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Sexual fluidity among non-heterosexual men: discourses and practices on sexual variability negotiated with hegemonic masculinity

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ABSTRACT

Hegemonic masculinity constitutes a relevant tool for understanding the genderization processes prevailing in men's sexualities. Hence, we deployed this concept as a resource to analyse how sexual fluidity might apply to the sexuality of non-heterosexual men and how they experienced this. We carried out semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, ranging from 20 to 53 years old, who all reported having experienced sexual fluidity. This article presents experiences of sexual fluidity as a shifting identity amidst flexible sexual activities and concerns over normativity through personal and social reactions taking place in a *heterostable* social world. These results exhibit the negotiations of sexual fluidity with hegemonic masculinities, both reproduced and questioned.

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Introduction

In a study exclusively involving women which, along with other research findings, helped debut the concept of sexual fluidity with a seemingly greater applicability to female experiences, Lisa Diamond defined sexual fluidity as a 'situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness (...) that makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation' (Diamond, 2008, p. 3).

For various years, research on sexual fluidity has tended to focus more on women than on men and with several studies portraying female sexuality as more fluid than male sexuality (e.g. Baumeister, 2000; Mock & Eibach, 2012; Ross, Daneback, & Månsson, 2012). For instance, the study by Ross et al. (2012), in which participants were women and men with fluid or fixed sexual orientations, describes how women report the greatest fluidity in sexual orientation in both their fantasies and sexual behaviours. These authors state: 'this may relate to greater stigma associated with same-sex behaviour in men compared to women, or to male roles being more specified than female ones' (Ross et al., 2012, p. 458).

When we ask ourselves why research about sexual fluidity reinforces the scope of sexual fluidity as being more suited to women, we not only encounter a set of distinct prescriptions for the sexuality of men and women, but we also face a social system of surveillance that controls masculinity across several aspects including sexuality (Grave, Teixeira, Teixeira, Marques, & Nogueira, 2020; Santos, 2009). In addition, it is important to take into consideration hegemonic masculinity as a gender configuration, socially constructed as Western, white, and middle class (Lamb et al., 2018), which brings together the current and cultural responses of the patriarchal system, elevating masculinity to 'dominant' and privileging the traits traditionally considered 'natural' in men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Regarding sexuality, these traits include a performance that preferably implies the maintenance of heterosexuality through an active sex life that does not contemplate changes in sexual attractions (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Grave et al., 2020). Heteronormativity and homophobia seem to ground hegemonic masculinity (Diefendorf & Bridges, 2020). Thus, sexuality is imbued with the effects of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Men with nonnormative sexual experiences may face social constraints due to contradictions between the norms controlling their sexuality and the rules of gender assignment (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Grave et al., 2020), which may contribute to men either having fewer experiences of sexual fluidity or reporting them less frequently. Therefore, in understanding sexuality as a social product and a complex relationship of concepts and discourses (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986) in which the confirmation of masculinity is achieved through its hegemonic performance (Connell, 1995), the concept of hegemonic masculinity represents an important tool that assists in the study of sexual fluidity in men even while there is only scarce research that deploys hegemonic masculinity to study sexual fluidity.

Therefore, considering sexual fluidity as a potential human attribute, justifies questioning the concept's applicability to men's experience, and recent research on sexual fluidity has also brought into debate this scope. Examples would include the studies by Sabra Katz-Wise (2014), Jane Ward (2015), Tony Silva (2017), Ritch Savin-Williams (2017), and Carrillo and Hoffman (2018). However, most research on sexual fluidity in men takes heterosexuality as its starting point and correspondingly denotes a heteronormative bias. Terms such as mostly straight (Savin-Williams, 2017) or heteroflexible (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018), for instance, distinguish a set of participants who identify as heterosexual, whose sexual experiences express flexibility when choosing their sexual partners. These studies focus on men exclusively or primarily attracted to women that identify themselves as heterosexual, but their sexual activities present some disruption to heterosexuality. However, the study of sexual fluidity in men continues to grow, even if tied to a heteronormative bias in which the heterosexual participants reinforce the elastic quality of heterosexuality (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018), implying the assumption of a fluid heterosexual performance (Cover, 2015). Nevertheless, our study does not reinforce heteronormativity while contesting the traditional assumptions of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2012).

