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**Identity Construction at Brazilian Public
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Struggles and Policies**

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Identity Construction at Brazilian Public Universities in the Context of Recent Struggles and Policies

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Abstract

This paper relies on the notion of pluralistic democracy, as formulated by Chantal Mouffe, to analyze the social identity construction of university students in the context of struggles and policies newly arising in Brazil. Recent years have seen a trend toward greater equality through an affirmative action policy that increases the presence of minorities in university, which has gone part of the way to attending to demands for new rights pertaining to gender, race and socioeconomic status. Such changes raise tensions and lead to shifts in the construction of social relationships and identities. Our research, undertaken at two public universities located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, focuses on how such discourses and practices are influencing the identity construction of students attending health science courses. Interviews with students and teachers evidenced varied and conflicting subject positions and their construction in the intersection between the new rights and the power relations that establish hierarchies and subordinations. As implied in the notion of pluralistic democracy, there is a need for a hegemony of democratic values so that a multiplicity of identities can be formed within a democratic framework.

Keywords: democracy, university, identity, citizenship, Health Science courses.

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Introduction

The Enlightenment notion of universal citizenship and the rationalist view of the individual as a universal category are challenged by new rights presently claimed in Brazil based on such particularities as gender, race and socioeconomic status. Recent years have tended toward greater equality through new public policies that increase the presence of minorities in university, as well as through laws protecting women against violence and allowing same-sex civil unions. These occurrences, in a traditionally patriarchal society marked by social exclusion, raise tensions and lead to shifts in social relationships and identity construction.

Scholars from different fields have contributed to the understanding of contemporary transformations. Some of the various redefinitions of the sense of belonging understood to relate to such transformations are: identity shifts in relation to time and specific traditions (Hall, 2000, Bauman, 2005), growing cultural homogenization (Canclini, 1997; Martín-Barbero, 1997) and uninterested individuals who feel socially incapable (Giroux, 2003). From these ruptures, exclusion processes are accentuated and marked by the rejection of differences.

Social differentiations happen in specific institutional and historical settings such as the University, where besides acquiring “real knowledge,” students also learn what to aspire to in life, how to be men and women, and the way they should be and present themselves in society as citizens. According to the American educator Giroux (2003), university education should not be seen just as a technical strategy, but as a moral and political practice that facilitates the development of youths' protagonist sense, particularly in relation to the obligations of critical citizenship and public life in a cultural and global setting that has been undergoing radical changes.

Educational opportunities in Brazil should be considered within a context marked by sharp inequalities. Our population is built from African slaves, European immigrants, and remnants of the Amerindian population. Its segregation laws ended in 1888 with the abolition of slavery, and color in Brazil became closely related to wealth and status. Despite major social improvements in the recent past, Brazil is still one of the world's most unequal societies, and adverse social conditions are stark among black and mixed race Brazilians.

Brazil has achieved universal primary school enrollment, but university is still for the few and only approximately a quarter of the higher education places are in the prestigious public institutions that are barred from charging fees by the constitution. Starting in 2002 several public universities began introducing social and racial quotas. Following widespread controversy, especially concerning the introduction of racial quotas, in April 2013 the Supreme Court ruled that the affirmative action policy is an acceptable means of mitigating the shadow cast by slavery and that racial quotas do not infringe constitutional equal-rights provisions. Emphasis was placed on the provisional character of the quotas, as they were set to last only “until the historical

differences are corrected”. Later in the same year the Court passed a law mandating quotas for entry to all of the country's 59 federal universities and 38 federal technical schools. The beneficiaries are known as *cotistas* (quota students).

The trajectories of our democracy and citizenship, as pointed out by Botelho and Schwarcz (2012), have been shaped by many years of slavery and dictatorship, among other circumstances encumbering the concrete establishment of democracy. Brazilian educational institutions carry on these marks, as put forth by Cunha (1989), who stresses the important role student movements have played in the construction of Brazilian universities.

Some recent studies are shedding light on the value and limitations of such policies (Moehlecke, 2002; Lucckesi, 2008; Maggie and Fry, 2004, Azevedo, 2004), pointing out an array of transformations necessary for closing the gap in social inequality, such as improving the quality of the level of primary and secondary educational levels. In the larger context, some of our starkest challenges pertain to the need to lower the income gap and create a new political culture, mainly by strengthening Brazil's political institutions and restoring self-worth to politics. A spate of protests calling for social transformation has arisen in Brazil as of late, which can be seen as a promising sign that the population is participating in the construction of a better society.

