

African-Brazilians and Natives in an Elite University: The Impact of Affirmative Action on Students in Brazil

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Abstract. The best Brazilian universities are public, free of charge, and highly selective. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many public universities began to allocate places on all of their courses to underrepresented groups. The targets of these affirmative action policies were usually African-Brazilian and Native students coming from public schools. This article introduces data on Brazil's higher education system since its early beginnings: its expansion, the seg-

mentation between public and private sectors, and the elitist character of its public universities. It points out the specificities of race relations in the country since the arrival of the Portuguese, and the historical context that favored the introduction of inclusion policies in public universities. It then deploys qualitative data in order to present the experiences of African-Brazilians and Natives who entered one elite university—the Federal University do Rio Grande do Sul—through affirmative action policies. This university is located in the South of the country, in the region that has the highest percentage of white people amongst the general population. The analysis focuses on the educational trajectory, family support and expectations, race relations in the university, resilience processes, and one group of racial quota students' plans for the future. By reporting on this pioneering experience, the importance of diversity in the student body and the challenges the university has to tackle in order to face this new reality are highlighted. **Keywords:** university students, affirmative action, racial quotas, resilience, elite university, Brazilian higher education, diversity in the university.

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1. Higher Education and Society in Brazil

1.1. The Origins of Higher Education

Higher education developed late in Brazil. Unlike Spain, which in the sixteenth century created five universities in its American dominions, Portugal avoided the establishment of university courses in its over-

seas colonies. For over three centuries (1500–1808), during the colonial period, there were no higher education institutions on Brazilian territory.

Students belonging to the Portuguese colonial elite—Brazilian-born Portuguese—had to move to the metropolis in order to graduate from the University of Coimbra in Portugal. This university's mission was to unify the Portuguese Empire elites. It sought to imprint cultural homogeneity into the children of Portuguese born in the colonies, thus preventing them from questioning metropolitan superiority. In the words of Anísio Teixeira, the University of Coimbra was Brazil's "first university" [Teixeira, 1989]¹.

In 1808, the Portuguese Royal Family left Lisbon for Brazil, fleeing Napoleon's troops as they marched into Portugal. When the Regent Prince João VI arrived in the colony he created the first Brazilian Schools—of Medicine, of Law, and a Polytechnic. They were secular, professionally oriented, and independent from one another. These Schools, called *Faculdades*, had a highly elitist purpose. They were not part of a university [Oliven, 2014].

The first Brazilian university—the University of Rio de Janeiro—was founded by decree in 1920, as an aggregation of previously existing *faculdades*. Created two years before the celebrations of Brazil's Independence Centennial, it sustained the exclusive character of higher education, remaining far removed from the majority of Brazilians [Fávero, 1980].

Brazil's higher education system is highly influenced by the French elite professional schools created by Napoleon. University curricula are rigidly defined according to professional careers. Applicants to higher education institutions have to choose a professional degree—such as Medicine, Law, Geology, Psychology, or History—before they are admitted.

Admission is predicated on performance in the *vestibular* exam, which includes multiple-choice tests and an essay assignment based on a topic that changes every year. Between 1911 and 1996,² this exam was the only admission parameter for all university courses. It tested students on various subjects.

Passing the *vestibular* demands very tough and lengthy training. For many years, middle and upper class students, predominantly white and coming from elite private schools, have secured virtually all

¹ During the colonial period, over 2,500 students born in Brazil received degrees from this institution, in the fields of Theology, Canon Law, Civil Law, Medicine and Philosophy.

² Since 1996, with the new National Education Bases and Guidelines Law, the *vestibular* is no longer mandatory. However, many universities have maintained this tradition of carrying out entrance exams virtually identical to the *vestibular*.

the seats in the best public universities, thus benefiting from free, top quality education, funded by Brazil's population at large.

1.2. Urbanization and higher education expansion

In the early 1960s, Brazil was a predominantly rural society with 40% of its population illiterate and largely disenfranchised; to vote one needed to be able to read and write. Out of a population of around 70 million, it had only 102 thousand students enrolled in higher education. The highly elitist character of a higher education in a country that was taking large strides towards urbanization was subjected to sharp criticism from inside and outside the university.

At that time, advocacy groups regarded university reform as part of a broader transformation of society which also included reforms in agrarian structure, the financial system, the political system, and so forth. In 1964, the Military Coup suffocated social movements which had been active during the early sixties.

In the late seventies, the urban population grew bigger than the rural. In 2010, Brazil had 190.7 million inhabitants, 84% of whom were living in cities and towns.

The higher education system reflected this momentous change in Brazilian society. In 1975, enrollments soared to one million, and in 2012, they numbered over 7 million.

