


GENDER AND IDENTITY IN POSTMODERNITY: NASCENT CONSIDERATIONS¹

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ABSTRACT

It is urgent to reflect on identity and how it can be engendered by personal characteristics. The dichotomy that emerges when it comes to the identity between men and women reveals a segregation in which positive value is attributed to one and negative value to the other, placing the gender binary in our society as a unique condition. To this end, the guiding thread of this article will seek to understand the relations of identity in postmodernity and the relations that gender has in the post-structuralist movement, in a qualitative methodological proposal that encompasses basic texts on gender and identity in which the authors, in a surgent way, weave considerations. From the conception of identities, we see that differentiating individuals is a process imbricated with meanings that reinforces the historical and geographical characteristics to which the subjects are subjected, which presents constant modifications, which gives rise to new identities. With regard to gender, the search for it to become an analytical category crosses the struggle of minorities affected by inequalities in power relations and the resignification of the term so that it does not only differentiate male from female, opening space for new conceptions and categories. The current social construction, therefore, demands that the meanings loaded with absolute truths be remodeled, counterposing modern thought and resignifying identities and gender, to deconstruct the ambiguities and generalizations rooted in each one of us.

Keywords: Identity. Gender. Postmodernity.

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INTRODUCTION

If someone asks you, "Who are you?" and/or, "What is your identity?" At first, it seems simple to answer, we would risk saying that there should not be much complexity in this replica. But is such a question really something so simple to answer?

Silva (2000) states that identity can be understood as something "simple", what one is, or what you consider to be: "I am Brazilian", "I am black", "I am homosexual", "I am a woman". In this way, identity can be assimilated by some personal characteristic, mostly considered positive and that its holder will attribute to it. From this perspective, [...] "identity only has itself as a reference: it is self-contained and self-sufficient" (Silva, 2000, p. 74). We need, however, to be aware that self-attributed characteristics do not always reveal the truth and can be translated into a single perspective.

We consider that we cannot define ourselves only by a characteristic, or moment. We are beings in constant change and we are made up of countless facets, depending on where we are, the way we feel, among other variables that can influence our being. The liquidity of Zygmunt Bauman's modernity already evidenced the fluidity with which we have been busy in order to understand the movements that society goes through and that, consequently, affect identities progressively and exaggeratedly. "The very concept we are dealing with - identity - is too complex, too underdeveloped, and too little understood in contemporary social science to be definitively put to the test" (Hall, 2015, p. 9). That is why the definition of the terms covered here is a task that has begun, but which does not have an end point.

The conception of identity is intimately linked to the idea of what we are or are not, with what I identify with or what is foreign to me. Therefore, when I affirm what I am, I automatically say exactly what I am not, giving a pseudo idea of labeling, or even of satisfaction, since, through identity, I approach or distance myself from certain groups, I place or exclude myself from certain places and accept or refuse certain situations. "Identity and difference are thus translated into statements about who belongs and who does not, about who is included and who is excluded" (Silva, 2000, p. 82). We see that identity defines our choices, actions, perceptions, definitions, preferences.

In this way, one of the easiest and most accepted forms of segregation and understanding of identities is structured in dichotomous oppositions, that is, of two poles that theoretically should be opposites, such as: good and evil, light and dark, man and

woman. In this simplistic form of division, one of the terms is always privileged, that is, one receives a positive value and the other a negative one (Silva, 2000).

The relations of identity and difference are all ordered around binary oppositions: male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual. Questioning identity and difference as power relations means problematizing the binarisms around which they are organized. (SILVA, p. 83, 2000).

Regarding binarisms, Scott (1995) also points out that if antagonism is always latent, the possibility of there being no final solution to this situation is considered. The author considers that it may be possible to reshape and reorganize the symbolization of difference, without a punctual and resolute solution, evidencing the complexity of this opposition.