These points seem important when reflecting on the current state of the university, from a perspective that accounts for the “return of politics” and closes the distance between late displacements and uncertainties and a “radical democracy”, in the context of the aforementioned displacements. This paper relies on such notions to make an initial reflection on the construction of identities and differences in such scenarios and on possibilities for transformation within the university, from a point of view that closes the distance between present displacements and pluralistic democracy.

It seems important to note that beyond such an exclusion process, there are internal power relations that should be understood as mobile, relational and inherent to any human relationship, as shown by Foucault (2003).

The University, Power Relations and Identities Construction

Discourses place people differently as social subjects: for instance, as students, doctors or patients. As a builder of power, ideologies, knowledge and social relations, discourse is not purely instrumental, strange to cultural pressures: it is conditioned by context or production conditions.

The modernity discourse conceives university as a privileged place for developing citizenship and for transmitting to students a coherent vision, with emphasis on rationality, progress and individual autonomy (Veiga Neto, 2002). The linearity of this discourse becomes evident when one considers the unequal and complex network of experiences happening in these institutions, permeated by procedures, techniques and other means that build power modalities, “blurring” predictions and certainties.

Educational policies constitute discursive practices that acquire meaning within the social processes triggered at university through the curricular and informal activities the students carry out. A brief discussion of the notion of curriculum is pertinent at this point, from the perspective of the Cultural Studies. This vision considers curriculum to be a space where, through power relations, identities are produced and also produce, and where there is an embodiment of the set of all cognitive and affective experiences offered to students (Silva, 1999). In such a conception, curriculum is also seen as “an artifact that at the same time brings to school elements that are present in the world and also, at school, creates meaning for the world” (Veiga Neto, 2002, p.96). Therefore in an intertwined way the marks of gender, race/ethnicity and social class are constantly being produced, historically and in a contingent manner, as brought up by Meyer (2003).

In line with such a notion of curriculum it is possible to situate this study within the field of curriculum studies.

Some Notes on Democracy, Citizenship and Power

Chantal Mouffe (2005), in “The return of the political”, refers to one essential aspect, often forgotten these days: the presence of power in political decisions, breaking with the notion of communication and reason as the pillars of democracy. She exposes the shortcomings of such views as “political liberalism”, which present politics as a neutral domain insulated from all the divisive issues that exist in the private realm. For her, “the liberal claim that a universal rational consensus could be produced by an undistorted dialogue, and that free public reason could guarantee the impartiality of the state, is only possible at the cost of denying the irreducible antagonistic element present in social relations, and this can have disastrous consequences for the defense of democratic institutions” (idem, p.140). In this sense all systems of social relations imply to a certain extent relations of power, since the construction of a social identity is an act of power. The historical and contingent character of the discourses that construct our identities should be acknowledged.

As shown by Derrida (2003) the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles: form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on. “Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics require that they be brought to the fore, making them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation”. (Mouffe, 2005, p.149). We also learn from Mouffe (idem) that modern democratic politics, linked as they are to the declaration of human rights, do indeed imply a reference to universality, conceived as a horizon that can never be reached. Therefore, universal values like freedom and equality should be seen as something to guide policies and strategies.

We take it that the form through which identities and differences are being constructed at university is closely linked to citizenship. Canclini (1997) points

to the right of difference as a central dimension recently stressed in Latin America to understand citizenship, and no longer equal rights, as before. Besides civil, political and social rights, citizenship indicates the state of demands for the recognition of others as “individuals with valid interests, pertinent values and legitimacy in their demands” (Canclini, 1997). In other words, it is important to analyze the social experiences departing from the complex configuration of the social reality: “The problem does not refer just to diversity of interests, but to different identities of class, sex, race, ethnicity, sexual preference and many other differences concerning perceptions, preferences and experiences of the social actor (Torres, 2001).