There is furthermore a lack of research about sexual fluidity with non-heterosexual men. This article addresses this gap by providing an overview of the sexual fluidity experiences of 15 non-heterosexual men within the Portuguese context. Thus, this study sought to apply the theoretical framework of masculinities as the perspective for

studying the concept of sexual fluidity and understanding its potential applicability to men implicitly engaged in negotiating hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, we discuss the experiences of sexual fluidity given the social reinforcement for maintaining sexual stability, that is, maintaining throughout life a constant sexual identity and stable sexual experiences coherent with that identity. These experiences are bounded by the heteronormative social organization (Butler, 1999; Callis, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pascoe, 2007; Warner, 1991). We also debate the concerns around normativity, including individual identity dilemmas derived from nonnormative sexual and emotional experiences, and the oppressions/privileges of normativity in masculinities (Ahmed, 2006; Connell, 1995; Lamb et al., 2018; Wilton, 2004).

From hegemonic masculinities to sexual fluidity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was introduced to the scientific literature by Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995). Although subject to certain criticisms, or misunderstandings (e.g. Beasley, 2008; Hearn, 2004), the concept continues to influence research into interdisciplinary understandings of gender and masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). The work of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) contributed to important re-conceptualizations and reformulations of a concept that remains a useful tool for analysing gender order in masculinities (Christofidou, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2019). This is because hegemonic masculinity makes it possible to identify and evaluate how gender power operates on multiple levels, including sexuality. In this way, it provides a framework for understanding the intricacies of gender inequalities since 'gender and sexuality inequality are often simultaneously being challenged and reproduced' (Diefendorf & Bridges, 2020, p. 16).

Hegemonic masculinity represents a social construction; a gender configuration that gathers the cultural responses of a patriarchal system into a set of symbolically represented normative prescriptions that guide and discipline the collective and individual thinking about what it is and how it is like to be a man (Connell, 1987, 1995). The concept of hegemonic masculinity contributes to better understanding the multiplicity and hierarchy of masculinities, which construct different expressions over time in accordance with the specific prevailing social, cultural, and geographic contexts (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In educational, family, professional or even intimate and personal contexts, hegemonic masculinities are historically constructed and reconstructed locally, regionally, and globally (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These changing hegemonic masculinities, while neither fixed nor static, and therefore multiple (Allan, Waddell, Herron, & Roger, 2019; Beasley, 2008), represent the set of practices, characteristics, and qualities of masculinities that legitimize inequalities in gender relations not only between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, but also among men and among masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinities are shaped by historical and cultural changes and by the intersections of gender with other categories of belonging, such as ethnicity, social class, age, and sexuality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In Portugal, hegemonic masculinities are premised on the idea of physical strength, power, control, wage labour and family provider, fatherhood, heteronormativity, heterosexual desire and potency, homophobia, and an emotional detachment that justifies violence, and spurning everything

deemed feminine (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2012; Marques, 2011; Santos, 2009). Thus, this works as a regulatory and inspirational force for male conduct in keeping with its capacity to reinforce a system of heteronormativity (Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007; Warner, 1991) and stabilize sexual identities and experiences (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004) within which sexualities are socially constructed (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986). Therefore, as previously stated, the concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful tool to identify and characterize the genderization processes ongoing in various spheres of life, such as interpersonal relationships and, specifically, sexual relationships (Christofidou, 2021; Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lamb et al., 2018). For this reason, this concept was selected to inform the analysis of men's experiences of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008).

Lisa Diamond presents sexual fluidity as 'a capacity for situation dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, which allows individuals to experience changes in same-sex or other-sex desire, over both short-term and long-term time periods' (Diamond, 2016, p. 249). According to this author, sexual fluidity constitutes an additional component of sexuality that highlights the volatility of preferences, attitudes, behaviours, and sexual identities. This explains how sexual preferences differ over time and depend on the respective contexts of individuals (Diamond, 2008, 2016), suggesting human sexuality is not fixed but rather volatile and with the potential to change over time (Diamond, 2008; Diamond, Alley, Dickenson, & Blair, 2020).

Sexual fluidity is a flexible sexual response that, depending on the time and context to such an extent that a person may periodically experience sexual attraction that is otherwise not compatible with their sexual orientation and regardless of the sexual identification they choose to adopt (Diamond, 2008). The author refers to the existence of relatively stable predispositions in certain phases of life and with greater flexibility in others while never deterministically rigid. Nevertheless, such capacities for change in sexual attraction may never manifest themselves or, should the person encounter situations that contribute to those changes, may emerge on several occasions over the course of their life span (Diamond, 2008, 2016).

