The Importance of Social Recognition in the Construction of the Sexual Identity of Non-Heterosexual Women in Southern Bahia*

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to understand the construction of the sexual identity of four non-heterosexual, university women living in the cities of Ilhéus and Itabuna - BA. This case study began with women who participate in student movements at a public university in the region and sought to problematize the social recognition obtained through friendships established through the movements, showing the importance of recognition in the construction of these women's self-confidence.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Heteronormativity, Social recognition, Lesbian visibility.

Introduction

        The decision to research the construction of the sexual identity[1] of non-heterosexual[2] women was made to collaborate with the enrichment of scientific investigations about non-heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women, while also contributing to the political visibility of these subjects. Male homosexuality has been a significant theme in Brazilian social sciences since the end of the 1970s, while studies about the other identities that comprise the LGBTI+[3] collective, such as lesbian, bisexual, transvestite and transsexual identities are more recent. Studies of lesbian women began to emerge in late 1980s and early 1990s, while research on transsexuals and transvestites emerged at the turn of the millennium. Despite having increased during the 2000s, the number of scientific studies conducted about female homosexuality is still not very substantial, compared to the advances that gender studies have made regarding investigations of male homosexuals, for example (Simões; Carrara, 2014). Lesbians (and even more so, bisexual women) remain underrepresented, both politically within the LGBTI+ movement itself, and in Brazilian feminist studies, which still focus on the study of white, heterosexual women[4].

        In the case of southern Bahia, specifically in the cities of Ilhéus and Itabuna, a region marked by an extremely rich history and culture and where the interviewees lived at the time of the study, it was not possible to find, during the data collection for this study, a single scientific study that investigated any aspect relating to female homosexuality or bisexuality in the region. Therefore, this study performs an important role by giving political visibility to non-heterosexual women who live and interrelate in this region, contributing to gender studies understanding of their social reality and worldviews.

        The analyses presented here are an adapted version, in the form of an article, of a doctoral study entitled *Identidade Sexual de mulheres que se relacionam com mulheres em Ilhéus e Itabuna-BA* [*The Sexual Identity of Women Who Have Relationships with Women in Ilhéus and Itabuna, Bahia*] (Freitas, 2013), which involved a case study with data collection conducted by in-depth, semi-structured interviews between January 2012 and January 2013, with twelve non-heterosexual women from 18 to 41 years old, who had access to higher education and resided in the cities of Ilhéus and Itabuna, Bahia[5]. Public displays of affection[6] with their companions was the criterion chosen to understand how the interviewees viewed their sexual identity. This is because, how they dealt with displays of public affection, helped to understand how they comprehend their own sexual identity, and the positive or negative feelings they cultivated about this aspect of the self. This revealed the strength of the heteronormative power standard they have incorporated, that is, how much their perceptions of themselves were influenced by heteronormative conceptions, and the opportunities to question this standard they had access to.

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[1] Sexual identity is understood as the way a person conceives of themselves in terms of what gender they are sexually and romantically attracted to.

[2] Since the interviewees expressed a preference not to define an exclusive sexual identity for themselves, a negative definition was chosen as the best way to classify them. Respecting the desire to not be framed into a strict classification, the interviewees will be identified for what they are not, namely, heterosexuals.

[3] The acronym LGBTI+ used in this article employs the most up-to-date terminology pertaining to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transsexual, and intersexual population, with the + symbol being added to the acronym to include other sexual orientations, identities and gender expressions not represented within it. This terminology follows the model of the *Manual de Comunicação LGBTI+* issued by the Aliança Nacional LGBTI+, the Grupo Dignidade [Dignity Group] and the GayLatino network in partnership with other important Brazilian and international entities for the defense of LGBTI+ rights [https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/manual-comunicacao-LGBTI.pdf – accessed on: 14 Feb. 2020].

[4] For more information about the invisibility of female homosexuality in Brazil, see Mott (1987), Fry and Macrae (1991), Bila (2009), Simões and Facchini (2009), Simões and Carrara (2014).

[5] However, in some cases, the information collected through the interviews was enriched by my own observations and visits to some environments frequented by the interviewees, in addition to information from people the interviewees knew.

[6] Public displays of affection are considered to be expressions of tenderness between couples, both those more fraternal, such as holding hands, caressing the hair and face, hugging and kissing the face, as well as those that, in Brazil, clearly denote romantic/sexual relationships, such as kisses on the mouth, whether quick or slightly lingering.

The discussions developed in this paper concentrate specifically on an analysis of four of the twelve interviews that comprised the research for the thesis mentioned. The objective here is to demonstrate that the incorporation of valuative conceptions favorable to sexual diversity on the part of the four women interviewees, did not depend solely on cognitive access to the conceptions presented, for example, by television or social networks, but also depended, in the cases analyzed, on social recognition (Honneth, 1996) obtained through the romantic experience produced by significant social relationships, such as family relationships, friendships and romantic loving relationships.

