective reports of discrimination, resulting in 37 valid interviews that comprised the final corpus.

The interviews were conducted remotely via the Google Meet® platform between

January and March 2024. This strategy was adopted due to a university strike, ensuring accessibility, security, and flexibility for participants. The interviews were conducted by previously trained researchers, based on a semi-structured script with five open-ended questions about experiences of racial discrimination in different academic and social contexts. Participation was voluntary and interview times were arranged individually with students, with scheduling options from Monday to Saturday, between 8 am and 8 pm. The average interview duration was 20 minutes. Pilot interviews were conducted beforehand to refine the instrument and were subsequently excluded from the analysis.

Before each interview, permission was requested for recording, ensuring the accuracy of the transcription and interpretation of the accounts. The recordings were fully transcribed, forming the textual corpus submitted for analysis¹⁶.

The data analysis was performed using the software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRaMuTeQ), which allows for the statistical analysis of textual data, integrating quantitative and qualitative aspects. The Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) technique was used, which segments the corpus into homogeneous textual classes, allowing the identification of lexical and thematic patterns. The categories resulting from the DHC were interpreted in light of the thematic content analysis proposed by Minayo¹⁴, in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks that underpin the discussion on structural racism, mental health, and social inequalities.

The study rigorously followed the ethical precepts of Resolution No. 466/2012¹⁷ of the National Health Council. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Estadual do Vale do Acaraú (UVA), under opinion number 6.279.258 (CAAE No. 64750522.7.0000.5053). All participants signed the Informed Consent Form

(ICF), ensuring their understanding and agreement regarding participation and research procedures.

Results and discussion

The results of this research highlight the complexity of experiences of racial discrimination among self-declared Black university students – both Black and mixed-race – demonstrating significant impacts on their mental health, academic performance, and social integration. Based on the analysis of interviews using the DHC method in the IRaMuTeQ software, thematic categories emerged that allow for an understanding of the multiple dimensions of racism in daily university life. These results are discussed in light of theoretical frameworks that address structural racism and its unfolding in the lives of individuals, allowing for a critical analysis of the subtle and persistent forms of discrimination that are perpetuated in higher education environments, often naturalized and silenced.

Analysis and interpretation of the Descending Hierarchical Classification

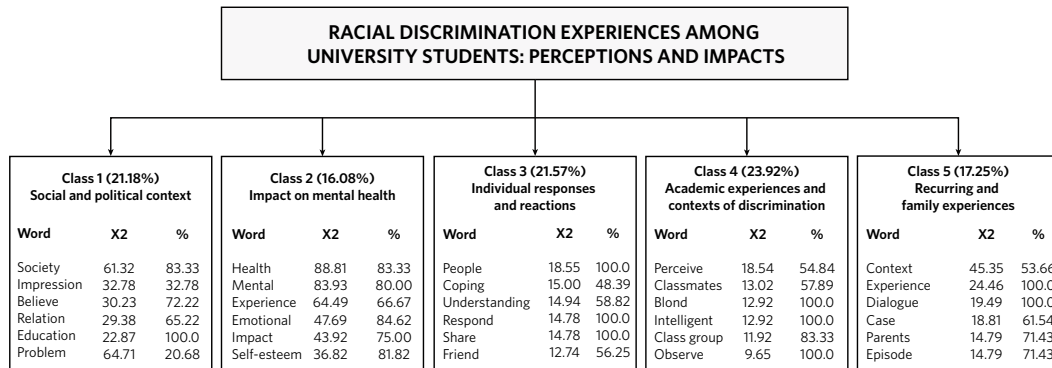
The DHC, conducted with the aid of IRaMuTeQ software, resulted in the identification of five main thematic classes: ‘Social and political context’; ‘Impact on mental health’; ‘Individual responses and reactions’; ‘Academic experiences and contexts of discrimination’; and ‘Recurring and family experiences’ (*figure 1*), each representing distinct dimensions of the experiences of racial discrimination reported by the participants. The analysis was based on the frequency and co-occurrence of words, the most representative text segments, and the distinctions between the classes.

The values of chi-square (χ^2) test were fundamental in establishing the association between the terms and their respective

classes, indicating the statistical relevance of the words in characterizing each thematic category. The higher the χ^2 value, the greater the word's contribution to the class composition. The relative frequencies (%) indicated the representativeness of the terms within each textual group.

