

# Rubia R. Valente | RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research seeks to produce scientific inquiries that measure and evaluate public policies and practices, with a focus on understanding social issues related to economic, political, and social development. On its broadest level, my work applies advanced quantitative methods and socioeconomic theory to investigate the impact of policies on underrepresented and marginalized groups, providing empirical support for formulating policies addressing socioeconomic inequalities due to race, class, and gender in social, political, educational, and religious institutions. Furthermore, my research also evaluates the impact of public policies on the quality of life of minority groups, such as Latinos, immigrant workers, and women. I plan to continue applying this interdisciplinary approach to pressing societal issues, including immigration reform, racial and gender equality, human rights, and affirmative action policies.

My interest in the social sciences is accompanied by an interest in data management and analysis. As part of my research, I normally work with dense, very-large datasets, which often need to be cleaned and pre-processed before being evaluated. For example, the raw micro-data for my work on race and education in Brazil [6, 7] comprised about 8 million students and over 200 individual variables, requiring special automation to efficiently batch-process individual data records in STATA/MP. The resulting, cleaned dataset contained roughly 2.5 million students in Brazil who took the *Exame Nacional do Ensino Medio* (National Secondary Exam of Secondary Education) between 2004 and 2008. Were this pre-processing step performed in the typical, rote fashion of parsing the entire dataset in a single pass, the analysis would become intractable.

Overall research achievements include:

- **ten journal publications** in peer-reviewed research venues, including the *Latin American Research Review*, the *Geographical Review*, *Cities, Race Ethnicity and Education*, and the *Journal of Happiness Studies*;
- **accepted papers and talks in leading conferences** in Latin American Studies, Public Policy, Political Science, and Sociology, including the *Latin American Studies Association*, the *Midwest Political Science Association*, the *International Society for Quality of Life Research*, the *Brazilian Studies Association*, and the *Society of Pentecostal Studies*;
- **invited guest at *Brian Lehrer TV Show***'s public intellectual segment to discuss my research on happiness studies.

## 1 Research

My research contributes to advance understanding in four distinct areas of study: (1) Race, Ethnicity and Education in Brazil, (2) Happiness Studies, (3) Political and Social Movements, and (4) Sociology of Religion. The underlining connection is the focus on underrepresented and marginalized groups in Brazil, and comparatively in the United States.

### 1.1 Race, Ethnicity, and Education in Brazil

Access to higher education is a pivotal tool for social mobility, yet in Brazil access remains unequal. An anomaly of the Brazilian educational system is that while well-regarded institutions at the primary and secondary levels are in the private sector, the situation is reversed at the university level. Brazilian public universities, both at the state and federal levels, are tuition-free and considered to be the most prestigious institutions in the country. As a consequence, admission to public university is a rigorous, competitive

process. The result is increased disparity—underprivileged students who cannot afford private high school education perform worse in the entrance exam than students from private schools, and since nonwhite Brazilians have been disproportionately located at the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution, this hinders their ability to get into college, affects their social status, and reinforces an intergenerational cycle that confines them into lower socioeconomic status. My doctoral dissertation explored this issue in depth and quantitatively demonstrated the negative effects of racial discrimination on high school performance and college admission in Brazil [3].

Building upon this work, my research explored the effects of race on access to higher education. My research documents a vicious circle which connects the schooling of the young with their race, socio-economic status, and university attendance. The lack of empirical evidence have led to claims that racial disparities in the educational system in Brazil are a result of students' social status, and not of racism. My research shows that in the educational achievement process, there are differences due to social origins to which further differences due to race are superposed [7]. To further analyze this issue, I researched the admission progress at the University of São Paulo (USP) and found concurrent results: those accepted at USP are more likely to be white, from affluent families, to have studied in private high schools, to have enrolled in prep courses, and to have a mother who attained higher education [6]. These findings posit that the lack of accessibility for nonwhites and lower-income status students to higher education in Brazil is an impediment to social mobility. These findings provide credence to arguments in support of affirmative action, particularly that of racial and social quotas combined.