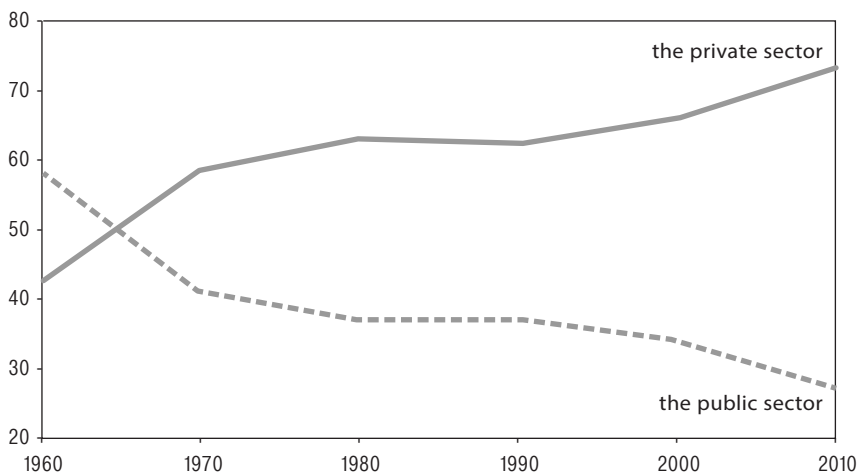
With the steady rise in demand for higher education, the system expanded through sharp internal segmentation. On the one hand, the public sector, which comprised most universities, graduate programs and research activities, became increasingly elitist. On the other hand, the private sector, which grew by opening isolated institutions, offered courses of a much lower academic standard. Young Brazilians from poor families, who had attended public schools and did not have the cultural capital to pass the vestibular exam in public universities, had to pay a private higher education institution in order to get a degree.

When enrollments are compared across the two sectors, an inversion of percentages is found (Fig.1). The decade between 1960–1970 is emblematic of this switch in higher education supply. During this period, the private sector outgrew the public sector in terms of the number of students enrolled. This trend intensified and persists to this day.

Brazilian public education at all levels, including higher education, is free of charge. This renders public universities, which have higher academic standards, extremely competitive. Until the early 2000's, federal universities were highly refractory to the inclusion of poor students—mainly African-Brazilians—coming from public schools³.

³ Brazilian census classifies the population as regards race/color in five categories: *branco* (White), *preto* (Black), *pardo* (Brown, or mixed-race), *indígena* (Native) and *amarelo* (Yellow, that is, of Asian origin). We will be using the term African-Brazilians to refer to Blacks and Browns altogether.

Fig. 1. The number of students enrolled in the private sector and in the public sector



Source: Expansão da educação superior no Brasil—Gráficos (last accessed, 04/17/2015)

1.3. Race relations in Brazil

When the Portuguese first arrived in what is now Brazil, in 1500, there were around 4.5 million indigenous people living in the territory. Contact with Whites and the exploitation of Natives led to the near extermination of this population. Today there are around one million Natives in Brazil, distributed in almost 200 groups, each with their own culture and language. Most of them live in communities. In the last few years, Native population has been growing as they succeed in regaining their traditional land.

During three centuries, Brazil took in 3.5 to 3.6 million black slaves from Africa. It was the last country in America to abolish slavery, in 1888. Its population is highly mixed racially. In the 2010 census, African-Brazilians (that is, Blacks and Browns) outnumbered the White population.

During the nineteenth century, under the influence of racialist European theories, which assumed a hierarchy of races and foresaw the impossibility of national development due to miscegenation, Brazil put into practice immigration policies aimed at whitening its population [Santos, 2002; Seyferth, 1996].

In the early twentieth century, an important shift in national thinking regarding race took place. Based mainly on the works of Gilberto Freyre, a consensus was created around a national project rooted in a positive view of crossbreeding among its three major races (white, indigenous, and black) [Freyre, 1956]. The celebration of *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) allowed for an optimistic perspective on Brazilian society, seen as unique in its successful racial hybridization [Maggie, 2007].

The notion of racial democracy took on a relevant role as the basis for a model of *Brazilianness* that began to emerge in the thirties. It act-

ed as the cement for Brazil's national identity. Since then, this model of a racially harmonic society has been questioned by organized Black groups, as official statistics have unequivocally demonstrated that African-Brazilians show the worst quality of life indexes and that Brazilian elites are predominantly white.

1.4. Historical context favoring inclusion policies in public universities

In 1985, the military regime ended in Brazil. In the aftermath of re-democratization and the strengthening of civil society, new actors emerged in Brazil's political scene. The 1988 Constitution recognized, for the first time, collective rights such as the right to land by native peoples and maroon populations. Equality was regarded in material as well as in formal terms. Illiterate people conquered the right to vote. Research on income concentration, regional disparities, racial and gender inequalities depicted a rich and highly unequal country.

An important actor in this context was the Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado), founded in the 1970s, which brought together different movements around a common struggle for more and better educational opportunities for African-Brazilians. In the III World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in 2001 in Durban (South Africa), the Brazilian government took a stance towards the adoption of public policies favoring historically unprivileged groups in Brazil. Since then, debates on affirmative action have gained a nation-wide scope.