The main criterion employed for the selection of the four interviewees analyzed was access to higher education and participation in student movements at the university. It is assumed that the access to cultural capital[7] that universities provide can offer those who attend them the opportunity to present themselves as potentially more critical and questioning, as being capable of accepting a greater diversity of viewpoints and worldviews, and the opportunity to present discourses, values and behaviors that express a potentially greater questioning of more traditional worldviews, making the research more complex. The interviewees were undergraduate students at the same public university at the time of the study, and were indicated to the researcher because they had some participation in university student movements.

These women are experiencing something unprecedented in previous generations, and rare in the cities where they live for most of the people of their own generation: the opportunity to access and incorporate counter-discourses that present different knowledges about their sexualities[8], thus guaranteeing them the possibility to experience them with less prejudice. The rarity that characterizes how the interviewees experience their identity construction, relates not only to the recent historical emergence of the LGBTI+[9] movement as a political subject and its critical discourses, but also to the economic and cultural reality of southern Bahia.

The emergence of new social movements related to identity politics (the black, feminist and, principally for this work, LGBTI+ movements) in late modernity[10] connect the economic, political and sociocultural transformations, brought on by the latter, with the reality of this study's interviewees. Since the 1960s, feminist and LGBTI+ movements have been politically active in the contemporary West fighting for equal rights and developing counter-discourses resistant to traditional patriarchal values and heteronormativity. On the other hand, the social inequality caused by the selectivity of Brazilian modernization (Souza, 2000; 2003), relegates more than a third of the country's population to economic and cultural poverty, impeding their access to infrastructure, basic health services, education, security and the right to adequate food for the maintenance of a dignified

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[7] Cultural capital can be presented in three modalities: objectified (ownership of valued cultural objects), incorporated (referring to culture considered to be legitimate, which is incorporated by individuals and expressed through eating habits, body posture, consumption of cultural goods, behavior, tastes, language skills and knowledge) and institutionalized (referring to the possession of educational degrees that tend to be used as attestations of a certain cultural education) (Nogueira; Nogueira, 2004:41).

[8] Sexuality is understood here not only as a Foucauldian device (1993), but also, as Simões and Carrara (2014:78) defend, as an erotic *habitus*: "a set of structuring principles of practices and discourses, but also of sensations, desires, attractions, emotions and representations, which define, under different circumstances, the boundaries between what is sexually desirable and what is undesirable, what is respected and what is shameful."

[9] For more about the history of the Brazilian LGBTI+ movement, see Simões and Facchini (2009), Facchini and França (2009); Pereira (2016).

[10] I use the concept of late modernity developed by Anthony Giddens (1991) to characterize the current period of capitalist development, marked by globalization, the flexibilization of capital and work, the development of digital communications and information technology, the weakening of the welfare state and the emergence of new social movements and identity policies. For Giddens, these phenomena don't go beyond the fundamental characteristics that characterize the modern era, but they make the phenomena that identify and singularize modernity more complex. Giddens (2002) analyzes the radical transformations that late modernity creates in the nature of everyday social life, affecting the most personal aspects of our existence. He demonstrates the growing connections between the globalizing influences of late modernity and the construction of the identity of modern individuals. Social movements around identity politics have a fundamental role in the public and legal arenas of states, and bring to public debate substantive issues focused on the rights of the person, which in turn are linked to existential dimensions of self-identity as such. With globalization, no one escapes the transformations brought on by modernity, and even people who live in more traditional environments are affected by some aspect of modern institutions.

life. This social inequality is very significant in the cities of Ilhéus and Itabuna, affecting a huge portion of the population, which does not have adequate access to citizenship and has less chance to construct a more critical perspective of the power relations that produce social inequality, including those relating to sexual and gender domination.

Southern Bahia is considered a very traditional region, where the values of "coronelismo" and rural patriarchy[11] were very deeply rooted. Despite the economic and social difficulties faced by the municipalities of Ilhéus and Itabuna[12], their reality follows the contours of selective modernization including the consolidated presence of modern institutions such as a competitive market, urbanization, various state institutions (including two public universities) and even the recent historical presence of politically active LGBTI+ organizations.[13]

The construction of heteronormativity and how it influenced the construction of the identities of the interviewees in this study, will now be analyzed. The following section will then examine how social recognition emerged as a determining factor in the strengthening of the positive self-understanding of the sexual identity of the women analyzed here.

Heteronormativity and identity

Feminist and post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, show how sexual and gender identities in modern Western societies are constructed and fixed by standards of power that are based on defining heterosexuality as the norm. These authors criticize the supposedly "natural", fixed and immutable character of sexual and gender identities, and analyze how they are fixed by power mechanisms. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality relates the social order to a sexual order, as Foucault (1978) points out through the concept of the *dispositif* of sexuality; compulsory heterosexuality is a normative standard that, anchored and reproduced by institutions, expresses social expectations and demands based on heterosexual relations as the only ones recognized as "natural" and legitimate. It defines the normalcy of bodies and subjects according to the degree of coherence they maintain between sex-gender-practice and sexual-desire. The greater the break with this chain, the greater the possibility for societal rejection and violence against these subjects (Butler, 1990; 2004).

