

Universality and equity: an ethnography of migrants navigating Brazil's universal healthcare system during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Brazil has the broadest universal healthcare system in the world. The Brazilian Unified Healthcare System (Sistema Único de Saúde) structures itself on three paradigms: universality, which means all people, citizens or foreign-born, have the right to health care regardless of whether or not they have documents, are up to date with fiscal obligations, and any other situation that may cause discrimination; comprehensiveness, which means that all dimensions of health care must be addressed, including mitigating vulnerabilities and providing access to welfare services; and equity, which means that is necessary to assure such rights by diligently observing people's social, economic and cultural particularities - considering, therefore, people as equal, but within their differences, and providing healthcare insofar as social, economic, and cultural differences are placed. Nonetheless, racialized immigrants communities were systematically denied the right to access healthcare and vaccination campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus of this research, which took place in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, from 2020 to 2022, was to delineate how the tensions between universality and equity played out on the definition of Black and indigenous migrants' experiences in accessing health care during the pandemic. Taking the impacts produced by Covid-19 pandemic over immigrant populations and the state performance both through the production of a lack of information on the phenomena ,and the structuring of the national vaccination campaign as object of analysis, I argue that these populations were actively erased in the design of pandemic tackling public policies in the wake of a process of memory halting and of the denial of official record of the hardships they have to endure due to the sanitation crisis. I also describe the strategies used by migrants political movements and their Brazilian allies to refuse forgetfulness, since as halted memories, these events will struggle to return to the surface of political facts. Lastly, I discuss the tensions between universality and equity, guiding paradigms of the Brazilian Unified Health System, and the effects produced by these tensions on the assurance of the right to health to migrant populations.

Biography

Alexandre Branco-Pereira is a PhD candidate at the Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil. He also coordinates the Brazilian Health and Migration Observatory at the same university, and is presently a member of the Migration and Displacements Committee of the Brazilian Anthropological Association. His research focus on the intersections of migration and health, mental health, processes of racialization and racism, and analysis of healthcare systems. The work presented was awarded a Honorable Mention in the Anthropology and Human Rights, PhD category, by the Brazilian Anthropology Association in 2022.