Inclusive policies in the form of university racial quotas became a flagship proposal of anti-racist struggles. In spite of increases in higher education coverage, public universities remained predominantly white and middle-class. A good share of gains obtained by struggles for the democratization of Brazilian universities in the last years stemmed from the political pressure from Black movements.

1.5. Affirmative action policies in Brazilian universities

Affirmative action policies are corrective policies for redressing opportunity structures favoring certain groups over others. Debates on the implementation of affirmative action policies in Brazilian universities point to the need for democratizing higher education by increasing representativeness of poor, African-Brazilian and Native populations in Brazilian public institutions.

In a society such as Brazil's, which displays one of the world's highest income concentration rates in the world, educational inequalities lead to fewer opportunities in the labor market, thus reinforcing the vicious cycle of exclusion. African-Brazilians and Natives suffer additional discrimination. The first group accounts for over half of the country's population, while Natives make up less than 1%. Official figures make evident the sharp divide between African-Brazilians and Whites in Brazilian society [Paixão, 2011].

In the early twenty-first century, affirmative action policies came to benefit groups historically under-represented in Brazil's public universities. The first experience of affirmative action policies in Brazil-

ian public universities took place in Rio de Janeiro state universities in 2002. In 2007, 34 public universities across the country had some kind of affirmative action program. In less than a decade, the number of universities adopting inclusion policies grew to over one hundred.

Affirmative action policies, especially those based on racial quotas in elite universities, have been the target of ample criticism. Two manifestos by civil society, *All Have Equal Rights in the Democratic Republic* (*Todos têm direitos iguais na República Democrática*, 2006) and *One Hundred and Thirteen Anti-racist Citizens Against Racial Laws* (*Cento e treze cidadãos anti-racistas contra as leis raciais*, 2008) culminated in the legal challenging of its constitutionality in the Brazilian Supreme Court [Oliven, 2008].

In 2012, the Court unanimously rejected these claims. In practice, the justices ratified what was already a reality in many public universities. That same year, the Brazilian Congress passed Federal Law 12,711/12, valid for 10 years, setting aside 50% of the admission places in federal higher education establishments for students from public schools, taking into account their social and racial origin according to the demographic profile of the region where each university is located. Affirmative action in federal universities henceforth became a State policy for a period of at least one decade.

This is different from what happened in the United States. There, affirmative action in universities was introduced earlier than in Brazil, in the 1960s, but in 1986 the US Supreme Court ruled that quotas in universities was non constitutional. It recognized, however, that race could be one among several criteria used by universities in their selection processes, as it would enhance diversity in the academic environment and bring benefits to society at large.

2. African-Brazilians and Natives in the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul: Listening to the students

The Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) is located in Brazil's South Region, which has the country's highest percentage of Whites: 80%. This university ranks among the top universities in Brazil. Leaders from Black movements and Native communities participated in debates among the academic community organized by the university in order to subsidize its decision-making on the implementation of an Affirmative Action Program.

Based on negotiations with representatives from the various departments, the University Council established that, for a period of five years beginning in the academic year of 2008, 30% of the places on all courses would be set aside for students coming from public schools—and half of these, for self-declared African-Brazilians⁴. Moreover, catering to demands by Native groups, 10 new vacancies

⁴ Through decision number 134/2007, the UFRGS University Council instituted the Affirmative Action Program based on reserved places in all undergraduate courses for applicants coming from primary and secondary schools in

would be created every year in courses chosen by the communities. This group undergoes a special admission process.

Before the implementation of UFRGS's Affirmative Action Program, only 3.27% of students approved in the entrance exams had self-declared as African-Brazilians (this category includes Blacks and Browns). With the adoption of the racial quotas, this percentage rose to 11.03% (Coordenadoria de Ações Afirmativas da UFRGS, 2013–2014).

The 2012 Report by UFRGS's Affirmative Action Committee compared performance indexes among students enrolled in each course. The average number of credits obtained by all students in each course was the yardstick for comparison. The students were thus divided between those above and below average, the latter group including those who were excluded, dropped out of the course or transferred to another course. The comparison between non-quota and social quota students (i. e., students coming from public schools) did not show any significant correlation. Credits from 30.64% of non-quota students were below average, while for social quota students this figure was 34.72%.

When social and racial quota students (i. e., students coming from public schools who self-declared as African-Brazilians) were compared, the correlation was strong. The performance of over half (52.38%) of those coming from public schools who self-declared as African-Brazilians was below average. This shows that vulnerability among racial quota students is significantly higher than among social quota students (i. e., students coming from public schools that did not self-declare as African-Brazilians) (Coordenadoria de Ações Afirmativas da UFRGS, 2012).

