

The impacts of transgender identities in sociability of travestis and transsexual women

Os impactos das identidades transgênero na sociabilidade de travestis e mulheres transexuais

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ABSTRACT: This paper is the result of research conducted in the city of Maceió-AL, Brazil, between March 2013 and September 2014, which aimed to understand the impacts of transgender identities on the sociability of travesties and transsexual women. In this qualitative field study, we used three sources to produce and register data: field diary, participant observation and focus group. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The presentation and discussion of results used three thematic categories: the family as the first group that excludes; the school as a reproductive locus of prejudice and discrimination; the street that welcomes and increases vulnerability. The results showed that the expression of transgender identities produces negative repercussions on the sociability of travesties and transsexuals, exposing them to social vulnerability and various types of suffering.

KEYWORDS: Transgendered persons; Gender identity; Social participation; Transvestism; Social vulnerability; Transsexualism; Women.

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RESUMO: Este artigo é resultado de uma pesquisa realizada no município de Maceió-AL, entre março de 2013 a setembro de 2014, e teve como objetivo geral compreender os impactos das identidades transgênero na sociabilidade de travestis e mulheres transexuais. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, que utilizou três fontes para registros e produção dos dados: diário de campo, observação participante e grupo focal. Os dados foram analisados por meio da análise de conteúdo. A apresentação e discussão dos resultados se deram a partir de três categorias temáticas: *A família como primeiro grupo que exclui; A escola como locus de reprodução do preconceito e discriminação; A rua que acolhe e vulnerabiliza*. Os resultados evidenciaram que a expressão das identidades transgênero repercute negativamente na sociabilidade das travestis e transexuais, empurrando-as para uma situação de vulnerabilidade social e gerando sofrimentos diversos.

DESCRIPTORES: Pessoas transgênero; Identidade de gênero; Participação social; Travestismo; Transexualismo; Vulnerabilidade social; Mulheres.

This article presents some of the reflections contained in the concluding paper of the Occupational Therapy Program of UNCISAL: "The processes of femininity in travesties and transsexual women and their repercussion in sociability".

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INTRODUCTION

Transgender studies can be considered the result of libertarian struggles which began in the 1960s, especially in the social movements of 1968. Women who participated in these movements perceived that, although they fought on equal terms with men, they were relegated to a secondary role. In Brazil, the field of gender studies or gender relations emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a function of the discussion of the feminine condition¹.

Anthropologists debated the distinction between sexual differences and sexuality from the perspective of social constructs that differ culturally. In some cultures, gender may be tied to sexual identity⁽¹⁾, whereas in others these concepts are more loosely connected, in a way that the development of symbols and concepts which define masculine and feminine genders are socio-historical constructs^{2,3,4}.

Bruns and Pinto⁵ argue that gender is a social construct and therefore historical, such that it is possible to conclude that the concept is plural and that there are diverse understandings of feminine and masculine. For Peres⁶, gender relations participate in modes of subjectivism, considering the images, discourses and meanings which are built into people's quotidian routines and which determine diverse understandings of the world and of human relationships.

However, the notion of gender as a social construct is not the only understanding found in human societies. Many cultures exhibit a predominant perspective of binary relations between genders, assumed to be the natural state of things in the duality man/woman, masculine/feminine.

According to Jesus⁸, *binarism* is a concept built upon a simple and fixed duality between persons of the feminine and masculine sex. This idea is associated with the belief that there is a direct relationship between sex (biological) and gender (psychosocial). Cisexism is the ideology which flows from this concept of duality, based on the belief that biological characteristics related to sex correspond to psychosocial characteristics related to gender⁸.

