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Negotiating Normality(ies): Constructions of Gender Identity among Girls

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Abstract: This study analyzes the construction of gender identity among adolescent girls considering its performative dimension. The ethnographic research was conducted at a public middle school in Salvador, Brazil. The discursive construction of differences, similarities and inequalities among categories of girl is one of the ways gender is (re)constructed and negotiated in daily interactions. Within the context of the moral regulation exercised by peers, the article presents how each subject position assimilates, contests and resignifies behaviors and characteristics socially considered to be feminine and masculine. In a continuum of conformities and subversions, girls considered to be “normal”, “forward” or “evolved” exhibit traces of cultural permanence and change, revealing the markedly contradictory heterogeneity of the constitution of gender identities.

Keywords: Gender; Sexuality; Performativity; Categorization.

Negociando normalidade(s): construções da identidade de gênero entre meninas

Resumo: Neste artigo analisamos a construção da identidade de gênero entre meninas adolescentes, a partir da sua dimensão performativa. A pesquisa etnográfica foi realizada em uma escola pública de Ensino Fundamental II, em Salvador. A produção discursiva de diferenças, semelhanças e desigualdades entre categorias de menina é um dos modos pelos quais o gênero vai sendo (re)construído e negociado nas interações cotidianas. Tendo como pano de fundo a regulação moral exercida pelos pares, expõe-se como cada posição de sujeito assimila, contesta e ressignifica comportamentos e características socialmente convencionados como femininos e masculinos. Em um continuum de conformidades e subversões, “normais”, “atiradas” e “evoluídas” exibem traços de permanências e mudanças culturais, evidenciando a heterogeneidade marcadamente contraditória da constituição de identidades generificadas.

Palavras-chave: gênero; sexualidade; performatividade; categorização.

Introduction

The negotiation of gender and sexual identities in the contemporary cultural sphere involves complex interactions. The illusion that gender is essential and stable acts as a powerful “regulating fiction” and legitimates regimes of power, not only among subjects, but also among identities and modes of living sexuality and gender (Judith BUTLER, 1990). Gender practices and sexualities constitute a terrain of disputes, and spaces of resistances and subversion by amalgamating dissonant discourses, values and symbols such as liberation and morals, equity and repression (Adriana PISCITELLI, 2005; Anoop NAYAK; Mary Jane KEHILY, 2013).

Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity has referenced substantial analyses about agency in power structures related to gender identities. From this perspective, performance is a discursive-corporal act that is part of a process of naturalization and (re)production of social identities, roles and norms. Focusing on the production of subjectivity in processes of signification that construct the self, Butler affirms that the subject is constructed performatively in experiences of repetition of norms,

where gender is both constructed and destabilized. Agency is situated in this spectrum of possibilities of variation of iterative citations. Although iterations of gender practices produce the idea of a coherent and stable gender, the very imperative of a repeated evocation expresses the necessarily contingent way to live gender.¹ The potential to “undo” this resides precisely in the performative involvement in behaviors that distort and are distant from gender norms.

In a school environment, the process of constructing gender identity transcends the socialization promoted by institutional agents, and expresses a continuous negotiation of symbolic, social and material frontiers among peers (Barrie THORNE, 1997; Maria do Mar PEREIRA, 2012; Eivind FJAER *et al.*, 2015; Sarah MILLER, 2016). These frontiers are maintained, reinforced, contested and transgressed based on systematic recourse to discourses of affirmation (or of questioning) of the differences between sexes, and of the strategies for social inclusion and exclusion. Peer groups establish a context structured by dynamics of power that are based on regimes for policing conduct. Through schemes of moral regulation, political processes of rivalry and dispute produce the characterization and hierarchization of subjects and groups, shaping different relationalities among youth.

This demarcation of differences and similarities constitutes an important dimension of gender construction in daily interactions, both through the active creation of barriers between genders and in attempts to transgress them. Disputes over power lead to the circulation of regulatory discourses about sexuality, appearance and behavior, based on which criteria for social recognition are delimited (KEHILY, 2004; Shirlei SALES; Marlucy PARAÍSO, 2013). The “scenes” of conflict go beyond “the motive itself, explicitly evoking images that design roles” (Maria Filomena GREGORI, 1993, p. 164) of femininity, adolescence, power, conformity, transgression and inequality.

We understand that moral defamation is part of the complex group of pressures, expectations and social and institutional restrictions that compose the rigid regulatory structure of gender, which Butler (1990) denominates as the heterosexual matrix. Depreciative conversations, gossip and acts of degradation are ordinary rituals of classification and production of hierarchies, which engender spaces of control whose moralizing pedagogy confirms a “mined normative field” in which young women need to navigate under requirements for “continual self-monitoring, impression management, and a full complement of defensive and offensive maneuvers” (Laina BAY-CHENG, 2015, p. 286).

