

Literacy, speech and shame: the cultural politics of literacy and language in Brazil

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This article examines the relationship between shame, literacy and social relations by analyzing shame narratives told to the author by youth and adult literacy students during a 24-month ethnographic research project conducted in two Brazilian cities. Employing Bourdieu's theoretical framework and literature from the anthropology of emotions, the article asks: What is accomplished through the micropolitics of shaming? What can it teach us about theories of literacy, language and power more broadly? The article shows how speech shaming in Brazil contributed to the cultural production of inequality by individualizing, psychologizing and embodying responsibility or blame for illiteracy. It argues that sociocultural theories of literacy, language and power need to account for the influence of emotions in communicative interactions.

There's always someone correcting you, calling you out, 'You're wrong, you're talking incorrectly.' Others hear that, and they think it's funny to make fun of you. That makes you feel ashamed, and you learn to talk like others talk. (Vera, April 1996)

One of the words frequently associated with 'illiteracy' is 'shame.' Newspaper editorials, activists and politicians decry the 'shame of illiteracy,' in their attempts to mobilize groups of people to volunteer as tutors, fund programs or enroll in classes (see, for example, Kozol's 1985 indictment of 'illiterate America'). Reports from community-based literacy programs located in the US and overseas are replete with quotations from literacy students referring to their sense of shame over their inability to read and write in socially approved ways. Scholarly studies of literacy often mention, almost incidentally, the sensations of shame reported by those who are interviewed or consulted during research (see, for example, Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Hasselbring *et al.*, 1997; Stromquist, 1997; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). And yet, though psychologists have explored literacy and speech shame to some

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extent,¹ the topic has largely been ignored by sociocultural scholars of language and literacy.

In this article, I make central the poignant shame narratives of the youth and adult literacy students with whom I worked while doing research on literacy programs in Brazil. I examine the phenomenon of literacy, speech and shame, asking: what is accomplished through the micropolitics of shame and shaming? What can they teach us about social theories of language and power more broadly? Participants' discussions of speech and literacy shame show how literacy and speech shame in Brazil contributed to the cultural production of social inequality by obscuring the social factors that create inequality and individualizing responsibility for illiteracy. I suggest that the ethnographic data provide important insights for the modification of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, and that the stories of these literacy students remind scholars and practitioners of the importance of a social analysis of shame.

Literacy in sociocultural perspective

New literacy studies

This article is rooted in sociocultural theories of literacy, specifically in the work loosely categorized as New Literacy Studies and in Bourdieu's practice theory.² Based on decades of research demonstrating the 'striking variability [of literacy practices] in sequence, development, and articulation across cultures and historical periods,' sociocultural scholars reject a psychological model of literacy as a discrete, unified, universal set of skills learned gradually through developmentally more complex exercises (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 99). Instead, they conceptualize literacy as social practices 'inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society,' mediated by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are enacted (Street, 1993, p. 7; see also Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Barton, 1994). This approach, which anthropologist Brian Street dubbed the *ideological model*, 'stresses the significance of the socialization process' and influential institutions 'in the construction of the meaning of literacy for informants,' and it emphasizes how those meanings shape the acquisition and use of literacy practices (Street, 1993, p. 56). Sociocultural scholars emphasize the multiplicity of literacies, which vary by language, script, domain, role, network, participants, context and other factors (New London Group, 1996, 2000). From this analytical perspective, literacy cannot and should not be defined a priori, as it is by most conventional measures of literacy; instead, what counts as literacy results from ongoing, complex sociocultural negotiations. Further, the work of Paulo Freire and critical literacy theorists amply demonstrates how literacy practices shape and are shaped by larger power structures (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). In general, then, sociocultural scholars focus more on the *types* of literacy being employed by people, the *meanings* with which they are imbued, and the ways in which literacy practices participate in larger power structures (McCarty, 2005).

Bourdieu's practice theory

Bourdieu's theoretical corpus offers three concepts—field, capital and habitus—that are particularly useful for a sociocultural approach to literacy. Bourdieu aimed to develop an analytic framework that avoids the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism, that is, one that can carefully consider the ways in which social structures and historical and material contexts constrain without utterly determining individual agency. He emphasized that all human action occurs in *fields*, or distinct, structured social spaces characterized by (culturally arbitrary) norms, logic, discourse and social activity (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Different fields value and reward different configurations of *capital*, which can be defined as resources with an exchange value in one or more social fields. While the value of economic capital (e.g. all assets with a monetary value) is obvious, Bourdieu described how symbolic resources also have significant but field-specific value and can in some instances be converted into other forms of capital. Specifically, Bourdieu discussed the importance of social capital (connections and networks that an individual can mobilize to achieve goals), symbolic capital (honor and prestige) and cultural capital. The latter entails institutionalized cultural capital, such as the credentials and qualifications earned from schools; objectified cultural capital, defined as cultural goods like art works that can only be consumed with the appropriate type of cultural capital; and embodied cultural capital, which includes ways of being, doing and speaking strongly formed during early socialization. Linguistic capital, or particular ways of speaking differentially valued in different social fields, is an important form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 114). Finally, according to Bourdieu, the mobilization and use of capital within specific social fields is governed by the *habitus*. Habitus is a 'durably installed [embodied] generative principle of regulated improvisations,' strongly shaped by early socialization and resulting from the sedimentation of past social experiences, which guides but does not dictate future actions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). Habitus, therefore, is a 'socialized subjectivity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126); the concept explains the way in which the social becomes embodied.