The multiple demands and the features that characterize the manifestations that currently take place in our society differentiate them from past ones. Botelho and Schwarcz (2012) argue that today citizenship should be understood as “politicized social identity”, which means that “the widening of the democratic citizenship must be conceived as a possible result of the concrete disputes of social groups, and that such disputes are, by their turn, powerful sources for inter-subjective identification and recognition among people (idem, p.13). Such a view of citizenship is no longer tied to belonging or stability; rather, it comes to mean a group agenda that declares and defends the difference. In other words, citizenship is seen as socially constructed, in relation to historically situated phenomena.

Methodology

Methodological definitions in a study are not just technical and “scientific”: they are at the same time political decisions, given how it is impossible to separate knowledge production from the interest in producing such knowledge.

Our empirical study, given the complexity and social nature of its object, adopted a qualitative approach. The subjects were students and professors from the health field at two universities: the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro - UFRJ [Federal University of Rio de Janeiro] and the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro - UERJ [State University of Rio de Janeiro].

We departed from the notion that the subjectivities of individuals are developed at the various socializing instances where power relations occur and that they have major repercussions, constituting rich contexts to call into question the effects of contemporary transformations. Another key notion that we adopted concerns the existence of a dialectic relationship between society and what happens at schools and universities.

The two public institutions are at different implementation phases of the quota policy. That, we believe, afforded us a broader spectrum concerning the issue.

Over the last few years UFRJ has significantly increased the number of courses it offers, and consequently the number of places. However, only in 2010 was the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio - ENEM [National High

School Examination], implemented as criteria for qualifying for admission, and just recently, in August of 2012, its University Council approved the quotas.

Our choice of UERJ was based on its history as a pioneer in adopting the mentioned policy. In 2001, following the Durban Conference, it was introduced in Brazil through a bill, and in 2003 UERJ inaugurated the quota system in its entrance examination.

Data were collected throughout 2011 and 2013. We did semi-structured interviews (a larger study from which this is derived also included observations) and have interviewed teachers and students of the nursing and medical schools at both institutions and of microbiology at UFRJ. A total of nine professors and 29 students (19 students from UFRJ and 10 from UERJ) were interviewed. In this paper we give special emphasis to the results related to the interviews with the medical and microbiology students.

Medical and microbiology courses are very selective and there is a discourse circulating, especially at UFRJ, which reinforces a belief in the intellectual superiority of their students. We believe such context contributes to the underpinning of norms that influence the construction of particularities as far as identity construction is concerned.

As for nursing school, it has a “culture” of its own, having traditionally observed such characteristics as selfishness, altruism and material detachment. Lopes and Leal (2005), note that as a women-dominated profession, it supports the stereotypical feminine traits of caring and nurturing, in contrast to masculine characteristics of dominance and aggression.

Discourses were viewed as historical constructs; as they were interpreted, we believe that we have participated in the co-construction of meaning, since there is no possibility of total neutrality or noninterference on the part of the researcher. The analysis of the meanings of a discourse, too, is conditioned by the social place and ideologies of he/she who interprets it. (Pinto, 2003).

Results and Analysis

We have found that some quota students do assume their identities as “different from the other students” (differentiations of socioeconomic class or race/ethnicity); in other words, they do not attempt to cast off their differences, while others insist on affirming their “sameness” in relation to the “other students”: “it is not written in our front head that we are quota students”, as one of them said. It seems possible to relate such finding to the ambivalent type of relationship with “the different” that traditionally has reigned in Brazil; unlike other countries like South Africa and the United States, whose objective base for discrimination is origin and the amount of negro or white blood, in Brazil the patterns would be more flexible, contingent on such aspects as context, social situation and cultural origin, as it appears in the classical analysis undertaken by Oracy Nogueira in 1954 (apud Schwarcz, 2012), to whom “a person can define his/herself as more or less white, there is a variation

according to the situation, to the person who poses the question, and to the context in which the identification occurs, with his/her economic situation also being an important variable”.

We have also noticed “acceptance” discourses based on pragmatic reasons, of accommodation to a given situation. In this sense, a medical student at UFRJ affirmed that she accepts the coexistence with people “of lower cultural capital”, but that they do not belong to her group. At the same time, she denied the existence of differentiation, and affirmed that she was learning to “accept the differences”, which serves as evidence of the existence of tensions in her identity construction, a transit between different views.