The tension created by the constant threat of moral defamation summarizes the regulation of public performance of gender. Thus, as occurs with the label “fag” among boys, the stigmatization of “slut” becomes a powerful disciplinary mechanism (KEHILY, 2004; PEREIRA, 2012; FJAER *et al.*, 2015; MILLER, 2016). Acting as a marker of limits of normative femininity, the categorization of deviants infuses normative attributes and moral behaviors, which are used to contrast groups and shape our ideas about gender. We interpret this type of categorization of the other as a social practice whose coercive content contributes to shaping the process of constitution of gendered subjectivities and identities.

To produce a discussion that allows us to observe how adolescent girls signify and manipulate hegemonic female attributes, in this article we focus on two manifestations of negotiation of gender in school: the administration of the categories of girl and the mobilization of these categories in the regulation of these subject positions. The objective is to understand how they reinforce and contest behaviors and characteristics based on the category “girl/woman”.

Methodological aspects

This article uses thematic and empirical elements of a broader study about the role of mechanisms for social control and disciplining among girls in the construction of gender identities. Part of this ethnographic work was conducted between 2014 and 2015, with girls between 11 and 15, at a public middle school [known as “fundamental II” in Brazil] (grades 6 - 9), in Salvador, Bahia.²

The school is located in a neighborhood near the beach, whose residents are middle and upper class, while the school serves mostly youth from neighboring poor communities. At the time of the study, the institution had a total of 422 students in the morning, including 238 girls in the sixth, seventh and ninth grades, and 289 students in the afternoon, including 154 girls in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades.

The participant observation had a regular frequency of three days per week, in the classrooms, hallways, yard and teachers’ room. The production of data took place, above all, by witnessing dialogs and in conversations with students and institutional agents (William FOOTE WHYTE, 2005). These conversations and interviews followed a fluid format, and were conducted informally with open questions based on a script of topics related to the problem of the study (Vitor Sérgio FERREIRA, 2014).

¹ Even if in limited and contradictory ways, the resistance is related to the weakening of broad social norms. This modality of agency involves the transgression of a specific and tangible social limitation. In its more complete form, the resistance encompasses the subversion of the structure of social norms.

² According to the norms for research ethics involving humans, the names of the subjects and of the school involved in this study are fictitious to assure anonymity. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee [Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa] of the Faculdade de Saúde Pública of the Universidade de São Paulo (FSP/USP) protocol nº 22343413.3.0000.5421.

To obtain a broad view of the various gender discourses and practices, an effort was made to encompass the different subject positions of the girl and of the place occupied in the social hierarchy.

Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted to better understand situations that took place or concepts of interest presented by some girls. To contemplate a relational vision of gender issues, 5 boys were also interviewed. Once the visits to the school were concluded, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school's director, assistant director (who managed the school in the afternoon) and three teachers.

The detailed reading of the field notes and of the transcriptions of the conversations and interviews considered the references (direct or indirect) to the differences, similarities and inequalities among girls and groups, based on notions of female and male. The objective was to identify the categories that the adolescents convoke to speak about "girls", gender and sexuality, to map their discursive strategies to manage presentation of self, and characterize the inter and intragender relations that they establish. From this iterative process three themes emerged related to the discursive construction of gender: the uses of the categories of difference and similarity in terms of the social practices and positions of the girls; the uses of the categories of natural and social in the description, justification and evaluation of the causes subjacent to the differences and similarities among them; and the forms of presentation of self, considering the vector modernity-conservatism.³

Daily re-performances: the meanders of constituting a "normal" girl

To analyze the negotiation of discourses and practices of gender by the girls, we used the concept of "positioning" introduced by Bronwyn Davies (1989) and defined as "possible modes of being", to describe the gender behaviors assumed or imputed in the daily interactions among peers.⁴ Positionings are fluid and dynamic forms of being, in opposition to roles that are static and long-lasting. Beyond alluding to how people can "be" and to what they can "do" in a certain context, conceived as an interplay of social disputes, positioning emphasizes the subjectivity of girls (and boys).

On one hand, positionings are necessarily related with having or not having power and command in a hierarchical conformation of gender. On the other, they highlight the complex relations of adherence, resistances and manipulation of models of femininity (and masculinity) by means of which gender performances are constituted.

The categories female and male are associated to meanings and values that go beyond the particular context (Pierre BOURDIEU, 2012). The hegemonic model of gender constitutes an ideal cultural pattern which women and men use to steer their behaviors, tastes and aspirations (Robert CONNELL, 2002). Adherence to dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity is a particular form of being normal, being correct and therefore, desirable (Michel FOUCAULT, 2003).

"Normal girl" was the way that many of the participants of this study identified themselves. This subject position encompasses the group of behaviors and characteristics that are socially conventioned as female. The basic normative quality of a "normal" girl is being "quiet". The alignment to reserved behavior and passivity appears to be associated to how they "should present themselves in public": "it is that [girl] who does nothing, arrives and likes to stay in her place...sits down, stays in a corner, just talking" (Paula, 11). The limitations of movements and corporal language of these girls compared to that of boys was notable (PEREIRA 2012; Victoria VELDING, 2017).