Bourdieu's concepts enrich language and literacy studies immensely. Bourdieu argued that social relations determine the acceptability and *legitimacy* of language: 'Just as, at the level of relations between groups, a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 652). Fields 'help fashion linguistic production by determining the "price" [or value] of linguistic products' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 145); consensus within various fields about what constitutes 'proper' or 'correct' language may be fairly consolidated (or *unified*) or may vary widely. In a specific linguistic field, people undertake speech production with a certain 'anticipation of profit,' or anticipation of (and accommodation towards) the expected reception of one's words. Linguistic capital, though stable, is not unchanging; rather, it is created, adapted and asserted through linguistic encounters. Legitimate speakers, or those who hold significant linguistic capital within particular fields, speak with 'command' or the power to influence a

listener toward desired interpretations. To be legitimate, discourse must be uttered by the appropriate person (e.g. religious language spoken by a priest), addressed to the appropriate audience, in a legitimate situation, in phonologically, syntactically and semantically prescribed ways, ‘except when transgressing these norms is part of the legitimate definition of the legitimate producer’ (as, for example, with youth and slang) (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 650). The negotiation of legitimate language and linguistic capital is a fundamental, quotidian, sociopolitical process. As Heller and Martin-Jones argue, ‘By exercising control over the value of linguistic resources ... groups simultaneously regulate access to other resources (such as knowledge, friendship, or material goods) and legitimate the social order that permits them to do so by masking (that is, naturalizing) their ability to do so’ (2001, pp. 2–3).

Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus explains why, *despite* widespread beliefs in a universally valued and valuable literacy, the value of literacy and language practices is always situationally determined. As Carrington and Luke explain:

As individuals move across various sociocultural fields, their particular patterns and volumes of capital resources dictate the social position within each field to which they may lay claim. It follows, then, that the same forms and amounts of capital may result in differing social positioning in relation to differing fields. In this sense, one’s linguistic capital thus competes within various fields, and in combination with an individual’s other capital resources, for relative value (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, linguistic capital valued within one social field may be of limited value within another (Corson, 1993), or may be contingent upon other field-specific (and therefore culture and subculture-specific) combinations of different forms of capital. In such a scenario, *there can be no universally valued form of linguistic competence or capital*, regardless of the claims made on behalf of school literacy by curriculum developers, teachers and others. (1997, p. 101, emphasis added)

Of course, this theoretical insight does not prevent teachers, or students, from *believing* in a universally valued and valuable way of writing, reading or speaking; in fact, that belief is a powerful, pervasive literacy and language ideology.³

The overlooked dimension of emotions

Bourdieu did not detail the links between his theoretical framework and emotions;⁴ it is my contention that this glaring absence impoverishes the utility of his theory for sociocultural studies of literacy and language and of schooling.⁵ Several scholars have developed concepts to fill that breach. For example, from her study of the professional trajectories of a single New Jersey high school class, anthropologist Sherry Ortner developed the concept of psychological capital, which is ‘the quality of love and support that one gets from one’s important social relationships, and particularly—for the years of growing up—from one’s immediate family’ (2002, p. 14). Ortner found that her informants viewed what she called psychological capital as ‘an enormously important resource that the family provided (or failed to provide), and that was always closely intertwined with issues of class’ (p. 14). Similarly, in her work on mothers’ investment in the schooling of their children, British feminist Diane Reay adopts and adapts the notion of emotional capital. She borrows Patricia Allat’s

succinct definition of emotional capital as 'emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care, and concern' (Allat in Reay, 2000, p. 572). As Allat and Reay note, this form of capital is largely cultivated and employed by women.

While the concepts of psychological and emotional capital certainly have their utility, my work reveals that they are somewhat limited. In particular, they fail to capture the important social work done through what might be considered more negative emotions. As anthropological studies of emotions have demonstrated, emotions are utterly cultural and social (Harre, 1986; Lutz & White, 1986; Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990). People learn feeling: what to feel; when and where it is appropriate to feel or to demonstrate emotions; what types of emotions are appropriate to what types of people; and how emotions should feel. Further, emotions reflect and reinforce social structures (Briggs, 1970; Feld, 1983; White & Kirkpatrick, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Harre, 1986; Lutz, 1988).

