Ethnic/Racial Discrimination in Mexico:
A Taxonomy of Discrimination Practices[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyse discrimination practices associated with ethnic/racial characteristics, compiled from interviews and focus groups we undertook in Mexico City, Monterrey, Oaxaca, Mérida, as well as three smaller towns in Yucatán State. These practices are analysed according to the social spheres where they take place, the type of consequences that they bring, the agents who carry them out, and the traits that trigger them. We find that experiences of discrimination are consistent and ubiquitous across different geographic regions and socioeconomic sectors. Importantly, discrimination practices are triggered by both racialized physical traits and "classic" ethnic elements—such as speaking an indigenous language or wearing traditional indigenous clothing—, as well as by characteristics that are related to socioeconomic conditions. The ubiquity of discrimination practices implies that, despite the apparent weakness of racial categories in Mexico, the principles that people use to socially classify, identify, and discriminate are systematically based on racial criteria. This suggests that discrimination practices are a key element for the reproduction of ethnic/racial inequality in Mexico.

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1. Introduction

In the past years an increasing number of studies has focused on the effects ethnic/racial traits have on inequality of opportunity, including e.g. education, health, work placement, income, and wealth (Bailey, Saperstein, and Penner, 2014; Flores and Telles, 2012; Solís, Güémez Graniel, and Lorenzo Holm, 2019; Telles, Flores, and Urrea-Giraldo, 2015; Trejo and Altamirano, 2016; Villarreal, 2010). These studies have underscored the role of ethnic/racial traits as elements associated with inequality. While the studies reveal significant structural trends on the statistical relation between ethnic/racial characteristics and social inequality, they shed little light on the specific processes and the actual social agents that are involved in the making of ethnic/racial inequality (Goldthorpe, 2016: 99; Reskin, 2008: 83). It is thus necessary to focus on the mechanisms that actively contribute to reproducing inequality. As Lamont, Beljean, and Clair (2014) point out, studies on inequality must "connect the social structural and the social psychological to develop a more refined understanding of the pathways through which inequality develops and is perpetuated" (2014: 579).

Our article moves in that direction. We argue that discrimination practices are one of the key mechanisms for the reproduction of social inequality associated with ethnic/racial characteristics. The practices we analyse are based on testimonies we gathered in interviews and focus groups carried out in four Mexican states: Mexico City, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, and Yucatán. There, we inquired about ethnic/racial discrimination practices towards men and women belonging to different age groups and socioeconomic sectors.

The article is divided in five sections, including this introduction. In the second section, we present the conceptual and empirical background for this research, as well as our main research questions. In the third section, we present the study's methodology and the analytical dimensions that we use. In the fourth section, we present the main findings, and in the conclusion we discuss the article's limitations and future research interests.

2. Ethnic/racial Discrimination: Focusing on Practices

In order to bolster an empirical research agenda on ethnic/racial discrimination in Mexico, it is useful to develop an operational definition of discrimination, with *discrimination practices* at its core. It is also important to define what we understand as "ethnic/racial," as the term must be employed wisely if it is to be used for anti-discrimination and anti-racist purposes. We understand discrimination as "the set of practices, either informal or institutionalized, that deny equal treatment or produce unequal results for certain social groups and result in the deprivation or undermining of access to rights and in the reproduction of social inequality" (Solís, 2017: 27).[2] This

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[2] See Solís (2017); Rodríguez Zepeda (2006; and Blank, Dabady, and Citro (2004) for a more detailed discussion on this issue.

definition emphasizes the structural character of discrimination, as it highlights both individual and collective behavior that reproduces asymmetric social relations. It is based on a hierarchy of power relations and is frequently legitimized by stereotypes and prejudices towards groups in a position of domination (Rodríguez Zepeda, 2006; Pincus, 1994; Giddens, 2010; Pager and Shepherd, 2008).

Specific *discrimination practices* are thus the main element of our empirical research agenda on discrimination. While these practices are very frequent and have been documented by ethnographic research, few studies in Mexico have analysed them systematically (CONAPRED, 2012; Gracia and Horbath, 2019; Horbath, 2018; Iturriaga, 2018; Oehmichen, 2007; Moreno Figueroa, 2016; Barabas, 1979). Studying discrimination practices means identifying the *social spheres* where they take place (Solís, 2017; Blank *et al.*, 2004). As these social spheres can be very diverse, some must be prioritized for operational purposes. Since our main interest here is the deprivation of rights and the reproduction of social inequality, we focus on social spheres that are directly linked to rights and inequality, such as the workplace and the job market, as well as the education, health, and justice systems. Other spheres are also important because of their strong impact on a person's life, such as family, friends, public spaces, and private consumption spaces such as restaurants and stores.

It is useful to classify discrimination practices according to the *type of consequences* that they have. A basic classification in this sense could include three different types of practices:

a) Practices that deny or restrict access to the social sphere in question, for example: denying access to a school, a restaurant, or a job.
b) Practices that do not deny access, but condition it or limit internal mobility once access has been achieved, for example: giving preference to some people over others for job promotions, medical treatment, or fair treatment within the justice system.
c) Practices regarding mistreatment that are not directly related to access or internal mobility. These practices significantly affect a person's life and can have relevant cumulative effects in the long term. For example: derogatory treatment at work, school, or any other sphere, involving nicknames, insults, contempt, and disregard.

It is also important to identify the *agents* who exercise discrimination in each of the different social spheres. The possibility of developing anti-discrimination public policy mechanisms depends on the accurate identification of these agents, as well as an intervention into the processes they control.

Our empirical analysis of discrimination practices then focuses on these three analytical dimensions: the social sphere where they occur, the type of consequences that they produce, and the agents who carry them out. Before starting the analysis, it is necessary to explain our approach to the "ethnic/racial" characteristics as a joint category.

