Negotiating and enacting gender identities in the organization: a queer approach

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INTRODUCTION

"Refusal or inability to conform leaves only
an unrecognizable 'I', an 'I' with no place and
no identity, an 'I' that is therefore strange,
subordinate, inferior, 'queer'."
(Harding, Lee, Ford, & Learmonth, 2011, p. 930)

In the fields of Social Psychology and Organizational Behavior, the conceptualization of social identity has been highly influenced by the work of symbolic interactionists and micro-sociologists from the University of Chicago (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995, p. 97). Differently from the Illuminist/Cartesian paradigm (Hall, 2005; Miskolci, 2009), which understood identity as innate and unified, the sociological view of the subject reflects the complexity of modern society, acknowledging that there were no inner individual characteristics capable of being constructed without the determinant effect of social interactions. The social subjects are located in relation to a social category, social position or status (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). The identification of oneself and one's group, in that context, occurs with the recognition of a binary opposite Other.

During the last century, this social subject was continuously decentralized. Science, philosophy and social and political movements reflected fragmented, multiple and contradictory identities (Hall, 2005, p. 12). Queer theory appears in this context to challenge both conceptions of identity as essential or binary (Souza, 2017). By *queering* identity, this approach seeks to understand how people negotiate and enact their identities among a grid of power relations that constrain and define them.

Organizations are not outside of this context. On the contrary: they are immersed in these power relations and on dominant norms that set which identities are intelligible and which are not (Acker, 1990; Foucault, 1999; Souza, 2017). Nevertheless, the scholarship and the practice of organizational behavior is still attached to ideas of essential and binary identities, as individual identity narratives demonstrate. When narrating their career trajectory, individuals are required to "explain" themselves, while organizations usually facilitate narration by providing prototypical narratives tied to organizational values and identity (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 124). This way, narratives with coherent plots, which reflect narrator's expected agency and socially desirable archetypes, are more likely to earn validation (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010 *apud.* Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

When looking specifically at gender identity, this attachment is at least worrying. The work of Kelan (2009) identifies a current state of gender denial in organizations, as workplaces are often constructed as gender neutral in spite of evident discrimination. When episodes of discrimination occur, they are constructed as singular events and not consequences of structural or systemic differences. The author also introduces a phenomenon she calls "gender fatigue" - a certain reluctance to discuss issues of discrimination that are characterized by a loss of interest in recognizing the fact.

In the light of this context, the relevance of studying gender dynamics becomes evident, especially in its intersections with other axes of identity such as race, class, age and sexuality. Gender discrimination not only happens between (cis) women and men, who still earn different wages and occupy unequal positions within organizations (Kaplan, 2009, p. 198). When one expands the idea of gender to *other* genders, the conversation on discrimination becomes even more complex. Trans issues, so to speak, are almost completely erased from organizational studies and practice, and organizations do struggle to deal with this group (Baggio, 2017).

In this theoretical essay, we defend that the queer approach is a useful tool to apprehend the dynamics of gender relations in organizations - including the specific processes of discrimination. First, we present a brief historical account of the concept of gender identity. Then, queer theory is explained. Finally, we approximate queer theory and organizational setting, showing how a queer approach can help on diminishing day-by-day identitarian issues in these settings.

GENDER IDENTITY

As stated by Hall (2005), subject and identity notions have been continuously decentralized during the past centuries. Following this change, different conceptions of gender identity have emerged.

Thus, both Illuminist and Cartesian notions of subject have been deconstructed: first the assumption of a unified essential being was questioned, and afterwards the subject notion founded on the Cartesian mind-body dualism, along with all dualisms that derive from it, such as "culture" *versus* "nature", and "gender" *versus* "sex" (Hall, 2005). In this process, specific ruptures have played important roles and need to be highlighted.

First, in the 19th century, Karl Marx's theories have displaced the individual agency by bringing up social constructs, such as class consciousness and identity. Secondly, Sigmund Freud's findings of the human subconsciousness, and how it operates in the formation of individual identities, come to question the rationality paradigm profoundly established in the modern notion of the subject. In this way, identity is seen as a never-finished product, constructed over time and subconsciously (Hall, 2005, p. 39).

Following these ruptures, Michel Foucault develops the concept of disciplinary power, focusing on the severe control of body experience perpetrated by military institutions, or even in prisons, schools and hospitals. In order to moralize the individual experience as a whole, one's body is traversed by discursive constraints that emulate imposed social identities. Foucault also demonstrates how individuality becomes a product of the disciplinary power, once it is taken as the focus of this control (Hall, 2005, p. 43).