As I show below, the narratives of speech and literacy shame expressed to me by my informants revealed that shame feelings were intimately connected to their sense of linguistic capital and, more broadly, cultural capital. Yet these emotions could hardly be categorized as the positive 'love' or 'support' discussed by Reay and Ortnier. Further, women and men were equally subject to literacy shame experiences. My data shows that socio-interactionally produced emotions like shame play an important role in the cultural production of inequality.

Context, methods and Bruno

Context

Literacy, like education more generally, is unequally distributed along regional, racial and class lines in Brazil. The South and Southeastern regions, which are wealthier and whiter, enjoy much higher rates of education than do the North and Northeast, where African-descent and poor populations are concentrated. Though the various regions are by and large monolingual, in 1997 the rate of illiteracy in the Southeast was nearly 9%, while in the Northeast it hovered near 29% (Haddad & di Pierro, n.d.). Indeed, though the Northeast has only 26.8% of the nation's population, it is home to almost half of the nation's illiterate population. While literacy rates for white Brazilians topped 91%, rates for 'blacks' and 'browns' was 78% (Haddad & di Pierro, n.d.; Hasenbalg & Silva, 1990). Poorer students in Brazil are much less likely to have access to basic education than are wealthier students: for example, in rural areas, children from families in the poorest quartile have completed, on average, 1.7 years of schooling, while those in the highest quartile have completed 5.4 years; in urban areas the numbers are 3.9 and 10.3 years, respectively (Haddad & di Pierro, n.d., p. 294). This skewed distribution is related to a number of factors, including, but not limited to, availability and quality of schooling, family income and the opportunity cost of schooling a child, the child's comfort in the school, and the child's school readiness. As I examine in this article, the distribution of literacy reflects social structures of

power, but it also helps to reproduce them, since those with limited reading and writing proficiencies find serious obstacles to their political and economic participation. Further, as the data show, social shame over race, class, region of origin and educational level compounds the phenomenon of literacy shame.

Methods

In this article, I draw on data from a 24-month ethnographic study of youth and adult literacy in two Brazilian cities: Rio de Janeiro, a southeastern metropolis with somewhere between eight and 12 million inhabitants, and João Pessoa, a state capital in the Northeast with approximately 600,000 residents. In each city, I studied two cases, one public school and one non-governmental organization; between the four cases, I conducted classroom observations at least four nights per week over the course of 20 months. In each of the four educational programs, I worked closely with 10 focal students, interviewing them and conducting informal participant observation with them at school, work, home, church and during free social hours. I came to know these 40 focal students very well. In general, they seemed to enjoy the novelty of having an English-speaking foreign friend, and they would often ask me to teach them English vocabulary or interpret American political and cultural events. My personality seemed to fit well with the laid-back, sociable, friendly manner that most of them cultivated and valued. We often held spontaneous, intimate conversations about family, studies, religion and other topics, which brought us even closer together. I still maintain correspondence with many of the friends I made there.

The specific data set for this article consists of formal interviews with and informal observations of the 40 focal youth and adults. All interviews and observations were conducted solely in Portuguese, a language in which I am proficient thanks to several years of language study, two years of immersion, and the patience of my interlocutors during my first few months in Rio de Janeiro. Interviews generally lasted one and a half to two hours, though six lasted between three and four hours. They were generally conducted during class time (classes were held at night between 7 and 10 p.m., depending on the school's schedule) in an empty classroom. Each interview was taped by me and transcribed by a fluent Portuguese speaker. After reviewing the tapes, I regularly asked follow-up questions during informal interactions with students.

Of the 40 participants, 36 independently introduced a discussion of shame (*vergonha*) to our interviews about literacy. For example, when I asked interviewees to describe a situation in which they needed to know how to read and write and did not know how, one described the shame she felt when she went to the bank and had to sign her name to withdraw money; a second explained how intimidated she was by the forms she had to fill out at the health post; a third, who worked as a waiter in a restaurant, explained the shaming he experienced when another waiter realized he did not know how to write down orders; a fourth talked about how ashamed he felt when his evangelical minister asked him to read the Bible in front of the entire congregation; a fifth explained in depth the shame she felt while struggling to sign her name at a

polling station; a sixth described how, when one woman in the grocery store asked her to read the label on a can, she pretended she had left her glasses at home; a seventh described at length the shame and fear she felt when she ventured outside her neighborhood to visit a friend, but then got lost coming home because she could not read the names and numbers on the buses that passed her.