We use the term "ethnic/racial" to underscore the fact that the line dividing what is "ethnic" and what is "racial" is diffuse and difficult to trace (Brubaker, 2009; Loveman, 1999: 894; Nutini, 1997: 228). In practice, discrimination is frequently caused by a mixture of both sets of traits. Looking simultaneously at what is ethnic and what is racial also brings two analytical advantages. Firstly, it allows us to investigate the extent to which the discrimination faced by indigenous people is a result of their association with somatic characteristics and not only caused by ethnic or cultural criteria (such as speaking an indigenous language, having specific customs, or wearing traditional clothing) (Saldívar, 2014). Secondly, it allows us to understand that ethnic/racial discrimination is not solely directed at indigenous persons, but affects people with certain racialized physical traits—such as skin tone—across the entire Mexican society (Chávez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista, 2014; Dixon and Telles, 2017; Ortiz-Hernández, Compeán-Dardón, Verde-Flota and Flores-Martínez, 2011; Telles, 2014).

When speaking of racial attributes, it is necessary to point out that "human races" are not an objective reality. They are not groups that are classified hierarchically because of their biological or genetic characteristics. However, they *are* a social construction that legitimates an asymmetrical power relation. The idea that races exist is tightly linked to racism, the idea that supposed biological differences exist between certain groups and that these differences are not only physical but also related to intellectual capacity, moral attributes, behaviour patterns and, generally speaking, human quality (Bonilla Silva, 1997; Gall, 2016; INTEGRA, 2017; Navarrete, 2016; Solís et al., 2019).

The social construction of racial classification builds on "racialization," the process through which physical external attributes are imbued with meaning in order to assign racial qualities to certain persons (Webster, 1993; Fassin, 2011; Segato, 2010; Wade, 2014; Gall, 2016; INTEGRA 2017). The racialization process in Mexico goes back to the social order of the colonial era and has a more contemporary expression in the twentieth-century mestizaje ideology. It is manifested in daily life through people's cognitive principles of social classification and categorization. People are identified as belonging to an ethnic/racial hierarchy through their physical traits, whether they identify themselves as part of a certain ethnic or racial group, or not (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair, 2014; Roth, 2016).

In this sense, in incorporating the racial dimension to the study of discrimination, we underscore the fact that people make social classifications based on physical traits, based on the process of racialization. The concept of "racial" highlights its role as a cognitive principle of social classification. It does not attempt to reify the existence of "human races," nor to support any supposed group-based biological or genetic differences among peoples.

A further element of our analysis of ethnic/racial discrimination are the "triggers" of discrimination practices. We define "triggers" as the attributes that lead to the social identification of a person and bring forth the discrimination practices that are directed towards them. Triggers can be ethnic traits (speaking an indigenous language,

wearing traditional clothing) as much as racial traits (racialized physical characteristics such as skin tone, height, facial features, etc.). It is also common for ethnic and racial features to be grouped with other types of triggers, such as socioeconomic or regional origin.

Having discussed our theoretical and conceptual background, we conclude this section with the questions that guide our analysis:

a) To what extent are ethnic/racial discrimination practices present in people's daily lives?
b) In which social spheres to these practices mainly happen?
c) How are these practices classified and described according to the type of consequences that they cause?
d) What are the triggers for discrimination practices? Are triggers that relate to physical appearance common, in addition to cultural or ethnic triggers? What other types of triggers do people refer to when describing discrimination experiences?

3. Methodology

The data for this article stem from the Project on Ethnic/Racial Discrimination in Mexico (PRODER),[3] a research and social awareness project on racism, ethnic/racial discrimination and their consequences on social inequality in Mexico. In this section, we briefly describe the sources of information that were used to gather empirical data on ethnic/racial discrimination practices. We also explain how the practices were classified according to the analytical dimensions discussed in the previous section.

Data sources

We extract the information we analysed from 19 focus groups and 35 in-depth interviews conducted during the first semester of 2019 in Mexico City, Mérida, Monterrey, and Oaxaca City, as well as in the following towns of Yucatán State: Oxkutzcab, Teabo, and Valladolid.[4] The first four cities were selected to achieve regional diversity, while the latter three towns were chosen as part of the project's focus in the Mayan region of the Yucatán Peninsula.

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[3] This project is hosted by the Centro de Estudios Soiológicos, El Colegio de México, and is directed by this article's first author. The project is funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and Oxfam Mexico. For more information, visit: https://discriminacion.colmex.mx/.

[4] The three towns in Yucatán State (in addition to Mérida, the capital city) were chosen to include a variety of population sizes. Oxkutzcab (population: 23,096) and Valladolid (population: 48,973) were chosen as small cities that serve as economic hubs for the nearby areas. Teabo (population: 6,115) was chosen because of its smaller population (INEGI, 2010).

In the four cities, we conducted three focus groups in each city, divided in the following socioeconomic sectors (SES): low, medium, and high.[5] All groups were made up of six people; three women and three men. In each of these cities we also conducted a fourth group, composed of what we defined as individuals vulnerable to ethnic/racial discrimination. In Mexico City and Monterrey, these were persons from upper-middle SES[6] who self-identified as "dark-skinned" in the recruitment process. In Mérida and Oaxaca, this group was made up of people from upper-middle SES whose parents spoke an indigenous language. In Yucatán (aside from Mérida), we conducted one focus group in each of the abovementioned towns, due to the difficulty of recruiting people according to SES and other characteristics in towns with small populations.

To conduct the 35 interviews, we selected interviewees based on their participation in the focus groups. We chose seven interviewees in each of the four large cities (at least one from each focus group) and seven interviewees from each of the three Yucatán towns (at least one from each town), aiming for a balanced gender composition. We designed the focus group and interview protocols to approach people's cognitive frameworks, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices related to ethnic/racial characteristics. The interviews allowed us to discuss more broadly issues that came forth during focus groups.

