A Silent Discourse: Using Brazil's Quota System to Understand a Critically Active Post-Structural Policy Analysis

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Introduction

During the 11-year span from 1995 to 2006 Afro-Brazilian student enrollment increased to 31.4 percent in public universities and 124.5 percent in private institutions (Somers et al. 2013). This spike was indicative of the rapid growth of Brazil's economy, the increase in the number of existing postsecondary institutions, and the use of race-based quotas as a tool of affirmative action. Since then, a number of scholars have argued over the benefits and setbacks of the use of a quota system in Brazilian higher education touting the impact of receiving a degree from a public university as the entrance into the upper echelons of Brazilian society (dos Santos 2014; Schwartzman 2008, 2009), quotas as necessary but not always reaching the neediest of students (de Araujo 2012; Pazich and Teranishi 2012), and the messy identity politics that comes along with a race-based quota implementation process (Fry 2000; Hooke 2005; Schwartzman 2008, 2009).

Despite these claims, very few studies address how and what Black quota students are experiencing during and after their time in college. Furthermore, these accounts fail to examine the quota policy with a critical lens that goes beyond the surface of what the policy was created for and how it has been carried out. While addressing these shortcomings, this paper offers an alternative framework guided by poststructural policy analysis and feminist poststructuralism to re-situate and deepen a theoretical understanding of affirmative action policies used in the higher education system of Brazil. I advance this framework to argue that traditional policy approaches

miss valuable opportunities to engage with policy beneficiaries (Yanow 2003). As such, these approaches are limited in scope thereby lending themselves to unintentionally reproduce the inequity that the policy was initially designed to help alleviate (Bensimon and Marshall 1997). The examination of three consequences: racial self-classification, selection of majors, and professor-student relations provide context for this alternative framework to be applied and for a reconceptualization of policy processes on a global scale to begin.

My use of poststructural policy analysis, hereafter referred to as PPA, is grounded in the work of Herbert Gottweis (2003), David Howarth and Steven Griggs (2012), and Dvora Yanow (2003). These public policy scholars lend critical frames to the field by going beyond conventional policy practices to create a more comprehensive approach. Thus, PPA necessitates the inclusion of diverse actors, the importance of context, and taking into account multiple perspectives.

I draw from Elizabeth J. Allan, Susan Iverson, and Rebecca Roper-Huilman (2010) to identify some important characteristics that distinctly signify feminist poststructuralism, hereafter referred to as FPS, and its use for higher education policy. FPS draws attention to power dynamics in policy processes, elucidates the influence of discourse on education, and encourages "an ethic of activism" (Allan et al. 2010, p. 5).

The fusion of PPA and FPS moves the field of policy analysis forward from the epistemic norms of technical knowledge and objectivity to the recognition of diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. This perspective offers an alternative lens with which to view and understand policy from the vantage points of various

stakeholders that may otherwise go unnoticed or ignored. Further and more specifically, the integration of post-structural thought and FPS provides a unique approach to education policy analysis, which is often dominated by narrow-mindedness and neutral language that overlooks issues of difference and hierarchy (Allan 2010; Fischer and Gottweis 2012; Yanow 2003, 2009). Therefore, this paper calls for an integration of PPA and FPS to generate a more comprehensive examination of education policy issues that confronts the complexities of intersecting identities, hegemonic relations, and social realities. To begin, I look at Brazil and its use of a race-based quota system to implement affirmative action policy in universities.

Background

Brazil is one of the most economically and racially stratified societies in the world where the top 20 percent of wage earners bring home 18 times more money than the bottom 20 percent (Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning [*Centro Brasileiro de Análise a Panejamiento*—CEBRAP] n. d.). To further exacerbate this reality, top earners are more likely to identify and be classified as White than Black or Indigenous. The higher education system is a direct reflection of this stratification as an elite space almost exclusively occupied by White students from the upper socio-economic segments of Brazilian society (dos Santos 2014; Schwartzman 2004). Furthermore, the high quality public universities are federally funded, thus underrepresented students who could really benefit from subsidized post-secondary education are being overlooked.

To address this enrollment gap, the Brazilian government turned to affirmative action and implemented the quota system in 2002, which mandated that 40 percent of undergraduate enrollment in state universities be reserved for "Blacks and Browns." [1] This legislation was amended in 2003 to include eligibility based on family income, attendance at public schools, students with disabilities, and children of police officers who died in service (Somers et al. 2013). Other solutions to increase access to underrepresented students included adding

points to student entrance exams, known as the Vestibular, and adjusting the percentages of reserved spaces to reflect the racial and ethnic population of the state where a particular university is located (Somers et al. 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The following section describes what guides the conceptual frame put forth here. The interdisciplinary nature of education lends itself to interdisciplinary frames (Lather 1992) like PPA and FPS as they highlight the socializing nature of education, the roles of various stakeholders, the distribution of power between and amongst them, as well as the role of agency at the individual level.