This combined approach allowed for an in-depth reading of the patterns and meanings present in the students' narratives, offering a more robust and structured understanding of how racism is manifested¹⁸ in the university environment, its subjective impacts, and the coping strategies employed.

Figure 1. Dendrogram resulting from Descending Hierarchical Classification: experiences of racial discrimination among university students: perceptions and impacts



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Class 1 – Social and political context

Representing 21.18% of the total corpus, Class 1 emphasized experiences of racial discrimination within a broader sociopolitical context. Among the most representative words were 'society' ($x^2 = 61.32$; 83.33%), 'impression' ($x^2 = 32.78$; 32.78%), and 'believe' ($x^2 = 30.23$; 72.22%), indicating a concern with understanding racial discrimination as a phenomenon deeply rooted in social and political structures.

Content analysis revealed that respondents frequently mentioned discriminatory comments and prejudiced attitudes, highlighting an educational and social system that reinforces racial inequalities. The term 'education' ($x^2 = 22.87$; 100.0%) indicated a relationship between the perception of discrimination and the educational system. As one of the respondents stated:

This is a long-standing, deeply rooted structural problem in our society that primarily affects Black people and those in vulnerable situations (E10).

Class 2 – Impact on mental health

Comprising 16.08% of the analyzed corpus, Class 2 highlighted the close relationship between experiences of racial discrimination and the impacts on students' mental health. Words such as 'health' ($x^2 = 88.81$; 83.33%), 'mental' ($x^2 = 83.93$; 80%) and 'experience' ($x^2 = 64.49$; 66.67%) showed high frequency and a strong association with this class, reinforcing the centrality of psychological suffering in the narratives of the interviewees.

Content analysis revealed that episodes of racial discrimination caused emotional trauma, feelings of insecurity, and decreased self-esteem. Expressions such as 'emotional'

($\chi^2 = 47.69$; 84.62%) and ‘self-esteem’ ($\chi^2 = 36.82$; 81.82%) illustrate the multifaceted nature of these effects. One of the accounts exemplifies this condition:

If I hadn't experienced what I went through, I believe my mental health wouldn't be so affected. The traumas I faced have impacted my relationships and my self-confidence, as I still feel insecure in certain environments due to what I experienced in the past (E12).

Class 3 - Individual responses and reactions

Class 3, responsible for 21.57% of the corpus, addressed individual responses and reactions to experiences of racial discrimination. The most frequent words included ‘people’ ($\chi^2 = 18.55$; 100.0%), ‘coping’ ($\chi^2 = 15.00$; 48.39%), and ‘understanding’ ($\chi^2 = 14.94$; 58.82%), highlighting how subjects personally deal with these experiences.

Content analysis revealed that reactions varied between coping strategies, attempts at understanding, and direct responses to discriminatory situations. Terms such as ‘respond’ ($\chi^2 = 14.78$; 100.0%) and ‘share’ ($\chi^2 = 14.78$; 100.0%) highlighted the importance of dialogue and social support among friends and acquaintances. One student reported their experience:

At that moment, I really didn't know who to turn to. I didn't feel comfortable sharing those experiences with my parents or other people. Whenever I faced discrimination, I kept everything to myself and tried to move on. Today, I realize it was a mistake not to seek help at the time. I recognize that I should have spoken to someone who could understand what I was going through, but at that moment, I thought it was something common and not serious. Keeping those emotions bottled up ended up making me very sad, and even today I still carry some of that sadness (E6).

Class 4 - Academic experiences and contexts of discrimination

Class 4, representing 23.92% of the corpus, explored academic experiences and the specific contexts in which discrimination occurs. The most characteristic words included ‘perceive’ ($\chi^2 = 18.54$; 54.84%), ‘classmate’ ($\chi^2 = 13.02$; 57.89%), and ‘blond’ ($\chi^2 = 12.92$; 100.0%), highlighting situations in which students experienced discrimination within the academic environment.