Following a longitudinal study exclusively with women, Lisa Diamond (2008) coined the concept of sexual fluidity. This was followed by several research projects on female sexuality during a period when the stability of male sexuality went unquestioned even while the scope for the sexual fluidity of women was reinforced (Diamond, 2008). These theorizations around sexual fluidity emerged in a social environment guided by hegemonic masculinity, a force of surveillance and control that marginalizes the sexualities of men who do not comply with the sexual norms stipulated (Butler, 1999; Callis, 2014; Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007). However, research on sexual fluidity in men has recently proliferated. Below, we present some leading examples.

Katz-Wise (2014), one of the pioneers of the study of sexual fluidity in men, has conducted a study of 199 participants (men and women) to understand the 'relationship between gender and sexual fluidity in female and male sexual minority young adults; and to explore the relationships between sexual fluidity and specific dimensions of sexual orientation, and between sexual fluidity and traditional conceptualizations of sexual identity development' (Katz-Wise, 2014, p. 13). Katz-Wise (2014) supports Lisa Diamond's theory of sexual fluidity and extends its applicability to men by demonstrating that 64% of women and 52% of men reported sexual fluidity at the level of sexual

attractions, with 23% of women and 22% of men reporting changes in sexual attractions more than once in their life paths.

Jane Ward (2015) was also responsible for extending studies of sexual fluidity in men through case studies about men who self-identified as heterosexual while resorting to homoerotic behaviours as masculinity initiation rituals in both military and urban contexts in the U.S. The author uses the term *dude-sex* to illustrate these male sexual experiences (Ward, 2015).

Similarly, but in rural contexts, Tony Silva (2017) explores how men who identify as heterosexual resort to what this author calls *bud-sex*. These men identify themselves as ‘strictly masculine’ (Silva, 2017, p. 8), masculine in behaviour, in corporality, in communication, as well as in sexual orientation, thus self-identifying as heterosexual, who nevertheless maintain sexual practices, in secrecy and without emotional involvement, with ‘guys like me’ (Silva, 2017, p. 11), that is, with other men with masculine and heterosexual performances.

Savin-Williams (2017) analysed the narratives of men who consider themselves mostly straight but accept nurturing sexual attractions and/or fantasies directed toward men even while their primary sexual and romantic attraction is toward women. Thus, they present themselves as predominantly but not absolutely heterosexual, reinforcing how sexual identification and orientation may vary.

Lastly, Carrillo and Hoffman (2018) discuss the experiences of men seeking sex with men while maintaining their identities as straight and in this way reconceptualize the category of heterosexuality, permeabilizing it to encapsulate the scope for encompassing same-sex attractions and sexual behaviours.

These studies represent some examples of research on male sexual fluidity that illustrate the permeability of heterosexuality. It is important to highlight the significance of these studies that have revolutionized the way male sexuality is studied, presenting its variability, and challenging the notions of hegemonic masculinity as premised only on homophobia. However, as previously stated, these studies are shaped by heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) as they present the experiences of men who identify themselves as heterosexual yet are flexible. On the contrary, this article intends to contribute to the study of sexual fluidity in non-heterosexual men, applying the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a resource for its analysis and understanding, starting from, and arriving at, the variability of sexuality.

Methods

Participants

Fifteen people with experiences of sexual fluidity participated in this study (Diamond, 2008), ages ranging from 20 to 53 years, with an average age of 33. Participants’ self-identifications are diverse, constituting a non-heterosexual group (Table 1). The recruitment process will be explained subsequently.

As regards these self-identifications, it is important to note that in the recruitment phase, we explained we were looking for participants who identified as men with experiences of sexual fluidity. In this knowledge and with participant consent, we proceeded with the interviews. However, during the interviews themselves, three participants

Table 1. Participant self-characterizations.

Participants	Age	Self-identifications		Country of origin
		Sex/gender	Sexual orientation	
Alexandre	33	masculine	bisexual	Portugal
Bernardo	34	cis man	bi	Portugal
Carlos	53	masculine	bisexual but I consider myself fluid	Portugal
Diogo	23	masculine	homosexual	Brazil
Eduardo	20	masculine	bi to be easier to understand	Portugal
Fabiano	28	masculine	bisexual	Portugal
Guilherme	38	fluid	fluid	Portugal
Henrique	32	masculine	fluid	Brazil
Ivo	30	gender queer	pansexual	India
Jaime	29	masculine	polysexual	Portugal
Lourenço	24	masculine	I am not straight, I am not gay and I am not bi	Portugal
Mário	24	masculine	bisexual	Brazil
Nelson	48	cis man	bisexual	Portugal
Óscar	39	queer	queer	Portugal
Paulo	42	masculine	bisexual but perceived as gay	Portugal

problematised the term ‘man’. They claimed other terms for their self-identification regarding the sex and gender system for ideological and political purposes. Respect for diversity and personal identity wills are transversal to this work. Therefore, the authors would highlight how Guilherme presented himself as ‘fluid,’ Ivo as ‘gender queer,’ and Óscar as ‘queer’. The remaining participants identify themselves as cis-men or masculine. The authors consider these personal self-identifications in no way invalidate the participation of these three individuals who, like other participants, explored their experiences of sexuality within the scope of masculinities.