Seeping in positivist roots and the need to situate the social sciences as an acceptable field of research, traditional policy analysis relies heavily on modernist ideals. It assumes objectivity, promotes linear approaches, views the researcher as unbiased and espouses a narrow concept of expertise (Allan 2009; Bensimon and Marshal 1997; Fischer and Gottweis 2012; Yanow 2009). Accordingly, marginalized actors are viewed as needing help and are not considered as valuable stakeholders in working toward viable solutions (Allan 2009; Yanow 2003).

PPA, on the other hand, places emphasis on the role of meaning making and its influence in shaping human interaction and social institutions in the policy-making process (Allan et al. 2010; Howarth and Griggs 2012). The poststructuralist approach "rejects essentialist accounts of policy making" that does not take into account the fluidity of social formations and the meanings associated with them (Howarth and Griggs 2012, p. 307). Thus, policy analysis using the poststructuralist lens must critique the intentions and reasoning behind policy making processes, situate policy in the context of larger social and political happenings, and deconstruct normative approaches to policy creation and implementation.

Despite the difficulty in defining FPS, we can look to poststructural ideology and feminist theory as providing its base. FPS embraces all of what is described above while including the use of gender as well as other social identities (race, class, or sexual orientation) as an analytic tool. Furthermore, FPS advances a social justice

agenda that supports societal change and the individual's role in making change happen (Allan 2009).

Together PPA and FPS render an ideology that highlights the interconnectedness of knowledge and power (Foucault 1978), the fluidity of discourse and its ability to shape and be shaped, and the necessity for activism, which none of them offer on their own. Knowledge, power, discourse, and activism are the ingredients that provide the substance of Critically Active Poststructural Policy Analysis (CAPPA), an alternative lens that critically examines policy. CAPPA is the summation of PPA and FPS and exemplifies the point at which the two frames together offer a stronger analytic tool than if they were separate. As such, CAPPA pushes the boundaries of conventional policy analysis to consider the ways in which knowledge, power, discourse, and activism impact policy practices (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPPA AS THE SUM OF TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT
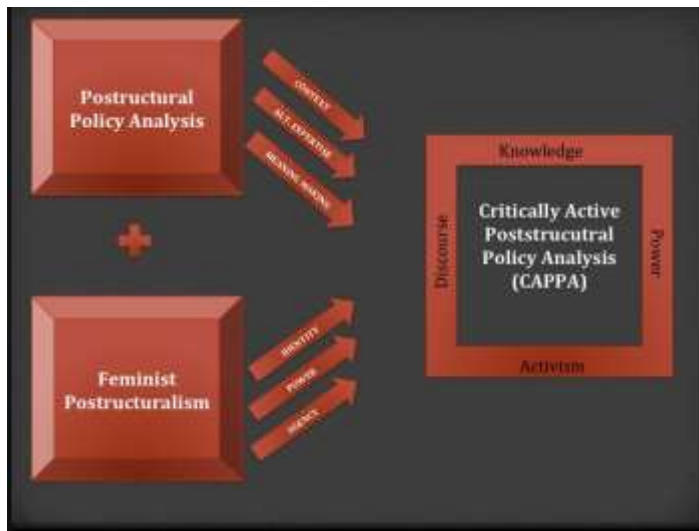
CAPPA is framed by the belief that knowledge and power are intimately bound together and the effects of this can be seen in the policy arena where certain ways of knowing are privileged, validated, and serve as the standard to which other ways of thinking are measured (Yanow 2003, 2009). Further, CAPPA acknowledges that discourse is ever present in the way that people talk about and understand phenomena. Discourse is not only

spoken but it is written and often times implied via cultural norms (Allan 2010; Gee 2014). Multiple discourses exist simultaneously where some are heard and others are silenced. Additionally, CAPPA asserts that the point of critically engaging policy is to insight change from the micro to the macro levels, thereby making room not just for sharing research findings but also for individual and collective action. As such, this framework recognizes how larger structures impact higher education as a global institution and vice versa, therefore distancing CAPPA from traditional policy analysis approaches.

Discussion

After thirteen years of implementation in the higher education system of Brazil, the quota system still proves to be a hot button issue and has garnered as many advocates as it has opponents (de Araujo 2012; Somers et al. 2013). There are many areas of the quota system in practice that deserve attention; however, I will focus on three consequences that seem most appropriate to this discussion: racial self-classification, the selection of majors by quota students, and professor-quota student relations. I will describe the unintended consequences here and offer possible solutions informed by CAPPA to address some of the challenges that they produce.