This paper employs the concepts proposed by Jesus: gender expression, gender identity, gender roles

and sexual orientation. *Gender expression* has to do with a person's appearance and behavior, according to social expectations of a given gender, depending on the culture in which the person lives. *Gender identity* is the gender with which the person identifies, which may or may not correspond to the gender assigned at birth, i.e., a person may be born with a biological sex (male or female) but identify with the opposite gender (masculine or feminine). *Sexual orientation* is the affective-sexual attraction for someone, an internal state regarding sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual). Gender identity and sexual orientation are different dimensions that should not be confused. A *gender role* is a way of behaving in certain situations according to the attributed gender, which has been taught since birth; it is a social trait, not a biological one⁸.

Among transgender people are travesties and transsexual women. Most travesties are born with a biologically masculine sex, with a masculine physical appearance, but do not identify themselves as men. They tend to build a feminine gender identity. Transsexual women, however, claim social and legal recognition as women. They are individuals who are persuaded that they belong to the opposite sex, i.e., their psychological sex is dissonant with their biological sex^{5,8,9}.

During the process of identity construction, travesties and transsexuals differ in several ways, but both possess feminine symbols and elements. The construction of the feminine body begins early, in infancy or adolescence, when they identify with feminine symbols. There are a number of physical manifestations, beginning early on, such as colored nails, makeup, use of wigs, shoes and clothing, voice quality, the art of hiding the penis under clothing, plastic surgery, hormonal therapy, and, in the case of transsexuals, transgenitalization, or sex reassignment⁽²⁾. This surgery is sought to harmonize physical appearance with psychological sex. By way of these processes of transformation, both categories seek what they identify as feminine^{2,9}.

In social contexts, all persons are different; however, this reality is not always taken into consideration. People who do not fit into the collective social imagination regarding what is the accepted social representation of masculinity and femininity are discriminated.

(1) Sexual identity is the sense of oneself as man or woman⁷.

(2) Transexuality is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be a gender identity disorder, catalogued in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) under number 10-F64.0.

The *Queer Theory* was elaborated as a way to (re) think new and old perspectives of social construction of the mechanisms which lead to discrimination and prejudice against transgender identities, and as an attempt to problematize the denaturalization of issues involving the biological sexes. This theory emerged in the United States during the 1980s as a blending of cultural studies, French post-structuralism, and the “third wave” of feminism. In 1990, the term *Queer Theory* was first used by Teresa de Lauretis to contrast the analytical project that a group of researchers was developing in critical opposition to sociological studies of sexual and gender minorities^{10,11}.

Queer is an English language word whose original meaning is “strange,” “weird”. The term was used as a form of offense and discrimination against what people considered outside of normative patterns of sexual binarism. Today the word has acquired positive connotations along with the debate of denaturalization of sexual and gender identities, and has contributed to the understanding of the organization of identities, as well as to the notion of difference¹⁰.

Queer Theory is opposed to exclusionary perspectives and deals with gender as a cultural phenomenon. It considers that masculine and feminine are present in both men and women, so that each person has characteristics which can qualify as masculine or feminine, apart from biological sex¹⁰.

In Brazil, the incorporation of *Queer Theory* began in the 1990s with the study of gender and sexuality. Its reception can be established in 2001, when Guacira Lopes Louro published the article “Teoria Queer: uma política pós-identitária para a educação” [Queer Theory: a post-identitarian policy for education]. Since then some *queer* theoreticians have found applicable concepts and method in the works of Michel Foucault and Jaques Derrida¹¹.

According to Miskolc¹¹, the objective was to explicate the processes which create people considered normal and well adapted, as well as those considered illegitimate, labeled as abnormal and placed at the margin of society. The concept of supplementarity idealized by Derrida was essential to the development of *Queer Theory*. According to him, our language operates in binary units, so that the hegemonic is only built as an opposition to something inferior and subordinate. Thus, heterosexuality only exists in opposition to homosexuality, as its negative. Homosexuality is the other without which the hegemonic is not made, nor is it able to describe itself.