The names of the participants in this article are fictitious as are all other factors that might compromise their confidentiality and anonymity. All participants are fluent in Portuguese.

Procedure

The research received approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto.

For recruitment, we set out a call through an online form where participants could sign up to participate in the study. The call contained information about the study and a description of the participants requested: men with experiences of sexual fluidity (comprising an explanation of sexual fluidity). This process was mediated by privileged contacts, personal and institutional, who facilitated both the dissemination of the call through online social groups, and the direct recruitment of participants divulging the study verbally and directly to potential participants. This approach is appropriate in keeping with the difficulties in identifying and contacting potential participants (Heckathorn, 1997). All participants received a detailed explanation about the research and its objectives. Participants provided their explicit consent to participating in this study by signing an informed consent form.

Recruitment ended when the research team found that new data would not be adding relevant information meeting the study’s aims, thus no different theme emerged from the new interviews and, therefore, attaining theoretical saturation (Fontanella, Ricas, & Turato, 2008).

Between April 2019 and February 2020, semi-structured interviews took place on a one-on-one basis with a team member. These lasted an average duration of 2-hours. All the interviews were recorded in an audio format before later being transcribed by the same researcher who carried out the interviews. These interviews were held in Portuguese with the most relevant excerpts translated into English by the authors. The interview script to access respondent narratives contained questions including; (i) inquire about participant sexual histories, considering the dynamics regarding practices, partners and experiences; (ii) seek to know and characterize their current sexual experiences and aspirations, as well as their prevailing relationships with sexual orientation and sexual identity, including the descriptive features of their sexual desires, considering body, emotions, and affections; and (iii) characterize participant positions regarding social categories related to sexual orientation and sexual identity and understand how they integrate them into their daily interactions. This is a qualitative study that seeks to access language as research data through contextualized meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006), therefore valuing the involvement of the researchers with subjectivity and reflexivity who adopted a critical and social constructionist perspective.

Given the difficulties in recruiting participants, this study contained a relatively small and homogeneous group of participants in accordance with certain sociodemographic characteristics, for instance, the fact that all participants lived, at the present time, in urban areas (Oporto and Lisbon). In addition, recruitment made recourse to privileged contacts, which generates limitations due to the potential for bias in the group of participants. Therefore, it is impossible to analyse the intersectional influences of different categories of belonging. This study is furthermore not comparable to that developed by Diamond (2008) as it both differs in several aspects and is not a longitudinal study. Nevertheless, we sought to access the narratives of participants about their sexual fluidity experiences and this analysis stems from those accounts.

Data analysis

To align the study objectives with the qualitative nature of the data, we applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the narratives of participants, enhancing the understanding of the explicit or implicit meanings in their discourses. Thus, we followed the six phases of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three researchers were involved in the analysis process. Data familiarization, in which the authors systematically read the interviews, resulted in the production of the initial codes. Then, we initiated the search for themes, which included the continuous rereading and coding of all the interviews. After defining the themes, all the interviews were read again by the three researchers to not only ascertain the applicability of the themes to the entire data set but also check for additional themes. Finally, we named the themes and subthemes, established the relationships among them and set out the analytical results.

Analysis

Of the various themes identified by this analysis, this article focuses on two that stand out for their correspondence and articulation of meanings. Their cohesion and unity allowed for analysis and discussion without the inclusion of the remaining themes.

The first theme hereby discussed is entitled *experiencing sexual fluidity* and comprises several experiences of sexual variability within a social context that establishes heterosexuality and the rigidity of identity categories as the norm (Butler, 1999; Callis, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pascoe, 2007; Warner, 1991). The experiences discussed below encompass the events that acted as triggers for the variations in the attractions of participant, thus experiences of sexual fluidity. In relation to hegemonic masculinity, we would highlight, for instance, that sexual fluidity often arises as a consequence of the pressure for sexual activity that many men report through the intricacies of masculinities. The other theme discussed encapsulates *concerns of normativity* and includes the link between the individual identity dilemmas of participants and the oppressions/privileges of normativity in masculinities (Ahmed, 2006; Connell, 1995; Lamb et al., 2018; Wilton, 2004). Study participants, being non-heterosexual, encounter social reactions that result in discrimination and personal and identity concerns. These are the effects of hegemonic masculinity that demands permanent heterosexuality.

