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TRAJECTORIES OF QUOTA STUDENTS FOR ADMISSION TO A BRAZILIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT. Psychosocial experiences of quota students are topics of interest to Psychology in the field of affirmative action studies. This research aimed to describe the trajectories of quota students to enter a federal public university. Eleven quota students participated, Psychology students, subdivided into two focus groups. English-oriented discourse analysis was used as an interpretive strategy. Narratives were organized into six repertoires: family culture on higher education; limitations and precariousness of public basic education; the search for educational complementation; the routine and difficulties prior to university admission; extracurricular activities and the Federal Institutes to enable access to higher education. The analysis of quota student trajectories showed common psychosocial experiences. The shared meanings pointed out that to achieve the goal of entering a public university, in addition to the intense personal effort, discipline and new habits, to break with cultural and family values, it was necessary to have the support of good quality educational institutions, such as the Federal Institutes, or resorting to complementary studies. This study is expected to contribute to the development of psychosocial interventions for quota students in areas of academic and career guidance and also for the consolidation of affirmative action policies.

Keywords: Affirmative action; public policy; higher education.

TRAJETÓRIAS DE ESTUDANTES COTISTAS PARA O INGRESSO NUMA UNIVERSIDADE PÚBLICA BRASILEIRA

RESUMO. As vivências psicossociais de estudantes cotistas são temáticas de interesse da psicologia no campo de estudos das ações afirmativas. Esta pesquisa objetivou descrever as trajetórias de estudantes cotistas para o ingresso em uma universidade pública federal. Participaram 11 universitários cotistas, estudantes de psicologia, subdivididos em dois grupos focais. Utilizou-se da análise do discurso, de orientação inglesa, como estratégia interpretativa. As narrativas foram organizadas em seis repertórios: a cultura familiar sobre o ensino superior; as limitações e a precariedade da educação básica pública; a busca por complementação educacional; a rotina e as dificuldades anteriores ao ingresso na universidade pública; as atividades extracurriculares e os institutos federais para viabilizar o acesso ao ensino superior público. A análise das trajetórias dos cotistas evidenciou vivências psicossociais comuns aos estudantes. Os sentidos compartilhados sinalizaram que para alcançarem o objetivo

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de ingressar em uma universidade pública federal foi preciso, além do esforço pessoal intenso, disciplina e novos hábitos, romper com valores culturais e familiares, contar com apoio de instituições de ensino de qualidade referendada como, por exemplo, os institutos federais ou recorrer à complementação de estudos. Espera-se que este estudo contribua para a elaboração intervenções psicossociais aos cotistas nos âmbitos da orientação acadêmica e de carreira e também para a consolidação das referidas políticas de ações afirmativas.

Palavras-chave: Ação afirmativa; política pública; educação superior.

LAS TRAYECTORIAS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE CUOTA PARA EL INGRESO A UNA UNIVERSIDAD PÚBLICA BRASILEÑA

RESUMEN. Las experiencias psicossociales de los titulares de cuotas estudiantiles son temas de interés para la Psicología en el campo de los estudios de acción afirmativa. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo describir las trayectorias de los estudiantes de cuota para la admisión a una universidad federal brasileña. Participaron once universitarios, estudiantes de psicología, divididos en dos grupos focales. Se utilizó el análisis del discurso orientado al inglés como estrategia interpretativa de los datos. Las narraciones se organizaron en seis repertorios: la cultura sobre la educación superior; las limitaciones y precariedad de la educación básica pública; la búsqueda de complementación educativa; la rutina y las dificultades previas al ingreso a la universidad; actividades extracurriculares y los institutos federales para permitir el acceso a la educación superior. El análisis de las trayectorias de los titulares de los cupos mostró experiencias psicossociales comunes. Los sentidos compartidos indicaban que para lograr el objetivo de entrar en una universidad pública era necesario, además del intenso esfuerzo personal de disciplina y nuevos hábitos, romper con los valores culturales y familiares, contar con el apoyo de instituciones educativas de calidad, como los Institutos Federales, o recurrir a estudios complementarios. Se espera que este estudio contribuya al desarrollo de intervenciones psicossociales a los titulares de cuotas en los campos de orientación académica y profesional y también para la consolidación de las políticas de acción afirmativa.

Palabras clave: Acción afirmativa; políticas públicas; educación superior.