From analytical to observable categories

We codified the testimonies gathered in interviews and focus groups using the analytical categories discussed in section 2: *social spheres*, *types of practices* based on consequences, *agents* who exercise discrimination, and *triggers* of discriminatory practices (Table 1). Some of the social spheres are institutionalized spaces (such as schools or healthcare), while others are spaces of informal interactions (such as public spaces). For each experience mentioned by informants, we attempted to identify the

Table 1. Categories for studying ethnic/racial discrimination practices	
Dimension	**Categories**
Social sphere	Healthcare; Schooling; Mass media; Real estate and housing; Social networks (online); Family relations; Social relations (friends, neighbors); Public security and justice provision; Shops, restaurants, and other establishments; Workplace and job market; Public spaces
Type of practice	Access; Internal mobility; Treatment
Agents	Friends; Clients; Classmates; Work peers; Teachers; Employers; Doctors; School administrative staff; People in public spaces; Native people (vis-à-vis immigrants); Policepersons; Healthcare staff (excluding doctors); Government staff (excluding agents mentioned in other categories); Employees in consumption establishments; Neighbors or relatives; Un-identified
Triggers	Racialized physical traits; Socioeconomic traits; Language; Generic mention; Clothing; Last name; Regional origin; Other cultural traits

Source: Own elaboration

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[5] The socioeconomic sectors were defined using the criteria provided by the Mexican Association of Marketing Research Agencies (AMAI). The low SES group was made up of people classified as C- and D according to AMAI, whereas the medium SES group was made up of people classified as C, and the high SES group of people classified as A/B and C+ (AMAI, n.d.).

[6] C+ according to AMAI. In choosing vulnerable people from the upper-middle SES, we attempted to recruit people whose experiences would clearly differentiate between ethnic/racial discrimination and socioeconomic discrimination.

agents who exercised discrimination and the role that they played in each of the social spheres, as far as allowed by the informant's recount.

Classification by type of practice entailed paying attention to the effects that are identified as a result of the discrimination practice. For example, in the sphere of the workplace and job market, a discriminatory practice can affect: a) whether a person is hired or not (access); b) their possibilities to receive a promotion (internal mobility); or c) the way that bosses, peers, and clients treat said person, without it having an effect on access or internal mobility.

The triggers of discrimination practices were classified based on references people made to skin tone and other racialized physical traits; use of an indigenous language (or ways of speaking Spanish associated with indigenous speakers); and use of specific clothing that lead to ethnic identification. We also included triggers that are not directly connected to ethnic/racial characteristics but which are frequently associated with them, such as socioeconomic traits (being poor, having a low level of schooling, having a rural origin); regional origin (coming from a specific state or region in the country, such as Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí, "the south," etc.); and last names, which refers almost exclusively to having a Mayan last name in Yucatán State. The category "other cultural traits" refers to customs, behaviour or activities people relate to indigenous belonging, but which do not include clothing and language. Finally, we included a category for "generic mention," which refers to discrimination experiences that are attributed to certain ethnic/racial belonging, but do not give more information on specific triggers. This category includes discrimination experiences that were recounted as affecting, for example, "an indigenous person," or "a black person," but did not specify whether the person had been discriminated because of his/her cultural traits, linguistic traits, physical traits, etc.

4. Results: Analyzing ethnic/racial discriminatory practices

4.1 Statistical density of the different analytical dimensions

Ethnic/racial discrimination is so frequent in Mexico that we gathered a total of 565 testimonies of concrete discrimination experiences. Table 2 shows the frequency of these experiences by social spheres. While these results are not statistically representative, they *do* show which social spheres are perceived most frequently—or most importantly in the informants' memories—as being the scene of discrimination practices. The main spheres are the workplace and job market, mentioned 24% of the times; family relations (19%); school (18%); shops, restaurants and other establishments (18%); social relationships with friends or neighbors (14%); and public spaces (12%). Firstly, it is worth noting the high number of different social spheres and the diversity among them. Secondly, it is important that discrimination is frequent both in spaces that are key for the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality (workplace and job market, and schooling) and in informal spaces where inequality can be reproduced in daily life (family, social relationships, consumption spaces, public spaces). It is also remarkable that the health system, the justice system, and public security do not appear among the most cited social spheres. It seems that, although discrimination in these spheres has repeatedly been

Table 2. Percentage each social sphere was mentioned in recounts of ethnic/racial discrimination experiences*		
Social sphere	*%*	*n*
Workplace and job market	24.4	138
Family relations	19.3	109
Schooling	18.4	104
Shops, restaurants, and other establishments	17.9	101
Social relations (friends, neighbors)	14.4	81
Public spaces	12.1	68
Mass media	3.2	18
Real estate, housing	3.0	17
Healthcare	2.8	16
Public security and justice provision	1.2	7
Social networks (online)	0.7	4

*The sum of percentages is larger than 100 because some testimonies mentioned more than one social sphere in reference to the same discrimination experience
Source: Own elaboration

documented by previous studies, the perception of its frequency is relatively less than that of other spheres.[7]

Table 3 presents the distribution of discrimination practices according to the *type of consequences* that they have, divided across the six main *social spheres*. In general terms, most testimonies (63%) are about mistreatment, without specifying explicitly what the discrimination practice did in terms of access or internal mobility.[8] In the workplace and job market, the most frequently mentioned social spheres, most practices refer to their effect on the person's access (46%) and internal mobility (12%), often expressed as an objection to hiring a person displaying ethnic/racial characteristics commonly associated with an indigenous belonging.

Table 3. Distribution of discrimination pracitces in the most-mentioned social spheres, by type of consequences					
Social spheres	*Mistreatment*	*Access*	*Internal mobility*	*Access and internal mobility*	*Un-classified*
Workplace and job market	38.4	45.7	12.3	1.5	2.2
Shops, restaurants, and other establishments	70.9	26.4	0.9	-----	1.8
Schooling	67.6	26.7	1.9	-----	3.8
Family relations	64.7	34.3	1.0	-----	-----
Social relations (friends, neighbors)	81.7	15.9	-----	-----	2.4
Public spaces	79.7	15.9	-----	-----	4.4
Total*	63.2	29.6	4.3	0.4	2.7

*Includes all discrimination experiences
Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4 shows the frequency with which different *agents* were mentioned as the perpetrators of discrimination experiences. In relation to the most commonly mentioned social spheres (Table 2), the most frequently mentioned agents are friends (20%), and neighbors or relatives (30%). This is followed by employers (18%); personnel in shops, restaurants and other establishments (14%); and classmates (10%). Again, agents related to institutionalized social spheres (policepersons, doctors and other healthcare workers, teachers, school personnel, and government employees) receive fewer mentions compared to the first five types mentioned above. However, taken together they amount to 10% of all mentions.