Experiencing sexual fluidity

Participants' experiences of sexuality match sexual fluidity concept defined by Diamond (2008, 2016) as sexual flexibility that allows for the experience of variations in sexual attraction depending on the sex/gender of the partner, time, and context. As 32-year-old Henrique explains, 'I use the term 'fluid'. My attraction varies between men or women anyway, and it depends on the moment. The moment defines it'. After being asked about the experience of sexual attraction variation, Guilherme, for example, illustrates it by saying: 'Yes, [my sexual attraction] has definitely been changing. I was not constantly interested in men and women simultaneously. And it totally depends on the circumstance' (Guilherme, 38 years old). In addition, participants also highlighted the contextual and situational factors that contribute to changing their attractions (Diamond, 2008), i.e. events triggering changes in sexual attraction. Festive contexts, breakup or broken hearts, sexual initiation pressures, the ease of access to sexuality among men, and the time factor were all highlighted. Furthermore, the variability of sexuality is negotiated with hegemonic masculinity as we shall subsequently discuss.

As mentioned by Diamond (2008), people might undergo sensitivity to certain situations and relationships that may facilitate changes in sexual attractions depending on the sex/gender of the partner and more specifically on the 'exposure to environments that provide positive experiences with the same sex (...) or other sex attractions' (Diamond, 2008, p. 84). Diogo refers to how he always knew himself as gay and never questioned his sexual identity until a festive context when he felt a change in his sexual attraction:

Two years ago, during the first carnival I spent with friends, everyone was drunk, and I remember this girl (...), and she came up to us and said, 'I would love to fuck you with a strap-on,' and strangely, that seemed very interesting even though she was a woman. And there I was ... the attraction that I felt for the idea and for her was unprecedented in my life. (Diogo, 23 years old)

The experiences of breakups or unrequited love were also evoked by participants as triggers for changes in attractions, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Around the age of 26, I had a relationship for three and a half years that I thought was something more solid and ... I thought we had a future together, it did not happen. It was a disappointment at the time and that led me, maybe, to try other things, such as experiences with same-sex people. (Alexandre, 33 years old)

The feeling of being late for the first sexual experience was also mentioned by participants. Fabiano explained that he felt, for a long time, sexual attraction to women but because he also felt an urgency and social pressure over sexual initiation, the desire to have sex with men arose as he considered this easier and more accessible. Therefore, he experienced a change in sexual attractions:

At a certain point, when I was 23, 24 years old, I started looking for people ... I mean men ... online. Trying to talk and, if possible, to have something more, you know? Physical contact, I wanted to have it, because I was at a point ... hum ... I thought I was too long without ... without ... without ... sex. (Fabiano, 28 years old)

It is through discussion and narratives about sexual experience that some men find their position in their peer group and establish their masculinity (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Here, sexual practice becomes a behaviour that demands the performance of masculinity, thereby validating it (Lamb et al., 2018). The participants' narratives reinforce that they establish their masculinity through sexual conquest. The masculinity pressures for sexual practice are also reinforced by Alexandre when, for example, stating: 'I also felt that with my peers (...) you had to feel the urge to have sex right away, that needed to be ... that had to happen. When you were a teenager, it was something that (...) 'we have to do it!'' (Alexander, 33 years old). Thus, as observed in experiences at a young age, boys may become susceptible to pressure for sexual activity to achieve the privilege of belonging to the group of masculinities (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). This sexual activity is preferred whenever fulfilling heteronormative patterns (Butler, 1999; Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). However, the participants' experiences report negotiations with hegemonic masculinity and reveal the presence of reflexivity, a concept Messerschmidt evokes in his work when citing Margaret Archer (2007) and encapsulating the ability to fluctuate among given social contexts, events, interactions, structures and discourses in favour of better adapting our interactions with the world (Messerschmidt, 2020).

In this study, reflexivity emerges out of the construction of hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities as the participants do not respond to the heteronormative ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Through same-sex sexual experiences, they validate hegemonic masculinity while refuting the heteronorm. This analysis reinforces the idea that sexual activity might validate masculinity (Connell, 1995; Grave et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018), thus participants achieve victorious manhood based on the ideal of masculinity which reinforces the insistent pursuit of sex (Grave et al., 2020; Kimmel, 2006). However, this victorious manhood is achieved through subordinate masculinity since it is performed through same-sex sexuality. An unrepressed experience on an individual level, but not a similar situation on a social level, as we will discuss later.