In what follows, we analyze the experience of a group of students who were admitted in 2008 to the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) through affirmative action policies. This study works with a qualitative approach, and is based on recorded interviews with 10 African-Brazilians. These quota holders were enrolled in eight different courses and had a similar or better performance than the average of those students who entered the same course through the regular process. The performance criterion was the number of credits received during their first three semesters in the university. Students were aged between 20 and 33, and most lived in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre. They were enrolled in eight courses: Accounting, Law, Civil Engineering, Letters, Geography, Marine Biology, Physical Education, and Veterinary Science. These students were pioneers, and their presence changed the dynamics of the academic community [Bello, 2011].

the public system, for students coming from public schools self-declaring themselves as Blacks, and for Natives.

UFRGS has a policy of not disclosing individual data on student status whether they are quota-holders or not. The students who participated in this research were approached informally and spoke about their lives before and after they entered the university. Their identity was protected. Besides each statement quoted, we inform of the interviewee's course and gender.

These data were complemented by interviews published in newspapers. In this case, the student was identified by his/her name. News coverage includes African-Brazilians and Native quota-holders.

2.1. Views on UFRGS

Quota students used to see the university as an ivory tower very distant from their daily needs, and as a power-ridden space that reproduced white elites. The classic architecture of old buildings, such as the School of Law and of Medicine and their magnificent marble stairways, fittingly represents the distance between the included and the excluded. Inside the hallways, photos and pictures of alumni and faculties show that they are almost all white, thus reaffirming the notion that the university is a space dominated by a self-reproducing elite.

In the aftermath of studies carried out in the late fifties, there was growing recognition that educational performance is not entirely dependent on individual merit, having also to do with the students' social background. Bourdieu came to see reproduction and legitimation of social inequalities where previously one saw equal opportunity, meritocracy and social justice [Bourdieu, 1970].

In the words of one quota student:

I never fathomed entering UFRGS. To me, it was totally inaccessible. (...) I thought admission was just too hard. That was something for the super-genius (Geography, female).

At the same time, a professional course in a good university is a highly valued opportunity, a dream difficult to fulfill. When undergoing the entrance exams, many students were sure they were not going to pass. Some are the first generation in their families to attend higher education.

I didn't think I was going to pass. I thought it was abusive for my mother to pay R\$100,005. We paid, I didn't know about the income exemption, we paid on the very last day. (...) I just took the exam and passed. It was a big surprise (Letters, female).

To see one's name on a list of admitted students is a joy that many describe with a certain degree of disbelief, since in these situations it

⁵ The interviewee is referring to the exam fee. In 2008, minimum wage was R\$380.00.

is common to find out that many schoolmates were not able to overcome the obstacle posed by the minimal score required, especially in the most competitive courses.

I was very nervous because I didn't think I was going to pass. The list came out on Wednesday, and I went to look on Sunday. I saw people hugging each other on TV. Nobody told me about it. On Sunday, I saw my name there. My mother was so happy! (Veterinary Science, female).

In Rio Grande do Sul state, university admission is followed by various rituals, such as the congregation of successful candidates, and shown on TV and published in newspapers. Another custom is to place a banner with the student's name, institution, and course in front of their homes in order to share the news with neighbors. This appeared in an interview with a quota student:

My mother made a huge banner announcing that (I) had been admitted at UFRGS, along with a dolphin because I had passed for marine biology. (...) She hung it on her bedroom window, which faces the other buildings. All the neighbors came in to congratulate us, asking how was it and about the course, which no one knew existed. I received many calls, from uncles, from my father (Marine Biology, female).

After the euphoria of admission, there is the classroom reality shock: these students had an image of themselves as exemplary, hardworking and responsible. They stood above their peers' average. But once in the university, they had to face their own handicaps: they had fewer resources, lived farther away, relied on often precarious public transportation, had less time to study, and many were workers. These conditions often contrast with those of their classmates. Moreover, they lack the cultural capital the university requires, such as knowledge of foreign languages, mastery over computers and the written language itself.

I find it difficult to express myself, convey some information to the class, words falter... It'd be good to have a course to help out with that. I spoke a lot of slang; it took me a while to get used to the classroom language (Physical Education, male).

One complication often noted refers to university bureaucracy. In the schools they attended, relations were closer, and the language more informal. For most of these students, the university had always been a distant and scarcely accessible institution. More than that, it requires social capital in the form of networking. This can be exemplified by the following observation of another student:

Something I noticed in the beginning of the course is that it was very difficult for me and other classmates. I didn't know I had these benefits, even in terms of my course, senior students didn't care much (Geography, female).

To feel a part of the academic community is therefore a slow, long, and sometimes painful process.

It was very hard. It seems like another world; people speak a different language. I think I'm a bit dumb. When I talk about it with classmates that had a trajectory similar to mine, they also voice this difficulty. It's difficult for me to speak with the professors (Geography, female).