Entering medical school is seen as a great “investment”, especially at a public university; many “sacrifices” were mentioned, and between the lines it was noted there was an underlying grudge against the quota students, due to the fewer places available since the policy was introduced. As told by one medical student: “It was complicated because, not being a quota student, UERJ does not have too many spots in its medical school. It was very complicated, and then after high school I attended two years of pre-vestibular [preparatory course] in order to succeed in entering [medical school], but then after two years with no life at all, studying like a prisoner, everything worked out and here I am, see?”. Seemingly, the subjectivation of medical students as “different” and “superior” occurs prior to their joining medical school, when isolated from socializing instances their energies are concentrated upon the achievement of a status reserved for few, namely being a medical student. The historical and social construction of Medicine as the first scientifically recognized knowledge on health seems to be one of the influencing factors in a medical students’ positions and practices. In this way, the value attributed to the course and the difficulties faced to enter it seem to influence the students in introducing certain specific meanings to the quotas policies.

It was found that many students aim to pursue their own interests and individual motivations, without concern for the rights of “others” or the common good. The main motive that sustained the political decision concerning the racial quotas, their being an acceptable means of treating the scars left by slavery, was almost totally ignored by teachers and students alike. Students who were not benefited through such policy often mentioned the high cut-off entrance grades and their effort to achieve them “despite their becoming higher due to the quotas policy” (the quota students’ cut-off entrance grades are lower). Meritocracy was often claimed as the key aspect to be observed, not “to endanger” the “courses’ excellence”: “I have succeeded in entering, did not need to ‘get in by the back door’, even being black and poor”, said one Microbiology student. One could argue for the validity of any opinion concerning such democratizing educational policies, if one adheres to the notion of liberty as the guarantee that a part of human existence remains independent of the sphere of social control. But it is important to take into account that personal standpoints should be reconciled with more universal values such as equality and freedom, as advanced by those aligned with a pluralistic democracy.

Some, like Isaiah Berlin (apud Mouffe, 2005, p.37), criticize the liberal idea of liberty, a “peaceful enjoyment of private independence”. At the same time he helps to understand the complexity and contradictions that mark personal standpoints. In order to be able to defend the acceptability of a political order, he says, we need to reconcile an impartial concern for everyone with a view of how each individual can reasonably be expected to live. Nagel (apud Mouffe, idem) proposes that we start with the conflict that each individual encounters in himself between the impersonal standpoint that produces a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality and the personal standpoint that gives rise to individualistic motives which impede the realization of those ideals.

Although the quota policy results in inclusion processes for previously excluded segments of our society, one cannot forget that the quota students are excluded from some of the favorable conditions shared by the majority of the other students - such as nice housing, good transport and favorable learning conditions throughout their lives - and the repercussions in their achievement and identity construction should not be minimized.

Medicine is considered by the students and teachers of both universities to be a course “for the few”, and entry into it is perceived as a type of trophy; such idealization contributes to the construction of hierarchies among the students. Nursing students from both institutions reported their frustration in not succeeding in entering medical school. Attending nursing school does not appear as a choice, but as something that is viable to those who fail to be accepted into medical school. Within such dynamics, nursing students are subjectivated as inferior to the medical students.

The social relevance of the curriculum appeared in various statements. A medical student who did not benefit from the quotas system said: “I think that any course should have some way to allow you to get closer to society, so that the university does not stand as if it were a “knowledge island”, of extremely intelligent people that attend it [the university] to learn and to get rich one day. We are here to serve society”. Such statements provoke reflection on a recent fact that has placed the government and the Brazilian Medical Associations on opposing sides, concerning the “importation” of doctors, especially from Cuba, as a solution for the shortage of medical doctors in regions that are priorities for the national health system. Brazil’s Mais Médicos (More Doctors) program, launched in 2013, facilitates the hiring of Brazilian and foreign medical doctors to work for the Sistema Único de Saúde - SUS (Unified Health System) in under-staffed locations. We believe that stressing the social dimension of the curriculum would prompt a greater commitment to social change and favor the construction of various identities and ways of thinking about oneself and one's role in society, helping to strengthen our health system.