The poignant shame narratives elicited during interviews often demonstrated how people endeavored to ‘pass’ as literate in order to maintain social standing in quotidian social interactions. For example, during our interview, 18-year-old, light-skinned Bruno described how he often felt ashamed when the wealthy customers in the chic hair salon where he worked in the South Zone of Rio assumed he was literate:

LB: In what situation have you found yourself where you needed to know how to read and write and didn’t know how?

BN: Many, many. For example, in this salon where I work, I’ve experienced shame. A client, I love to talk with the clients, she indicated a book for me to read. She said, ‘Take this, read it, look at the author’s name.’ I lowered my head like this, full of shame. And I said, ‘Yeah, yeah, I’ll buy this one, I have to buy this book.’ In order to not lower myself [*me rebaixar*], you know, I didn’t say anything, I didn’t have to tell her, ‘No ma’am, I don’t know how to read. You read it for me.’

LB: You didn’t tell her.

BN: No, I get really ashamed. I got myself out of it, but there are times I don’t. For example, the other day, we were all talking, and a client asked me to read the box of ginger chews [a favorite herbal medicine for sore throats]. She said, ‘Read it, because I don’t have my glasses, and you can see if it’s salty or sweet, so you can choose the one you want.’ She was all over me, so I had to say, ‘I don’t know how to read, I don’t know how to read right.’ I mean, I was left with that shame in the air.

In some instances, Bruno managed to fake his way through such encounters; in others, if his interlocutor was insistent, he was forced to admit that he could not read. Bruno evocatively described the sensations invoked by such encounters—they made him lower his head and lower himself in relation to another person; they filled him, or filled the air surrounding him, with shame.

That shame emerged as a central theme in the interviews I conducted probably has as much to do with me, the fieldworker, as with the focal students. As a white woman raised in a newly lower middle-class family, one generation removed from the farm, in the southern United States, I was already fairly sensitive to issues of speech, education, shame and discrimination. As a first-generation college undergraduate, my studies in English education courses of dialect and language instruction compounded my awareness of the politics of language and literacy in relation to class, race and region. My consciousness was heightened by my immersion in 1995 in a foreign culture and my undoubtedly muddled oral and written use of my recently acquired second language, Portuguese. However, it is clear to me that I did not impose the topic of speech or literacy shame on the project. I was certainly not looking for it in the data; on the contrary, I went to Brazil with the expectation of studying whether and how Freirean literacy programs empowered students, and I (naively) thought speech mattered little to a study of literacy. Indeed, I had heard narratives of shaming from at least 15 students before I finally realized that a pattern was emerging. Shaming was

a cultural phenomenon in the lives of my informants. But I am also highly aware that something about the socio-interactional space created by my research (and by my presence) created for students the possibility of naming and analyzing their experiences of literacy and speech shaming.

Speech and literacy shame

Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers many insights into the processes of shame described by my informants. Consider, for example, the following statement by Maria, a *morena* or brown-skinned young woman who had migrated to João Pessoa from the countryside a few years prior to our interview:

I'm ashamed to talk to people who have studied, because I don't speak Portuguese correctly. There are some words whose meaning I don't know, and I swallow letters when I'm speaking.... [If you misspeak,] some people pay no attention. But others like to show off and correct you. Wherever there's a group of people, I always avoid speaking. I have a complex, a trauma, from this thing of people correcting each other. I've heard people do it since I was little, and it stayed with me. In the rural areas, people like to correct each other. They do it to undermine others, to show their defects.

Maria's encounters with more formally educated people occurred within a linguistic market, in which her interlocutor evaluated her speech as inferior. As such, Maria's anticipation of profit was low, and she avoided speaking. As Maria explained, and as Vera described in the epigraph, the denigration of linguistic capital does not occur only in cross-class situations. Maria confirmed the existence of horizontal shaming, or shaming within social groups, when she said that people in rural areas like to correct each other. Indeed, my research shows that people in similar class positions often staked claims to superior speech forcefully, suggesting that more was at stake or at risk for those claimants than for higher status ones. Even small profits are significant in social fields where other forms of capital—economic, symbolic or otherwise—are scarce. And, in a local social field, where peers can more easily define for each other the parameters of the linguistic market, people stand a greater chance of winning a relatively higher status.

What is immediately evident in Maria's statement but not accounted for in Bourdieu's theoretical framework is the centrality of emotions to the construction of linguistic capital and habitus. Maria emphasized her sense of shame over her speech, including grammar ('I don't speak Portuguese correctly'), vocabulary ('some words whose meaning I don't know') and pronunciation ('I swallow letters'). She described shaming encounters in which people 'show off and correct you,' to 'undermine' people and 'show their defects.' In other words, the shamer attempts to assert or construct her superiority by provoking a sense of inferiority in her interlocutor. Interestingly, Maria described this social process in psychological and physical terms: as shame which results in a 'complex' or 'trauma.' Finally, Maria emphasized the long-term, iterative learning that is such a part of shaming: having seen others shamed and been shamed herself since she was young, she learned not to risk talking in front of certain interlocutors. Thus, past experiences of shaming regulated her

social interactions. As a result, Maria carefully monitored her presentation of self, judiciously selecting moments of silence and speech.