The analysis revealed that respondents frequently mentioned episodes of discrimination perpetrated by classmates, and the word ‘intelligent’ ($\chi^2 = 12.92$; 100.0%) suggested that this discrimination was also related to perceptions about intellectual abilities. Furthermore, the term ‘class’ ($\chi^2 = 11.92$; 83.33%) indicated that the classroom is a recurring space for these experiences. One student reported:

I noticed that a professor favored a white, blond classmate, giving more attention to his project, even though it was less complex than mine. This demotivated me, as I saw projects by Black students being less valued (E9).

Class 5 - Recurring and family experiences

Class 5, representing 17.25% of the corpus, focused on experiences of racial discrimination that occurred in family contexts and other recurring situations. The main words were ‘context’ ($\chi^2 = 45.35$; 53.66%), ‘experience’ ($\chi^2 = 24.46$; 100.0%), and ‘dialogue’ ($\chi^2 = 19.49$; 100.0%), highlighting how racial discrimination is experienced recurrently in different contexts, including the family environment.

Content analysis indicated that these experiences were frequently related to interactions with parents ($\chi^2 = 14.79$; 71.43%) and specific episodes of discrimination ($\chi^2 = 14.79$; 71.43%), highlighting the constant presence of racial discrimination in various dimensions of the

respondents' lives. A representative example was the following account:

The racial context I experienced occurred primarily within my family, involving my aunts, grandmother, parents, and stepfather. I am the only Black granddaughter in my maternal family, and expressions or situations frequently arose that made me uncomfortable. My stepfather commonly used racist expressions in the past, which deeply bothered me. This shows how, even within my family, I faced discrimination that affected me emotionally (E2O).

The results show that the racial discrimination experienced by Black university students is structural, permeating different dimensions of social, academic, and family life. Class 1 reveals that students understand racism as a phenomenon historically rooted in the social, political, and educational dynamics of the country, recognizing that the very organization of society and the educational system contributes to the reproduction of racial inequalities. This understanding broadens the comprehension of racism beyond individual experiences, reinforcing the need for systemic and institutional confrontation.

These findings are consistent with the literature, which characterizes racial discrimination as a structural and persistent problem, reproduced through social institutions, especially the education system^{19,20}. The maintenance of these inequalities, even in the face of technological and pedagogical advances, highlights the urgency of profound structural transformations in social dynamics²¹.

In this context, Class 2 deepens the analysis by demonstrating that these structural experiences materialize subjectively, directly affecting the mental health of students. The accounts are consistent with studies that point to racial discrimination as a risk factor for anxiety, depression, and persistent emotional distress⁴. The internalization of racism, coupled with the lack of support, amplifies psychological damage, requiring the implementation of institutional care and prevention strategies²².

In addition, studies indicate that continuous exposure to racism during academic life compromises not only psychological well-being but also academic performance. Intolerance to suffering has been identified as an important mediator between perceived racism and reduced well-being²³, being associated with higher levels of stress, somatic and depressive symptoms²⁴.

It is crucial to highlight that such impacts are not limited to the university period, extending to the professional trajectories and future prospects of Black students^{7,25}. These consequences become even more critical when experienced during sensitive phases of development, such as adolescence and the beginning of adulthood, periods marked by the consolidation of identity, definition of objectives, and insertion into the world of work²⁶. The recurrence of discriminatory experiences during this period tends to compromise self-confidence, sense of belonging, and expectations of social advancement²⁷.

Given this scenario, the urgency of institutional measures that promote more inclusive, welcoming, and racially equitable university environments becomes evident. The implementation of strategies such as spaces for active listening, qualified psychological support, and the strengthening of anti-racist policies is essential to mitigate the impacts of discrimination on mental health²⁸, favoring a fairer and more humanized academic education.

The individual responses presented in Class 3 reveal coping strategies, often marked by silence and the normalization of violence. In this context, the internalization of racism exacerbates emotional suffering, creating a cycle of vulnerability in which the individual ends up coping alone.

This finding aligns with the literature, which points to the difficulty individuals face in sharing experiences of discrimination and seeking support, often due to stigma and the absence of adequate support mechanisms²⁹. The lack of effective coping strategies

reinforces the importance of building safe environments in which students feel empowered to express their experiences and access emotional support³⁰.