In the midst of these processes and structures, we can cite some forms of identity to indicate social constructions. In this article, gender relations will be viewed as a "fuse" for the "new" thoughts that emerged with postmodernity, in relation to the roles imposed on men and women. We consider that, historically, society makes an effort to construct in its majority, through language, a "universal" gender identity, to categorize and impose certain subjective limits on certain groups (Scott, 1995) and that this process is full of meanings and experiences.

To this end, the objective of this article is to understand the relations of identity in postmodernity, and the relations that gender has in the post-structuralist movement, aware of the complexity of the theme and with the expectation of deepening - without the intention of defining or exhausting - the concepts.

THE IDENTITIES

These new identities are constructing and "fragmenting" the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality that in the past had provided us with solid locations as social individuals. (Hall, 2015, p. 10). Enabling countless facets to those "old" and "regulated" identities, limited by the environment in which one is present.

This phenomenon is perceived through globalization, whose identity processes act on a large scale, establishing and connecting new organizations to multiple identities, distancing themselves from the "framework" proposed by the beginning of modernity. It is important to note that this phenomenon is not recent, but it was only in the 1970s that global relations emerged exponentially, legitimizing the "new" identities (Hall, 2015). From

then on, the so-called postmodern subject is conceived as one who possesses a mobile, transcendent identity, and not one who possesses a fixed, essential or permanent identity.

To a certain extent, this mobile identity resulting from globalization emerges through the consumption of these "new" cultures, which corroborate a kind of "shared identity", which distances itself from identities socially accepted as intact and conservative (Hall, 2015). In this way, postmodernity acts mainly as a decentralizing agent of this hegemonic identity, with a perspective that enables new identities, occupied with the experience of each individual, in which the subject can metamorphose and (re)construct himself.

As a provisional conclusion, it seems then that globalization does have the effect of contesting and displacing the centered and "closed" identities of a national culture. It has a pluralizing effect on identities, producing a variety of possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more positional, more political, more plural and diverse; less fixed, unified or trans-historia. (Hall, 2015, p. 51)

We then realize that identity, for each individual, has a different meaning and format, however, it has a universal meaning if we understand that their individuality is part of a discursive process and symbolic production (Silva, 2000). However, this statement can be understood if we think contrary to what has been mentioned. Just imagine, if we were all the same... Born in the same place, with the same color, the same job and the same options of choices. How could it be possible to identify ourselves? In this world, created here, the concept of identity would make no sense at all. Therefore, circumstances significantly interfere in the attribution of meaning to what is understood as identity.

Difference can be considered as a product derived from identity. From this perspective, identity is the reference, it is the original point in relation to which difference is defined (Silva, 2000). Therefore, identity is not something concrete, it is not a phenomenon, it is not natural or cultural. It is changeable, flexible and subject to choice, having different meanings according to those who conceive it. Silva (2000, p. 96) adds that

[...] Identity is a construction, an effect, a process of production, a relationship, a performative act. Identity is unstable, contradictory, segmented, inconsistent, unfinished. Identity is linked to discursive and narrative structures. Identity is linked to systems of representation. Identity has close connections with power relations.

From this perspective, identity is closely related to difference, of "to be or not to be" and to what constitutes each one, its representation, its meaning. "Meaning arises in the relations of similarity and difference that words have with other words within the language code. We know what "night" is because it is not "day" (Hall, 2015, p. 25). In this way, the

relationship between identity and the system in which the subject finds himself is evident, since power relations exert a significant influence, in the same way that identity is considered a performative act, since we can "adopt" a certain identity to adapt to the social environment, for example.

We understand that the term mentioned above, "representation", as well as identity, has numerous definitions. However, in this article we will exclude modern philosophical and performative conceptions in order to pay attention to a post-structuralist idea that is imbricated in signification, that is, in a form of attribution of meaning. Glimpsing what is represented expressly, externally and/or through the inaccuracies and modifications of language and culture, closely related to power relations (Scott, 1995; Silva, 2000).