In 1991, Michael Warner created the concept of heteronormativity to designate an alteration that, according to Richard Miskolci, can be explained as follows:

> Historically, the prescription of heterosexuality as a social model can be divided into two periods:
> one in which compulsory heterosexuality prevails purely and simply, and another in which one

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[11] For Gilberto Freyre (1981), rural patriarchy represents itself as the basis upon which all of Brazilian society of the colonial period is organized, with no political, economic or religious power, or moral values to limit the orders of the rural master, who took his personal command to the extreme limit. Patriarchalism is understood as a total institution, in that the patriarchal family extends its domains both in the economic sphere – through monoculture agriculture based on slavery – and in political and cultural life, in which the landholder is the absolute authority over his dominions. When modern institutions began to crystallize in the colonial world, the patriarch saw his power gradually dismantled, restrained by modern institutions and values that became dominant in society. Although Brazil's rural patriarchalism suffered its first questioning in this process of decadence, it remained vigorous for a long period, but was gradually overtaken by modern values and institutions. "Coronelismo", as Victor Nunes Real (1975) asserts, is much more an expression of its weakness than its strength. According to Real, "Coronelismo" is based on a compromise, an exchange of favors between a public power, increasingly strengthened, and the decadent social influence of local bosses, notably powerful landholders. Despite being currently dominated both economically and politically – since the impersonal logic of the marketplace and capitalist state has been consolidated in Brazil since the second decade of the 20th century – institutions such as the church, the family, the state and schools still practice some patriarchal values. According to Bourdieu (2007), sexual division (male domination) is the basis of the social world in Western societies, varying its strength in each, and is very active in Brazilian society even today, thanks to the historical influence of the rural patriarchy on the institutions mentioned.

[12] According to data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica (IBGE), the level of poverty in the municipality of Itabuna in 2003 was 42.83%, and the Índice de Desenvolvimento Humano Municipal [Municipal Human Development Index] for 2010 was 0.712. Whereas in Ilhéus, the municupality's level of poverty in 2003 was 47.34% and the Municipal Human Development Index for 2010 was 0.69. Source: IBGE [https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/ - accessed on: 06 fev. 2020].

[13] In 2001 and 2002, the first politically organized LGBTI+ groups emerged in southern Bahia. The first LGBTI+ Pride parade in the region was held in Itabuna in 2002. For more information about the LGBTI+ movement in southern Bahia, see Oliveira Júnior (2013).

enters the dominion of heteronormativity. Between the last third of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century, homosexuality was invented as a pathology and crime and the normalizing social knowledge and practices called for internment, imprisonment and psychiatric treatment of homo-oriented individuals. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, with the depatholigazation and decriminalization of homosexuality (1974) , the predominance of heteronormativity can be seen as a sign of control and normalization of the lives of gays and lesbians, no longer for them to "become heterosexuals", but with the objective that they live like them (Miskolci, 2009:157).

In heteronormativity, all individuals and relationships, including non-heterosexual ones, must follow the heterosexual model, considered "natural" and legitimate. This means that non-heterosexuals are considered acceptable as long as they identify themselves with heterosexuality as the model – in other words, that they retain a causal relationship between "sex" (genitalia) and gender, that is, men should behave in a virile, masculine way and women should be "feminine". According to Miskolci (2009), this model presupposes the invisibility of non-heterosexual eroticism. Thus, I understand heteronormativity as a concept that identifies a shift in the mechanism of power, in the sense that it is no longer legitimate to criminalize or "cure" homosexuals by means of physical force and violence. This power shift is the result of a sophistication in the relationships of domination. Even if they eventually give up the use of physical violence, they don't lose, however, their symbolic power for domination and for the compulsory production of the heterosexual norm in the bodies and minds of subjects. In this paper, I will adopt the term heteronormativity because I believe it to more appropriate to identify this shift in the power mechanism centered on heterosexuality as the norm, which Butler calls compulsory heterosexuality.

For Butler, gender "requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime" (Butler, 2004:41). In other words, gender is a norm that operates within social practices as a standard for normalization. It is the norm that assures the social intelligibility of the actions of subjects and simultaneously regulates and disciplines subject, subjugating them, allowing them to be worthy of recognition in the sphere of appearance (Butler, 2015). Thus, the regulatory apparatus that governs gender produces lived modes of intelligible embodiment, socially recognizable as humans. In this way, gender is understood by Butler as a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990:33).