Furthermore, as already evoked in a previous excerpt from Fabiano, the accessibility of sex with men is highlighted by participants as a facilitator to the change in attractions as also evident in Mário's description: 'You have to work on the relationship with women. Men ... it is easier to get to a man's body, it is more ... I am not saying animalistic, but it

is more ... it is lust, it is more physical' (Mário, 24 years old). There are differences in sexual activity, in this case gendered, which are important to highlight. Participants evoke distinctions in sexual performance according to the sex/gender of their partners, while reinforcing a set of experiences and characteristics of sexuality that legitimize inequalities in gender relations between men and women (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2019). They link man with control and woman with submission, assuming a protective role (Lamb et al., 2018). The excerpt of Jaime (29 years old) illustrates this difference:

I think there is a (...) physical tension with a boy, and there is a certain aggression, even friendly, (...) there is a different feeling with the woman ... The feeling of protection, caring, conquest, attention, dedication (...). Among boys, it is ... laid back, get the Playstation, whatever.

As the participants describe, in sexual experiences with men, the sex is physically intense, emotionally detached, easily accessible, and occurs immediately; in sexual experiences with women, they are described as affectionate, emotionally attached, implicated, and effort is required for the conquest. In this way, we highlight the intersections between sexuality and hegemonic masculinity in a set of normative prescriptions, symbolically represented, which guide and discipline collective and individual thinking about what it is and how it is to be a man (Connell, 1987, 1995), in this case concerning sexual performance, reiterating the submissive role of women and the dominance of men.

Time is a relevant factor in analysing sexual fluidity experiences. Participants referred to sexual attractions not reconcilable with their sexual orientation, over time, and regardless of the sexual identification they choose to apply (Diamond, 2008). Therefore, this conveys how, in the experiences of older participants, the time factor alone is a trigger for changes in attractions because desires to experience different sensations accumulate with maturity and sexual experience. As Lisa Diamond (2008) details, sexual fluidity varies according to the person, time, and context. This is how these participants narrated their sexual experiences, including that outlined by Óscar: 'I used to have stronger orientation boundaries. My attraction would be for men. Nowadays, I am more curious. Not to what it appears but I am attracted to trans-men and people of different nationalities, and I find some women quite ... they are quite erotic, so ...' (Óscar, 39 years old).

The experiences of participants highlight sexual fluidity due to volatility in sexuality. The respondents report their present sexual activity does not predict the future, with their sexuality under construction (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986), as Bernardo describes: 'From there, I assumed myself more naturally, considering my sexual orientation, my desire ... considering it is always being constructed, that it is not closed' (Bernardo, 34 years old). However, these strategies of sexual variability are situated in social contexts that impose limitations and norms. The participant discourses display negotiations with normativity, i.e. there is a social structure that privileges heterosexual monogamy (Callis, 2014; Pascoe, 2007; Warner, 1991), and sexual stability as a function of a particular sexual identity or orientation (Ahmed, 2006; Wilton, 2004):

I think we could be more fluid if it were not for the labels and models that we must fulfil. Because (...) if we had never heard about: 'they lived happily ever after,' where the thing is to fall in love and to have nothing more with anyone else and so on ... if this was not a problem for us, I think that ... people would have sex with more people, without any promiscuity

label, and with much more different people, without the need to say, 'Oh no, I am gay and I can only have relations with men' or 'I am a lesbian and I can only have relations with women' ... No, things would be more open. Although I think my sexuality is fluid, it would have been much more fluid if it was not for this imposed model. (Nelson, 48 years old)

Concerns of normativity

This theme focuses on experiences both of sexual fluidity and of masculinities limited by normative boundaries. One of the most oppressive norms in participant experiences stems from the stability and rigidity of identity categories (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004).

Regarding sexuality, the beginning of the Ahmed (2006, p. 543) article questions: 'What does it mean to be oriented?' Revealing the meanings and implications deriving from orientation. As the author explains, 'Orientations allow us to take up space insofar as they take time. Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 554). Thus, we return to the concept of time, which is central to any understanding of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008) and we analyse the *concerns of normativity* that participants presented. Along with temporality, the concept of sexual orientation enables an understanding of how life is directed by the requirement to follow what set down for us to follow, which situates us not only in the present but also in the future (Halberstam, 2005). Therefore, sexual orientation determines a certain stability by expecting particular sexual experiences, depending on people's identity that derives from their corresponding orientation. In a culture that we labelled as 'heterostable', experiences that deviate from this norm are socially constructed as deviant (Ahmed, 2006), including those experiences marked by hegemonic masculinity (Christofidou, 2021; Connell, 1995).