The sense of gender identification is not stable, but is part of a process to be represented and re-performed each day (BUTLER, 1993). The performance carries a dynamism particular to a (re)contextualization according to volatile interactional demands. This helps us to understand why quietness was interpreted as a potentially risky qualification in an environment where conflict was a common form of social interaction. "Rudeness" – verbal aggression – was mobilized so that some girls positioned themselves as strong and assertive in relation to other girls. At times, the definition of their behavior as "normal" was followed by a clarification: "I am quiet...up to a point (Lili, 13). If there is a confrontation, "you resolve it, if not, they pile up on you, they treat you horribly" (Celina, 12).

Girls aligned to the normative model presented themselves as being able to differentiate "wrong" from "right" in terms of gender practices. The reproduction of the sexual standard is materialized in the reinforcement of traditional sexual scripts, which are considered central elements in the negotiation of their sexual identities as "normal girls". In addition, the "dissimulation" (Luiz Fernando DUARTE, 1987) of sexualized actions offers them a more secure route for protecting themselves from defamations by their peers.⁵ This ritual of attraction follows the popular expression

³ Considering that the categories of race/color and homo/heterosexuality are not based on relations of power and practices of social differential of the groups studied, the methodological perspective used was the framework of references contextual to the constitution of gender identity and sexuality among heterosexual girls.

⁴ We emphasize that the intention here is not to reify the "types" of girl as fixed, but to analytically explore these positionings to highlight the possibilities that are open to the girls and to the consequences of assuming different subject positions. We avoid using the term femininities to describe them, conceiving them as gender performances produced by adolescents or ways that others define as the position of the subjects.

⁵ Duarte (1987) speaks of dissimulation when describing the enactment of a woman's seduction with "strategic" movements of resistance, to then gradually give in to a partner's (sexual) desires.

"playing hard to get". In their statements about flirting, the girls indicated that they must be more attentive to their actions with a boy, to present desirable attributes (and character), without going too far or being "vulgar". It is in this lapse in flirtation that policing by peers becomes more intense. In the words of Elisa (14):

You have to be quiet, but bold ...it's like a way to deceive [...]. I am not going to appear and right away [say], "So? do you want to make out with me?", you can't do that. You have to talk to the person, you begin by being kind with the person. The person asks you to do something and you go and do it. That's how I got my boyfriend in the 7th series [8th grade] ...then the person sees that you are quiet, but that you are also fun, not putting out. You have to be quiet with other people... Then you stay like that until you win the person over, then you change, showing your real self, but you have to go slowly.

Dissimulation requires a certain command and, therefore, an ability to handle moral discourses, handling them to be able to delineate oneself as a "proper girl". Reputation depends on performances of decency and on hiding acts that may be stigmatized. The normalized assumption of this positioning illustrates how girls' possibilities to conjugate romantic-sexual desires are limited by normative discourses of femininity. In contrast, it allows us to see how, among the discursive restrictions, girls manipulate feminine attributes to enjoy a good position among their peers.

To exalt respectability and good sexual conduct is a way to regulate not only female sexuality, but also social hierarchies. A lack of power experienced in the contexts of life can be mitigated by forceful normatized affirmations of gender (Deevia BHANA, 2016). The emphasis on passive performance certainly does not denote resistance to the heterosexual matrix, but also conjugates the use of elements that adolescents find desirable for realizing their own interests (Debbie WEEKES, 2004). The agency of adolescent girls expresses a contradictory process in which submission to cultural norms is necessary to articulate power and recognize a particular identity (BUTLER, 1995).

Under the risk of involvement in demeaning gossip, even girls who contest and transgress certain gender rules – for example, who ask boys directly if they want to make out – seek to align themselves to a discourse of female passivity. The imperative of avoiding the label of "slut" mobilizes a constant administration of their self-representations. Based on the evaluation of others, "defamation" refers more to regulation of public performance of gender than the regulation of private sexual practices. One common dissimulatory scheme is to be part of mixed groups of friends because this facilitates the circulation of girls in a male universe. This relational fluidity serves to justify an image that is more distanced from sexual labels, to the degree that it confers a certain permission to be with the boys. In an interview with Yolanda (11), the contradictory game of positioning that they used was made clear:

Yolanda: They call [it being a] slut, I call them forward because I can see the two sides of the story...I prefer to call it forward because I see that it is also a quality.

Jamile: What type of quality?

Yolanda: At the social level, they call a girl who goes after boys forward or easy, they deprecate her... people wind up speaking badly of her... they talk about them because they just makeout. I think that today boys are more interested in girls who are romantic than those who are being forward, who go after them and everything... I consider myself romantic.