Research carried out by Social Psychologists call attention to the fact that many of the problems of low performance among students belonging to stigmatized minorities are not just academic. Steele, an African-American scientist who was himself a victim of racial segregation while growing up in the United States, studies the social factors that weight on certain individuals belonging to unprivileged groups, such as Blacks, the poor, women, the elderly, and so forth. According to him, "the sense of having a given social identity arises from having to deal with important identity contingencies, usually threatening or restrictive contingencies like negative stereotypes about your group, group segregations, of one sort or another, discrimination and prejudice, and so on, all because you have a given characteristic" [Steele, 2010]. Therefore, the pressure of being one of the few representatives of a historically subaltern, often stigmatized group may be such that it ends up having a negative impact on their academic performance.

Besides adapting to a new environment, learning about university bureaucracy, and overcoming deficiencies received from public school, African-Brazilian and Native quota students also have to face discrimination. Hostile attitudes come from the hallways, classmates' comments, and certain professors.

2.2. Facing discrimination

Luciola Belfort, daughter of a French-descendant father and a mother from the Kaingang community, is the first Native student to get a medical degree from UFRGS. In an interview to Zero Hora the most important newspaper of the state, she talked about the offense she faced from both her seniors and professors: "[They] talked about me in front of me, they wanted to know who I was. They thought I looked like a Native, even if I don't really have the phenotype." She claimed to have been insulted in the social network site Orkut⁶, as if she were an

⁶ Before Facebook, Orkut was the most popular social network among young Brazilians.

impostor: “You are the worse Caucasian, a White girl trying to pass as Native” and “even if you’re White you’re no good” [Porciúncula, 2015].

This angry tone is also found in the case of black quota students:

[...] on Orkut there is a lot of racism, unbelievable things such as, “Kill the Blacks. Blacks cannot join UFRGS because they’re ugly. Blacks belong to the kitchen.” (Letters, male)

These offenses overflow the university walls in graffiti such as one found close to the university that says, “Blacks, only in the university restaurant kitchen; say no to the quotas!”

Discrimination was part of their lives before joining the university. School is regarded as a space where we learn and share not just scholarly content and knowledge, but also values, beliefs, habits and prejudices regarding race, gender, class, and age. Gomes’s studies on race relations in Brazilian schools point out that the school years are for most students an important moment for constructing a Black identity, where negative stereotypes and representations on this racial segment and its aesthetic standards are reinforced [Gomes, 2002].

This is shown in the following statement:

Where I went to school, they would never let me be part of performances [...] All my classmates were in, and they’d never let me. My mother would go there and talk to them (teachers), because I didn’t have the clothing, but they would give it to my classmates. My (white) friend was always part of it. They laughed at my hair, said I had kinky hair, and all. All I did was cry, I wouldn’t tell my mother, I was embarrassed, I guess. [...] once, a classmate told me: each monkey on its own branch. And the teacher (would say nothing). I didn’t say anything, I just cried, I was about 10 years old, so you see how these things really get under your skin (Geography, female)

Children frequently absorb such offenses, alone and embarrassed, unable to speak out. Teachers often do not know how to support them. Taylor [1992] points out, “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others”. Some authors consider recognition to be a fourth kind of right, along with civil, political and social rights. Examples of non-recognition towards African-Brazilians and Natives in Brazil are not lacking [Schucman, 2014]. This may become manifested as low self-esteem and reduced expectations among youth, who do not hope for a better future.

In a study on racial quotas at UFRGS among Law students, the following question was asked: “Have you felt discriminated against because of the color of your skin? Yes or No”. All students who self-declared as White answered in the negative, while 64% of Blacks responded positively. According to the author, “There is a clear situa-

tion of hegemony, showing what being White means in Brazilian society: not being a victim of discrimination due to the color of one's skin shows that these individuals are not 'racialized'; they represent themselves rather as a collective" [Baranzeli, 2014].

Students cope with these issues in multiple ways. They may join others who are in a similar situation in order to exchange information and share experiences, or seek support from certain professors. They become autodidacts in order to redress their deficiencies, as was noted by one interviewee:

During my first year at the university, I used to spend the weekends reading everything I thought I had missed. My mother thought I was ill: "This kid doesn't go out, he's locked in his bedroom the whole time" (Letters, male).

UFRGS gradually tried to adapt to these new students, offering and advertising support services in order to improve the material and academic conditions for the students who need it. For students contemplating these services, one opportunity usually leads to another. Those who are granted some kind of scholarship or position in tutoring, outreach or research, acquire a richer view on the university and its activities. Their relations with the academic community become more symmetrical.

Quota students also realize that, just as society became divided when it came to accepting (or not) affirmative action policies and especially the racial quotas, the university too is not monolithic. Many faculties, staff and students support the admission of under-represented groups into public universities, and acknowledge their skills and hard work. More than that: they wish them to be successful. Most emotional support however comes from family.