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[7] This does not mean that ethnic/racial Discrimination in these spheres is irrelevant. While less frequent, discrimination in these spheres have direct and important consequences in people's lives, as is explored in section 4.2.

[8] However, no specific questions were asked about the most significant consequences of these mistreatment experiences. It is possible that most informants implicitly associate these practices with larger consequences, although this cannot be verified from our data. Internal mobility is of course not a relevant consequence for experiences related to family relations, social relations, public spaces, and private consumption spaces, where discrimination is mainly expressed in terms of access and treatment.

Table 4. Agents who perpetrate ethnic/racial discrimination practices (%)*	
Friends	30.4
Neighbors and relatives	30.4
Employers	17.7
Employees in consumption establishments	13.5
Classmates	9.9
People in public spaces	7.3
Clients	5.3
Work peers	3.4
Policepersons	2.5
Native people (vis-à-vis immigrants)	2.3
Healthcare staff (excluding doctors)	2.3
Teachers	1.9
School administrative staff	1.9
Government staff (excluding agents mentioned in other categories)	1.4
Doctors	0.2
Un-identified	6.6

*The sum of percentages is larger than 100 because some testimonies mentioned more than one agent in reference to the same discrimination experience.
Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, Table 5 shows the main features triggering discrimination experiences. Racialized physical features are at the top of the list, with 63% of total mentions. Among these racialized features, skin tone was one of the most frequently mentioned, although other traits also appear.[9] This supports the importance of the racial dimension as a trigger of discrimination. It was frequently mentioned in conjunction with ethnic traits, such as speaking an indigenous language (14%), wearing traditional clothing (10%), having an indigenous last name (4%) and other cultural characteristics (4%). It is important to underscore the role played by socioeconomic characteristics (22%), which confirms—as has been suggested by previous studies—that ethnic/racial discrimination is often triggered by a mixture of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic traits (Solís et al., 2019; Telles and Torche, 2018; Flores and Telles, 2012).

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[9] The pre-eminence of physical traits, and in particular skin tone, could be due in part to the fact that our questions explicitly mentioned skin tone as a possible trigger for discrimination. However, it is important to note that skin tone also emerged spontaneously as a trigger even when our questions only mentioned discrimination towards indigenous persons.

Table 5. Triggers for ethnic/racial discrimination practices (%)*	
Racialized physical traits	62.8
Socioeconomic traits	21.6
Speaking an indigenous language	13.6
Generic mention	11.5
Clothing	10.3
Last name	4.2
Regional origin	4.1
Other cultural traits	3.5

*The sum of percentages is larger than 100 because some testimonies mentioned more than one trigger in reference to the same discrimination experience.
Source: Own elaboration.

4.2 Analysis of specific practices

Workplace and job market

As studies have previously documented (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vázquez, 2014; Horbath, 2008), discrimination in the job market begins in the recruitment phase of the process, restricting access to people with certain characteristics. Informants described very strong filters conditioning the possibility to occupy certain positions, mainly related to physical appearance and, less frequently, to linguistic traits, socioeconomic traits, last names and clothing. It is worth noting that these triggers operate jointly, without participants necessarily explaining which trigger carried the most weight. The main perpetrators in this social sphere are employers, but peers are also mentioned as perpetrators of mistreatment.

Regarding access, appearance was a key element, including skin tone, weight, height and other elements related to a specific beauty standard. Several informants said on separate occasions that some applicants are considered "the pretty ones" for having fair skin, in the words of one informant from the vulnerable group in Mérida. On the side of perpetrators, one informant from the vulnerable group in Mexico City, who works in human resources, talked about explicitly discriminatory recruitment practices:

> It's like an understanding that we need a certain profile. I mean certain directors or managers tell you. And I don't just see it in my company. Right now, I'm studying my master's and I see it happening in other companies […] where you get asked about certain characteristics and they want certain characteristics. Take the example of the receptionist […] You may say "It's [just] the receptionist," but the receptionist is the company's face, it is the first front that you see. And many companies, maybe medium or large, seek for profiles of pretty girls, even if they haven't finished their degree. They get paid well and preferably

they ask for white girls, with good bodies, with pretty faces, no matter their level of schooling […] and they get paid well.[10]

Differentiation is not limited to the recruitment and selection process, but continues within the companies, affecting both treatment and internal mobility. It is noteworthy that in all regions participants perceived a preference for people with lighter skin tones when promotions were considered, as reported by an informant from middle SES in Mérida:

The girls who were there, including my girlfriend, did his work. The secretaries did everything. The guy didn't go, he skipped the day, everything, but since he was a very tall guy, *güero*,[11] with reddish, bushy beard, he was very handsome, then he came with his smile and they would say, "Oh, this guy has the image that the company needs!" Although the other one [contending for the position] seemed to be much more capable, at least according to his résumé, but [he didn't get the promotion]."

Especially in Yucatán, Mayan last names were reported to limit access and internal mobility, as those who have them are more prone to being discriminated against (see López Santillán, 2011: 162; Iturriaga, 2018: 197). An informant of high SES in Mérida, for example, talked about a colleague with a Mayan last name who "would not get the same salary as the rest of the engineers, just because his last name was Caamal. He was very good, he worked hard, but his last name is Caamal, not like the rest of the engineers who have last names that are… flashy."