This work of disidentification with the stigma of "slut" expresses a continuous vulnerability in status, not only because of a potential framing as immoral, but above all by the circulation of discourses of administration of risks and prevention of damage that evoke personal responsibility, shaped in the strategies of disguise exemplified here. Nevertheless, the reiteration of differences between adolescents is strengthened with the use of categorization: "unequivocal" definitions of appropriate female behavior are reinforced by the identification and production of divisive practices that cause the local rules to be learned (BUTLER, 1993).

It appears that the opposition between housewives (a permitted sexuality) and women of the street (a prohibited sexuality) continues to be an important organizer of distinct moral codes and the affective-sexual contexts of men and women (Roberto DAMATTA, 1997; Tania SALEM, 2006). In our study, the tension that constitutes femininity (purity-corruption) was expressed by the categories of "normal" and "forward". In the words of Vera (12), a "forward" girl is a girl who begins to have that fire, who wants to go after the boys". They were also identified for behaving like "pivetas"⁶ [little thieves], circulating in the school yard, "running and speaking loudly to attract attention". The term "piveta" refers to the assumption of characteristics such as aggressiveness, vulgarity and rudeness by girls.

The differences in cultural codes of gender were incorporated in the categories "foveira"⁷ and "settled". The dichotomy between maturity and childishness was a basic criteria for social distinction

⁶ Piveta is the female version of "pivete" which is a popular disparaging term that refers to a child who steals and usually lives in the streets. A "pivete" behaves like an adult (and is immoral), in contrast to the characteristics of childhood.

⁷ Foveira is a slang expression used in Bahia to refer to women considered to be too liberal (vulgar and sexually appealing) and who dress provocatively. It alludes to impurity, given that skin known as foveira is caused by peeling, considered to be the result of lack of care for one's appearance.

according to the division of sexual behavior among the girls by age. The “older” adolescent girls (in the 8th and 9th grade) usually affirm that the “younger ones” (girls in the 6th and 7th grades) still do not know how to deal with sexuality, while they [the older ones] had “already” “settled down”, “matured”. Consensually recognized by their peers as “calmer and quieter” they identify themselves as “settled”. In an antagonist position, the term “foveira” was used to (re)affirm their *status* and social power:

It's a girl who likes to wear really tight pants... to show her behind, to wear her uniform shirt so that her belly appears, she goes around swaying. [They] are going out with boys now and are very forward. They want everyone...the girls in the eighth and ninth grades are more mature, they know how to control themselves, be more discrete (Bethânia, 14).

The social asymmetry is expressed in the domain of framing of how to be a girl and in the regulation of the activity of other groups by the “settled” girls. “Gستاçaõ” [ridiculing] was a form of exchange that intimidates and vilifies the “foveiras”. It configured a dramatic performance of depreciation of “mistakes” in dressing, the form of talking and behavior of the “younger girls”. The embarrassment caused by the “ridiculing” refers to the Goffmanian idea of the need to dominate a role (Erving GOFFMAN, 2008; Omar LIZARDO; Jessica COLLETT, 2013). The arc of the process of learning rules and moral conventions of gender that occurs during adolescence acquires features of a corollary through which the girls guide themselves to base their own values in relation to traditional female standards.

Some of the “older girls” comment that “foveiro” behavior was associated to an enthusiasm for the novelty of sexual “experimentation”, a circumstance that they passed through when they were between 11 and 12. The change in mentality was consubstantiated in the social control exercised by the peers, especially friends, who repeatedly repressed “sluttiness” and at times initiated disparagement.

Although fleeting relationships are part of the dynamic of affirmation of female and male gender identities, the “fire” that strikes girls at the time of puberty was understood as “uncontrolled hormones”, not a period of youthful exploration and self-realization (Amy SCHALET, 2011). The centrality of a discourse that encompasses the natural-social dichotomy in the construction of differentiation of gender reveals how the reproduction of the naturalization of differences between men and women takes place (CONNELL, 2002; BOURDIEU, 2012; Pedro PINTO *et al.*, 2012). If for boys impulsiveness triggers an expected transgression of frontiers of safe and suitable exercise of sexuality, for girls the cultural expectation is that they assume a role that maintains limits in physical and moral terms (SALEM, 2006).

Between cultural permanencies and changes: contextualizing the creation of (other) narratives for girls

In this section, we emphasize the constitutive importance of contextually agreed upon references. The local regime of gender is materialized at the “gaps” and structural “barriers” that condition the steering of gender construction processes in terms of availability (or not) of resources, participation, reference models and exposure to a variety of situations in life (Susan WILLIAMS, 2002). The melting pot of particularities in sociability among peers and in the administration of discipline shapes a context where girls have tangible opportunities to manipulate the meanings imputed to categories of girl and negotiate gradients of meaning to actions of each subject position, based on the reading – now always conscious – that they make of a situation, of current social rules, behavior and values.