For Butler, gender does not express any essence or objective ideal to which one aspires, since it is not a given of reality, something fixed, stable or previously determined. Butler understands gender identities as constructs that have no ontological status separate from the various acts that constitute their reality. One of the central issues of Butler's work is to break with the idea of an ontological being that preexists the various functions and roles that it assumes socially, in other words, a break with the idea that there exists a substance that carries a universal capacity for reason, morality or language before its social insertion. This is why the notion of gender cannot be subordinated to identity, given that, as stated above, there is no "being" behind the doing, realizing and becoming; there is no gender identity behind expressions of gender: identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions considered its results. Butler continues by deepening Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase (Beauvoir, 1967), that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman: one is not born of a gender, but rather we become, masculine or feminine genders, thanks to a performative construction that is based upon, and at the same time, produces ideal cultural standards of what feminine and masculine genders would be.

However, while gender is the mechanism through which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, it is also the apparatus that allows denaturalizing and deconstructing these notions (Butler, 2004). As seen, heteronormativity is an hierarchical and exclusionary regulatory power mechanism that condemns and punishes entire groups for not complying with a set of norms that humanize only those lives that adapt to its criteria, based on male-man x female-woman binarism, for example. However, as Foucault asserts, "where there is power, there is resistance," (Foucault, 1978:95) and this is never found in a position of externality in relation to power. Resistances permeate subjects themselves, "cutting them up and remolding them" (Foucault,

1978:96) and allow, in the case of the interviewees in this study, the resignification of the heterosexual norm and, consequently, of their own sexual identity.

This resignification is possible because "To the extent that gender norms are reproduced, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation" (Butler, 2004:52). Thus, those bodies that do not fit the criteria that recognizes them as human, because they have non-heteronormative sexual or gender identities, can live experiences that dismantle the restrictive and dehumanizing normative concepts of sexual life and gender in two ways, one good and the other bad (Butler, 2004). In the latter, Butler affirms that a normative concept of gender "can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" (Butler, 2004:01), threatening the very possibility for this person to exist and continue (Butler, 2015). However, on other occasions, the experience of undoing a normative restriction "can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim" (Butler, 2004:01).

The four cases that will now be analyzed fit into what Butler points to as a good way to undo heteronormative conceptions about non-heterosexual sexual identities, enabling the interviewees to experience their sexuality with greater freedom and acceptance, even living in a society like Brazil's that is strongly constituted by heteronormativity[14].

We will see how these two opposing forces, heteronormativity and the counter-discourses that challenge it – raised mainly by the LGBTI+ movement – materialize in the lives of the interviewees, in the way they build perceptions about their sexual identity. The interviewees were able, to some degree, undo the heteronormative conceptions about their non-heterosexual sexual identities. However, as will be seen, this was only possible due to the construction of affective relationships that allowed the interviewees to acquire self-confidence by obtaining social recognition. I will now analyze how this happened.

Recognition as an opportunity for resistance to heteronormativity

The four women interviewed, Rafaela, Júlia, Marina and Alice[15] are young, white, middle-class women, between 19 and 24 years old, and students at a public university in southern Bahia. At the time of the interviews, they all had long-term or occasional romantic/sexual relationships with women. Of the four interviewees, two were in monogamous homosexual relationships, one was single and the other maintained two open relationships, one with a man and the other with a woman.

The university experience in southern Bahia offered them, in addition to an opportunity to leave their parent's house and the direct control of the family, leading to a huge change in their values and lifestyles, especially related to the questioning of traditional constructs about gender and sexuality. However, this transformation in values, far from being an automatic process that everyone who enters the university goes through, was not automatically provided by access to the university per se, but by the affective bonds constructed by participation in student movements, because the prejudice against religious, cultural, sexual and ethnic diversity was still part of the ethos of the public university in question. All of the interviewees at some point took part in a university student movement, and many of the friends with whom they had intimate and frequent conviviality, were also, or had been, part of a local or regional movement involving students; with three of the four interviewees being members of the first feminist and LGBTI+ movements at the university and/or part of the first large movement representing local students.

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[14] The elevated murder rates of LGBTI+ people in Brazil are a highly-visible example of the power of heteronormativity in this country. According to the non-governmental organization Grupo Gay da Bahia, in 2017, 445 LGBTI+ deaths were reported, the most murders since the group began its research 37 years ago. For more information, see the website [https://homofobiamata.wordpress.com/ - accessed on: 06 Feb. 2020].

[15] To ensure the privacy and anonymity of the interviewees, their real names were not used. For the same reason, the student collectives at the university that the interviewees were part of were not identified. For this reason, all of the student movements organized around identity politics and those organized by professional category, whether local, regional or national, were referred to with the generic term "collective".

Rafaela: It strengthened… the girls, we are much stronger in the sense of not tolerating snide comments, everything that we hear that bothers us, we speak out, if the person puts it on Facebook[16], we post "sexist, ridiculous!" We used to see things and say "dam" and not do anything, now we show ourselves all the time, we speak out, we don't accept it, and this is what changed in our lives.