From the perspective of *Queer Theory*, which contests any normalizing pattern, people who diverge from the heteronormative pattern are not intelligible to the hegemonic patterns of gender based on binaries, and become the target of prejudice and/or discrimination due to their gender identity. This practice is known as transphobia, and should not be confused with homophobia¹². Transgender people are targets of prejudice, are denied fundamental rights and are subject to structural exclusion. This manifests itself in difficult access to education, the work force and even to the use of public bathrooms, as well as in various types of violence, threats, aggression and homicide¹³.

Taking into consideration the belief that the body is a natural attribute and it defines the identity of men and women as persons of one sex or another, the bodily changes practiced by travesties and transsexuals translate into convivial problems in socially normalized spaces. The lack of family acceptance leads them to live in other environments. They also experience difficulty in acquiring health services, participating in public policy decisions and circulating in public spaces, territories and institutions. With few options for housing and self-support, they may end up living on the street and turning to prostitution as a means of survival, which puts them at risk¹⁴.

Recognizing these circumstances, the present study was developed with a view to understand the impacts of transgender identity on the sociability of travesties and transsexuals. The word sociability is used to describe any type of social interaction; it is fluid, and the practices and spaces of sociability suffer mutation when the surrounding context is changed¹⁵.

The specific objectives of the study were: to identify the principal life contexts affected by transgender identities; and to identify the conflicts generated by those identities in certain contexts. The study was conducted as part of the final requirements for the graduate program in Occupational Therapy at the Alagoas State University of Health Sciences (UNCISAL).

The field research was conducted in the city of Maceió, Alagoas, between March 2013 and September 2014. The initial field work began at the First Conference of Travesties and Black Transsexuals of the Northeast, held in 2013. Later, the research project was presented to the Association of Travesties and Transsexuals of Alagoas (ASTTAL), which approved the work. The study was approved by the UNCISAL Committee of Ethics in

Research of Human Beings, under the protocol number 23519713.8.0000.5011.

PROCEDURAL METHODOLOGIES

The approach of this study is qualitative, descriptive and applied. Procedurally, it is a field study composed of participant research and ethnomethodology, which sought dialogue with the theoretical-methodological references of Complexity, Multi-referentiality and Cultural Studies, as well as authors with specific theoretical knowledge related to the problem theme.

Five members of the ASTTAL who called themselves travesties or transsexuals participated in the study.

The field work consisted in following the daily life of the travesties and transsexuals between May and July of 2014. During this period various home visits were made, as well as participation in meetings of the ASTTAL and accompaniment of leisure activities and work routines. The tools of data collection and register were participant observation, field logs and focus groups.

The participant observation took place through insertion in the group under study and participation in various situations peculiar to the group, such as association meetings, rehearsals and preparation for cultural events⁽³⁾ carried out by the participants, as well as leisure activities. The field log permitted the recording of the approximation to the field of research and to the group under study, including the most intimate processes experienced by the participants.

Beyond this a focus group was developed, formed by three travesties and two transsexuals. The group discussed the same subjects followed in the field study, which permitted the building of relationships favorable to data collection.

The focus group took place in the home of one of the participants. To initiate discussion, two trigger questions were used (*What are your first memories regarding your sexuality? Would you tell us about what you did to transform your body?*). To elicit deeper feedback, these questions were complemented by others in order to encourage the participation of everyone.

For analysis and interpretation of the data, the technique utilized was content analysis of the thematic mode. This consisted of exhaustive reading of related

material to identify key ideas, interpretation of those ideas, categorization of ideas, comparison of different nuclei of meaning, classification of the nuclei of meaning in wider axes around which revolved the discussions and redaction of the interpretive syntheses of each theme.

RESULTS

The travesties and transsexual participants, a total of five people, were aged from 21 to 48 years. All live in working class neighborhoods of Maceió and make a living with nocturnal prostitution and activities of the group Trans Show. They are members and active participants of ASTTAL and its events. One of them is president of the association.