Literacy shame depended on a complex of literacy ideologies. First, the students linked literacy and speech. The shame narratives volunteered by informants were not limited to reading and writing events. Despite the fact that the question asked about problems resulting from not being able to read or write, people regularly responded with comments about their speech, rather than (or in addition to) reading and writing. Like Maria, several students explained that they did not speak well because they did not know how to spell words and therefore ‘swallowed letters’ when pronouncing the words.

Further, many of the students I interviewed shared a belief that a single, ‘correct’ form of (oral and written) Portuguese exists and that it is inherently superior to other linguistic forms. One woman, Bia, gave an extended example of the kind of shaming she experienced from her neighbor, an educated schoolteacher named Dora. From behind the thin wall separating their houses, Dora incessantly ridiculed Bia’s vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Bia reported:

B: So, I sa[y] something wrong [incorrectly] there [in my house], and my neighbor in her house keeps correcting me.... She is always correcting me, correcting, correcting, correcting, correcting.

LB: Correcting what?

B: Because I speak wrong, and she speaks correctly, you know? ... She mimics me, that I talk wrong.... [For example,] sometimes when I leave a little late for school, I call out to my family, ‘I’m going, I’m already going, I’m going there’ [*já vou, já vou embora, já vou lá*].... But the right way to say it is, ‘I am going, I am leaving’ [*tô indo, já tô indo*] right? With a T and an O, ‘*já tô indo*,’ right? But sometimes I don’t like to talk proper and so I say, ‘I’m going there you all, I’m going son’ [*já vou lá gente, já vou lá menino*]. And that’s all it takes. She stays there the whole day correcting these words.

Bia tells her family good-bye in a very common, informal way: the first person simple present. With the verb *to go*, this tense is often used to indicate present continuous (I am going). Ironically, Dora’s correction (as reported by Bia) is also an informal manner of saying the same thing. While Dora used the more proper present continuous form, she used the slang ‘*tô*’ to stand for ‘*estou*.’ Dora’s shaming of Bia depended not on her ability to conjugate the grammatically correct alternative; instead, it rested on Dora’s ability to speak with command and on Bia’s acceptance of Dora’s speech as legitimate.

Bia continued:

Another one, for example, sometimes I say ‘Go girl, get outta’ here, get [*vai menina, sai daqui, sai*].’ I have a small dog named Tupa and I say that. I speak quickly. And that neighbor goes, ‘get, get outta’ there, get, get.’ Meaning, the word ‘*sai*’ isn’t right, is it? ... So, the whole day, she’s like, ‘get, get outta’ there, get’ making fun of me. I don’t know.... For example, if I’m talking with my kids, there are four of them, right? And I would say, ‘Where are you all going?’ [*Vocês vai pra onde?*] I would say it wrong. Now I’m getting used to it, ‘*Vocês vão pra onde?*’ That’s right, isn’t it? If two leave, two is plural, right? So she’d keep correcting me.

In these examples, according to Bia, Dora made fun of Bia for not using the formal imperative form of *sair* and for using a third-person plural pronoun with a third-person

singular verb form. Bia, like many from the rural Northeast, has the habit of joining a second- or third-person plural pronoun (*vocês, eles*) with a third-person singular verb (*vai*). Even more than pronunciation or vocabulary, grammatical differences strongly mark ‘uneducated’ speech. Speech shaming rests on the belief in one correct way to say things. Grammar creates a linguistic insecurity in people with low levels of education, a persistent suspicion that someone else has learned the ‘right’ way to say things. Bia seemed overwhelmed by the inexplicable grammar rules, and she continuously checked her deduction of the ‘right way to say it’ with me, a formally educated but clearly non-native speaker.

Finally, the people I interviewed held the conviction that people learn to ‘speak well’ in school. Maria, for example, accused herself of not speaking ‘correctly,’ and she felt her utterances to be inferior to those of ‘educated’ people. She believed their linguistic superiority was achieved through schooling. Bia, discussed above, was intimidated not only by the fact that her neighbor Dora had completed high school but also that she was a teacher, a representative of the school system. João, a 30-year-old construction worker from rural Paraíba, told me that he could not react when someone ridicules his speech ‘because I don’t have the right words. I can’t disagree. I’m the one who is wrong. I don’t have certainty in my words. I don’t have much “culture of speaking.”’ In mentioning ‘culture,’ João used a common gloss for ‘educated’ people. Literacy students frequently described themselves as not ‘speaking right’ or ‘knowing how to talk’ because they had not attended school as children. Because of this belief, in my observations, the speech of people with more formal schooling was often granted more legitimacy. I was surprised to find in informal observations that students often knew the precise grade level that their neighbors and friends had completed, and they would differentiate between, for example, someone who had finished second grade and someone who had finished third grade, even though fourth grade was usually the basic level of schooling required by the formal job market.