2.3. The importance of family and for the family

One aspect that stands out in the quota students' statements is family support, especially from the mother and other female relatives. A survey on university quotas carried out with a sample of the Brazilian population at large found a reverse relation between the level of education and income and the approval of affirmative action policies (Folha de São Paulo). Affluent groups tend to favor universalistic policies. Black women, who are more precariously included in the labor market, are possibly the most enthusiastic supporters of affirmative action policies, which provide opportunities for their children to advance their studies.

In the words of a quota student,

My family's bedrock is my mother, she is the provider [...] She always says, 'You are all I have. Everything I do is for you' (Geography, female).

It must be noted that in the *Bolsa Família*⁷ Program, it is the mother who receives the cash for keeping children in school, since she tends to think more about them than about herself.

Quota students also hope that a professional qualification will provide more opportunities for their children and those around them.

I'm studying in order to have the things that my mother couldn't give me when I was younger, in order to give them to my children and whoever else is around me. That's why I'm studying (Veterinary Science, female).

Among black families, to study and become qualified in order to find a better position in the job market, is something highly valued.

My mother encourages (study), she always says that someone who hasn't studied has nothing. Especially if she is black. Many employees prefer to hire a white person that only went to fundamental school than a black with a degree. The more we study, the better are our opportunities for getting a well-paid job. It also shows that black people aren't good for cleaning jobs only. (Letters, female).

According to Lahire [1997] there is a myth about parental omission among poor communities, which for some educators would explain the failure of students coming from the popular classes:

[...] parental omission is a myth. This myth is produced by teachers who ignore the logics of families, and surmise from the students' behavior and performance that their parents do not care about them, and do not interfere. Our studies reveal a deep interpretive injustice when parents' "omission" or "negligence" is invoked. Almost all our research subjects, at whatever school situation, feel that the school is something important, and expect their children to become better off than them [Lahire, 1997].

Families make internal arrangements to enable the dream of getting a university degree. This was the case of Taís Leite, the first African-Brazilian cartographic engineer to graduate from UFRGS. Her husband supported her during her studies. She is currently working in her field of expertise, and will support her husband during his MBA studies [Custódio, 2015a].

One student told a story that showed her mother's wholehearted dedication:

In the first day of class, it was a geology class, not even geography. My mother came along, and put in her face (to speak with the pro-

⁷ Bolsa família is an income transfer program that benefits 11 million families below the poverty line, conditional on maintaining children in school.

fessor): ‘You take good care of my daughter. Good-bye, my daughter, have a good class’ (Geography, female).

Family support is reciprocated by the social and symbolic return that having a son or daughter in a good, free, public university may have for the family at large, in terms of information and as an example to others. Quota students encourage their relatives to increase their level of schooling and apply for public universities.

Now with the quotas, in my father’s family [...] several of my cousins have taken on the opportunity for joining the university. So two of my cousins who had given up private college because they couldn’t afford it, decided to take the (UFRGS) entrance exams, and this year they passed. One is studying Psychology, and is enjoying the course, and the other went to Nursery School (Law, female).

Denize Leticia Marcolino, the first Native to graduate from UFRGS in 2012, encouraged her mother, who lives in an Indian village, to take a distance-learning pedagogy course.

This encouragement may have an impact beyond the academic sphere, as the following comment by the mother of a graduated quota student shows:

My daughter makes the entire family proud. I have improved due to her support: from maid, I became a cleaning lady, then a door-woman, and now I am a guardian [Custódio, 2015a].

2.4. Students’ resilience

We have noted some recurrent obstacles in the trajectory of quota students, such as difficulties in accessing the university; the need for adapting to the language and readings required in academia; for conciliating work and study; and discrimination, among others. In these cases, students sought alternatives for dealing with these daily challenges, pointing to a process of resilience [Bello, 2013].

Originally, the term “resilience” comes from physics, and refers to the “property whereby energy stored in a deformed body is restored when the tension that caused the elastic deformation is removed” [Ferreira, 1975].

In psychology, this concept is being revised by Koller and Poletto [2008], since a person cannot absorb a stressful event and return to their previous form. She learns, grows up, develops and matures. Resilience does not mean to return to a previous state, but to overcome or adapt when faced with risk, and to open up possibilities for new paths in life.

Resilience is the capacity to be reborn from adversity with renewed strength and more resources—that is, an active process of re-

sistance, restructuring and growth in response to crisis and challenge [Walsh, 2005].

The new student profile points to young adults who work, are married with children, and pay rent—thus different from the previous profile of adolescent students living with their high/middle class parents who frequently also hold a university degree. For these new students, it is worth overcoming all obstacles in their quest for fulfilling an individual and family dream. A Letter student talked about his family, child and work:

I'm married with a five month-old son, João, and we live here in Riachuelo (street). I'm looking for an apartment because (this one) was sold. But my financial situation is not that good; it is stable, I manage to pay the bills, buy books. I'm about to finish my undergrad studies, and that's what's important [...] My access to academia was very indirect, it was like I entered through cracks I was finding along the way. (Letters, male).