The localization of the school in a busy zone of the city provided the girls various opportunities for fun such as luncheonettes, squares, shopping centers and beaches. The sociability lived in the school environment extended after class in “moment[s] that allow being young”, that are highly valued because they are at ease among each other. They would buy coconut water, soda or alcoholic drinks and snacks at a supermarket close to the school and meet to talk or flirt at some square or beach.

At the school itself, the students enjoy a certain liberty of action and expression. The disciplinary management adopted by the administration is based on dialog, complacency and on the assumption of mutual commitments between teachers, students and parents and guardians. The disagreement by teachers about what they consider a “lack of rigor” and compliance with punitive rules by the administration is expressed in regular reprimands for indiscipline and/or “vulgar” conduct, in the case of the girls. Expressions of sexuality that are more “provocative” were referred to the administration, which did not treat this behavior as a disciplinary issue, as it gave priority to preventing violence among students. The procedure adopted was counseling so that they would try to develop a more open relationship with mothers, and learn from their romantic and sexual experiences.

The control over the behavior of students was also relativized by the interpersonal distancing maintained by teachers. Discouraged by the precarious conditions of the public function and disbelieving in students who come from communities affected by drug dealing and criminality, some of them regularly missed work. Students without class or who skipped “really boring classes” spent a lot of time in the halls and yard. The dispersal was not controlled by the school monitors, who

did not continuously oversee the students. In fact, they only watched from a distance. They were also not motivated, given that monitors were outsourced employees, linked to companies that regularly missed payments, and the monitors could go months without receiving their salaries.

In sum, the school discipline oscillated among situations of constraint, but mainly characterized by a lack of regulation or a more permissive attitude, which wound up reducing the consecrated institutional control over manifestations of pleasure (even games, laughing and joy) and of affective-sexual interest (Paulo Rogério NEVES, 2008). The relational fluency among girls and boys was apparent: friends of both sexes sat on each other's laps, hugging or caressing. This situation allowed a certain levity in treating sexuality, which appeared to be more articulated with its ludic dimensions and of an expression of power. Heterosexual interactions permeated by "gaiatice" [playfulness] required a greater disinhibition on the part of girls and boys. A sweet or pure appearance was related to "chatice" [being boring], difficulties in constructing "good friendships" and "enjoying" the moment. This form of establishing relations appeared to loosen the demand (or the contours) of idealized female conduct, and sexual moderation was required of the girls.

As some of the boys said, "they should take some time, wait before making out with another" (Martim, 14). Therefore, it was up to the girls to "preserve themselves", exercising restraint and self-control. The boys indicated that they distinguished between uncontrolled sexual behavior and sexually active conduct. The statement by Ernesto (15) reflected the perception of a negative generational change about the exercise of sexuality by the girls:

That type of girl who makes out with someone today, and tomorrow is with another, I don't like that type of girl. It's ugly for her, she doesn't value herself [but] it's normal to make out [with them], to go out with them is not. [...] previously the girls wanted a serious relationship, to have romance, fall in love, but today [they] are not interested, they don't want anything serious, they only want to fool around.

It is in this direction that the terms "forward" and "rodada" [loose] help us to understand the (re)significations of gender produced by students. Used to represent girls whose sexual behavior is dissonant from the conventional configurations of femininity, these categories exhibit different "degrees" of heteroglossia (Becky FRANCIS, 2010): they are nuances of a *continuum* of reprehensible behavior, and offer a mitigation of immoral conduct, or even of the semantic of a euphemism that proves to be relevant in the treatment by their peers and in the handling of social positioning.

The term "loose" was used to insult and demean colleagues who "put themselves out", are "vulgar"; it is a "curse" similar to "slut". It refers to girls known for publicly boasting about sexual feats, for example, to make out with a high number of boys at school or at parties. Only used with a disparaging connotation, "loose" does not appear as a category of self-identification. For this reason, some of the girls said to be "loose" define themselves as "forward", linking this position to a personal and social quality, an indication of "independence", as was mentioned above by Yolanda. The narratives indicate a desire to "live for themselves", to enjoy a liberty and independence that they consider to contrast with involvement in stable romantic relations (Sueli SALVA, 2008).

Girls who "admit to being forward" usually observe that the difference in relation to normal girls is limited to the fact that they "are not ashamed of devaluing themselves. They do openly what the quiet ones do in secret. I think that [a forward girl] is more advanced than the quiet ones. It's a question of attitude", as Renata (14) affirmed. This discourse indicated the intent to separate the category of "forward" from the flaw of being "immature", to the degree that they communicate their determination to act according to their own discretion and desire.