In addition to limiting access and internal mobility, treatment is also different within the workplace. It's common that "our very colleagues" discriminate their peers, as reported by an informant in Valladolid, Yucatán. An informant from low SES in Monterrey, for example, said: "I've been called a 'colored person' at work [mischievously]: 'Colored person, do this.'" As these informants' recount, the trigger for mistreatment is mainly a racialized physical appearance. Other testimonies mixed racialized and ethnic traits. For example, a lawyer in Oaxaca talked about discrimination against his peer as follows:

Secretaries treat me really well [but I have a colleague] who I appreciate a lot, short, darkish, very dark skin, and he's actually from a *Triqui* area, from San Juan Copala […] Even when he's very well dressed they always call me in first […] They know us both well. I mean, I even feel like in that courtroom […] he actually has more work there than I do. So, it's something you notice.

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[10] All translations from Spanish are our own.
[11] Fair-skinned and/or blond.

An occupational sector deserving special attention is domestic service (see Toledo González, 2014; Castellanos Guerrero, 2005: 162), as it is characterized by significant gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic/racial asymmetries. Furthermore, their confinement to the domestic space makes these discriminatory practices all but invisible. A noteworthy case was that of an informant from low SES in Monterrey, who recounted an experience related to mistreatment, and possibly internal mobility, in her workplace:

> They judge you, because you are dark-skinned [*morena*], because she [her boss] would say: "Let's see, you are very darkish, you are *aperladita*."[12] Because there were several of us, then: "The 'blackie' can't serve [the table]." The 'blackie' was me. I mean, because my hands, when I put down the plate, they wouldn't like them because of their color. Then I would only do cleaning. And the one who had fairer skin […] she would serve the table, set the table, put the tablecloth and pick up [the dishes] […] The simple fact of [skin] color when I put your plate down at the table.

Family relations

As pointed out by Moreno Figueroa (2008), the sphere of family and spousal relations is particularly important for discrimination, as racist logics are normalized more intensely when they happen in the private domain. Rea Campos's (2017) work is illustrative on this issue, as she conducted a survey among students of León, Guanajuato. While she found some favourable attitudes towards indigenous immigration into the city and towards learning an indigenous language, the opinions turned strictly negative when it came to having a relationship with people from an indigenous background.[13] Students reported feeling little attraction towards indigenous "physical features and skin color" (Rea Campos, 2017: 268, our translation).

Similarly, our research shows that ethnic/racial prejudices regarding partner selection abound among family members and friends.[14] For example, a participant from high SES in Mérida talked about a man he knew who had married an indigenous woman. Although his family's critiques and the critiques of others in his social circle did not stop his relationship, the woman's access to the family was strongly affected by her ethnic belonging and by socioeconomic considerations, as she was the daughter of a low-ranking employee on the family's ranch:

> I have a friend who married an indigenous woman and they are discriminated against. They mock him. He said: "I want her as my wife, and I don't care" […]

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[12] In Monterrey, dark-skinned, *morena*.
[13] Marriage segregation across ethnic/racial lines is explored in Martínez Casas et al. (2014: 72).
[14] These discussions frequently came in response to an explicit question made in focus groups and interviews, regarding the popular usage phrase "Improving the race," which usually means marrying someone who has less of an indigenous background than yourself.

Go figure. He was almost the family's embarrassment, that he went and married an indigenous woman […] "How are you going to marry that one?" […] It's fair game, right? But people frowned upon them. It was ugly, to this day, in some social circles.

An informant from low SES in Monterrey said about his preferences for his daughter's future partner: "I wouldn't like her ending up with a *chirigüillo* or with an indigenous person 'with a passport',[15] even if he was schooled." The triggers in these cases are indigenous belonging (including speaking an indigenous language), coming from a lower SES, coming from rural areas, and coming from a different region.

Explaining the main motives behind the preference for "whiteness," an informant from the vulnerable group in Mexico City said that he agreed with a suggestion his grandfather had made to him once with regards to his partner:

My grandfather said to me: "Do you want to improve the race [*mejorar la raza*]? Marry a white woman" […] Whether I like it or not, marrying a person with a white tone does open a lot of doors, it attracts attention. At least they [the children] won't turn out that ugly. That's what you think, right? At least they'll be pretty […] Because you come and ask for something in a government office and you even get treated nicely. And I tell you that as a lawyer, who goes to courtrooms.

In this informant's experience, his wife's "white tone" was an advantage she had over other women that enabled him to inherit desirable physical traits to his children, and gave him social capital just by her standing next to him.

Discrimination experiences also referred to treatment, mainly via the ideas expressed by parents about their children (whether existing or hypothetical) and the children of people they knew. In these cases, the trigger is mostly skin tone. Several informants talked about preferential treatment that they or other people might apply towards their children with lighter skin.[16] For example, a woman from high SES in Mexico City said, about a friend married to a man "of mulatto ancestry," that "she preferred a divorce over children […] Because she wouldn't be able to go around showing off her kids, I think." Even though this is just an interpretation on behalf of the informant, other people also talked about an undesirability of having dark-skinned

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[15] In most interviews and focus groups in Monterrey, the terms "chirigüillo" and "with a passport" [*pasaporteado*] were used to refer to people identified as coming from a different region and having indigenous features or dark skin, mainly immigrants from the northern central region of Mexico. The states of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, and Hidalgo were usually mentioned as these persons' origin.

[16] Nutini describes the same process: "In emulating a superordinate social class or ethnic category, upwardly mobile men marry European-looking women in order to enhance their progeny's phenotypes and influence their children to do the same, often favouring more European-looking offspring to the neglect of the more Indian-looking ones" (1997: 231).

children. A woman in Oxkutzcab, Yucatán, for example, expressed her fear of having dark-skinned or *boox*[17] children:

> I *was* [scared], right? […] I mean, of course I'm going to love him. But from that to saying, "I wanted him to be dark-skinned…," not really. Who knows why it matters, that thing about color, right? It's not like you say, "I didn't want him" or "I'm not going to love him." I mean not that at all, but yes…

Similarly, a woman from the vulnerable group in Oaxaca talked about a friend, who would say: "If I have a dark-skinned son, I'm going to throw him away and have another one."