In this study, participants report social resistance to any sexual ambivalence that unsettles the matrix of stability (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Clarke, Cover, & Aggleton, 2018; Wilton, 2004). Participants report the external reactions of many people who do not understand their changing attractions and react with confusion, misunderstanding, and discrimination, forcing them to negotiate with and navigate against strategies of exclusion and inclusion (Wilton, 2004). The experience of Ivo illustrates the traditional binary system that operates in Western society (Elizabeth, 2013), revealing the dichotomization and polarization in the way sexual orientations and identities undergo interpretation (Bradford, 2004). This demonstrates a social unease that resists variability in sexuality:

I always go back to boys or girls, and I have argued with many people who think I just want to hide or I am afraid of being gay ... and I do not agree with those people! I know it is not like that! I know it within me! It is not easy ... but it is worth it. (Ivo, 30 years old)

And Lourenço reflects on the recurrent questions that ask him to impose a binary sexual identity of heterosexual or homosexual (Elizabeth, 2013):

I think it is perfectly normal that I am attracted to boys ... and to girls ... (...). But when they [others such as friends, family, colleagues, and so on] ask me those questions [about a binary sexual identity of heterosexual or homosexual], (...) they want me to show, to give a fixed

and concrete answer when the subject is ... it is more fluid for me! When they ask me that, I think they are trying to know more than I do about myself. (Lourenço, 24 years old)

Participant contributions focus on other people, specifically on the external and social reactions of people who do not understand variability in sexuality, which results in confusion, concerns and discrimination due to the destabilization of a comfortable certainty (Welzer-Lang, 2008). When talking about his family, Fabiano explains, 'I got to a point where I had to explain something that was basic to me, such as this [experience of sexual fluidity], like it was the theory of relativity. It is kind of weird' (Fabiano, 28 years old).

Participants' sexual experiences, marked by normativity, are under negotiation with hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities in resistance to the 'heterostable' social world. One example is Mário's need to control and manage his corporality in such a way that it does not show his nonnormative sexual orientation (Klesse, 2011):

I was very, very, very, very repressed when my parents found out. At that time, I remember controlling the way I walked and the way I gesticulated so I would not show I was gay in any way, or that I was bi, or whatever. I did not want to look effeminate. (Mário, 24 years old)

Thus, Mário strived to publicly maintain a performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), while experiencing a subordinate masculinity that is constructed as inferior by the experience of nonnormative sexuality.

Furthermore, participants present some personal considerations about the limitations of normativity in social organizations in which normativity represents sexual stability, with heterosexuality preferred. The internal and identity conflicts arise from the experience of perceiving variabilities in sexuality. Participants share several thoughts about their sexual identity, denoting fuzzy moments when they disidentified (Muñoz, 1999) with the stability of sexual identity. The case of Henrique includes the following consideration related to his sexuality: 'And I don't know if that is normal (...). But why am I like this? Is it right for me to maintain that? Is it not right?' (Henrique, 32). The questioning about 'normality' stems from the normative power of sexuality stability and brings about both internal and identity conflicts. However, because of experiences of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008), participants also find themselves shifting identities; thus, they do not encounter any place in the norm. Their sexual experiences are not fixed in a sexual identity, which changes and is variable. The identity fluctuations are exposed in participants' experiences that, as Carlos explains, make him a 'mix' of outcomes: 'Therefore, if I defined myself as exclusively gay, I think that would be a mistake. But I am also not exclusively heterosexual in any way. So ... I am nothing, I am a mix!' (Carlos, 53 years old). Eduardo reinforces disidentification (Muñoz, 1999), describing his sexual self-identification: 'To make it easier, I say gay because everybody understands what it is. If we get into deeper conversations, I do not use a term ... I think this thing of being more predisposed toward so-called masculine bodies, hum ... does not invalidate other bodies' (Eduardo, 20 years old). Through their experiences of sexual fluidity, participants exhibit sexual diversity, limited by the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and the stability of identity categories. Thus, they invite people to think about an orientation toward (dis)orientation (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Pascoe, 2007; Wilton, 2004), as Paulo summarizes: 'It does not have to be a sexual orientation that limits a sexual practice. This applies in the past and in the future!' (Paulo, 42 years old).