Finally, the feminist movement arisen in the 1960s, both as a theoretical critique and political movement, can be considered a closing rupture to the idea of innate and unified identities, mainly when it comes to the notion of gender identity. As Hall explains, the feminist movement has challenged the naturalized ideas of gender, placing gender identification as the result of a binary categorization system, socially and historically constructed (Hall, 2005, p. 45).

Until the beginning of the last century, gender was solely understood as innate and essential to a specific type of body, following the Cartesian idea of identity. In spite of this notion of gender as a biologically-given difference in individuals, "woman" and "man" have been socially and historically built throughout the establishment years of western modern societies (Butler, 1990).

With the emergence of feminism, gender was distinguished from the body (divided into the categories of sex). "Gender", therefore, became the way cultures interpret and organize sexual differences between men and women, unlike "sex", which is perceived as a distinction of physical and biological nature (Yannoula, 1996). For feminist scholars up until the 1990s, the social subject is gendered through social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes (Scott, 1999).

QUEER THEORY

Up until the 1990s, the categories of "woman" and "man" went unquestioned by the feminist academia. The use of these identity categories as universalized signifiers bothered the emergent postmodern scholars (Butler, 1990; Souza, 2017). Based on Foucaultian ideas, they also questioned the idea of gender socialization as a finishable and homogeneous process (Souza, 2017).

Queer theory emerges in this context to question established conceptions of subject and identity to evidence how perceptions of sex, gender and sexuality are historically dependent, intersectional, and naturalized by social processes - including here the categories of "woman" and "man" (Eng et al., 2005; Souza, 2017). Queer theory problematizes "the normal, the legitimate and the dominant" (Souza, 2017, p. 5) by "interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity" (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005, p. 1).

Who, where and when has the power to name subjects? Who, where and when has the power to demarcate which individuals fall into the category of "woman" or "man", and which individuals are *outside* this categories? Which social structures are responsible for producing "normal" subjects - "normal" women, "natural" men - through the demarcation of "pathological" others - other genders not recognized under or outside these categories?

Queer theory attempts to answer these questions by understanding identity as both political and intersectional (Souza, 2017). Identity is political for its discursive power to discipline and organize. Identity moulds frontiers - what is *inside* and *outside* that particular category - and contains hierarchies of power. These hierarchies are visible from an intersectional point of view: each individual is constricted in numerous *identities* - including, but not limited to, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, type of labour -, and the state of belonging to these categories may alter the subject's position before these power structures.

For queer theorists, it is not possible to *become* or to *be* a certain identity: it demands constant negotiation and reiteration of cultural norms to be recognized as a member of a certain identitarian category. Identities are considered to be constructed in and through the discourse as part of a constant process, and via the coexistence of multiple affects which do not follow any kind of hierarchy, meaning that there is not an identity that exists prior to others, or that works as a base for others to be built (Souza, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, identity in general and gender identity, in particular, are said to be *performative*.

> "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 45).

The "highly rigid regulatory frame" Butler refers to is the *heterosexual matrix* (Butler, 1990, p. 208), which imposes a presumed order related to notions of sex (gendered body), gender (culturally constructed) and sexuality (desire-driven) that operates a tripartite system when construing subject identifications. In other words, individuals in Western societies are faced with two broad sets of gender rules - women's and men's - that are attributed to them according to their bodies - read as female or male - when they are born. This sets of rules are not homogeneous, that is, each person is faced with different combinations of gender rules. It is also presumed that these genders/sexes will relate with each other only through heterosexual desire. For an individual to be recognized as a subject of a certain gender, it is necessary that this person reproduces repeatedly the pertinent gender norms - femininity or masculinity - of that specific gender. Because of this "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler, 1990, p. 45), gender gains the appearance of a natural substance essential to the person (Butler, 1993; Souza, 2017).

When circulating in society, a person's identity is also read by others *according to* that same heterosexual matrix, through which other people make gender and sexuality

assumptions based on identification marks and symbols, that is, on the performance of gender (Butler, 1990; Souza, 2017). If the individual is recognized as a member of one of the two established gender identities, their status as an intelligible subject is assured. According to Judith Butler, "'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler, 1990, p. 22). If however, the individual is not recognized as a member of a certain gender category, they are socially allocated into the limbo of unintelligibility:

> "The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 24).

Whenever subject identifications do not suit the heterosexual matrix, there is an identity crisis in progress. There is an individual who falls outside of identity categories considered possible by that particular social group and, therefore, is not properly understood and legitimized before society as a whole.