It was also noteworthy that several female participants talked about having to convince their daughters that having a darker skin tone was not something to be embarrassed about. This shows a high degree of internalization, on behalf of young girls, of the negative connotations associated with darker skin. An informant from low SES in Mérida, for example, said that her daughter had tried to get rid of her darker skin tone by scrubbing herself with a brush,[18] while an informant from high SES in Oaxaca said that she had to explain to her daughter that her skin tone was not something bad, because she had inherited it from her father.

School

With regards to education, informants recalled more discrimination experiences related to treatment than they did to access or internal mobility. As other researchers have discussed (Oehmichen, 2007; López Santillán, 2011), several participants mentioned cases of bullying, triggered mainly by skin tone, coming from a rural area and from a different region, speaking an indigenous language and, in Yucatán, having Mayan last names. An informant from the vulnerable group in Mérida, for example, compared the experience of her two daughters, one with lighter skin and one with darker skin:

> I have all the contrasts at home; I have one who's white like milk and I have one who's almost mulatta. And the one who's almost mulatta comes home crying every day because she got bullied. They won't let her play because… And precisely today she was saying: "I hope they let me play because it's Children's Day" […] Although physically both are identical, her color has marked her a lot and they won't let her play. "You're the black one." That's the way it is, unfortunately.

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[17] "Black" in Mayan.
[18] An informant from the vulnerable group in Mérida mentioned something similar, when she said that, as a child, she had toyed with the idea of bathing herself in bleach to whiten her skin.

With regards to speaking an indigenous language and having an indigenous last name, an informant in Oxkutzcab said:

> My classmates and friends who had the opportunity to go to Mérida for school, having a Mayan last name led to what today we call bullying. They discriminated them, they separated them. Speaking Mayan affected their possibilities to interact.

An informant from high SES in Oaxaca said that, when she went to primary school, her teacher would not allow one of her classmates to speak his language. Speaking an indigenous language was a trigger discussed with relation to other social spheres, but it was clear that it played a more important role at school. In the experiences recounted by the informants, speaking an indigenous language played a key role in affecting the socialization process, mainly because of an understanding that schools were a place where people come to learn Spanish. Several informants, for example, shared experiences in which they had to explain to their children that speaking an indigenous language was unnecessary and, due to all the bullying it brought about, undesirable.[19]

With regards to access to education, informants mainly referenced the triggers of physical appearance (and its relation to socioeconomic traits), speaking an indigenous language, coming from a different region and coming from rural areas. Regarding physical appearance and socioeconomic origin, an informant from high SES in Mexico City mentioned discrimination "due to income and physical appearance." To avoid the admission of 'undesirable' persons, the school would ask for economic conditions impossible to fulfil: "They manage it like […] It's not like they say 'I'll let you in based on how you look,' but they do say 'Pay in advance for the whole year,' they know that you can't pay the year and off you go." The informant also talked about self-induced segregation, explaining that, even if someone with an undesirable physical appearance *could* "pay the year," she would end up noticing that she was not welcome: "They would say 'Okay [you're admitted],'" because they know that, once inside, you're not going to have the social status that they want and, after a year or two years, you'll leave voluntarily." The undesirable physical characteristics the informant was referring to— as well as their close link to perceived socioeconomic origin—were clear in a different moment of the interview, when she defined the father of one of the students as follows:

> I'm telling you, you don't know whether he's the chauffer or the father […] because he could come with a suit or he could come with a shirt and dress pants, but you would still see a dark-skinned man, maybe overdressed, the wife as well. All the time they need to display the [clothes] brand from here to the floor to meet the social status.

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[19] On attitudes towards learning an indigenous language (particularly, Mayan), see Sima Lozano and Perales Escudero (2015).

Regarding the triggers of speaking an indigenous language and coming from a different geographical region, particularly from rural areas, an informant from low SES in Monterrey talked about a student's problems upon being admitted into her daughter's school. The problems arose from her being a speaker of an indigenous language—a migrant from the northern central region of Mexico—and having a poor level of Spanish. As the informant explained, the girl was admitted after some reticence on behalf of school authorities but, once inside, met bullying practices similar to those mentioned in the previous cases.

The two experiences described above discuss the undesirability of having certain people admitted into two very different types of schools; a private elite school in Mexico City and a public school in an underprivileged area of Monterrey. Despite these schools' differences, both exclude people with ethnic/racial characteristics associated to indigenous belonging. Different triggers are combined for these practices to take place. In the private school case, socioeconomic origin plays a fundamental role and is tightly associated with racialized traits. In the public school, the trigger is the combination of speaking an indigenous language, originating in a different state and coming from a rural area.

Shops, restaurants, and other establishments

In shops, restaurants and other establishments, most participants talked about discrimination experiences related to nightclubs, restaurants and department stores. In their accounts, ethnic/racial traits would often be combined with socioeconomic traits. One informant from high SES in Monterrey, for example, talked about his difficulty of getting into nightclubs:

> It's happened like three times in the line to get into the club […] it's like 'No, you can't get in.' And my girlfriend does get in because she's blond [*güerita*]. My friends get in and I don't. You have special help [an influential friend] and he comes out and it's like: 'What do you mean he can't get in?' 'Oh, I'm sorry,' and then I get in. But it's all because of his help because if it was me alone, just standing there, not knowing anyone, I wouldn't get in.

Discriminatory experience in nightclubs was also mentioned by an informant from high SES in Mexico City.[20] In her account, she and her daughter would describe the bumper in highly racialized terms, proving that discrimination does not only go from the people working in the establishment to its customers, but also vice versa. To the informant and her daughter, the bumper was "a hideous *naco*,[21] a guy this big [short]"

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[20] Iturriaga (2018: 228) finds similar discrimination practices in Mérida, Yucatán.
[21] Indian, rude, inadecuate.

who, in her view, did not possess the allegedly superior qualities one would need in order to discriminate others:

> My daughter, who's 19, always in the clubs, does say: "Mom, I mean you look at them and you think: 'How is *this* guy not letting me in?' Well of course, because they look at them contemptuously, because he's dark-skinned. 'Why wouldn't *he* let me in when I have the status and the money to be in there?