**Affirmative action.** The implementation of the affirmative action law in Brazil for federal universities in 2012 was very controversial. Many claim that there exists a mismatch, and affirmative action students cannot perform at the same levels as non-quota students. Although this belief is widespread, there was no research using quantitative methodology to test whether this was actually the case. My research, examined the results of the ENADE (*Exame Nacional de Desempenho dos Estudantes*) examination to determine whether there is a relationship between students' performance at the university level and mode of their admission. The results show that students who were admitted to public universities under affirmative action perform at similar levels to students who were not, while quota students in private universities perform slightly better than students admitted through traditional methods [12]. Such awareness contributes to the debate of affirmative action in important ways. It provides empirical evidence that affirmative action students are not reducing the quality of education, or being a burden to the educational system by falling behind—once admitted, they perform just as well as other students.

**Anti-discrimination policies.** Another important issue in the educational domain is the pervasive effects of discrimination on student's well-being and satisfaction. Creating a safe and positive school environment where any form of discrimination is not tolerated is an important intervention that can improve psychological outcomes, academic performance and students' well-being. My research therefore analyzes the effects of several types of discrimination, including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation and disability [11]. Although any form of discrimination is detrimental, my findings indicate that discrimination against homosexuals and disabled persons has a greater impact on school satisfaction than racism, sexism, ageism, and religious-based discrimination. This imparts important orientation on policy makers and educators aiming at creating a safer school environment.

This research provides a valuable contribution to both race relation studies and educational attainment in Brazil, and it paves the way for future research on the continued effectiveness of the recent implementation of affirmative action policies in federal Brazilian universities. I am currently working on a **book manuscript** which analyses Brazil's racial relations from racial democracy to affirmative action policies.

## 1.2 Happiness Studies

Happiness studies is a relatively new area of research in economics.<sup>1</sup> Latin Americans are among the world's happiest people [2], despite social-inequality, civil violence, and poverty. This paradox intrigues me—*why should this be?* Likewise, there is few research comparing happiness in Latin America and in the United States. *Are there any differences due to cultural or regional characteristics?*

Seeking to answer these questions has propelled my research in this area. For example, I compared the life satisfaction and working hours of Latin Americans and U.S. Americans using the AmericasBarometer and the General Social Survey. While there are several common determinants of happiness, hours worked is not among them. In fact, my research shows that Latin American males are less happy than married U.S. Americans males when working longer hours [13]. Another natural, yet intriguing research question that emerged from this study is whether Latinos in the United States, especially immigrant Latinos, have a similar attitude towards work and happiness. When examining the relationship between the life satisfaction and working hours of Latinos in the United States, my analysis shows that Latinos have adopted American values with respect to work and happiness [9]. Similarly, in another comparative study, I examined whether place of residency (urban vs. rural) played a role on people's happiness in several countries in Latin America. The results indicate that unlike in the United States, in Latin America there is no evidence of rural-urban happiness differences. In Latin America, familism is the key driving force, aspatial and transcending location [10].

My work on subjective well-being has attracted **media attention**, and I was invited to discuss it at the Brian Lehrer TV show.<sup>2</sup> This research is an important first step into filling the existing gap in the happiness literature when it refers to knowledge of Latin Americans' subjective well-being, Latino's happiness, and comparative Latin American vs. U.S. studies. Being happy is one of the most important aspects of life and its study directly contributes to understanding what policies in regards to work or housing should be in place to improve happiness in the overall society.

## 1.3 Social and Political Movements

My work on social and political movements in Brazil connects with my previous research on education, quality of life, and rural/urban differences. I am particularly drawn to social movements in rural areas such as the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra—MST*). Using data from a national survey of formerly landless peasants residing in federal land-reform settlements in Brazil (*Pesquisa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária—PNERA*) [8], my analysis shows that MST has been far more successful than other settlements in assuring a better quality of life for its members. MST members have better residential environments, more material possessions, and better access to education in rural areas than non-members, which improves and significantly affect their life satisfaction.

Aligned with this research, I have also studied political participation, looking particularly at the 2013 protests in Brazil. Although social movements, such as the MST, have been organizing protests and demonstrations throughout Brazil for years, they were much smaller in scale and more scattered than the current waves of political protests. Traditionally, Brazilians are not prone to protesting. In fact, as recent as 2002, Brazil registered one of the lowest rates of protest participation in Latin America. To comprehend this emerging phenomenon and what factors influence protest participation in Brazil, I used

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<sup>1</sup>Research was initiated in economics in the mid-1970's by Easterlin (1974).