One of the interviewees who lives with his grandmother in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre talked about his daily efforts for reconciling work and study, and underscored his determination for fulfilling his goals:

I work from 8am to 5pm as an assistant accountant in a car dealer. The actual schedule goes until 5:48pm, but they let me out 48 minutes earlier. On Fridays I don't have classes, so I stay until later in order to make up for the rest of the week [...] I'm very resolute, I go after what I want (Accounting, male).

Another student emphasized the courage required to go after one's dreams by circumventing or overcoming obstacles:

I see myself as a brave, hard working person; I go after what I want. My goals are clear. I'm severe, sometimes crabby, I'm aware of that. I'm very anxious, a bit radical, I like doing things my own way, I'm very perfectionist. Stubborn, I like to establish my goals and go after them. Of course, if I'm wrong, I end up acknowledging it, even if not immediately. But I'm usually sure about what I want (Marine Biology, female).

One element that figures in several statements is a sense of opportunity, and not being intimidated by obstacles:

My life isn't hard, I just take advantage of what I do have. I took advantage of the quotas, and whatever else comes along my way. I want to maximize the opportunities that my parents gave me (Law, female).

This student's parents have higher education degrees, but still, they were unemployed and had to move to other states in search of work. She has been living with her grandparents or aunt since high school. She admires a friend who divorced her husband during her studies and whose parents live outside of Porto Alegre: "she struggles financially and sometimes gets discouraged, but never gives up".

A study carried out at Campinas State University aimed at subsidizing affirmative action policies in that institution compared students coming from public and private schools, having as a control variable the score received in the entrance exam. Results show higher academic performance among students coming from public schools, which was attributed to these subjects' greater resilience: "Poor students with good training show higher likelihood of academic and social success even on the face of personal and social adversities. Explanatory factors include their special capacity for facing unfavorable situations, a valued skill in the competitive environment of a research university which is not always shared by their middle class peers, who are often spared of adversities by their families" [Marques, 2008].

To be admitted to a federal public university generates expectations and dreams among relatives, since a higher education degree is also regarded as an opportunity for upward social mobility. As Carvalho puts it: "It means to be able to dream with the possibility of being CEO of the National Development Bank, Minister of Finance, Supreme Court Justice" [Carvalho, 2004].

In fact, many dreams do come true. UFRGS students who were admitted through affirmative action and got their degrees often go on studying in specialization or even graduate programs. These students show that being a part of the UFRGS academic community transformed their life expectations.

2.5. On expectations and accomplishments

A university degree expands the horizons of students whose chances had been previously restricted: "My world ended in my neighborhood" (Geography, female).

Scarcity of resources is passed along generations. One interviewee talked about the city in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre where she lives, which is similar to her grandmother's neighborhood:

The neighborhood is very poor, the entire city is sort of poor, my street is very strange. There are some large houses like mine, and another four. All the rest looks like a slum, a bunch of poor and ugly little houses. People dump garbage in empty lots, almost everyday the municipal truck has to go there remove it. It looks like a slum. Loud music. When I enter that street I remember when I used to visit my grandmother, who lived in the Vila Maria da Conceição. It was just like that: a gang of kids, lots of dogs, loud music, just like that. The entire neighborhood is like that (Letters, female).

The same student described her relatives:

[...] no one is rich in my family, but everybody works. ... Everybody is a worker. College degree, nobody has. My cousin is a nurse, but she didn't go to university, she went to technical school (Letters, female).

To attend UFRGS presents students with new levels of expectations, instead of the often-restricted horizon prevalent in poor neighborhoods.

I have many plans, to get a degree, I also want to go to grad school, to study mollusks—gastropods. My professor is an expert. I really wish to go to grad school. To get to know other places where there is marine biology. I would go there to see species that haven't been discovered yet [...] I wish I could go there, to get my hands dirty (Marine Biology, female).

Denize, mentioned earlier as the first Native student to get a degree from UFRGS, graduated in nursery. She did a specialization course in São Paulo and is currently working in the health clinic that services the Kaingang community in São Sebastião do Cai⁸. In a newspaper photograph, she appears at work without wearing the white coat typical of health professionals. She prefers to look more like the others in the village, and talk to them in their native language, Kaingang.

Lucíola Belfort, the first Native to earn a medical degree from UFRGS, declared that she would like to remain close to Porto Alegre, since she wants to further her studies. As for the future, she says that "If I have to go to the UN to work with indigenous health, so be it. I don't see any obstacle. I just don't see myself in a hospital" [Porciúncula, 2015].

The College of Education hallway displays a photograph of Dorvalino Cardoso, the first Native student to get a Pedagogy degree. He is currently an M.A. student in that same College.