Marina: It's part of this short period in the collective, I lived with people who had an already prepared discourse, you know? So I began to absorb it very rapidly, in fact, I was one of those who spoke least, but I was there, listening to everything.

(…) I matured in some manner. Then, like, last year was a very decisive moment in my life, see? (…) I hung out more with people with sexual orientations similar to mine. That's when I began, like, to loosen up a bit more, you know? (...) especially because I hung out in a very hetero environment, so these issues were sort of cut off, even if we stay together because of other characteristics, other similarities, but this is a similarity that really unites people, even if we don't talk about it, but we know that there are people who accept it and even feel the same thing as we do, you know.

Júlia: No, it was the entrance into the collective that… the entrance into the collective, because the entrance into the university was a segment of high school, I was dealing with the same thing. The teacher handing out the content, reading, learning and reproducing, reading, learning and reproducing. (...) It was after being… being in the collective you end up dealing with it a lot, because it's very open, and that's when I discovered myself, concerning the question of sexuality, I was already in the collective, already dealing with it. So the two things were opening up…

Before the tight social conviviality and the emotional relationships that they established via student movements, the interviewees affirm that their university experience represented a continuation of their lives prior to entering the university, that is, it represented a way of life whose critique of the hegemonic power relations (based on class, gender, race and sexual domination) did not occupy significant space in the construction of their identities and their intersubjective relations.

They reported that their family relationships were not sources for gaining self-confidence and acceptance of their non-heterosexual sexual identities. On the contrary, relations with close family members were marked by insecurity and fear of their affections being rejected due to a discovery of their homo-affective relationships. The fear itself of revealing these relations to the family demonstrates how the issue was still a source of tension. Therefore, although they did not express crises of self-acceptance regarding their sexual identities, they feared being rejected by their families, and all – except Marina – avoided revealing them to their families.

The positive resignification of sexual identity that the interviewees underwent during the study, implied a reconstruction of the conceptions of the world coming from their family socializations, all were characterized, to a greater or lesser extent, by heteronormativity – in this case expressed by difficulties of conceiving of homosexuality as something natural, as occurred in Alice's family, or in the anti-bisexual posture that Rafaela's mother indirectly aimed at her daughter, or in the family suffering caused by the "discovery" of the homosexuality of Júlia's sister, or, still, in the great suffering caused by Marina's mother's difficulty in accepting her daughter's homo-affective relationship.

A very common way for families in heteronormative societies to get along "cordially" with a homosexual relative is "accepting" the person despite their homosexuality (which ends up being concealed and treated as if it did not exist). In this case, the homosexual is denied their right to any kind of thematization of their homo-affective relationships, as well as any component of their life and identity: recognition is denied the homosexual subject through the silencing of their emotions and the process of making their homosexuality invisible and, since it is a constitutive and inseparable part of the subject's entire life, the denial of recognition affects the subject as a whole. It is also common in less-intimate friendships or relations with colleagues to make the homosexual person a target for ridicule, that is, to make fun of homosexuality. However, making fun of homosexuality means treating it as strange, ridiculous, something to laugh at, and abnormal. In both cases, the

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[16] *Facebook.*

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subject is denied the right to an identity construction considered valid and worthy of respect and social recognition.

In this way, we can see that social recognition presents itself as a fundamental component for the construction of a positive practical self-relationship, that is, a positive relationship with oneself. Important contemporary social recognition theorists, such as Judith Butler, Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor, share the basic Hegelian premise that there is an intrinsic link between social recognition and identity, so that the understanding of who we are, of our fundamental characteristics as human beings, is strongly shaped by the recognition – whether present or absent – that we receive from others (Taylor, 2000:241).

Butler, also following this tradition, asserts that "it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings" (Butler, 2004:02). However, the terms that allow us to be recognized as humans vary socially and historically. Thus, social recognition is discussed as an act or a practice undertaken by at least two subjects and which constitutes a reciprocal action. For this recognition to take place there must be norms shared between the subjects, that is, normative frameworks that precede the possibility of social recognition. According to Butler (2009; 2011; 2015), norms operate to make certain subjects persons "recognizable" as human beings, with value, whose lives, if lost, will be socially grievable, that is, will be valued, missed, perceived as lives that matter. Thus, Butler asserts that these intersubjectively shared existing norms attribute social recognition differently:

> The human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity. Certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life. If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well (Butler, 2004:02).

