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Racial Inequality and Affirmative Action in Education in Brazil

By Stephanie Gimenez Stahlberg, published August, 2010

Affirmative action is designed to compensate historically discriminated groups for disadvantages pressed upon them, be it on the basis of racism or other forms of discrimination. These policies have been experimented and implemented in many different countries, and began to be implemented by some public Brazilian universities in 2004. In the case of Brazil, affirmative action consists mostly of university quotas for brown (mixed) and black students. Indigenous students are also beneficiaries but are a very small population in the country (less than 1%). The university-quota policy has been very controversial, and there are better alternatives to addressing racial inequality in Brazil. Because the college admission process in Brazil is very impersonal (only admission test scores count, no personal information or background is made known) nobody argues that admission officials discriminate based on race. What the process actually does is discriminate against poorer students, because they cannot afford better education at private schools and as a consequence do not perform as well on the college admission exams. The big racial problem in Brazil is that, although browns and blacks represent 50% of the Brazilian population, they account for almost 75% of these underperforming, poor students.

Because most browns and blacks receive worse education at public schools, they are less likely than other students to enter and complete college: only 2 percent of browns and blacks have college degrees, compared with almost 10 percent of whites and more than 25 percent of Asian descendents.² The racial inequality in education translates into income inequality: blacks and browns represent 73 percent of the poor, and only 12 percent of the rich.³ These income differences had always been pointed out by the black movement in Brazil, and when some of the movement's leaders studied in the United States and learned more about affirmative action, they began to call for similar policies in their home country. The policy framework is a little different in Brazil though, where quotas are not used to increase diversity but rather to do away with inherent preferences in the system.

What quota advocates fail to mention is that many studies done in the United States and other countries show the negative psychological effects that affirmative action may produce. A number of studies show that people rate others lower and as less qualified for a job or graduate school when they learned the person benefitted from affirmative action.⁴ Madeline Heilman, professor of Psychology at New York University, has also found that the lower the opinion men held about a coworker, the more they regarded affirmative action as the reason why the coworker was hired. Being a quota beneficiary can create a stigma that marks one as less

qualified than others, as happened in Germany with quotas for women. The German word *Quotenfrau*, which literally means quota women, is commonly used in negative and derogative contexts.

Brazilian quotas reinforce a stereotype that browns and blacks are not capable of entering college on their own, and as a consequence these groups will face the stigma of being a “quota student.” The effects of stereotype threat have been proved and documented: the fear that a negative stereotype about oneself may be true leads many students to think less of themselves and perform worse in school. Psychologists have created different environments for students, one in which the stereotype threat is present and another where it is not, and the negative effect of the stereotype on students’ performances is clear.

The stereotype that quotas reinforce affects browns and blacks beyond their school exams: confidence in one’s abilities is extremely important for overcoming challenges and achieving success. The psychological effects of stigmas, stereotypes, and lower self-confidence are the unintended consequences of the quota program, and must be anticipated.

The unintended psychological effects are very important to consider, but the main reason why university quotas are not a good solution to Brazil’s racial inequality problem is that they do not target the problem at its root cause. Because most browns and blacks have to attend public school, they have a hard time competing against their white and Asian counterparts on the college admission exams. There is a big difference in quality between public and private schools in Brazil up through high school. Hence the inequality begins much earlier than college, when poorer students (mostly brown and black) have to attend public schools. At the college level, public universities are the best, and totally free of costs. So while poor students could afford to study at public universities, they rarely score high enough to pass the admission exam. Most students attending public universities could easily afford to study at private ones, but choose the public universities because they are free and usually better than their private counterparts.

Hence, the Brazilian educational system is truly tough on the poor, independent of race. Richer students who all attended private schools come to admission exams much better prepared than poorer students who attended public school. These unprepared poor students also include a minority of white students, because around 25% of the Brazilian poor are white. As many racial-quota opponents say, poor whites are as unprepared as poor browns and blacks for college, and yet do not benefit from quotas. They are effectively placed at the bottom of the admission ladder, behind richer white students and all brown and black students because of racial quotas. In the case of Brazil, income-based quotas would make more sense than racial quotas. But if we really want to solve the educational problem at its root cause (as we should), greater investment in public schools is the best way. Every student should have the opportunity of receiving a good education, regardless of their families’ income, and not be disadvantaged simply because their families cannot afford private school.

So far quota implementation by colleges has been voluntary, but may soon become mandatory at federal universities if the Racial Equality Statute is approved in Congress. The quota program has not yet been evaluated, but the government wants to expand it. Although quotas help address the racial imbalance in Brazilian universities, they are not the best solution because they do not help students be better prepared for college. In addition, the quotas create stigmas and enforce negative stereotypes about browns and blacks. What Brazil should really be doing is helping the poor through investments in public schools and basic services. Browns and blacks will directly and greatly benefit from programs that help the poor, and in this way will be able to compete against their richer counterparts in college admissions exams.

1 Comment »

1.  [Selma Blum, November 20, 2010 @ 11:58 am](#)

Dear Stephanie,

Excellent article. You summarize our “apartheid” situation in Brazil where black and poor people don’t have access to good education, good health care and dignity. Affirmative actions is a controversial issue since we are not sure if it will be used also as a discrimination tool.

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