In department stores, an informant from low SES in Mexico City talked about the security guards' behaviour when she walked into a store. According to her story, the triggers were at once her physical appearance and her socioeconomic traits:

> It happened to me once and I felt really bad because I thought: 'How is it possible that we get catalogued because we look modest. So what, we can't afford a shirt, some shoes?' That day I was angry because of the guard, we would go to one department and he would be behind us. We moved to another one and he […] Then I turned very angry and said, "Well I'm not stealing anything! See, here is my money."

Further along the interview, the informant defined "looking modest" both in terms of her outfit and her behavior, as well as in terms of her physical traits: "I mean they think that because you look short and darkish and are modestly dressed they think that you don't have it, that you can't afford it, that you don't deserve it, and that you're less than them."

As in the work sphere, an informant gave us a glimpse into the logic of the perpetrators. As a restaurant owner in Mérida, he explained how differentiated treatment in his metier worked based on appearance (including age, skin tone, and other traits):

> Always with young, good-looking people, you place them in the outside tables […] and older people or less desirable-looking people, which includes people with darker skin, you hide them a bit in the back tables. You bring them to the back so that people, when they arrive, see the pretty people in the place and say: "This is a cool place to go to" […] It's not in the rules, but it's in the training process. When you're a hostess, that's what they teach you, to place people.

Regarding additional triggers, an informant in the vulnerable group in Oaxaca explained how skin tone can become even less favorable when mixed with traditional clothing:

> Once I thought of buying some sandals [*huaraches*]. I like them. And I came into the clothes store with my *huaraches* and they say to me "No, I won't sell you

anything." Really. And I stared at her and said: "But why? What's wrong with me?" And I said: "Do you realize what you just did?" "Yes. I'm not selling to you."

The experience of this informant—of upper-middle SES, as the rest of the people in the vulnerable group—shows that, in order to avoid an association of her physical features with a lower SES, she needed to dress a certain way.

Social relationships (friend, neighbors)

As to social relationships with friends and neighbors, access to the social circle seemed to be affected by ideas and comments similar to those expressed in the family sphere. For example, an informant from low SES in Monterrey said that a friend had remarked about a woman he was dating: "Man, she looks like a *chirigüilla*. Leave her to a *chirigüillo* in the *Alameda*. You're not going with her. I agree, she has a great body, I mean size zero, but her face does not help." As mentioned with regards to the family sphere, in the testimonies of informants from Monterrey, the term "chirigüillo" would include physical traits as much as linguistic, cultural, and geographical traits. In the description of the woman in the previous quote, "chirigüillo" only references her physical traits. This means that her sole *appearance*—in the view of the phrase's author—linked her to the cultural characteristics of indigenous migrants who frequently look for work in Monterrey's *Alameda.*

Regarding treatment, the informants' experiences illustrated a social situation without sharp segregation, but where racialized physical traits constantly appear as jokes, frequently linked to socioeconomic origin and/or indigenous belonging: "Here, when they're joking around among friends, my friends would say: 'Dude, you have modest skin color [*tez humilde*].'" Dark skin as a joke also appears in the testimony of an informant from high SES in Monterrey, who said that a friend of hers would call the informant's nieces "*semilleras*" (women who sell seeds): "They look like *semilleras*, even if they do have a lot of money."

The link between coming from a lower SES and having a particular racialized appearance related to an indigenous origin is most clear in the experience of an informant from high SES in Mexico City, where she emphasizes that one can stop being from lower SES, but one's appearance would still link one to it:

I'm thinking of a friend's husband […] You see her and really… Very good status. And she married a man who… My God! But, over time, you have no idea how much he's improved […] She polished him. He was like a raw diamond. And really, physically he still has a lot of trouble. But you don't know how much he's polished himself. You can have a really good conversation with him.

Discrimination experiences in public spaces are mainly related to treatment (mostly jokes) and are mostly triggered by speaking an indigenous language, wearing traditional clothing, coming from a rural area, and physical traits such as skin tone. An informant from low SES in Monterrey said he had incurred in discriminatory practices against people who spoke an indigenous language. His testimony is different from others in that he did not seem conscious of behaving reprehensively:

> This one time I was in the subway, like two months ago, and I turn around and I stare at them. There were three *chirigüillas*, and I stare at their behavior. Not morbidly, not with anything, just the girls […] And they turned around and they thought I was staring at one of them, but they would start to speak in their dialect [sic.]. Because in the subway they don't care, they do speak their dialect […] And they think it's like they were speaking English, right? […] I've said something like: "Hey, you're very cool!" But really saying: shut up, speak Spanish. It's what bothers you. I've told them, looking around: "Speak Spanish, speak what's normal."

Other informants talked about discrimination experiences they had witnessed, openly condemning them. An informant from low SES in Mexico City, for example, talked about an experience in a bus, when a woman refused to give her seat to an indigenous woman carrying her baby. Her story mixed ethnic/racial differences between the two women with class differences:

> So we all know that the first seats are for handicapped persons, pregnant women and sorts. And the woman was carrying her baby and tells this girl who looked middle class: "Hey, can you give me your seat?" And the girl looks at her head to toe and says: "There are others over there; you can tell the people over there" […] And this woman, you could see that she was not from here, that she talked very differently than us.

Mistreatment is also expressed in certain comments that are not made *towards* a person, but *about* her in her presence. An informant from high SES in Mérida, for example, talked about feeling uncomfortable when his father-in-law mocked a Mayan man. The trigger in this case were the man's physical traits, which were linked to cultural traits (of technological backwardness) by the man who was mocking him:

> At the entrance, there was an autochthonous man, from Telchac, with his radio, dark-skinned, tanned from the sun, short, with his legs arched a bit, very Mayan […] and the man makes a comment […] "Look at those Mayans, they even have

a radio those Mayans, look at them, how modern, the Mayans and their radios"
[…] I became offended. Like it was a chimpanzee with a radio, not even a person.