Introduction

This study is within the scope of investigations on affirmative action public policies, which aim at the democratization of access to education and work. Specifically, this study deals with the trajectories for entering public higher education, with focus on career construction of quota students in the initial transition to graduation.

Permeated by multiple dimensions and opinions, affirmative actions bring an extremely particular historical, social and subjective background. According to Moehleck (2002), these actions would be defined as initiatives that seek, with legal, normative and democratic support, to promote the representation of oppressed groups, acting in the logic of equality and compensation for losses and delays derived from marginalization and historical prejudice. The expression 'affirmative action' originates from the political experience of the United States, which has completed more than forty years of implementation of actions in this area, also with extensive discussion and differences of

opinion. Countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Honduras, India, England, Canada, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand also have experiences of affirmative policies, with positive results in their implementation. Among the achievements of countries that have implemented a quota policy, the progressive integration of historically oppressed social groups and greater representation in relevant political and social spaces are remarkable (Racoski & Silva, 2020).

In Brazil, the history of affirmative action has been built from the arduous struggles of social movements organized after the country's redemocratization. With regard to university quota policy, in a state-of-the-art literature review study, Guarnieri and Melo-Silva (2007) showed that the production of the SCOPUS and Jstor databases (with 59 studies), in the 2002-2007 period, can be organized into three sets of content: (a) the dichotomy present in the articles from that time, with positions in favor or against the policy; (b) deepening the debate on diversity; and (c) a dialectical, more integrated and reflective view of this public policy, showing the controversial debates in a period prior to the approval of Law 12711/2012. In another analysis, after a decade of scientific production on university quotas in the country, Guarnieri and Melo-Silva (2017) described the complex process of civil debate that developed over time until the approval of the Quota Law in 2012. They analyzed 109 publications in three electronic databases (Scopus/Elsevier, CAPES Periodicals and Google Scholar), covering several areas of knowledge, in two periods: 2003-2008 and 2009-2013, and reported that theoretical and legal clashes continued, this time emerging studies on the impacts of quotas, public policy perspectives, the criteria adopted and comparisons between countries. The authors emphasize that the productions of the first period emphasize questions about the constitutionality of quotas and, in the second, the repercussions of the Brazilian experience on society.

Recently, Oliveira, Viana and Lima (2020) carried out a literature review on scientific production exclusively in journals in the field of Psychology, in the SciELO, PePSIC, Index Psi and LILACS databases. With only 11 articles, the authors pointed out a low number of studies, methodological gaps and little variability of objectives and methods in the research, highlighting that most of the analyzed studies focused on people opinion about university quotas. They also highlighted that only two studies dealt with experiences of the benefited students.

Recovering the history of affirmative action policy in the Brazilian context, from the redemocratization, with the Citizen Constitution of 1988, paths are opened by public policies movements that aimed expand the access and permanence of racial minorities in higher education. Such initiatives began to be articulated in the late 1990s, through civil organizations, without committed public involvement. Only since 2001, broad public policies of affirmative action have been effectively implemented as laws (Moehlecke, 2002).

In higher education, under Law 12711/2012, 50% enrollments per program and shift at universities and federal institutes were progressively distributed among students who attended high school in public schools, taking into account the demographic percentage by state of blacks, brown, indigenous (BBI), according to the latest census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE. In 2016, people with disabilities were also included and benefited by Law 13409/2016. Of this total, half of the vacancies are intended for students from public schools with a gross family income equal to or less than one and a half minimum wage per capita, and the other half for students from public schools with a family income of more than one and a half minimum wage (Brasil, 2012).

Affirmative actions for admission to public higher education are based on the premise that education provides important instruments for social, cultural and economic advancement. As a strategy to overcome inequalities, the quota system seeks to democratize the access of groups that, starting from public basic education, would not be able to compete for a place in public higher education on an equal basis with students from the private network (Racoski & Silva, 2020). Historically, admission to the Brazilian higher education system denounces the continuity of segregation, as it exposes the difficulties of the poor and black population to access their experience (Mont'Alvão Neto, 2014). It is important to emphasize that the centuries of discrimination, violence and suffering of Brazilian ethnic and racial minorities go beyond succinct descriptions. The historical reason, with slavery, massacres, segregation and denial of rights need to be rescued as a moral responsibility and as a strategy to promote social justice and reduce structural racism in the country.