Thus, this difference that constitutes the issues inherent to identity have a cultural and social relationship, since they are constituted from symbolic meaning, with constructions that must be understood and dated historically and geographically (Silva, 2000). "The idea that identities were fully unified and coherent and that they have now become totally displaced is a highly simplistic way of telling the story of the modern subject" (Hall, 2015, p. 17).

Identity, like difference, is a social relation. This means that its definition - discursive and linguistic - is subject to vectors of force, to power relations. They are not simply defined; they are imposed. They do not live harmoniously, side by side, in a field without hierarchies; they are disputed. (Silva, 2000, p. 81).

Identity is formed over time, experiences, relationships and processes, and cannot be understood as something innate, which comes from an early age, or from birth as something fixed for the individual. Thus, it remains in a continuous state of incompleteness, always in the process of development (Hall, 2015). The author also states that "the old identities, which for so long stabilized the social world, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual" (p. 9).

GENDER RELATIONS

Based on the conceptions of identity, and decentralization of the subject proposed by Hall (2015), we contemplate in this article the conception proposed by the decentralization of identity from the perspective of feminism. The latter, from Scott's perspective (1995, p. 84) refuses the hierarchical construction that occurred between feminine and masculine,

seeking that its operations be reversed or displaced to "[...] develop gender as an analytical category".

Feminism questioned the notion that men and women were distinct parts of the same identity, a universal, socially accepted identity in which individuals should behave in a pre-established way. This "politicized subjectivity, identity, and the process of identification [...]" (Hall, 2015, p. 28). We emphasize that feminism sought to listen to the voices that had been "ignored" until then, those considered minorities, such as women themselves, gays, lesbians, sexual politicians, and people involved in racial struggles, for example.

What began as a movement aimed at women's position in "social ascension" constituted the emergence of the struggle of identities for each of the movements (Hall, 2015). We point out here the beginning of the formation of sexual and gender identities that are subjective and suffer consonance with symbolic resources and the construction of power (Scott, 1995).

The cultural and constructed character of gender and sexuality, feminist theory and queer theory contribute decisively to the questioning of the binary oppositions - male/female, heterosexual/homosexual - on which the process of fixing gender identities and sexual identities is based (Silva, 2000, p. 89).

In a brief historical review, of the various definitions of gender that feminist studies have brought, we can discuss the simplest and most tender one, which was used as the first definition in the mid-1960s, as gender, being the opposite and complement of sex, that which is unanimously constructed in society as the idea of what is biologically accepted, between man and woman. This primary definition aimed to explain and emphasize the dimensions that gender overlapped the sex category, in order to elucidate the social dimension that the word gender could carry, since the term was only used to differentiate between masculine and/or feminine (Carvalho, 2012).

The theoretical concern with gender as an analytical category only emerged at the end of the twentieth century. It is absent from the main approaches to social theory formulated from the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Still others were concerned with the formulation of subjective sexual identity, but gender, as a way of talking about systems of social or sexual relations, had not appeared. (Scott, 1995, p. 85)

After the primary definition of gender, with greater social acceptance of its dimensions, gender does not remain categorized as the opposition to sex, but rather as one of the distinct and elaborated issues that the sex category permeates. The understanding of

sex and gender advocates that different individuals assume different roles and social constructions of meaning. With this, we see that gender can be understood as an important locutor of the meanings and symbols that constitute an entire social construction, not only those related to the pseudo-hierarchy of masculine/feminine and biologically accepted ones. In this sense, Carvalho (2012) states that "gender is the lens through which we look, understand and act in relation to bodies and sexuality" (p. 403).

Another factor that impacts this relationship with the constitution of gender is superimposed in society by other inequalities, such as class, race/ethnicity, age, among others. Gender can also be emphasized in the economic issues of society, in relation to the role of men and women, as well as in power relations and differences between the sexes in the construction of language and behavior. "When gender was taken as an open-ended question about the ways in which sexual difference was conceived, it served as a provocative category of social, cultural, and historical analysis" (Scott, 2019, p. 329).