According to Honneth, there are three standards of recognition that subjects need to experience to reach new forms of positive or successful practical self-relation: love, rights and social esteem:

> The connection between the experience of recognition and one's relation-to-self stems from the intersubjective structure of personal identity. The only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities. The scope of such traits - and hence the extent of one's positive relation-to-self - increases with each new form of recognition that individuals are able to apply to themselves as subjects. In this way, the prospect of basic self-confidence is inherent in the experience of love; the prospect of self-respect, in the experience of legal recognition; and finally the prospect of self-esteem, in the experience of solidarity (Honneth, 1996:162)

When a subject's expectation of recognition is denied, a wound can occur in the formation of their own personal identity, since the way he represents himself is closely related to the manner that his interaction partner identifies him. Honneth seeks to explain how collective struggles for social recognition are configured as an engine for social changes that move towards a historical process of moral progress for all of society. The conflict generated by the denied recognition presupposes the "claim of always being known in new dimensions in which this recognition was not evident" (Souza, 2000:115), which generates an intersubjective acquisition of progressive self-awareness in the subject, providing a moral learning that encompasses the whole society. Thus, for Honneth, the experience of forms of social disrespect or denied recognition can drive the development of social conflicts in the configuration of morally motivated struggles of social groups that try to establish, culturally and institutionally, reciprocal forms of recognition. However, Honneth's concept of social struggle includes a practical process in which individual experiences of disrespect should be "read as typical for an entire group, and in such a way that they can motivate collective demands for expanded relations of recognition" (Honneth, 1996:162).

In this study, the analytical focus will be on the social recognition acquired through amorous experiences. The social recognition obtained through love encompasses "primary relationships insofar as they – on the model of friendships, parent-child relationships, as well as erotic relationships between lovers - are constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people" (Honneth, 1996:95). In recognition through love, the subjects mutually confirm the concrete nature of their needs, recognizing themselves, thus, as beings that depend, in their state of need, on one another. Honneth emphasizes that the self-confidence provided by the intersubjective experience of love is the psychic basis for two other forms of recognition (rights and social esteem), insofar as it is part of a fundamental component of personal maturation, being the indispensable basis for autonomous participation in public life (Honneth, 1996:107).

For Honneth, the internalization by subjects of social norms does not occur solely through the application of techniques and mechanisms of power over the subjects' bodies, as Foucault asserts (1987), but the intermediation of affective relations that allow individuals to seek adaptation to the norms is also necessary, because when these are socialized in affective relationships guided by normative principles, they gradually internalize the normative components present in a relationship, since these components present themselves as one of the conditioning factors for the proper reception of recognition (Honneth, 1997). This is why the experience of being recognized, respected and valued by our partners of interaction as an end in itself, is fundamental for a positive practical self-relationship.

Thus, in our most important social interactions, such as those with family and friends, when we do not find our non-heterosexual sexual identity recognized as being legitimate, we find it very hard to recognize and value it as being just as legitimate as a heterosexual identity, because the way we make this evaluation is strongly related to the image that those who are most important and significant in our lives, return to us about this aspect of the self. On the other hand, as was seen earlier, the image constructed about sexuality has a direct relationship with social norms and culturally shared processes of signification.

The friendships that the interviewees constructed through the student movements were established through a concept of respect and acceptance of homosexuality, which is related to the recognition of this as a legitimate form of exercising sexuality. In these relationships, they were able to acquire self-confidence in their sexual identity, something that can be seen in the way that the interviewees talk about themselves and, mainly, as will be seen later, how they present themselves and their homo-affective relationships to other people.

> **Marina:** I don't go around with it written on my forehead that I'm a lesbian, or that I'm bisexual, or my sexual choice, or anything, but if someone comes and asks, I say it without a problem. (...) I'll tell whoever it is. I don't have a problem, for me it's the same thing as saying my boyfriend, it's… for me, it's the same thing as saying my girlfriend, for me it is, who knows.

> **Rafaela:** – That's right, I don't say it, but I don't hide it. If I'm some place talking to someone, they'll know, I won't hide it, I'm also not going to show up and say, "Hi, actually, I'm bi."

> **Alice:** If it comes up in the conversation, if the person asks, or if I think there's some need for me to talk about it for some reason, whatever *(their sexual orientation)*.

> **Júlia:** I don't see a need to be "Oh, I'm a lesbian, I'm a lesbian, I'm a lesbian!" This actually bothers me, because for me it's a question of… people must have some problem to use sexual preference to reaffirm themselves all the time. I think she is trying to accept herself and keeps repeating it all the time. However…I think you have to have a position and not keep denying it.

All four of the interviewees spoke favorably about the struggles for equal civil rights for women and LGBTI+ people – like the criminalization of LGBTI+ phobia, equality in civil marriages, adoptions by same-sex parents, not treating transsexual identities as a pathology, etc. – and preferred not to clearly define a sexual identity. These women tended to not fit into, and not live their sexuality in an exclusive manner, asserting that their sexual desires and affections go beyond the "sex" of the people they relate to, preferring instead to state that "they don't label themselves", "that they like people" regardless of their "sex", a discourse whose principal social support comes from the LGBTI+ and feminist movements. As Anthony Giddens asserts, "Sexuality thereby

becomes free-floating; at the same time as 'gay' is something one can 'be', and 'discover oneself to be', sexuality opens itself up to many objects" (Giddens, 1992:14). The more "fluid" manner with which the interviewees view their sexuality reflects echoes of the "sexual revolution", which, according to Giddens, began in the second half of the 20th century, bringing revolutionary transformations to modern social life, such as the female sexual revolution and the blossoming of homosexuality, which became increasingly viewed "as a quality or property of the self".