For an outline of the meaning of Brazilian structural racism, one must understand the facts in a logic path. Any supposed break with oppressions imposed for centuries, such as the slavery model, must be accompanied by actions that create new spaces of belonging for marginalized groups. Social inequalities and manifestations of racism seen in the first two decades of the 21st century are continuities impregnated with a historical link. As an example, data on access to education and income and on homicides of the black population in Brazil, the second country with the largest black population in the world, are statistics that denounce vulnerability to violence and segregation, which, as in slavery, makes them occupy spaces of non-citizenship (Mendonça & Aranha, 2020). In addition to the logic of compensating inequalities, the encouragement of representativeness and structural changes in the deepest spheres of society justify the construction of affirmative actions of this nature (Silva & Machado, 2018).

Recent data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], (2019) indicate that between 2016 and 2018, a series of educational indicators of the black or brown population begins to show an improvement. In 2018, black or brown students became the majority in public higher education institutions, reaching the historic mark of 50.3%. However, the disadvantage in relation to the white population remains evident. Statistics show that 36.1% young people aged between 18 and 24, of white color or race, attended or had already completed higher education, while among young people of black or brown color or race, in the same age group, the percentage is only 18.3%. According to the IBGE, this relative improvement in the access of the black or brown population to higher education is the result of measures adopted from the 2000s onwards in the public and private networks, such as the institutionalization of the quota system and other government programs (IBGE, 2019). Although in need of improvement, affirmative actions, such as university quotas, can guarantee social justice and equality of opportunities, to access the university and reduce the social prejudice. As Castro, Martin and Almeida (2020) point out, social quotas are a provisional mechanism for achieving equality, that is, for building practical short-term results that make it possible to reduce levels of social inequality at the present time, while taking care of promoting better quality of primary and secondary public education.

On the other hand, arguments against the quota policy focus on a possible opposite effect, in the sense of causing an inferiority of quota applicants potential, at the same time that it would violate the right to equality provided for in the Constitution. This type of perception is guided by the view of privilege, ignoring the bias of right and equity, in the face of a violent history of social, cultural and material blocks (Wink, 2018). In addition, the

reactivity faced by affirmative action can also be associated with an authoritarian trend of Brazilian society, built on a history of colonization and slavery, with an unstable democracy and an internalized social vision with overtones of surveillance, punishment and with a sense of poorly structured collective responsibility (Santos & Queiroz, 2016). Part of unfavorable opinions on the implementation of the quota policy in Brazil is due to the lack of knowledge of the content of the law (Oliveira et al., 2020). This exposes the importance of the dialectic of everyday life as an instrument for disseminating and substantiating well-founded and clear social opinions (Mendonça & Aranha, 2020) capable of promoting, in fact, beyond theory, racial equality and the mitigation of racism (Santos & Moreira, 2019). It is also important to recognize the need to improve the implementation of the quota policy to prevent frauds by white students, especially in the ethnic-racial category in the self-declaration 'Brown'. In this sense, it is necessary to formulate stricter inspection criteria (Santos & Freitas, 2020).

It is in this context, in a complex web of discourses, that quota students enter public higher education, carrying with them not only a common baggage of expectations, but a whole skewed collection of social visions. Thus, analyzing the movements of perpetuation and disruption of social places, supported by narratives of young people from popular origins who live these experiences, allows the construction of practices of denaturalization of social inequality. The brake on the repetition of subordination fields enhances the expansion of rights and opportunities (Silva Júnior & Mayorga, 2016).

The transition, therefore, of these young people to a public university and their future passage to the world of work constitute important moments of dialogue between the different areas: social, academic, personal, interpersonal, vocational and institutional (Sousa, Badargi, & Nunes, 2013). The way individuals articulate their experiences and choices will progressively organize a psychosocial process of building themselves and the world, which will open paths to be followed.

In this sense, it becomes relevant to analyze the trajectories of these students and to know how the stories, plots and themes of life are built and intertwined. The construction of projects and the meaning of life itself, through adaptations and oscillations, will also be connected with socially legitimized models (Ribeiro, 2014). In this process of building oneself and one's career, one of the factors that has great potential to influence social mobility is precisely access to higher education. Consequently, inequalities in access to university contribute to a future distortion of career opportunities (Estevan, Gall, & Morin, 2019).

