

Guest Editorial

Exceptional racism at the dawn of scientific psychiatry in Brazil: the curious case of Juliano Moreira

Naomar Almeida-Filho, Lilia Schwarcz and Jair Mari

Twenty years ago, the British Journal of Psychiatry published an editorial regarding racism and psychiatry. Three decades ago, the journal published a lecture by Professor Michael Sheperd about Kraepelin's contributions to racist degeneration theories. A century ago, Albert Einstein visited the Brazilian Academy of Sciences, where he was hosted by Juliano Moreira [1872–1933], one of the most distinguished Brazilian scientists of that time. The only son of a former enslaved woman, he is regarded as one of the founding fathers of scientific psychiatry in Brazil. Moreira may have been a case of 'exceptional racism', the strategy of

praising outstanding people from oppressed groups as a way of denying or covering up processes of structural racism.

Keywords

History of psychiatry; human rights; degeneration theories; Juliano Moreira [1872–1933]; Brazil.

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Fig. 1 Juliano Moreira [1872–1933].

Thirty years ago, the *British Journal of Psychiatry* published a controversial lecture by Professor Michael Sheperd, which unveiled Emil Kraepelin's contributions to racist degeneration theories.¹ Two decades ago, this journal published a groundbreaking editorial regarding racism and psychiatry, authored by Professor Peter Tyrer.² Since then, this very sensitive topic has become more and more visible, discussed in several opportunities and under multiple aspects, particularly concerning the pervasiveness and chronicity of structural racism in research and university institutions in Western countries.

A century ago, Albert Einstein visited South America. In Rio de Janeiro, he was hosted by Juliano Moreira [1872–1933] (Fig. 1), one of the most distinguished Brazilian scientists of that time, who became the Emeritus President of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences. The only son of a former enslaved woman, Moreira is regarded as one of the founding fathers of scientific psychiatry in Brazil.^{3–5} Considering historiographic evidence,^{6–8} how could a poor Black person manage to overcome the structural racism and coloniality of Brazilian society?

A child prodigy, Moreira was accepted at the Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, two years before the abolition of slavery in Brazil. He graduated in 1891, at 19 years old, with a thesis titled *The Aetiology of Early Malignant Syphilis*, highlighting the role of 'physiological misery' in disease causation.⁶ In 1896, Moreira was approved with honours for the chair of Clinical Psychiatry and Nervous Disorders against those who opposed a 'mulatto', to become a professor at the renowned faculty.⁶ He soon joined the Tropicalist School of Bahia, as editor-in-chief of the *Gazeta Médica da Bahia*, then the most important medical scientific journal in Latin America.⁷

In 1899, Moreira travelled to Europe for pulmonary tuberculosis treatment, and attended courses in mental medicine in England, France, Italy, Austria and Germany. Pioneeringly, he embraced Kraepelinian nosology and Freudian psychoanalysis.⁵ Returning to Bahia with a vision for reform, his attempts to modernise medical training and conduct research in local institutions were met with resistance and racial prejudice.^{6–8} Undeterred, Moreira moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1903, the capital of Brazil at that time, and never went back to Bahia.⁶ Appointed director of the Hospício Nacional de Alienados, he used the opportunity to apply Kraepelin's nosology outside Europe, transforming the institution into a humane, science-oriented therapeutic space.⁶

Moreira was a founding member of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences in 1916 and later became its Emeritus President. From this position, he was a vocal critic of the scientific status quo, stating that, in Brazil, often 'unfounded assertions are accepted in science without proper examination'.⁶ His rise to the forefront of Brazilian science is indeed a testament to his extraordinary talent. Moreira died of complications of pulmonary tuberculosis on 2 May 1933 in the city of Petrópolis.⁶


Juliano Moreira may have been a case of 'exceptional racism', which is a disguised, perhaps refined form of structural racism. We propose to call 'exceptional racism' the strategy of socially and institutionally praising outstanding people (persons who are exceptions, extraordinary personalities) from oppressed groups as a way of denying or covering up racism on ideological and political grounds. Such strategies imply an overt, often disproportionate, overvaluation of talents as exceptions. Brazilian history has plenty of such examples: Machado de Assis in literature, Teodoro Sampaio in engineering, Luiz Gama in law, Candido Rondon in the military and Juliano Moreira in medicine. All were Black people of poor background celebrated in national

history as a demonstration that it would only take talent, effort and dedication to succeed in a proto-liberal, racist society. The case of Dona Yayá, a wealthy landowner treated by Moreira,⁹ who regularly travelled to São Paulo to assist her, is an eloquent example of how the elite valued his capacities despite his being a Black doctor.

The emergence of Brazilian medicine was inextricably linked to the nation's racial dynamics, marked by the lingering shadow of slavery.⁷ Theories of degeneration, prominent during the 19th century, posited that miscegenation between races at different evolutionary stages would lead to societal decay.^{7,8} Studies on human degeneration in Brazil were promoted as a way of legitimising social and political hierarchies then in force.⁸ Emil Kraepelin, Moreira's scientific correspondent, eventually advocated degeneration theories and eugenics, which composed Nazi medical ideology.¹ Kraepelin's influence on Moreira's work and the biometric references of Lombrosian physical anthropology reinforced stereotypes of the racist theories of his time. However, Moreira challenged the racialised application of these theories and elaborated a socio-biological counter-discourse of his own.⁵ Along this path, he rejected genetic explanations for somatic and mental ailments among Black populations. Analysing hospital data, he explored environmental and behavioural factors, actively confronting degeneration theories by arguing that mental suffering should not be attributed to racial factors but rather to poor education and living conditions.^{5,6} In this way, Moreira was a pioneer in studying the social determinants of mental health.

Nevertheless, open discrimination and racial segregation surely made up part of his personal and professional life. Biographers have not clarified the reasons why he resigned from his academic position in Bahia and decided to move to Rio de Janeiro. His move could simply have been in search of better treatment for his poor health or disappointment with refusal of his proposed reforms. Perhaps even more plausible an explanation is that he was trying to run away from a racist social, professional and academic environment.

Moreira's exceptional journey from offspring of slavery to a pioneering figure in modern neurosciences in his country reflects both the triumphs and struggles of Black individuals in the pursuit of medical excellence. However, his enduring legacy extends far beyond his personal achievements within a predominantly White, racist medical establishment. By shedding light on Moreira's life, we can better understand the historical role of racialism in shaping scientific medical progress in a social and institutional peripheral environment, still plagued by racism and other oppressive traits of coloniality.

Naomar Almeida-Filho , MD, MPH, PhD, Instituto de Saúde Coletiva at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brazil; **Lilia Schwarcz**, PhD, Princeton University, Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil; **Jair Mari**, MD, PhD, Department of Psychiatry, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil

Correspondence: Naomar Almeida-Filho. Email: naomaralmeida@gmail.com

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Data availability

Data availability is not applicable to this guest editorial as no new data were created or analysed.

Author contribution

N.A.-F. conceived the approach and wrote the initial draft and the final version of the paper. L.S. contributed to the socio-historical conceptualisation and revised the text. J.M. proposed the topic and contributed to writing the paper.

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Declaration of interest

None.

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