<sup>2</sup>The interview [1] can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/FfN06LVyiyA?start=2948>

data from the World Values Survey to develop a general analysis highlighting individual factors that are significant in explaining protest participation among Brazilians. In particular, this research sheds light on possible indicators that could have predicted the recent political mobilizations, and seeks to understand the extent to which a change from *materialistic* to *post-materialistic* values could contribute towards explaining the recent protests in Brazil. My findings demonstrate that post-materialistic values are a significant explanatory force in determining political participation in Brazil [14].

#### 1.4 Sociology of Religion and Pentecostalism

For many years, I have always been intrigued by religious traditions, institutions, and the effects of religion on many aspects of people's lives. In particular, I am interested in the recurrent discrimination against women in religious institutions, where traditional patriarchal authority remains the norm, with very few exceptions.

Most of my research in this area has concentrated on the oldest Pentecostal church in Brazil, the Christian Congregation in Brazil (CCB)—the second largest Brazilian Pentecostal church with over 2.3 million members nationwide. Despite its size, CCB keeps a very low profile, which difficults research on its members, customs, traditions, and historical significance to Brazilian Pentecostalism. In 2012, I designed and conducted the first survey ever administered to members of this church to learn their opinions and perceptions towards topics related to the church's ministry, doctrines, and practices. I created a questionnaire with 67 questions using Qualtrics Survey Software for members of CCB, and used social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Orkut to gather participants. During a six-month period, I collected data from 1,020 members. The outcomes of this effort have been documented in an **on-going book project** and two published journal articles [4, 5].

This research also resulted in the first historical analysis of the diminishing role of women at CCB, engaging the wider debate about the role of women in the Pentecostal religious context using Max Weber's analysis of the religion of non-privileged classes. Weber contended that some religious groups provide women equality only at the early stages of their religious movement. My research shows that Weber's arguments are valid and pertinent in understanding gender roles in today's Brazilian Pentecostal churches.

## 2 Future Directions

I will continue to focus my research on finding solutions to pressing issues in society, and I will seek opportunities to build deep collaborations with experts and faculty from diverse research areas—including economics, sociology, urban development, religion, public affairs, which I believe is key to tackling current social problems and better understanding social phenomena. Next, I present a sample of these opportunities.

**Racial Inequalities.** My work on affirmative action policies and racial discrimination in college admission provides a fertile area for further research and analysis both in the United States and comparatively in Brazil, and other Latin American countries. I am at the initial stages of a book manuscript analyzing racial relations, and working on a paper that examines racial housing segregation in Brazil.

**Subjective Well-being.** Presently, there is still a dearth of research comparing happiness of Latin Americans and of Latinos living in the United States. I am working on several projects to fill this gap in understanding, one relating to the happiness of career women vs. housewives, another analyzing quality of

life in slums in Brazil and Colombia, and another paper examining how religion affects subjective well being.

**Immigration Reform.** I plan to further document the experience of immigrants in the U.S. and explore the politics of immigration reform. I plan to examine the factors that shape Latino and non-Latino attitudes toward U.S. immigration policy focusing on whether generational differences predict different preferred outcomes of the national debate on immigration reform. I also intent to (a) study the experiences of undocumented immigrant Latinos in the United States, and the impact of their immigration status on their overall well-being, and (b) expand this analysis to the border region with focus on the Mexico-US borderlands, to learn about the experiences of the area residents, specifically how their geographical location and unique life experiences contribute to shaping their subjective well-being. Data for this research will be sourced from field-research (i.e., interviews, surveys), and the General Social Survey (GSS).

**Gender Equality and Religion.** I am currently working on a book manuscript on the Christian Congregation in Brazil. This will be the first book ever written in the English language about this church. I plan to document the findings of my survey, discuss the church's structure, doctrine, and traditions, but most importantly, provide an in-depth analysis of the role of women at CCB.

My research interests are not limited to these examples and will likely span a wide range of social and economic issues. I plan to continue using my statistical analysis skills to work on projects with social impact and policy implications to improve our understanding of social phenomena to support the formulation and assessment of policies that can positively transform our society.

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