Conclusions

This article focuses on the experiences of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008) of a group of non-heterosexual men who expressed their ability to align with both hegemonic masculinities and experiences of alternative masculinities while negotiating masculinities with nonnormativities.

The participants' variability in sexual attractions took place through relatively stable predispositions at certain points in life, flexible at others, and definitely not deterministically rigid i.e. sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008). The experience of sexual fluidity was narrated by our participants as often being triggered by specific contexts and situations (Diamond, 2008; Diamond et al., 2020).

As discussed previously, participants also reported negotiations with hegemonic masculinities such as the validation of hegemonic masculinity through same-sex sexual experiences while refuting heteronormativity, or the reproduction of the normative prescription that links men with control and women with submission while disrupting normativity and experiencing the variability of sexuality. These negotiations with hegemonic masculinities demonstrate the structural and unequal hierarchical relations that legitimize and justify differences between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and among masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2012). Hegemonic masculinity has been reinforced and validated by sexual activity (Connell, 1995; Grave et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2018), which is evidenced in moments when participants feel pressure over sexual initiation (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) as well as when participants genderize sexual performance based on preconceived ideas about the partner, such as linking men with figures of control, physically intense, emotionally detached, and protective toward women, thus women become figures of submission, emotionally attached and implicated (Lamb et al., 2018). However, through reflexivity (Messerschmidt, 2020), participants negotiate the hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities of a sexuality that, in terms of social expectation, is shaped by heteronormativity (Butler, 1999; Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007). On an individual and private level, participants validate masculinity through sexuality, and specifically promiscuity, even as they reject the heteronorm that also composes hegemonic masculinity. Thus, masculinity is reinforced through sexual activity but a masculinity that might be subordinate as it also occurs between same-sex people (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). On a social level, this expression of a subordinate masculinity is constructed as inferior as an experience of nonnormative sexuality, leading to discrimination. To avoid the consequences of subordination, participants resort to the performance of hegemonic masculinity through gestures and expressions of corporeality able to socially reinforce their masculinity (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2006; Marques, 2011; Santos, 2009). Thus, sexual fluidity seems to both reinforce and appear incompatible with hegemonic masculinity as the participants in this study are both subordinates and reproducers of hegemonic masculinity.

This work supports 'conceptualizations of how hegemonic masculinity may be challenged, contested, and thus changed' (Messerschmidt, 2019, p. 88), while also highlighting the power of sexual activity in achieving status within masculinity (Connell, 1995; Grave et al., 2020; Kimmel, 2006). Therefore, this observes a significant destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, which characterizes the modern sexual order

alongside the tendency toward ending the centrality of heterorelationships across both the social and individual levels (Cover, 2015; Roseneil, 2006). This relationship between gender and sexuality was observed, as set out by Eck (2014) citing Fracher and Kimmel (1987), 'It is through our understanding of masculinity that we construct a sexuality, and it is through our sexualities that we confirm the successful construction of gender identity. Gender informs sexuality; sexuality confirms gender' (p. 441).

Furthermore, this study distinguishes itself from recent developments on sexual fluidity in men (e.g. Anderson et al., 2012; Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018; Cover, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2017; Silva, 2017; Ward, 2015) by disengaging from heterosexuality as the starting point of participant sexual orientations and/or identities. The participants in this study express diversity not only in their sexual practices but also in how they understand their sexual identities, revealing ambivalence and variability in both conceptualizing and expressing their plural and diverse sexualities.

To conclude, this work explains that a constant pattern of sexual attractions is not synonymous to immutability, as changing sexual preferences, desires, thoughts, and behaviours can be a human potentiality (Diamond, 2008; Diamond et al., 2020). The sexuality outlined by our participants is under permanent construction (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986), thus susceptible to change. An implicit relationship with (dis)orientation (Wilton, 2004) was evoked because the norm of rigid identity categories for sexuality (Ahmed, 2006; Wilton, 2004) leads participants to experience shifting identities as they find no place in the 'heterostable' norm. Thus, sexuality appears as the main territory of emotional relationships as emotional investment and the 'directions' of sexual desire are exposed to social norms and constraints standardized according to the gender order (Connell, 1987). In Western societies, heterosexuality (Warner, 1991) and stable sexual identities (Ahmed, 2006; Wilton, 2004) are the norm, which implies the exclusion or discrimination against diverse sexualities and, consequently, amplify differences, because 'the social pressure to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life can feel like a physical press on the surface of the body, which creates its own impressions for sure' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 555).

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