The position of a "forward" subject could be a way to express alterity and power. The fulcral role attributed to the right to initiative and to sexual expression is manifest in the understanding of the heterosexual relationship as a domain where they feel that they can enjoy power over the boys. To "use the boys" was not only a form of experimenting with their sexuality, but, to some degree, it provided a space for exercising autonomy and exploring their own desires. Even with the social control of peers and surrounding adults, a sense of right to their own body prevailed among them. To exercise the right to desire and affective-sexual pleasure appears to extend to a desire for the freedom to be who they want to be, to feel that they can act and make things happen. This is how, as part of the self, sexuality comes to be signified as a trajectory of embodied relational experiences of feeling, knowing and being (Deborah TOLMAN, 2005).

"New" identities reveal the multiplicity and discontinuity of culture (Guacira LOURO, 2019). A questioning of hegemonic systems, institutions and practices is manifest in contemporary society in the diversified ways that girls live, conceive and position themselves in sexual-affective relations. The assumption of an active posture in relationships (expressing physical attraction and a desire to "make-out" with boys) is associated to a valorization of sexual conquest and experimentation, and can be interpreted as a trait of "female protagonism" (Cláudia GARCIA; Rosimeri da SILVA, 2011; Juliana VARGAS, 2008; 2015).

The construction of a sense of self as a sexual being is of clear importance for the conformation of femininities. The attempt to make gender norms flexible, establishing a greater equity in sexual

interactions, leads to a certain level of individualization of behaviors. However, the process is fragmented, and the partial modernization of sexual scripts can result in a permanence of asymmetric gender relations (Daniel JONES, 2010). This steering can point to a learning of gender in which the perception of self is measured through the perspective of the boys (TOLMAN, 2005).

In addition to the manifest exercise of sexuality, various “forward” girls use physical and verbal aggressions, signified by them as acts of self-affirmation. To “impose oneself” was their way of demanding equitable treatment by girls and mainly by boys. In the words of Lília (12): “When a person humiliates you, it’s harassment, not a game. I do not have to accept it because I am a girl... why does there have to be a difference between boys and girls?”.

Even if the use of violence as a means of contesting male domination establishes a complex tension between the reproduction of and resistance to traditional gender meanings, we disagree with the argument of authors like Diane Reay (2001) who interpret violent acts as a rejection of a certain form of being a girl (and being feminine) and associate female identity as necessarily averse to aggression. A productive perspective of violence can be glimpsed when we consider the agency over it and how it operates in the process of construction of gender identity (Bruna SOUZA, 2015). The return to the discussion of the borders between genders (or the access to equality) was based on the extension to women of a set of rights granted to men. The performances of “standing up” – to bullying suffered or in (re)action to rivalries that emerge in sexualized disputes – signify “courage”, a symbol of activity and strength. As discussed in the research of Neves (2008), Vargas (2008) and Rosineide Cordeiro *et al.* (2010), violence constitutes an exciting form of destabilizing the gender hierarchy, signified as an “attitude” with potential for redistribution of power and social prestige. Meanwhile, acts of physical and verbal violence signal a recourse to visibility, but not of social appreciation.

The constant process of reiteration of identity causes cracks that can lead to subversion and challenge (BUTLER, 1993). Nevertheless, subversion is not located outside the norm; it constitutes an ambivalent operation that acts at the interior of the norm, producing shifts and questionings of the hegemonic concept of normality.

This discussion is deepened here with the group that called itself the “evolveds”. In an effort to modify the dominant power relations and the local hierarchy, these girls resignify values and characteristics related to traditional femininity. Various authors have emphasized how the distancing of young women from practices that produce passivity, submission and superficiality has recreated the feminine in social relations of power. The “modernization” of gender emerges as part of a cultural process of repositioning of femininity idealized through attributes such as assertiveness, autonomy and individual liberty (Anita HARRIS, 2004; Angela McROBBIE, 2009; Shelley BUDGEON, 2014).

“Girls of today” – as many of them identify themselves – emphasized that they have “initiative” and “take a position”. To justify the assumption of an active sexuality and of expressions of autonomy and will that, even if isolated, give flexibility to the idea of rigidly separated male and female attributes, the “evolved” girls usually affirm that “the world changed and girls are also changing”. The following portion of the interview with Lucília (12) synthesizes this concept, interpreted by her as that of an “authorial girl”:

I have asked a boy to make out with me, I have asked a boy to go out with me, I have already been rejected for this, but I asked. I think it's very interesting, without that falseness. You have to have initiative right? If you only go halfway, if you don't take the first step, you won't get anywhere. And I think this capacity of ours to do the things that girls normally don't do is interesting ... I really think it's not fair that girls don't take a position. I am critical, I am who I am, without being ashamed, without being afraid (...) I think that the boys think that they have to take a position, but that was centuries ago, we are in the 21st century and I think that it's time for everyone to accept the attitude of a woman. So, I don't see a problem, I don't see a difference (...). It's an opening, an opportunity that my mother already had but my grandmother didn't, and now I have this opening... I know that there are people who do not accept this, but so what, like, I know that I pay for it, but I do it... I take responsibility for what I do, who I am.

