

Commentary

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

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Commentary; history; racism; scientific psychiatry; Brazil.

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Response


The article by Almeida-Filho et al¹ presents an interesting view, examining racial prejudice from the past. The life and achievements of Juliano Moreira are certainly worthy of special praise but can his success really be called ‘exceptional racism’? Does not the evidence that his merit overcame racial prejudice show that in Brazil at that time tolerance and acceptance of racial diversity was better than in many other countries? The authors could have made the case that Moreira’s colleagues and champions were in fact trail-blazers against racism and were ahead of their time.

Surely, racism is an ever-present and ever-past phenomenon that is timeless. However, examining racial prejudice in the past needs to consider the context of its expression and the paradoxes of past society.

Psychiatry, its practitioners and its patients, have long been a subject of stigma and prejudice,² and when we look at racism in the past, we need to be more aware of its historical context.

Another problem with labelling historical figures as being prejudiced is that this may be the only feature that is then remembered. For example, when Michael Shepherd dissected the life and work of Emil Kraepelin with surgical dexterity in 1995,³ it was his disclosure that Kraepelin was a racist that is remembered, not the much more important elements of Kraepelin’s scholarship.

Thus, my main point is that when evaluating past racism, it is wise, even though difficult at times, to fully understand the context and times in which those who expressed racist views were living.

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Declaration of interest

None.

References

- 1 Almeida-Filho N, Schwarcz L, Mari J. Exceptional racism at the Dawn of scientific psychiatry in Brazil: the curious case of Juliano Moreira. *Br J Psychiatry* [Epub ahead of print] 14 Oct 2024. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2024.144>.
- 2 Thornicroft G. *Shunned: Discrimination against People with Mental Illness*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- 3 Shepherd M. Two faces of Emil Kraepelin. *Br J Psychiatry* 1995; **167**: 174–83.