From then on, the word "gender" was used primarily to refer to categories such as "male", "female" and "neutral", structurally supported by sex, since sex is used for biological categories and gender for social categories. In fact, what can be perceived is that in both cases there is a relationship of dependence, considering that "[...]if sex is not entirely natural, neither is gender entirely social. (Scott, 2019, p. 323).

Such an understanding allows us to perceive the numerous changes in cultural patterns that have occurred in the peoples and cultures of the various locations on the planet, since every people must be understood as geographically and historically dated. In this way, if "[...] the predominant ideas about gender in a given social context lead to the attribution of certain meanings to bodies and sexual practices instead of others [...]" (Carvalho, 2012, p. 403); We believe that the various behaviors and perceptions about what it means to be a man, a woman, or neither, affect the importance of studies and the concept of gender.

Gender, therefore, does not replace sexual practices in discussions about sexual difference, but it helps for social identification and construction. Thus, when gender assumes the existence of sex differences, there is a difficult barrier to be broken, which walks in an interconnected way between the sex category and the gender category, making it difficult to be "broken", which in common usage has made them synonymous (Scott, 2019).

Gender has guided the path for social studies of sexual differences, masculinity, femininity and consequently sexual identities. It called into question the different roles and attributions that were assigned to each sex, and how such symbolic attributions interfered in the lives and practices of various individuals, since gender and sex should be understood as a complex web that is deeply interconnected (Scott, 2019).

However, it is still common to resort to biology to try to explain gender identity, essentially making the masculine as dominant, and consequently denying the postmodern constructions arising from the post-structuralist idea of feminism.

Although apparently based on biological arguments, attempts at identity fixation that appeal to nature are no less cultural. Basing the inferiority of women or of certain "racial" or ethnic groups on some supposed natural or biological characteristic is not simply a "scientific" error, but the demonstration of the imposition of an eloquent cultural grid on a nature that, in itself, is - culturally speaking - silent. (Silva, 2000, p. 86).

Before the biological perspective, there was an interpretation that the biological fact constitutes meanings and impositions that were socially constructed by a group. Silva (2000) mentions that what has real meaning for one group of individuals, for another, may have no meaning at all. Thus, among the various interpretations that can emerge about identity, even if it is biological, we must understand that certain perceptions do not represent in a unique and exclusive way the various interpretations that identity can take.

Another factor that must be taken into account is the relationship of the various identities and their relative importance in the different identities that the same individual can appropriate. For example, while the biological factor can be an indication for the gender relationship and its identity, cultural essentialisms become effective in relation to national identities, and do not necessarily have the same charge when placed in different contexts. This in a way equalizes the balance of their respective importance, since one is not necessarily justified by the other (Silva, 2000).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Reflecting on the meaning of identity is a very complex task, because of the countless ways in which it can be thought of, none is capable of promoting an absolute truth. What seems common to common sense actually brings us traces of a modern, cultural and structuralist thought, loaded with meanings and symbols that we urgently need to be removed from so that it can be investigated.

We understand that the concept and logic of identity are crucial for social construction, but postmodernity emerges by breaking and/or questioning paradigms through constant mutability and access to information. It is in this rhizome that we find a greater possibility of meaning to the globally constructed symbols.

We then point to feminism as one of the precursor movements of the struggle for freedom and resignification of identity, gender and the emancipation of difference. Since, it problematized intrinsic and extrinsic power relations, questioning what was instituted as common, through language. Reverberating in this way, in an erroneous universal identity.

Finally, we understand that, even though we epistemologically surpass modernity, some roots are still too fixed in us as a society, and we must then build new relations in order to overcome this generalization and ambiguity of what identity is, and especially of what constitutes identity and gender relations.

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