Also, it is important to emphasize that the subjective and heterogeneous views of the students trajectories from lower classes who enter education public superior cannot restrict analysis to individual fields. Similarities in living conditions, personal commitments, traits of determination, self-discipline and dedication also build social histories, being the result of collective mobilizations of support. Thus, the belief in meritocracy based on effort cannot be legitimized, understanding the need to build networks of incentive, recognition, and emotional and material support for these young people (Piotto, 2010).

Thus, it is observed that in the career trajectory of students from lower classes there are themes associated with the construction of autonomous forms of responsibility for training, facing difficulties, finding sources of pleasure and entertainment, the capacity for critical reflection of its reality, in addition to the historical-cultural role of school education, even in the face of its precariousness (Piotto & Alves, 2011). As Silva and Souza (2020) highlight, difficulties experienced by quota students in their trajectories tend to continue

after entering higher education, which requires the consolidation of student permanence policies that are more attentive and personalized to the reality of each institution.

In addition to institutional aspects, the construction of a positive identity that promotes self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence in oneself and in the world is linked to protection mechanisms arising from the family and community, and is therefore, a social disposition articulated to individual meaning (Maranhão, Colaço, Santos, Lopes, & Coêlho, 2014). Thus, to overcome the deficiencies of public basic education, it is common for students from lower classes to seek popular and community courses as a strategy to complement their learning (Guarnieri & Melo-Silva, 2010), or even, as an alternative, to enter Federal Institutes, as these are configuring themselves as potency in the national public education (Dutra, Dutra, Parente, & Paulo, 2019).

Based on the arguments presented, the study on the psychosocial experiences of quota students in their paths towards entering public higher education is a topic of relevance to Brazilian scientific production in Psychology (Oliveira et al., 2020). Knowing the stories of these students and analyzing how they build their trajectories can provide a diagnosis of their needs and clues for the definition of goals for quota university students in institutional political-pedagogical projects and for academic and career guidance services. With a view to contributing to the production of psychological knowledge on the topic, this study aimed to describe the trajectories of quota students for admission to a federal public university.

Method

Participants

This was a qualitative cross-sectional study. The following criteria for sample inclusion were set: participants admitted to higher education through the National Quota Policy, in which such criteria were verified through self-declaration and academic records. The final sample consisted of 11 undergraduates subdivided into two focus groups. The first group was composed of seven undergraduates from the 1st period of graduation (three men and four women). The second group had four participants (two undergraduates from the 5th period, one from the 3rd period and one from the 2nd period, one man and three women). All study participants were students of the Psychology program at the Federal University of Triângulo Mineiro.

Ages ranged between 17 and 21 years, with a mean of 19 years. Regarding race, six participants declared themselves to be brown, four white and one black. The participants' home cities, with the exception of the university host city, were concentrated in the interior of the state of São Paulo. Regarding financial support from the institution, eight participants received some type of benefit. Regarding the modality of quotas in relation to income, seven participants had a gross family income equal to or less than one and a half wage per capita. The other four participants had an income of more than one and a half wage per capita. As for the parents' education, there is a predominance of parents with complete primary education (five mothers/six fathers), followed by incomplete primary education (three mothers/two fathers), complete higher education (two mothers/two fathers) and graduate degrees (one mother/one father).

Instruments

Data were collected through a Focus Group Interview Guide (available upon request by email) and a questionnaire with personal and socio-educational data. The semi-structured script was organized into five thematic axes: (a) 'presentation of the participants' (E.g.: "Talk about their life stories, so that the group can get to know them better after listening to them"); (b) 'career path' (E.g.: "How did you get to the federal university and your specific program? Do you feel that you had support and influences/models in this path?"); (c) 'adaptation to university life' (E.g.: "How was the change and admission to the university, in relation to reception, feelings and expectations?"); (d) 'life and career projects' (E.g.: "Talk a little about your main life projects and professional goals. Who do you want to become and if there was someone who inspired you in these goals"); (e) 'expectations of success in the university-work transition' (E.g.: "How do you imagine the transition to the world of work?"). For the purposes of this study, information obtained through the first three axes was analyzed.

Data collection and analysis

The research was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university of the first two authors (Opinion 1376349 of 12/18/2015). Participants were contacted based on convenience, via the first author's social network, following the snowball effect, and the invitation was extended to students from different programs. Participants signed the Informed Consent. Ethical care was taken, according to Resolution 466/2012, which provides for research involving human beings, guaranteeing voluntary participation and anonymity of participants. In the description of the results, fictitious names were used for this purpose.