When asked if they tended to display affection in public with their partners in the same way they did when or if involved in heterosexual relationships, they all said yes, since they did not consider that there was anything wrong or disrespectful in demonstrating affection in public with their partners[17], since they considered their homosexual relationships just as worthy and legitimate as heterosexual ones. However, many stated that they were afraid of suffering from homophobia or being verbally or physically harassed, which led them to select spaces where they felt they would be safer to express affection with their partners. However, except at parties at friend's houses, a few public spaces considered gay, like the 'Bar da Tia'[18], and some gay parties that occurred periodically in Itabuna[19], the interviewees were only able to mention some parties in Vagão[20] and the university itself as spaces considered to be "safer", which demonstrates a great restriction on spaces for LGBTI+ sociability in the cities where they lived. Even so, they stated that when they were with their partners in these public locales, even at the university, their demonstrations of affection always generated reactions from the people around them, who didn't regard them with the same naturalness that they did heterosexual couples:

> **Rafaela**: (...) Oh, anywhere *(she would kiss her partner)*. So… that's it… it wasn't a question of heavy petting and all that, it was normal.
> (…) This generated a big crisis for me whether to remain in public or not, because I think it's very disagreeable to have to kiss in hiding. (…) you're there in a place where everyone is making out, and we have to go to the bathroom to kiss, hidden in a dirty place… I don't know… in one place… and then go back and hang out in the other. Everyone knows you left to kiss the girl, but you didn't do it in front of them. So, I say, "No, you have to kiss in front of people for them to understand that this is normal, that we aren't doing anything wrong." If everyone there is doing it, no one has the right to judge me. But then I think of the situation when guys stare and get excited from the situation and then I get too uncomfortable. And, also, I get particularly worried about exhibiting myself because of the danger.

> **Júlia**: I even had a [male] friend who said this … We were in Conquista (*the municipality of Vitória da Conquista*), I went out holding hands, talking, the people at the university didn't know that I was dating then. Then he said, "Hey, Júlia, they asked me if you were dating her and I said no, and then you show up holding hands with the girl?!" I said, "Hey, they did't know because they hadn't seen. I have no problem speaking out". (…) I don't like going around kissing, and

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[17] In the research for the thesis that gave rise to this article, other interviewees stated that they didn't publicly display affection with their partners because they believed they were disrespecting society by doing so. These women have an identity self-construction marked by strong conflicts of self-acceptance, which generates profound suffering and greatly affects their lives. For more information, see Freitas (2013).

[18] The Bar da Tia is a bar located in front of the Praça Olinto Leone, one of the best known squares in the center of Itabuna, on the banks of the Cachoeira River. Although it is mainly frequented by homosexuals and is known in the city as a gay bar, the rules of conduct established by the owner (Tia) did not allow displays of affection between homosexuals in the bar. Thus, it is interesting to note that, although most of the clients are homosexuals, the rules that governed behavior in the bar were based upon heteronormativity: accepting and in conviviality with homosexuals, as long as they maintained "the decency" that a "family" environment required, that is, didn't show non-heterosexual eroticization and sought to follow the heterosexual model.

[19] Gay parties in Itabuna, as they were called, were organized by residents of the city and periodically took place in small concert halls in Itabuna rented for this purpose, but were always itinerant. The opportunity to dance, kiss and freely express themselves to the sound of international pop music, energized the LGBTI+ population of Itabuna and several neighboring municipalities.

[20] A space in front of a beach in the municipality of Ilhéus where reggae, forró, xote were frequently held and sometimes rock shows. The public was more "alternative" and it was common for people to behave in a more relaxed way, including openly smoking marijuana near the beach.

that stuff, but I always go around holding hands, arm in arm. But if I feel like kissing her, I will. Wherever we are.

Alice: (...) I don't have any problem at all in making out with women in front of other people. (…) I've already made out with people in public, I feel fine, there's no problem. There's no hassle. (…) but I think this problem of always being afraid. Fear of someone harassing, or maybe, no one in the family accepting you. Even if today we think "oh, no, things are much calmer today", I think this idea of being afraid is always annoying.