Students’ discussions during interviews and observations of shame incidents made it clear to me that feelings of shame about one’s reading, writing or speech were intimately related to social structures of inequality like race/color and class. Their shame narratives frequently featured references to their keen awareness of their lower status (in relation to race/color, class, gender and/or place of origin) relative to their audience or interlocutor. For example, when I asked Graça, a dark-skinned woman from rural Minas Gerais, ‘How are you different now that you are studying here [in a Freirean literacy program]?,’ she replied:

I talk more with people. I’m happier. I used to be ashamed to enter places. For example, if there was a party, I wouldn’t go, because I thought since I was black I couldn’t mix with whites.... For us, being black, and not knowing how to speak, and not knowing how to read a word, you are isolated. Because you don’t know how to speak, other people don’t pay attention to you, because you don’t know how ... to converse with people. Now it’s different. I arrive in any place, I know how to talk, I know how to buy things, I don’t have that shame to look at people. I have confidence. I know that I will arrive [in a store] and people will wait on me.

Graça felt that, before studying literacy, she did not ‘know how to speak’ or ‘read a word.’ Her low literacy proficiency compounded the kind of racial exclusion she felt. However, studying literacy had helped her overcome her sense of shame. I found it revealing that Graça expressed a newfound confidence that she, like anyone else, could enter a retail space and expect customer service; like other poor people I met, Graça reported unpleasant past experiences in which a retail clerk had assumed she had no money to buy things or, even worse, suspected that she might steal items from the store. Given the uneven distribution of literacy along race, class and regional lines, it is not surprising that participants like Graça felt an increased awareness of social forces when they wrote, read or spoke.

It seemed to me, though, that the shame people experienced in literacy and speech events became a particularly powerful mode of social control. I argue that shaming was effective, in part, because of informants’ cultural perceptions of emotions as physical, embodied and individual.⁶ The sense of literacy shame as bodily, rather than social, was strongly communicated to me by Antonio, a 16-year-old student who had recently dropped out of the public elementary school, where he was in second grade, and joined the night-time literacy class. He described reading shame as a physical infirmity:

- A: When the [elementary school] teacher would call on me to read, I would feel something unpleasant inside of me, and I would start shaking, nervous, freezing. I couldn’t move. My tongue would get stuck [in my mouth]. I even fainted.
- L: What caused that?
- A: I don’t know. My mother took me to the Health Post, but the doctor did not find anything. I’d freeze up [when I had to read aloud].... All I could think about was those kids making fun of me.... Sometimes I felt like they were talking about me behind my back.

Soon after this incident, Antonio dropped out of the elementary school; two years later, he began attending night classes. Though Antonio recognized the role of his teacher and his peers in provoking his discomfort, he noticeably did not criticize them. Instead, he adopted an individualistic interpretation of his shame—he experienced it as physical in nature, and he sought medical relief.

Antonio was not alone in his embodied experience of literacy shaming. Bia, whose neighbor Dora (reportedly) constantly made fun of her speech, became ill from the shaming:

At one point, I got, [pause] I got so nervous, at this time I didn’t study, I had a nervous breakdown [*crise de nervos*]. I got sick. I had a fever, then a cold, a headache, and at night, I would get a kind of stress, it’s stress right? Stress of craziness. I would yell inside my house. My husband would say, ‘What is this Bia?’ It was something on top of me, like a person wanting to kill me. A mind disturbance. I had to go to the health post, and I talked to the doctor. It was right around that time that my illness started. I got skinny, I was this little thin thing, really skinny.

When Bia’s shame manifested as physical symptoms, she sought one of the few forms of professional help available in the poor neighborhood: the medical doctor. She used muscle relaxants for a while to help her deal with the stress and her nervous condition.

But after this expensive treatment, she still had to deal with the regular shaming, and at the time of our interview she reported that it was starting to make her feel ill again.