The “evolved” girl is conceived by the group as a way of being that originated in the advances in social participation of women found in contemporary society and of the moral claim to their right to exercise freedom of action and express their desires. It involves “being able to do the things that boys do” (Sofia, 12). The recognition of gender inequalities that they live in their daily life aligned to an alternative classification system manifest in the effort to establish distinction and social recognition, not by means of characterizations of girls as “good” or “bad”, but between “people capable” (or not) of facing socially valued symbols and capacities such as power, activity, strength etc.⁸

⁸ As Thorne (1997) pondered, given the social value of male attributes it is reasonable that youth are guided and aligned with practices and values of the dominant group. This leads us to believe that it is highly important to fill the gap of knowledge about the assimilation of discourses associated to modernization of customs by girls in practices of femininity produced in daily interactions (THORNE, 1997).

In contrast to the “forward” girls – who emphasize the development of a sexually active behavior (HARRIS, 2004; BAY-CHENG, 2015) – the “evolved” girls focused on the qualities and social values that they said they had. Adjectives like “courage”, “attitude”, “better”, “superior”, “evolution” are foundational to the social affirmation of this “new type of girl” who is more strongly linked with an emerging culture of empowerment. This dynamic of identity affirmation is expressed in the provocations and satires with which they deprecate the decadence of “boys today” (“weak”, “immature”, “childish”) in comparison with themselves. The strategy of “inverting roles” related to traditional masculinity and femininity rests on the reorganization of conventional gender practices as a means to revert the inequalities between girls and boys. Thus, the tenacity and initiative of girls contrasts with the foolishness of the boys, who are still stuck to infantile behavior. This perspective would reflect the extemporaneous maturing of the girls, who must deal with the demands to be good students, well-behaved and assume some tasks of taking care of the home. In contrast, the boys “have nothing in their head, they don’t know how to have a conversation”, “they have less attitude, they are nothing”, “they don’t take responsibility, they don’t do anything with life, just play”.

Considering a human rights perspective, the discursive interventions of the “evolved” girls formalize a space of evaluation and contestation of norms, in terms of just or unjust, of suitable or unsuitable, which in itself is a composition of new values in the local context. The salient idea of parity of participation fundamentally requires the exercise of basic human rights under equal conditions. It approaches Agnes Heller’s (1998) concept that equality must be understood as equality in liberty and equality in opportunities, conceived as concomitant in social processes.

The subject position of the “evolved” appears to result largely from the diffusion of feminist ideas in the common sense of her social environment. Although they were not consciously engaged in a discourse defined as such, these girls employed it in the microcosm of daily life and by doing so reveal that they perceive that their living experiences are implicitly structured by gender. Like the participants in the study by Budgeon (2001), the discursive negotiations employed by this group seek to confront the ways that girls are specifically positioned by competing gender discourses. This leads us to recall the model of recognition proposed by Nancy Fraser (2007). From this perspective, non-recognition is not expressed in terms of depreciation of identity, but as social subordination: “what requires recognition is not the specific identity of the group, but the status of its individual members as full partners in the social interaction” (FRASER, 2007, p. 13). The discursivity that breaks with hegemonic narratives about the naturalness of the binary of gender and of ideological discourses about how certain roles or sexual acts would be inherent to men or to women affects precisely the institutionalized standards of cultural devaluation that construct certain categories of social actors as normative and others as inferior, and whose result is the configuration of the latter as less than effective members of society.

In terms of experiencing sexuality, the idea of “power over oneself” was prevalent. The challenge to the notion of appropriate femininity is made by establishing an opposition between passivity and courage, based on which they insert a grammar that established a hierarchy founded on the interdictions of normative femininity. Regarding this point, there is a confluence between the “forward” and the “evolved” girls: both signify “courage” as a symbol of attitude and strength. It is this (superior) moral sense that drives the manifest action. As Camila (15) said: “There are some girls here that think I am putting out, a slut. Why? When I want to, I go get what I want... And when I want a boy I don’t send a friend, I go there and I get him. You have to know how to do it, and I do”.

Courage was consensually a quality highly appreciated by the adolescents. Many of them mentioned that “since they were too quiet”, they did not have “courage for anything”. On the other hand, the statement by Camila indicates that, although they say they are more distanced from the limitations of passive femininity, their position as subject is also based on the schemes of skills of sexual conquest.

The “use” of active sexuality among the “evolved” girls, however, is distant from the current post-feminist notion of an emphasis on emancipated sexuality to mark independence between genders (VELDING, 2017). It is not an issue of synthesizing (or reducing) the right of women to equality to active sexuality, but of glimpsing a “posture of activity” as a form of attaining more equitable positions of gender. It is a demand for parity of participation and power of expression aimed at liberation from the pre-existing constraints that limit their opportunities in life.