The academic experiences described in Class 4 highlight racism operating symbolically and institutionally within the university environment, especially in the relationship between students and professors. The devaluation of the intellectual capabilities of Black students and the favoring of white students generate feelings of demotivation and exclusion, amplifying historical inequalities.

These results corroborate studies that demonstrate how Black students frequently face additional challenges in academia, including discrimination in assessments, unequal access to opportunities, and low faculty representation^{31,32}. The perception of injustice in the educational process compromises motivation, academic satisfaction, and performance, even increasing the likelihood of dropping out and delaying course completion^{25,33}. These effects extend to professional life, since the accumulation of discriminatory experiences tends to negatively impact career opportunities^{7,25}.

Increased exposure to racism can raise levels of psychological distress, indicating a direct link between racism and impaired mental health²³. On the other hand, participation in extracurricular activities and courses that promote contact with diversity contributes to the development of critical thinking and self-confidence, factors associated with better mental health and greater academic engagement³⁴.

Finally, Class 5 demonstrates that racism also permeates the family environment, affecting the construction of racial identity and the sense of belonging. The presence of discrimination in intimate contexts reinforces its social normalization and highlights the need for coping strategies that include dialogue and anti-racist education from the closest relationships.

The literature corroborates the students' accounts, indicating that discrimination in the family environment can be as harmful

as in other contexts, negatively affecting the mental health and emotional development of individuals³⁵. This influences the formation of identity and sense of belonging, highlighting the need to address these issues from within the home²⁰.

Thus, the discussion of the findings reveals that racial discrimination in higher education is not limited to isolated episodes, but constitutes a continuous and multidimensional phenomenon, with lasting effects on the mental health, academic performance, and life trajectories of students. The implementation of anti-racist institutional policies, welcoming spaces, and qualified psychological support is fundamental for promoting more equitable university environments.

Final considerations

The findings of this study reveal that university racism manifests itself in a diffuse, persistent, and multifaceted manner, permeating everything from institutional spaces to interpersonal relationships. These experiences profoundly affect the mental health of Black students, triggering symptoms such as anxiety, low self-esteem, insecurity, and feelings of not belonging. Although the interviewees employ individual strategies of resistance and coping, often these responses occur in isolation, highlighting the lack of systematic and effective institutional support.

This study makes a significant contribution by giving visibility to voices frequently silenced in debates about equity and retention in higher education. Attentive listening to these narratives reinforces the urgency of anti-racist policies that transcend university access, focusing on guaranteeing dignified conditions for retention, care, and recognition. To this end, the implementation of concrete actions is essential, such as ongoing training for faculty and staff on ethnic-racial relations, the creation of psychosocial support centers, the strengthening

of student collectives, and crosscutting racial debate in academic curricula.

Among the limitations of this study, stands out the geographical scope restricted to the state of Ceará, which may limit the generalization of the results to other regions of the country. Furthermore, the selection of participants with high discrimination scores identified in a previous stage may have emphasized more explicit accounts, failing to encompass more subtle or internalized experiences. Future investigations could broaden the territorial scope, incorporate new contextual variables, and deepen the analysis of intersectionality between gender, class, sexuality, territory, and religion.

The persistence of racial discrimination in Brazilian higher education reinforces the need to rethink the role of the university as a space for emancipation, social justice, and diversity. Confronting institutional racism is not only an unavoidable ethical, political, and pedagogical imperative, but also, and above all, an essential condition for ensuring a truly democratic, pluralistic, inclusive, and socially referenced university. Therefore, building this

horizon requires the collective commitment of the entire academic community – administration, faculty, staff, and students – to consolidate anti-racist practices and strengthen an institutional culture based on care, equity, and respect for diversity.

Authorship contributions

Oliveira EN (0000-0002-6408-7243)*, Alves PL (0000-0001-7423-2515)* and Campos MP (0000-0002-9656-9140)* contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the intellectual content, and final approval of the manuscript. Pereira PJA (0000-0002-3941-8274)* and Almeida PC (0000-0002-2867-802X)* contributed to data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the intellectual content, and final approval of the manuscript. Vasconcelos MIO (0000-0002-1937-8850)* and Ximenes Neto FRG (0000-0002-7905-9990)* contributed to data analysis and interpretation, and critical revision of the manuscript. ■

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