I find it significant that participants uniformly described their literacy difficulties with an emotional term. Granting emotions what Abu-Lughod and Lutz called ‘the ultimate facticity of being located in the natural body’ obscured the political aspects of emotions (Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990, p. 1). Though shaming was connected to larger social forces like the raced, classed and regional distribution of literacy and educational opportunities, it was experienced as individual and embodied. The participants in my study ultimately blamed themselves for shaming incidents, explaining that they should have enrolled in school and learned to talk ‘right.’ As Walkerdine and her colleagues have demonstrated in their work, though shame is ‘lived as psychic ... it is socially produced and needs to be understood as profoundly psychosocial’ (Lucey *et al.*, 2003, p. 290; see also Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). However, we need to develop psychosocial analyses that forgo the methodological individualism and presumed universalism that characterize so much of the cross-cultural psychological work on emotions, analyses that truly embrace the social and cultural elements of emotion (Boellstorff & Lindquist, 2004).

Literacy and speech shaming: schooling as solution?

As I have demonstrated, shaming was a powerful form of social control that influenced the behavioral strategies of the participants in my study. People were not merely reactive, however; they sought creative means to respond to the shaming. Most, like Maria, avoided speaking, reading or writing in certain contexts; some, like Bruno, made efforts to ‘pass’ as literate when possible; some relied on literacy sponsors to help them with the literacy tasks; some contested the shaming. Each of the study participants also took another step: they enrolled in some form of schooling. Here, I briefly consider the impact of schooling on literacy and speech shaming.

In João Pessoa, as in most Brazilian cities, two types of literacy programs predominate: public schools and non-governmental organizations. Public schools are largely informed by an efficiency ideology, a transmission model of teaching and learning and a phonics-based pedagogy. Non-governmental organizations are largely Freirean; they adopt an equity ideology, a dialogical, constructivist model of teaching and learning, and a literacy pedagogy that emphasizes politicized context and meaning.⁷ By design, half of the participants in my study were enrolled in public school programs and the other half were enrolled in Freirean programs.

According to my observations, in some ways schooling further exposed students to shaming episodes. Shaming was not uncommon in public school literacy classrooms; students frequently made fun of each other. For example, Bia reported that the young women at her school, who were themselves born in the city (in contrast to Bia’s rural birthplace), frequently made fun of her way of speaking. She sought to avoid them whenever possible, choosing instead to sit with another middle-aged woman in the class. While students did make fun of each other in the Freirean programs as well, according to my observations, those efforts were often challenged by the teacher.

Occasionally teachers also made comments that reportedly made students feel ashamed. For example, during my observations in Bia's classroom, the teacher occasionally called upon students to read aloud, corrected their speech publicly or commented on their verbal 'errors' in ways that several students said made them feel embarrassed. This unintentional shaming also happened in the Freirean classrooms under observation.

Further, in some ways the edifice of schooling buttresses shaming. Shaming depends on the widespread acceptance of the belief in a single 'correct' way to speak. As Bourdieu suggested, schools play a crucial role in popularizing a belief in a single legitimate language (1991, p. 49).

Schools did counter schooling in two important ways. First, *some* (but certainly not all) of the students enrolled in a Freirean program were influenced by the critique of power they found there. As Graça reported, studying in a Freirean program made her happier and more confident. Or, as a student in a separate program explained to me, 'I learned that we are just as important as the rich ones "up there," and we have as much right to speak as they do.'

Second, for students in both types of programs, being enrolled in school did, by itself, offer students a potential source of symbolic capital. Bia was proud of her status as a student, since to her it symbolized that she wanted to 'be somebody in life,' as she explained. Other students expressed to me their conviction that being in school protected them from the accusation that they were 'ignorant.' In an effort to avoid shaming, which blamed them for their presumed linguistic deficits, students sought symbolic capital by enrolling in formal schooling.

Discussion and conclusion

I return, now, to my central question: What is achieved by literacy and speech shaming? My analysis of the narratives offered by Antonio, Bia, Bruno, Graça, João, Maria, Vera, and others led me to conclude that, in Brazil, literacy and speech shame help to produce and maintain social inequality. The participants experienced shaming as an embodied event in which they were 'caught out' or exposed as deficient. Emotions played a major role in students' continuous development of a socialized subjectivity. Shaming was a powerful interaction routine that influenced their future strategies and actions—for example, because of shaming, Maria began to 'avoid speaking,' and Vera tried to 'learn to talk like others talk.' The shame, achieved through social interaction, seemed to convince them that they were deficient. Literacy and speech shaming performed critical social work through a medium that was experienced by the shamees as entirely personal, individual, psychic and physical. Shaming relies upon several powerful language ideologies that individualize blame and obscure the social arrangements that produce racialized and classed educational categories of people.