Racial Self-Classification

Once in use, the process of self-identification was employed at some universities whereby students would classify themselves as Black to apply for quotas. Following self-classification, a board of representatives from the universities would decide whether or not the student fit the racial identification chosen. There were multiple cases of students who were wrongfully denied the opportunity to apply for quota spots as well as cases of students who normally did not identify as Black doing so to have a better chance of getting in to a prestigious university (Schwartzman 2009). Requiring students to classify themselves racially in a country that proposes to be racially mixed proves to be extremely complex and is often conditional. Furthermore, students' interpretations of the race categories, reflected in the fact that they use different words to identify themselves, often diverge from the

interpretations intended by the policy makers and quota advocates (Schwartzman 2009).

A CAPPA approach would first recognize how problematic it is to try and fit racial categorization within a technocratic framework. A plausible solution would be for policy analysts and government officials to get a clear representation at the ground level of how students perceive and understand the quota system policies and the identification processes associated with it. This could result in quota categories that more closely represent the reality of how students identify themselves.

Selection of Majors

It is the narrow assumption of the quota policy that education is the answer to upward social mobility; however, quota students are often pushed into fields that are considered less prestigious whereas they receive less economic return thus perpetuating systemic social and economic stratification (Francis and Tannuri-Pianto 2012; Schwartzman 2008). Luisa Farah Schwartzman (2008) explains one reason for this is the highly selective and elitist nature of programs such as production engineering where most students come from middle class backgrounds and are more likely to consider themselves White. This is different for programs such as education, where you can find more students from lower class backgrounds.

Additionally, there is a lack of internal support to address the academic and non-academic needs of these students (da Silva 2012). Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical research that explains what happens to these students when they leave university and whether or not they leave as graduates or dropouts (Schwartzman 2008).

To address these weaknesses using CAPPA would lead to speaking directly with students via interviews and/or focus groups to give them agency to share their academic and non-academic experiences in the university setting and their needs for addressing issues. This could lead to the hiring of more administrative staff and faculty that share quota student backgrounds, connecting students to mentors and creating strong connections between quota students and university leaders, as well as professional development that centers on working with quota students (da Silva 2012).

Professor-Quota Student Relations

It is not uncommon for quota students to experience ill treatment from professors and faculty members who disagree with the use of quotas. These professors are often very forthright in displaying their feelings by talking down to students, unfairly grading assignments, and not being available to students outside of the classroom (da Silva 2012). CAPPA decreases the error of taking marginalized actors and trying to simply fit them into a normalized system that at times is not flexible enough to cater to the needs of the "other" (Jacobson, Callahan, and Ghosh 2015). As such, one solution could be to allow quota students to develop relationships with a possible professor/mentor once they are accepted at a university and before they actually start classes (da Silva 2012). Additionally, students who have encountered bad relationships with faculty should be allowed a space to vent and receive support in dealing with how to rectify this issue.

Policy Implications

Looking forward, CAPPA provides a framework for using policy discourse analysis, a method described by Elizabeth J. Allan (2009) as a way "to examine how well intentioned attempts to advance equity policy may unwittingly perpetuate discourses and practices that reinforce inequity" (p. 30). Policy discourse analysis creates opportunity for questioning dominant discourses and answering with innovative solutions (Allan 2009). As such, the role of faculty and administrators in carrying out education policy becomes important here and deserves more attention as a subject of study (da Silva 2012).

By keeping with the traditional normative approach to the policy process and not accounting for the fluidity and developmental nature of meaning making, the Brazilian government has neglected to realize some unintended consequences that the quota policy has produced. This paper highlights areas where CAPPA contributes theoretically and practically to understandings and implementation of the quota system. In doing so, it illuminates ways that student experiences become important to the policy making process. PPA's ideas of critical exam-

ination, placing policy in larger political and social contexts, and deconstructing normative policy approaches in conjunction with FPS's call to activism is one step toward what the CAPPA framework can offer to the field of policy analysis in general and education policy analysis in particular. In the end, this may not be about getting to better solutions but more about not accepting dominant frames of policy processes as the ultimate truth (Bensimon and Marshall 1997; Lather 1992). In turn, this promotes a critical approach to understanding and implementing policies that is more comprehensive.

Note

1. Brazil has numerous race categories that include variations of skin color where Black is different from Brown. This distinction becomes important in the context of quotas. See Schwartzman (2008, 2009) for a thorough explanation.

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