Although the interviewees had acquired the self-confidence capable of making them understand their sexualities as being just as legitimate as heterosexual ones, and even gained the courage to affirm themselves publicly, they still suffer a series of heteronormatively imposed conflicts and challenges. As was seen with Foucault and Butler, the heteronormative power standard permeates and constitutes in a performative way all social relations and all subjects in our societies. Thus, we are all, simultaneously, its intermediaries and executors, and our sexual identities are multiply permeated by heteronormativity, either when we adhere to it, or when we construct any kind of resistance. As Butler states, the power cannot be refused, only shifted; "sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations", therefore, "a normative sexuality that is 'before', 'outside', or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream" (Butler, 1990:30).

This is why the possibility to contest heteronormativity can only occur within heteronormativity itself. For Butler, the visibility of homosexual relations is configured as politically fundamental to the gradual weakening of the heteronormative standard of power. As seen, the construction of the gender norm is not an infallible process, quite the contrary. That is why public demonstrations of affection between homosexuals have an important political role, because they function as elements that help depose the power of heteronormativity as they question the supposed naturalness with which heterosexual relations are constructed, making visible other possible manners of living sexual and gender identities. Guacira Louro (Cult, 2013:34) agrees with Butler that these "failures" and "deviations" represented by those bodies that do not fit into the requirements of heteronormativity can "constitute an opportunity for subversive reconstructions of identity," and can even be used to develop a policy for the resignification of genders. Hate discourses, even if not completely extinguished, can be reconfigured in a positive way. However, it is important not to forget that, depending on the extent and circumstances in which this "deviation" takes place, the "deviants" are punished, with varying degrees of symbolic, physical, psychological and social damage.

Because the process of identity construction is an infinite and unpredictable becoming, it is impossible to definitively affirm which cases may signify a subversion of the heterosexual norm and which may represent examples of the colonization of "deviations" by the heteronormative matrix[21]. However, this study makes it possible to point to social recognition as a fundamental factor in the construction of more just and egalitarian societies, because only through it, is it possible for the LGBTI+ population to gain the self-confidence necessary for autonomous participation in public life, and to demand economic redistribution and equal civil rights.

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[21] The article by Iara Beleli (2009) about the resignification of the imaginary regarding the homoerotic and homo-affective relationships in Brazilian soap operas and advertising is an excellent example of the complexity involved with the question of the subversion/reproduction of heteronormativity. The author points out that the "old 'caricatures' – marked by the language of humor to disqualify subjects" who are homosexual, have been replaced in soap operas "by characters without affectation and in monogamous relationships, as a way to make the image palatable to the general public." Thus, despite the growing visibility of homoerotic and homo-affective relationships in Brazilian mass media, and its importance in broadening recognized family models, Belli points out how these relationships seem to be included and accepted only when their "abnormality" appears mitigated by stable and monogamous family relationships. This is problematic insofar as it leads to an encapsulation of "subjects in a model based on heterosexual relationships, guided by practices that seem predefined and, therefore, do not need to be problematized" and reduces the complexity of homo-affective relationships and experiences to the only accepted model, heteronormativity (Beleli, 2009:117).

Final considerations

The results of this study reinforce arguments in favor of the problematization of conditions of vulnerability and dispossession of certain identities through which *entire groups are condemned and punished for their "difference,"* for not being in agreement with the intelligible identities produced by heteronormativity. Following inspirations from the theory of recognition, Butler affirms that *we are all beings in need of social recognition.* However, as seen, the condition for obtaining this recognition is regulated by exclusionary and dehumanizing gender norms: "For those effaced or demeaned through the norm they are expected to embody, the struggle becomes an emboried one for recognizability, a public insistence on existing and mattering" (Butler, 2015:37). Therefore, it is important to affirm that the political aspiration of this work is that proposed by Butler: to question the norms in order to loosen their coercive hold over gendered life (while understanding that this is not the same as transcending or abolishing all norms) with the goal of ensuring a more livable life. In other words, its political aspirations aim "to safeguard breaks with normality, and offer support and affirmation for those who make those breaks " (Butler, 2015:33).

At this point, it is very important to return to the earlier discussion of Axel Honneth, and emphasize his assertion that the process of social struggle includes the condition that individual experiences of disrespect must be interpreted as "typical for an entire group", so that they "can motivate collective demands for expanded relations of recognition" (Honneth, 1996:162). That is why there are no individualist possibilities for transformative political action, because recognition must always stem from the construction of dialogic and collective relationships. For Butler, the joining of bodies in alliance in the streets demanding social supports that guarantee more dignified lives is necessarily an action among bodies, never an individual action: "No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only 'between' bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's" (Butler, 2015:77).

This makes evident the LGBTI+ movement's paramount political importance as an engine for social change towards a more just and egalitarian society.

> **Júlia:** I believe that nowadays I think more in terms of struggle. When I think of homosexuality, I think of it as a category. (…) Normality. For me, I see how… I would thus define homosexuals today the same way I would define today's workers. Because I think that… it's not a question of choice, but of conquest, of place, because I think that's all that's lacking. Because (*otherwise*) [a homosexual] would be like any other person.

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