Data were collected through two distinct focus groups, both conducted by the first author, and assisted by a second member of the data collection team, who took notes in the order of the speeches. The groups had an average duration of 80 minutes each, and their content was recorded and transcribed in full. Subsequently, the information was analyzed within and between the groups, by the two researchers who participated in data collection, independently, in the light of the discourse analysis English-oriented by Potter and Wetherell (1987). This framework aims to problematize and theorize about the consequences and functions of language in use. In addition to content analysis, this interpretive approach seeks to create blocks of meaning from patterns of expression, metaphors and figures of speech. These blocks form, in turn, interpretive repertoires, which bring together the synthesis of these analyses and consider the context in which the discourses are used, as well as the functions resulting from their use (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The flow of the data analysis process followed the following order: (a) transcripts of the interviews in full into a table, (b) synthesis of each speech, (c) analysis of intergroup and comparative discourse exchanges between groups by two independent researchers, both students in the last year of the psychology program (d) coding interpretive repertoires, (e) comparison of the analyses carried out by the two independent researchers and, (f) validation of the results by a third researcher, PhD in Psychology (second author). The process made it possible to analyze the consensus, the differences, the themes and the patterns present in the participants' discourse, built in the interaction. In this way, the combination of the quota students' personal reports and their trajectories for admission to the federal public university originated, from the analysis, the codification of six

interpretative repertoires: (a) culture on higher education; (b) limitations and precariousness of public basic education; (c) the search for educational complementation; (d) the routine and difficulties prior to university admission; (e) extracurricular activities; and (f) Federal Institutes to facilitate access to higher education.

Results and discussion

Before starting the presentation of the results, it is important to emphasize that the meanings about the trajectories of quota students for admission to a public federal university reported in this study were products of the discursive encounter between the participants, being one of several interpretive possibilities on the subject under study. Thus, the discourse analysis allowed the identification of language units organized into six interpretive repertoires that together open the possibility for meaning construction about the trajectories of quota students for admission to a Brazilian public university.

Culture on higher education

This repertoire included the values of family culture and the social environment about the higher education degree. The trajectory of other family members emerged as an important element in determining their own culture and personal choices. Differences in positions were observed, not being unanimous in the participants' family culture the idea of higher education as an important element to be conquered in the trajectory of these young people. Thus, the figures and expressions that marked this repertoire were of the type: "[...] my mother always said that I had to study, because I had to go to a federal school [...]", "[...] my mother could not study, nor could my father [...]", "[...] in my family I was the first to go to college [...]", "[...] my father went to college after 45, my mother went to college at 38 [...]", "[...] after me, another cousin who wanted to go to college too [...]", "[...] my family always valued higher education, although none of them had done it [...]", "[...] they always pushed me along this path, you know[...]", "[...] whenever I thought, for example, one day that I would go to work instead of studying they would not support, you know, always directing me to that [...]", "[...] not repeating what she went through [...]", "[...] in my family, it's the opposite of everyone else: it doesn't matter to go to college [...] the right thing in life is to work [...]". Regarding the social comparison of the reality of their colleagues, the participants brought perceptions marked by statements such as: "[...] exceptions [...]", "[...] most of the elementary school went to private [universities] [...]", "[...] most are attending private college and working [...]", "[...] I feel a little bad, a little guilty[...]".

Regarding the culture of the environment, Bourdieu (1998) addresses the idea of cultural capital, which would be a heritage accumulated through material and social conditions of existence. For the author, the term *habitus* explains the movement of incorporation of this social and family heritage, in order to predispose preferences, postures, thoughts and actions, in an interconnected and interdependent affective movement.

In this research and in the investigation carried out by Silva and Machado (2018), it was possible to identify that socioeconomic origins and family values have the potential to interfere with the trajectory of quota students to higher education. It is also worth mentioning that, currently, the presence of the lower-income, black population in higher education is an achievement directly related to the organization and implementation of the quota policy (IBGE, 2019; Santos & Moreira, 2019). As pointed out by Mont'Alvão Neto

(2014), this gradual inclusion shows a possible path to reduce inequalities and expand opportunities for the families of these university students.