The belief that a single, 'correct' form of Portuguese exists and that it is learned at school had distinct consequences for youth and adults. The creation of a language standard is a sociopolitical process related to the relative status of the speakers of different language varieties; language or dialect hierarchies are social (rather than

linguistic) facts. In a country where the class system is not only heavily racialized but also correlated to rural/urban location, the linguistic varieties used by wealthier, whiter, urban Brazilians get established as 'correct,' and other varieties become stigmatized. A belief in in/correct Portuguese disregards the fact that the 'rightness' of utterances is tied to the social status of the speaker. Instead, those being shamed often perceived the 'rightness' of the speaker's language to derive from schooling. Prevalent language ideologies legitimized shaming and placed the blame for 'incorrect' speech on the un- or underschooled individual. The suggestion that schooling is the best path to linguistic improvement and, ultimately, to the avoidance of speech and literacy shaming is somewhat ironic, given the major role that schools play in establishing and maintaining the belief in 'standard' and 'shameful' varieties of languages. As I observed in many of the classrooms, schooling was not a liberating site in which students learned standard Portuguese. While their presence as students earned them a modicum of symbolic capital, they were in some ways further exposed to shaming by teachers or peers. The faith in schooling professed by many of the participants in my study speaks to the way in which schooling becomes powerfully symbolic, regardless of the actual content or outcomes of the educational process. Notably, posing schooling as the solution to literacy and speech shame diverts attention away from the issues of race, class and other forms of social inequality that are indexed by shaming.

Bourdieu's theoretical work concerning forms of capital and habitus fails to articulate the significance of emotions in social interactions. Theories of language and power that draw on Bourdieu identify the politics of communicative practices, but they have ignored the intense and important influence that emotions have on the interplay between language, individual experiences and social structures. Recently, feminist scholars have built upon Bourdieu's framework to develop the notion of emotional and psychological capital. However, they restrict their focus to mothers' loving investments in the educational careers of their children. Drawing on anthropological studies of emotion, this study focuses on a more negative but certainly as prevalent emotion—shame—and demonstrates how social positioning in regard to reading, writing, speech and schooling more broadly is routinely conducted through the cultural coin of emotions. The narratives offered by the youth and adults in my study poignantly and vividly illuminate the way in which emotional responses to social interactions around literacy and speech reduced responsibility for larger social inequalities and located it within individual bodies. Given the widespread prevalence of shame talk around literacy issues, I suggest that studies of literacy and language need to incorporate more attention to the important social work done through emotions.

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Notes

1. For a review, see Shelton (2001).
2. This review of the literature in sociocultural studies of literacy is necessarily abbreviated. See Street (1984) for a full review of the key studies that informed his distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy; see Collins and Blot (2003) and Collins (1995) for a helpful overview of the broader field.
3. I adopt the definition of language ideology offered by Kathryn Woolard: 'ideas, discourse, or signifying practices in the service of the struggle to acquire or maintain power' (Woolard, 1998, pp. 5–9; see also Kroskrity, 2000, pp. 8–21).
4. For more on how Bourdieu discussed emotions, see Reed-Danahay (2005, Chapter 4). Bourdieu occasionally referenced the impact of emotions on habitus, for example when he and Passeron wrote that feelings of self-depreciation could contribute to working-class children's expectations of failure in schools (1990, p. 204). Though he discussed taste at length, he failed to consider seriously the role emotions play in the construction of taste and habitus. In a footnote in the *Logic of practice*, he mentioned emotions as 'the extreme case of ... anticipation ... of the impending future, which, as bodily reactions identical to those of the real situation bear witness, leads a person to live a still suspended future as already present, or even already past, and therefore necessary and inevitable' (1990, p. 292, fn 12). Yet, while he discussed honor in relation to symbolic capital, he wrote almost dismissively of emotions broadly and especially in relation to habitus.
5. Of course, as critics have noted, Bourdieu's theoretical framework has other significant important flaws. Varenne and McDermott (1998) argue that Bourdieu's notion of habitus unnecessarily relies on a discredited notion of inculcation and internalization and posits people as 'cultural dupes' who 'misrecognize' or mistake elite interests for their own. Further, they argue, Bourdieu posited (rather than demonstrated) habitus as a solution to a theoretical challenge; they question whether and how habitus could be empirically investigated, given Bourdieu's suggestion that dispositions are internalized and preconscious (p. 174). In a different vein, King (2000) argues persuasively that the concept of habitus forces Bourdieu into an objectivist position and is incompatible with other concepts in his theoretical framework. Skeggs (2005) argues that Bourdieu's notion of habitus relies on a class-specific exchange-value conception of self, in which the coherent self strategizes to accumulate capital; she instead suggests a notion of habitus that incorporates use-value, which might incorporate broader patterns of valuing that she saw used by working-class women. Here, I wish to argue that, if scholars employ the notion, then they should also analyze the role of emotions in the continuous formation of habitus and embodied cultural capital.
6. See Scheper-Hughes (1992) for a similar argument.
7. For more information about Freirean programs and pedagogies in Brazil, see Bartlett (2005, 2007); O'Cadiz *et al.* (1998); Stromquist (1997).

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