The very belief in the ability to arbitrate and conduct their sexuality constitutes a form of significant protagonism in a phase of life in which sexuality is constituted as an essential element of sociability and identity construction. The manifestation of ideas of sexual pleasure and power resist normative gender practices. The narratives of “sexual equality” appear to offer the girls a greater sense of sexual freedom, autonomy and to open them to a diversity of options that would not be available in another form (NAYAK; KEHILY, 2013; Joni MEENAGH, 2017).

Nevertheless, subversive performances are usually more accessible to subjects from privileged groups (Susan LURIE, 1999). It was possible to identify a greater social acceptance (or a lack of public questioning) of the “older” girls who identify as “evolved” in comparison to the “forwards”.

Beyond emphasizing differences of power and status and therefore the opportunity for action among adolescents, this discrimination (by age) shows us the importance of caring about the image they project to others (BUTLER, 1993; Deborah YOUDELL, 2006; FJAER *et al.*, 2015). Unlike younger adolescents, they are not usually involved in interactions of a sexual content in school, most have already been committed to a "serious boyfriend" or go out with older boys ("they are men", "mature") from the nearby high school. The adoption of a more "discrete" behavior was also seen in the involvement in situations of ostensive confrontation with colleagues and teachers.

Considering the fragility of the concepts analyzed here, we can suggest that in terms of expression of social disputes the categories "normal", "forward", "loose" and "evolved" appear as discursive models constituted in a universe of characteristically ambiguous practices and behaviors. The ambiguity is noted to the degree that the categories are combined or diverge at each circuit of social events and/or personal motivations that shape the dynamics of the context of the peers. To occupy the position of a "female" subject is to be both a subject as well as an object, it is to "inhabit both types of spaces at the same time, it is to live a contradiction" (Teresa DE LAURETIS, 1989, p. 26).

Various authors have discussed the ambiguity of subjective values, norms and possibilities that are established by the coexistence of discourses of sexual freedom and control over sexuality (DAMATTA, 1997; Anthony GIDDENS, 2003; Mirian GOLDENBERG, 2015). In spite of changes in the exercise of sexuality, it is in the field of discourse that normative sexuality resists, serving as the foundation of gender hierarchies and differences⁹ (GOLDENBERG, 2015). In fact, taking our study as an example, the resignifications of attributes, values and forms of relationships promoted by the "evolved" and "forward" girls do not generate changes in the gender order, but constitute ruptures with hegemonic ideas at a micro level (BUTLER, 1990).

The negotiation of forms of conduct is supported by the polarized representations of "good" and "bad" girl, and therefore, usually preserves a structure of available subjectivities that are characteristically inhibitive and restrictive (YOUDELL, 2006). The movement of disjunction becomes more complex when we consider that discourse focused on sexual reputation not only provides descriptive labels, but models for behavior that invite the adolescents to look and understand their social world in specific ways. Thus, the look of the other is internalized so that the self becomes simultaneously an observer and seen, an evaluator and an object evaluated (Sandra BARTKY, 1991).

Final Considerations

To cast light on the discussion of gender discourses as practice allows visualizing a field of dispute around modes of being and moral values that dialectically engender the process of gender socialization that is simultaneously a factor of reproduction of social, material and symbolic structures, and a field of action and representation of the subject.

The discourses (ways of speaking) and subject positions (modes of being) express the core of the adoption, distancing or even conjunction of various attributes that represent a certain gender identity. By exploring the discursive constructions of the participants of the study, we can contextualize results of the regime of moral vigilance and constraint exercised by peers in homo and heterosocial planes. The appropriation of the dominant social model of gender makes it important to perceive how the relations established in a given context are organized. The learning of gender is constituted in this familiarization with practices, values, roles and forms of interaction present in the local culture.

Categorization emerges as an important component of construction of gender performances and identities, not only by making intelligible the cultural expectations and gender norms in the daily interactions but also by negotiating performances that are recognizable by peers. The discursive conflict between antagonistic categories proves to be essential for the exhibition of (and resistance to) identities, highlighting moral postures – who they are and that in which they believe. This work of establishing frontiers seeks to confer social legitimacy to certain modes of being a girl through the naturalization of certain concepts about "correct, ideal, appropriate" behavior.

Female identity is constructed by this interplay of differences and oppositions that do not flow between poles of an "I" and an exterior "other" such as hegemonic masculinity, but situationally shape opposing poles. Thus, the process of feminization is constructed in the meanders of balancing between poles that are in tension in traditional normativity: female performances are produced by surfing between being respectable and being daring and sexually (pro)active.

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⁹ For reflection by readers we offer the observation made by Budgeon (2014) that some practices and representations based on gender inequalities have not ceased; they sub-exist reframed at the discursive level. The integration of egalitarian ideas in discourses and representations can certainly operate as a tendency towards change that also includes strong dynamics of continuity.

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