The field work revealed that the participants share a life context marked by vulnerability, whether due to lack of fixed employment, which results in many material needs, or due to a life full of broken relationships, mainly with family members. In this regard, ASTTAL is an important source of support, providing material aid (basic food items, bus fare, etc.) and social/emotional care, thus preventing many from falling into social marginalization.

From the content analysis three thematic categories emerged: *the family as the first group that excludes; the school as a reproductive locus of prejudice and discrimination; the street that welcomes and increases vulnerability*. These categories revolve around the main contexts of life (family, school, street) affected by the transgender condition and which mark the life trajectories of the participants, according to their own stories.

DISCUSSION

The family as the first group that excludes

The participants said that their first experiences of exclusion occurred in the family setting, from the moment that they started to change their appearance, and intensified by their desire to become travesties or change sex. At that point, none of the families represented by the group was able to express acceptance and welcome, or establish a harmonious relationship.

(3) The "TRANS SHOW" is a non-profit group in the state of Alagoas, organized by members of ASTTAL, and seeks to develop artistic shows and raise funds as an alternative to prostitution.

My family was typical, I left when I was small. My mother died when I was 13 or 14 years old, and from that time on I was alone. (Participant 1)

When you are a minor, even if you have never made a decision in life, even if you don't want homosexuality, you don't realize the prejudice. It starts in the family. Cousins are the first to say: Act like a man! Talk like a man! With a deep voice! It's something they bring with them from childhood. (Participant 2)

I tried to connect with my family, and I was rejected by my brothers in Maranhão, 2008. The prejudice begins in your own family. They threw me out of the house! No one wants to accept a trans person. In the mind of family members, you are a man and you don't stop being a man. There is no openness to accepting a different sexual orientation. I was humiliated! (Participant 3)

For them, the family, instead of welcoming, became the first social group to exclude, and began the process of broken relationships and stigmatization, leaving the travesties and transsexuals vulnerable, with negative experiences and depreciated to the point of lacking the right to have rights. The depreciative processes they experienced influence the entire organization of their subjective lives, in their relationships with others, with the world and with themselves.

Only one travesty in the group returned to live with her family. The others said that they left home during adolescence, after their first attempts to obtain a feminine appearance.

When I took the initiative to start hormone therapy, I began to discover myself... When I accepted who I was, I ran away from home! (Participant 2)

When I started to take hormones, my body began to change. That's when I ran away. (Participant 3)

The realization that something different is happening compared to other people is something that marks some travesties and transsexuals. The discovery of a sexual body is a moment of attribution of meaning to various beatings, insults and family rejections. This moment is frightening, because mind and body cannot go against what they desire, which is to be what they really are. And in that moment, much energy and courage is required to confront one's context.

The childhood memories of *trans* persons point to common experiences of transgender life. Some negative aspects, for example, the feeling of being "strange," indicates an internalization by children of the binary discourse of gender which seeks to control and avoid the breaking of limits attributed to the biological sexes, and tries to hide its fallibility¹⁶.

Some of the subjects are greatly surprised by the discovery of a penis and that they are unable to behave according to social expectations. That is, they realize that they are unable to develop the "appropriate gender" for their sex¹⁷.

The situation encountered in this study corroborates the observations of Peres¹⁸, that many travesties are the target of verbal and physical aggression while they are still in the family context. Some are driven out of their homes and are forced to find support with friends.

Leaving home is a crucial moment in the maturing process for these people². The exit is connected with the non-acceptance of family members as they react to the new discoveries and changes in body and sexuality. It is also connected to bodily interventions which are nonreversible, such as the use of hormones and silicone implants.

When they are unable to express their gender identity in the family context, they seek new perspectives and this brings new kinds of suffering characterized by physical and psychological aggression, discrimination and exclusion.

The process of exclusion develops in waves, from the family to the community, then to the school, health services and other contexts where these people have social interaction¹⁸.