Limitations and precariousness of public basic education

This repertoire informed the participants' perception on the precariousness of public basic education and the role assumed in this context. The reality of public basic education was described as violent and permeated by approaches to the world of drugs and transgressions. The repertoire was marked by lines and expressions such as "[...] free world [...]", "[...] less demands [...]", "[...] dispersion [...]", "[...] I started to skip classes like crazy [...]", "[...] at my school there were police at the door every day [...]", "[...] people wanting to hit you [...]", "[...] knife fight [...]", "[...] gang confrontation [...]", "[...] confusion [...]", "[...] teaching that doesn't prepare [...]", "[...] a lot of subjects I hadn't seen [...]", "[...] the public school didn't teach me anything [...]", "[...] (in the preparatory school) it felt like they [other students] were just revising the content and I was learning while they revised".

According to Maranhão et al. (2014), the unveiling of violence in public school spaces opens paths to understanding a common social reality in the country. The immersion in adverse development situations, the need to mobilize resources to face abuse, the limitation of trust relationships, and the daily challenges are salient. Thus, as it seems to converge with the participants' life trajectory, the possibility of resilience opens up from the articulation between an adverse condition and the instrumentalization of protection strategies. This balance dialogues with the theme of the next repertoire, as the family and the community become mechanisms of care and promotion of identities.

It is also worth mentioning an overview of the nature of violence in Brazil. According to a survey carried out by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), 70% public elementary school students witnessed some type of violence at school where they studied. Conducted in seven Brazilian capitals, the research also pointed out another type of violence, the symbolic, described as a possible contributor to the formation of this conflicting environment. The school, composed of a precarious infrastructure (hot classrooms, lack of lighting, overcrowding) and a set of rules and deficient relationships potentiate aggressive experiences (Abramovay, Castro, Silva, & Cerqueira, 2016).

Thus, the very condition of deprivation of quality education goes back to the symbolic violence of social exclusion. The testimonies of elementary public-school students reported by Silva Júnior and Mayorga (2016) resonate with similarity with perceptions of participants of this study, when they raise the consequences of the deprivation of quality education and the distance of learning from private schools as a contrasting abyss, resulting in significant differences in the starting conditions for learning and also for admission to a federal university.

The search for educational complementation

This repertoire reinforced the perception of the lag of public basic education and the expectations created by students before directly experiencing this contrast, in a clash between the self-image of good students and the prospect of failure in the National High School Examination (ENEM). The developments necessary to compensate for training deficiencies were expressed, in the sense of the search for preparatory school, changes to the Federal Institute and/or study habits.

Expressions that marked this repertoire were “[...] there [public school] had classification and I was always in the top three [...]”, “[...] being considered the best in the class [...]”, “[...] I was in public school, there I was the smart one [...]”, “[...] I thought, I’ll get into Medical school by the time I leave here [...]”, “[...] I started to study a lot [...]”, “[...] I spent all day studying [...]”, “[...] My score was terrible [...]”, “[...] I got screwed, it won’t work [...]”, “[...] There were so many things that I saw that I didn’t know [...]”, “[...] I’m not as smart as I thought [...]”, “[...] then I wanted to stop (volleyball) and dedicate myself more to the third grade and study for the entrance exam [...]”, “[...] I’m just going to do the preparatory school and I’m going to focus to see if it will be [...]”, “[...] complement learning [...]”, “[...] scholarship in preparatory school [...]”, “[...] I got a lot of discount[...], “[...] change of habits”.

It is important to emphasize that the participants of this study were subdivided between those who spent their whole lives studying in public schools and those who had a passage through private institutions. Regardless of the experiences, the feeling of unevenness between public and private high schools was unanimous. The confrontation with reality was pointed out by the participants as a moment of transformations, disappointments, demotivations and changes in personal self-images.

In the same direction, Castro et al. (2020) argue about the principle of material equality that should underlie quota policies. For the authors, the argument of formal equality is not enough to guarantee that individuals have equal access to opportunities. In the case of students from public high schools, material inequalities and inequalities in access to quality education are evident and reinforce the impossibility of equalizing opportunities for admission to federal universities. In this way, as Estevan et al. (2019) point out, the relevance of affirmative actions in boosting social mobility is highlighted, as quota students are able to expand access to quality education, previously restricted to students from the private educational system.