2.6. A new view on the University

There seems to be a change in the way quota students view public university, as they become undergraduates with a more critical perspective on it. Criticism addressed, above all, the lack of flexibility. They claimed that the institution did not take into account the realities of new students who often work and need more time and other arrangements in order to cope with academic requirements. With respect to their faculty, one interviewee who is also a full-time worker said:

⁸ São Sebastião do Cai is located within the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre.

I think they were used to the model of the student who does not work and has plenty of free time. Professors demand a lot of homework, or visits to industries. Those of us who work do not have time to do this, we cannot get time off, it's hard, it's not viable, it's complicated and ends up undermining our professional training (Accounting, male).

Another kind of criticism relates to the distance between the university and its surrounding realities: the study of topics that relate more directly to foreign contexts. One student talked about the pedagogic training she received:

[...] students here are soft in the head, they dream up a perfect world, or just debate what is wrong. They are always discussing some controversy, and their debates lead to nowhere. I don't speak, I just listen. I don't meddle in, I let them speak, I let them go to Mars if they wish, the day they fall from their cotton candy cloud they'll see what real life is all about (Letters, female).

Some comments refer to the often hostile and discriminatory environment where students who are different and beyond standards are regarded as inferior:

[...] some people discriminate. They said my friend was dumb, because she has been admitted through the quota system. But a lot of people also support us (Geography, female).

There is also recognition of the backing received from part of the academic community, of the importance of financial support in being able to afford the studies, and research scholarships in order to bolster future academic opportunities.

The statements below were taken from an interview with an alumnus from UFRGS's Social Sciences, who was admitted through the racial quota system⁹. She underscored the importance of informal networks for raising academic expectations:

[...] I would hear my classmates saying, "I have to get a scholarship because I have to go to grad school, or because I have to get involved in a research group". Then I thought: well, I want that too, I'll go after it, this will make a difference in my Curriculum Vitae. And I did. So, these scholarships made a difference not only because of content, but due to the symbolic value of affirming that I do have a good CV, I have a competitive CV (Social Sciences, female).

⁹ The interview was carried out by Ph.D. student Eliane Souza as part of her qualifying examination.

Concerning her part in the university's destiny, there is visible empowering in her involvement in various activities organized by the Education and Social Development Department, as well as in groups such as the Affirmative Action Forum¹⁰:

[...] there is a Forum and I'll be a part of it. And that's when the issues became clearer to me, I felt encouraged to be part of a movement for reassessing the quota policy. (...) That's when other quota and non-quota students and I, students sensitive to the cause and also non-students, drafted a project for reassessing the quotas, defending the project's continuity, showing what improvements had to be made (Social Sciences, female).

The interviewee views the quota students' contribution to the university as being positive, against the predictions that university standards would suffer with the entrance of ill-prepared students. When her final monograph was recommended for being presented at a university located in another state, as part of a national meeting of university students involved in research, she said

When I did the presentation I told my story, things that happened to me in the university, the feeling of joy and empowerment involved in graduating with a piece of work of which I am proud. And I speak not just for myself, but for my peers. [...] sometimes we grant too much importance for academic knowledge, and academic knowledge comes from diversity—wherever there is diversity, there is enrichment. We cannot keep thinking that diversity is good but only elsewhere, not here at the university. No, there should be diversity here. There needs to be interaction (Social Sciences, female).

3. Final remarks The implementation of affirmative action policies in Brazil must be contextualized in terms of issues that have gained ground since the early twenty-first century, such as respect for human rights and recognition based on justice and equity. These are based on discourse on the inclusion of discriminated groups found in international documents signed by most countries in the world, Brazil included.

There has been a growing political will by social movements and the three State branches—Judiciary, Legislative and Executive—to face the huge inequalities, both socio-economic and racial, which lay at the root of Brazil's development. Policies for including minorities in Brazilian universities point precisely in that direction. Affirmative action policies lend substance to the ideal of a multiethnic nation. They

¹⁰ The forum assessed the first four years of affirmative action at UFRGS. It provided a subsidy for introducing changes to the admission process that enhanced the odds for racial quota holders.

play a pedagogic role by helping reconstruct the memory and image of historically silenced and little-recognized groups.

Racial quotas are a social mobility policy furthered by the State, aimed at redressing historical privileges based on notions of white supremacy in Brazil. They provide better access to professional training for a large number of students coming from groups that had been hitherto virtually excluded from elite universities. The profile of the student body in Brazilian universities is changing accordingly: many are now young adults, workers, living in distant neighborhoods, poor, and non-white. The statements analyzed here show these students' achievements, challenges and expectations. In spite of suffering discrimination both inside and outside the university, they have shown resilience and a will to overcome obstacles.

Significant challenges lie ahead for Brazilian universities. These institutions will have to come up with new strategies for welcoming and including these students, revise course curricula, and create spaces for reflecting on and debating the new realities brought by quota students.

By making room for these students, the public university encourages diversity. Ultimately, it is society as a whole that stands to gain with the emergence of a group of professionals and leaders with a worldview that is closer to the realities of most Brazilians.

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