However, recent research^{19,20} suggests that there may be a greater acceptance of transgender individuals on the part of their families, in comparison with the experience of travesties and transsexuals of previous generations. Adolescent travesties who were followed in the study by Monzelli¹⁹, in contrast to the participants of this study, all lived with their families of origin. Some were able to find space to express their gender without restriction.

The difference between the two studies, in relation to the preservation of family ties, may be the result of a generational difference between the two groups, such that what was earlier seen as impossible is now part of the daily life of some families¹⁹.

The school as a reproductive *locus* of prejudice and discrimination

According to the literature in this area, the school is not a positive experience for travesties and transsexual women, who continue to suffer physical and verbal aggression in that new social context. Without the support of family, many are simply unable to attend school, and when they do, they are met with a new social context which, in the majority of cases, reproduces the prejudice and discrimination they already know.

At school I began to hang out with the girls, and the boys said, "Look at the fag! Walking around with the girls!" (Participant 2)

At school I would dress like a girl and the boys laughed at me and said, "Look, teacher, it's a queer! A little girl!" I suffered a lot! (Participant 4)

In addition to aggression and insults on the part of students, other forms of violence were felt from the school administration itself and its system of disciplinary norms. These attitudes were then mirrored by many students and by other members of the academic community, like teachers, supervisors, etc.

The school forbade me to use women's clothing. In the beginning I wore two sets of clothing—the men's garb over the women's, and after class I would use just the women's clothing. In my sixth year at school I got tired of this and confronted the school. I started to use women's clothing all the time, to dress the way I wanted to. At the time I even received death threats for dressing like a woman. (Participant 1)

The school is a space where new discoveries are made, where people have contact with a diversity of people and knowledge. This could be a positive factor in the life of a student. However, there is a problem when the institution should be protecting the student and recognizing the importance of integration, respect and healthy community, but in practice establishes rules which reproduce the dominant heteronormative patterns of society and those rules become selective criteria which foster exclusion¹⁹.

In this sense, when schools give lip service to universality of access, but prohibit students from dressing according to the gender with which they identify,

[...] they show that the greatest pre-requisite for admission is the coherence between sex, gender and sexuality, which results in restricting access and circulation of some students who do not fit those norms (p. 73)¹⁹.

Systems of selective discrimination are present not only in the schools but also in most institutions through which transgender persons circulate, allowing them access through what Monzeli¹⁹ calls "conditional admissions". This form of admission shows the selective and prescriptive role of institutions. Even if they guarantee access, permanence and care in their principal guidelines, in contact with different ethnic, sexual, religious and social groups, among others, such institutions prescribe and reaffirm traditional forms of access, insertion and participation¹⁹.

This confirms that the processes of stigmatization and violence also show up frequently in diverse institutional spaces, like schools, in relation to the expression of travesties and transsexuals²¹.

Educational legislation, like the Law of Guidelines and Fundamentals of Education (LDB) and the National Curricular Outlines (PCN) envision inclusive practices. However, the school is a micro-institutional space, and reflects the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social representations in dispute in the macro-social context and in other institutions. The relevant contradictions in the power struggle for values and the acceptance (or not) of differences, are part of the contemporary scene. The school experiences these contradictions and many education professionals strive to make schools welcoming spaces for diversity and less characterized by symbolic, verbal and physical abuse.

Discriminatory practices on the part of the school community contribute to the climate of intense segregation of transgender persons, through their limited participation in social spaces as they are judged to be outside of the heteronormative reality, where there is no space for others expressions of gender to flow¹⁸.

The street that welcomes and increases vulnerability

In light of the insults and negative experiences in the school context, travesties and transsexual participants in this study did not feel like they belonged in the school environment. They feel fragile and begin to seek other social contexts where they can be accepted. That is when, generally, they meet an older and more experienced travesty or transsexual, who welcomes them and becomes a "mother"

or “godmother,” even suggesting new techniques to enhance their feminine appearance and introducing them to the night life on the street.