One interesting finding is that students and teachers highlighted the experiences, values and attitudes introduced by the quota students, as they entered medical school, including ideas for curricular change; they mentioned the presence of “a new vision” at the classes, of people that “are going through difficulties in order to study here”. Changes are informed in the course

composition: “there are poor students in the classes”, there are people with “a completely different viewpoint, people who have gone through the SUS [public health service] line, who have not received medical attention, [have witnessed] medical error... you are educating people who know the system, it’s bad part”.

The arrival to the public university of students from a lower socioeconomic class, with different aspirations and experiences, seemingly is shining a spotlight on some issues that previously went ignored, introducing “new ways” of seeing things, broadening visions. A medical student describes what she coined as “experience sharing”: “ah, my life experience is this, mine is such, ah, I am from the south section of the city (Rio de Janeiro's upscale Zona Sul), ah, I live in such a community [slum], and then... you see that difference”. And another student, attending Microbiology, described identity changes: “Outside, when I was on the outside I was against it, but today I see that it is a type of a myth what people say, that the quota students will drag down the quality of the course”. Another microbiology student said: “Before entering I found it a flagrant injustice, because they [the quota students] get half of our grades, 50 spots less for me, and it makes much difference... (...) The quotas opened my mind; I used to say things that I no longer say. I have learned to listen more, to talk less, to abuse less; everyone knows each other over here”. Teachers stressed the “pedagogical dimension” - transforming the values and attitudes of the students - related to the introduction such policy, as being the most important change taking place.

It was also found that some of the students and professors views concerning the quota policy implementation are not supported by evidence. Their worry that “ill-prepared students” who enter through quotas would not be able to cope with “tough courses” such as microbiology and medicine is not backed by evidence, as more than a few studies show that, even when initial gaps are wide, by graduation time most quota students have caught up. One possible explanation for this is that they work harder and are more dedicated to the course than the other students, as was often mentioned by professors and students in our study. We believe it is of the utmost importance that the university community gets plenty of information concerning the implementation of this policy, as well as opportunities to reflect on it.

The quota policy was introduced at UERJ more than a decade ago, and this factor may give some specificity to the meanings constructed by its students and teachers. In their speeches we found the recognition that UERJ has in fact committed itself to such policy - a well consolidated reality, as told by one teacher. We have found that more than a few quota students at this institution defend their being different, which may have to do with the fact that they are presently a majority in some courses, and this confers to the group an identity that favors their embracing their difference.

Final Considerations

Our research has evidenced varied and conflicting subject positions and their construction in the overlap between the new rights and the power relations that establish hierarchies and subordinations.

The introduction of quotas at the university, as shown, has initiated novel social and individual experiences. From these experiences situational identities appear, constructed in relation to new situations. In such context, citizenship is no longer limited to the individual's belongings, but it is related to group agendas that sometimes declare and defend their difference, sometimes deny it; sometimes delimitate belonging spaces, sometimes blur and expand them. One important finding was that the "others" - those who have entered the university through quotas - gain a new identity, namely that of a previously excluded social group now acquiring rights and voice.

Identities are defined through a process of difference production based on what is considered inferior: we have found that the hegemonic identity is that of the "insiders", who did not "need the quotas" and are subjectivated as culturally and intellectually superior to the "outsiders" whose "drawbacks" are perceived as a disruption to the high status of their courses and to the academic purposes of the university.

In this study, we were far from searching for "a truth" concerning such policies, whether the quotas are necessary or not. Instead, we have considered the importance of what is being constructed concerning such policies within concrete processes, conflicts, new questions and propositions. These policies are not a panacea, for the structural problems of a society with serious social inequalities as ours cannot be solved entirely through such measures; but we believe that the changes identified in the identities of students and teachers, their acknowledgment of things that were previously unspoken and invisible, are a path that facilitates the education of professionals with new ethical and professional commitments, contributing to the consolidation of our democracy, toward a pluralistic democracy - in this case, students and future professionals who are aligned with the promotion of health and with a vision of science linked to societal interests.

We consider this to be an important moment of transition, and a privileged time for promoting a critical view. Offering occasions for debate, the respect for a multiplicity of views and accounting for "the force relation of the individual with him/herself" (Deleuze, 2006, p.116), are essential to promote the possibility of building creative thought and action at university which and vital to attain inclusive conditions, where the exercise of citizenship and democracy is concerned.

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