In recounts of "indirect" harassment it is not clear if the person being attacked is aware of the situation. However, the generalized nature of these practices, as was mentioned by other informants, could lead us to assume that the victims eventually notice they are being harassed. The first testimony presented with regards to the three women in the subway also shows that mockery can easily evolve into outright attacks.

Other spheres: Health and justice

While the most frequently discussed spheres have been analyzed above, other less frequently discussed spheres are equally relevant for understanding the ubiquity of ethnic/racial discrimination. Even more, discrimination in spheres like health and justice can have highly pernicious effects on people's lives (CONAPRED, 2012; Gracia and Horbath, 2019). A possible explanation for these sphere's lower frequency in the informants' testimonies is that these are not spheres with which people interact on a daily basis—unlike work, school, family, etc.—, which may alter their perception.

In health services, for example, informants mainly discussed situations of "despotism, humiliation and contempt" towards indigenous people, as described in the middle SES focus group in Oaxaca. These practices are triggered by matters such as poor Spanish language skills, coming from rural areas, and coming from low SES. An informant in the vulnerable group in Mérida described how a private hospital in the city refused to receive people from rural areas in Yucatán when there were no rooms that were sufficiently far away from rooms reserved for important people: "And when the hospital is full, when there are only five rooms left, they would say: 'We don't have any occupancy, but I can refer you to another hospital' […] I would always get angry and say: 'But we *do* have space.' They would say: 'Yes, but they [the other users] feel uncomfortable." Practices that denied or delayed access were particularly dangerous in this sphere, as they resulted in unjustified deaths, according to the experiences of several informants in Mérida, Oxkutzcab, and Valladolid.

Regarding justice provision, informants in the middle SES focus group in Oaxaca recounted the difficulties that people who speak an indigenous language face in order to be properly assisted in courtrooms that do not have translators. One informant talked about the problem in her experience as an intern in the judiciary system: "I felt like they wanted to talk to me, and I would need a translator to understand them [but there weren't any translators]." Just like in the health system, discrimination in the justice provision system can have extremely dangerous effects, such as wrongful sentences.[22] Another informant from the vulnerable group in Mexico City talked about the preferential treatment a person with an "adequate" appearance could receive in a courtroom: "They come in and they ask for something in a government office or to do

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[22] On this issue, see Blanco Martín and Ibaven (dirs.) (2019).

some paperwork and they are treated well. They go '*Güera*, how are you? Come right in!' I say this as a lawyer who is often in court."

Informants also said that skin tone played a role in their interactions with the police, also linking it to socioeconomic origin. An informant from the vulnerable group in Mérida talked about her boyfriend being stopped in his car more often than others:

> …while they stopped us [at a checking point], they would stop others who also had dark skin, like me or darker. So, I do think that they base this decision on color. Not only color, but color is part of what they see to then say, "I'm going to stop him", or not. If someone with dark skin has a nice car, they don't stop him. And you say, "Why?" Everyone should be stopped at a checkpoint.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we argue that day-to-day discrimination practices are a key mechanism for the reproduction of ethnic/racial inequality in Mexico. Our empirical analysis suggests that these practices take place in a great variety of social spheres—both formal and informal—and are particularly frequent in family and friend circles; school; the workplace and job market; and in shops, restaurants and other establishments. Informants described experiences of mistreatment, limited access and limited internal mobility in these social spheres, triggered by a mixture of racialized physical traits such as skin tone; ethnic traits such as speaking an indigenous language and wearing traditional clothing; and other elements such as cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic considerations. Our findings underscore the importance of studying ethnic and racial triggers jointly. A great variety of agents was identified as the perpetrators of these practices, mostly friends, neighbors and relatives, employers, work peers, and classmates. In sum, ethnic/racial discrimination practices are generalized and can be said to affect the entire Mexican society.

Despite the great variety of social spheres, triggers, and testimonies, it is noteworthy that experiences were similar across geographical regions, socioeconomic sectors, and age groups. Most informants pointed out the same characteristics when defining people that are vulnerable to ethnic/racial discrimination, such as having a darker skin tone. It was also revealing that most participants recounted stories where racialized traits would become intertwined and sometimes exchanged with other sets of traits, such as ethnic (indigenous language, traditional clothing) and socioeconomic traits.

One of the consequences of this intertwinement is that discrimination can be doubly or triply triggered when a person has traits that are significant to more than just one axis of social classification. This results in a cumulative effect that increases victims' vulnerability when they possess several dimensions of socially stigmatized elements, e.g. speaking an indigenous language, having darker skin, and being poor.

In Mexico, ethnic/racial discrimination is peculiar. While there do not seem to be strong group identities based on racial criteria,[23] people systematically use social classification principles that are based on racial criteria in order to identify themselves (and others) and discriminate. When studying ethnic/racial discrimination in Mexico—and racism in general—it is convenient to escape the trap of discussing whether racial categories are prevalent or not and to focus on how these racially-articulated cognitive principles of social classification operate and reproduce inequality on a day-to-day basis. Further work on this issue should take a constructivist approach to ethnic/racial distinctions.

Our findings regarding generalized and profoundly normalized discrimination practices have both theoretical and public policy implications. With regards to theory, it is important to take into account the interaction of different triggers of discrimination practices. In particular, racialized physical traits deserve more attention, when the general trend is to highlight ethnical traits. With regards to public policy, our taxonomy of practices sheds light on the usefulness of building a larger, more complete catalogue of discrimination practices focused on identifying specific social spheres and specific agents. Such a catalogue would be useful for the design of policies that prevent and fight ethnic/racial discrimination in a more focalized and effective fashion.

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[23] This is historically linked to the success of the mestizaje ideology, which has aspired to integrate all Mexicans—mainly people belonging to indigenous groups—to a same racial group of mestizos. However, ethnic identities based on indigenous belonging are still strong to this day, and these identities bring in racialized traits as much as they bring in ethnic ones.

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