The importance of complementing studies was also echoed by studies by Guarnieri and Melo-Silva (2010), given that the authors identified the growing demands of quota students for access to personalized and extensive program content, which public basic education would not make possible, according to the participants. In addition, Piotto (2010), with university students from lower classes, also reported that the revision of identities is present in the trajectories of quota students: the feeling of sadness, fright, disappointment and depression are brought when the image and the history of ‘good students’ in public high schools are faced with low scores at the university, when compared to the scores of students coming from elite private schools.

Regarding the educational gap reported by participants, it is necessary to reinforce that academic performance is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that does not present a single pattern, and that a significant portion of quota students continues to face problems even after admission to university. Among the problems mentioned, adaptation to the pace of study and financial difficulties stand out (Silva & Souza, 2020). Thus, it appears that encouraging access to public universities through the quota policy is not enough for a truly restorative effect, if retention programs and strategies for these students are left out (Souza et al., 2013). If it was an arduous journey preparing for admission, another stage begins with redoubled efforts in university life to adapt and overcome new obstacles.

Routine and difficulties prior to university admission

This repertoire was marked by meanings related to intense daily activities, frequent changes and transitions, financial difficulties, early responsibilities and a family reality that is not always collaborative. Fears, changes, overcoming and ruptures were common points in the life stories of the participants, who also affirmed the emergence of attitudes such as the determination to face financial restrictions and difficulties in the family group. The experience of a trajectory marked by obstacles seemed to mobilize attitudes focused on effort, self-discipline and overcoming.

The narratives associated with this repertoire mobilized memories and affections that provoked emotional reactions throughout the exchanges. This repertoire was structured by a vocabulary composed of words and images such as: “[...] my mother got sick [...]”, “[...] it screwed up [...]”, “[...] my parents got divorced [...]”, “[...] the friends I had there stayed there, I had to build other bonds [...]”, “[...] I didn’t have money [...]”, “[...] very stressful [...]”, “[...] I would get home around midnight [...]”, “[...] unemployment [...]”, “[...] I am going to work because there is no way [...]”, “[...] my father was an alcoholic and a drug user [...]”, “[...] my mother was afraid, so I grew up more alone [...]”, “[...] I cried all the time”.

Difficulties in the trajectory seem to be common points among young people of popular origin. The study reports by Silva Júnior and Mayorga (2016) showed similarities with stories experienced by the research participants. Different types of deprivations and inequalities expose these young people to an imposed sub-citizenship, where the social fabric is restrictive and segregative. A good quality school, culture and leisure are unextended privileges, which sew a social condition of the excluded and open an abyss among young Brazilians.

In this way, the relevance of affirmative actions is perceived to break biased narratives, especially those linked to the discourse of meritocracy, for solidification of a more objective debate on the access and inclusion of students from lower classes in public universities (Wink, 2018). For these reasons, affirmative actions cannot be considered as privileges, as pointed out by Racoski and Silva (2020). They should be seen as provisional mechanisms, as well as used in other countries to correct or reduce the history of injustice and denied rights.

Extracurricular activities

Participants highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities for building their trajectories before admission to public university. Pointed out as key points in body, social and affective change, engagement was brought as a motivator and tipping point, including in the development of their own taste for learning. Volleyball, swimming, reading, writing, guitar, basketball, cinema, artistic initiation and ballet were some activities mentioned that characterized this repertoire. Expressions like “[...] it was a milestone in my life [...]”, “[...] it was the kickoff for me to start developing [...]”, “[...] reading was the starting point where I started to enjoy learning new things [...]”, “[...] I created a very, very big passion for basketball [...]”, “[...] I started to like art a lot [...]”, “[...] I started swimming since I was young [...]”, “[...] I started training and developed a skill that must be the thing I do best today [...]”, “[...] I became someone else [...]” marked the description of this repertoire.

In the study developed by Piotto and Alves (2011), the participants’ reports are in line with the meanings described in this repertoire. The taste for reading and writing was

also presented as a precursor of a passion for learning, finding pleasure, enthusiasm and power in facing conflicts. As for sport, its implicit gains are motor energy for the development of skills such as cooperation, respect, healthy competition, psychological well-being, self-confidence, assertiveness and friendship. The subjectivity of these experiences, with their human interactivity, much more than their format, determines the directions for acquiring more adaptive transferable attitudes and skills that contribute to learning.