I was going to night school when I met a travesty hair stylist and her friend. Both worked the street as prostitutes. They invited me to join them on the street and try out my first set of women's clothing. I liked what I saw in myself... I ditched school. (Participant 2)

I ended up on the street when I was 14 years old and my mother and brothers threw me out of the house. I came to live here in Alagoas. That's when I realized that the world is not what I imagined, it wasn't a bed of roses. I suffered a lot on the street, trying to survive. That's when I began to work as a prostitute. (Participant 3)

I had to adapt to new circumstances. I was alone and a long way from my family and I had no one to turn to. I had to drop out of school, and I quit my job. I enjoyed prostitution and thought it was beautiful. I made a lot of money relatively easy, but if you don't know how to invest it you will lose it quickly. (Participant 4)

I have already faced much violence and prejudice, and that continues today. Not long ago I was a victim of aggression. At the bus stop a homophobe came and hit me; I fought back and ended up falling and hurting my leg in two places. (Participant 5)

The street is a common space shared by all of the travesties and transsexuals in the study. They describe it, as Monzeli's research does¹⁹, as a receptive space. Although it offers numerous risks, it allows the construction of a new network of social support based on the common experience of vulnerability. The street becomes a social space where they circulate during the day, and a work place at night. Nocturnal prostitution becomes the only means they have to earn a living to meet their basic needs and survive.

Prostitution usually begins early in their lives, and they see it as a natural activity. There are profound factors which lead them into that situation, usually connected with social disadvantages springing from gender expression, although each has a unique story to tell.

When they are quite young they encounter new perspectives, including bodily modification, and they begin to learn how to become more feminine, to survive with money earned in prostitution and to protect themselves from dangers on the street.

The street, although it has its own rules of interaction, allows greater freedom for these people as they experience not only situations of risk and violence, but also of pleasure and acceptance.

The discussion presented here enabled the identification and understanding of the life situations of travesties and transsexual women in some social contexts, and that made lasting impressions on their life trajectories. Although each is different, the study made it possible to identify many similarities in the ways they expressed their gender.

CONSIDERATIONS

Transgender persons are part of modern society and reveal the diversity that it is capable of sustaining. However, the dominant model of society tends to negate and exclude human diversity while valuing the homogenizing of human beings, in such a way that existing normative social processes disqualify and exclude diversity from the social community, labeling as inferior anything that diverges from the established pattern.

This study shows that travesties and transsexuals with transgender identities which are expressed in society tend to be forced into vulnerable situations, characterized by fragile work and social relationships. This condition leads to restricted social participation in questions of human rights, resulting in social disadvantage. This process affects their autonomy, rights and empowerment.

It is evident that these people are subject to various situations which lead to different types of suffering. Environments which should offer important support, like family and school, become exclusionary at the first sign of difference.

The reality of the study presents challenges for professionals, among them the occupational therapist, who deal with situations of exclusion and vulnerability with the aim of elaborating strategies for prevention or correction of such conditions. Therefore, attention to macro- and micro-politics is necessary at local and national levels, as well as involvement in public policy directed toward improving the life of these individuals.

Given the complexity of the demands placed upon the transgender population, proposals of intervention on their behalf require the elaboration of interdisciplinary and multi-sector projects, establishing connections between different areas of public policy and knowledge in order to create more effective methods of technical

and political intervention. Whenever possible, these actions should be planned in cooperation with travesties and transsexuals in order to maximize their autonomy and empowerment.

Assistance to transgender persons while they are still in infancy and adolescence can prevent future cases of vulnerability and risk, such as the question of prostitution as a primary source of income and subsistence. In already

existing situations of vulnerability, there needs to be reconstruction of networks of social support and promotion of deconstruction of social stigmas in relation to the transgender population, as well as help in the cooperative elaboration of life projects, where emancipation, advocacy and social rights can be reestablished for travesties and transsexual women.

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