Federal Institutes to facilitate access to higher education

The narratives in this repertoire highlighted the quality of the work developed at the Federal Institutes (FI). Reported as an important point in the lives of more than half of the participants, joining the FI in high school brought an increase in the quality of learning, as it is a differentiated public high school institution. In addition, the environment experienced and the bonds created were praised as precious experiences. The words and phrases that marked this repertoire were “[...] high school with higher education level [...]”, “[...] change of environment and quality of learning [...]”, “[...] it was the place I found myself [...]”, “[...] I am very grateful to have studied there [...]”, “[...] everything from the little bit of basics that I know I think I learned there [...]”, “[...] even when I had nothing, I loved to stay at school all day [...]”, “[...] best period of my life [...]”, “[...] best phase [...]”, “[...] place where I did more friends until then [...]”, “[...] I think if it wasn’t for there, I wouldn’t have been able to, because I didn’t take a preparatory school or anything [...]”, “You talked about milestones and I think this was, if not the biggest, one of them”.

The meanings that characterized this repertoire reinforce the quality of training offered by FI. When analyzing the Enem statistics, from 2011 to 2015, Dutra et al. (2019) observed that the performance of Federal Institutes was positive, growing and significant over the years in all areas evaluated. Nevertheless, it should be noted that given the unpredictability of the political scenario, as of the 2018 presidential elections, the allocation of funds to federal educational institutions has been restricted. As base numbers in the scenario of the state of Minas Gerais (representing a national situation), in 2019, around R\$33.9 million were withdrawn from the Federal Center for Technological Education of Minas Gerais (CEFET-MG) and R\$27.9 million from the IFMG (Ronan, 2019). Thus, considering the reality of ongoing contingency in Brazil, the search for complementation of studies through the Federal Institutes is compromised, making it a real obstacle for future quota students in their trajectories for admission and permanence in Brazilian public universities.

Final considerations

In this study, the analysis of narratives produced by the quota students about their trajectories for admission to a public federal university made it possible to broaden the meanings of the psychosocial experiences of students benefited by affirmative action policies in Brazil. In general, quota students reported that the paths to the public university were marked by life histories full of changes, difficulties, early responsibilities and the difficult family situation, not always collaborative, in relation to plans for admission to higher education.

The analysis of the participants’ trajectories showed that, in addition to intense personal effort, discipline and new habits, to break with cultural and family values, it was

necessary to count on the support of quality high school institutions for admission to a federal public university, such as the Federal Institutes or resorting to supplementing extracurricular studies. Further, sports and artistic activities seemed to function as essential elements, mediators of the stressful study routine, reinforcing the importance of leisure activities and social exchanges.

However, besides the trajectories for admission to public university, it will be necessary to analyze the coping strategies that quota university students use to guarantee their permanence, completion of the program, and subsequent entry into the job market. Importantly, policies of inclusion of quota students in Brazilian public universities should be considered a provisional strategy for the inclusion and reduction of social inequalities and structural racism in the country. Additionally, as part of the process of implementation and operation of any policy, it is worth adding the need for a critical and not naive look at the inspection used in the admission of quota applicants, especially with regard to racial criteria. Thus, such topics are relevant for future investigations, including longitudinal studies.

From a practical point of view, the conclusions of this study may be useful as a basis for the elaboration of intervention proposals in the field of academic and career guidance and in the formulation of public policies and institutional actions aimed at this population. The possibilities that were effective in the trajectory of these participants can be valued and applied with more scope. In this sense, the importance of prior training offered by Federal Institutes is highlighted, that is, the value of a quality public school, and the encouragement for engagement in extracurricular activities, such as arts and sports.

In addition to the aforementioned contributions, the study has limitations, especially with regard to the qualitative design, such as the difficulty of expanding the size and diversity of the sample, restricted to undergraduates from a federal university and a Psychology program, whose results cannot be generalized without criteria. Finally, it is worth highlighting the importance of public education, especially universities, as a path of power for students of the most different classes, genders and races, to experience opportunities, knowledge and creative and inclusive exchanges, being a tool for the promotion of social justice and reduction of structural racism in the country. This study is expected to contribute to the formulation of psychosocial and career interventions with quota students, enabling them to reposition themselves in history and the occupation of representative social spaces as citizens-subjects in their trajectory in society.

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