But the queer theory is not only useful to study groups regarded as "abnormal". For instance, to understand the process that marks the "abnormal" it is necessary to comprehend the dynamics that produce the normal (Hardin et al., 2011, p. 929). Queer, in its essence, questions hegemonic norms and intelligibilities (Souza, 2017). Therefore, it understands that there are marginalized subjects in both "normal" and "abnormal" groups. Because of the intersectionality mentioned before, it is risky to read entire groups as "oppressed" or "oppressor" - for example, black women tend to be in an oppressed position in relation to black men and white women, although they share the categories of "black" with the former and "women" with the latter. Queer theory is also not restricted to analysis of gender and sexuality: nowadays, its uses have expanded to identity construction in general (Eng et al. 2005), and it is even used in organizational studies to analyse work identities such as "manager" (Parker, 2001) and "leader" (Hardin et al., 2011; Muhr & Sullivan, 2013).

QUEERING GENDER IN THE ORGANIZATIONS

For its particular gaze on power dynamics and intersectionality, we defend that a queer approach can be a path for organizations to deal with modern identitarian issues. Hardin et al. give a good example of the difference between the traditional gaze - positivist and structuralist - and the queer gaze on identities in organizations:

> "Where conventional theory would argue that it is the amazing qualities displayed by leaders that mark them out as leaders, a queer reading argues that it is the words 'leader' or 'leadership' that confer identity upon the (dominant) leader and the concomitant (subordinate) 'follower', with the acts undertaken by the leader emerging from this identity." (2011, p. 931)

Queering identity in organizations, first of all, smashes essentialized and apolitical notions that view workers as disembodied subjects - such as the very abstract "leader" whose qualities are sought after. A queer gaze pays attention to the power dynamics that form identities in organizations, and to who fits - and, indeed, *is fitted* - inside and outside of each of these categories.

In this paper, we emphasize specifically the relevance of gender dynamics in the organizations. Gender is the very first social categorization through which a human needs to go through in order to be a recognizable self in society (Butler, 1990). Organizations, supposedly gender neutral and asexual spaces, are no different. The research of Acker (1990) presents the concept of gendered organization, which explains the binary gender division of the corporate environment that one encounters when entering the labor market:

> "to say an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (1990, p. 146).

Queering gender in organizations is necessary to reduce the "exclusionary operations" (Butler, 1993, p. 19) that gender categories inevitably cause. There is much more beyond feminine women and masculine men. A queer gaze allows the observer to view the full spectrum of gender, beyond the binary and essentialized categories of man and woman. It permits the conception of varieties in that same categories of masculine men and feminine women - for example, that trans and cis people fit those categories. It also opens space for bodies that do not follow the heteronormative determinist sequence of body/sex/gender identity/gender expression - masculine women, feminine men, people that do not want to fit into binary categories. The myriad of possibilities of bodies, gender identities and expressions are already in the organizations negotiating their space or being excluded from them due to discrimination (Baggio, 2017; Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011).

For its political and intersectional lenses, a queer approach also evidences the nets of power that regulate the gender categories in the organization, and the intersections that are more or less valued in that environment. Who is allowed to enter this organization? Who is excluded from it? Who is allowed to get into positions of power? Who is understood as a "leader"? Who is seen as "competent", "effective", "top talent"? Who is the "ideal" worker in this particular work environment/area/department? Who do I send to visit clients or to investor meetings? The answer to all these questions is usually a body - or a set of bodies -, and is usually a very specific - man, white, cisgender, able-bodied, young, heterosexual - body (Nkomo, Cox Jr., 1999). And if the answer is actually so narrow, why is that the company is so homogeneous in such a heterogeneous world? What does it mean for a company to have that configuration? How can that configuration be *changed*, whether on a quest for better results and creativity or on a take on social responsibility?

Here enters the most important aspect of a queer approach: political action and social change.

> "Queer readings are not meant to circulate solely within academic milieu, as just another interesting interpretation of the social. They aim rather to identify and illuminate forms of injustice, especially perhaps those that are only with difficulty articulated within language, so hidden are they within the taken-for-granted of the everyday social world. Crucially, this leads to political actions whose aim is removal of the forms of injustice so revealed. This is possible because queer theory first provides a language in which to articulate abjection, and second uses that language to incite and guide a politics which undermines the constructions that require that some people be rendered abject" (Hardin et al., 2011, p. 931).

Of course, this abjection of non-legitimated gender identities and expressions are not constricted to organizations: the marginalization of unintelligible identities is an issue that permeates societies as a whole (Butler, 1990). In this sense, organizations are part of a bigger picture (Foucault, 1999) and unawarely reproduce heteronormative gender discourses inside their environments.

Although not able to individually change society as a whole, organizations have the agency to change themselves internally, building an environment that recognizes and respects the plurality of gender and promotes gender equality. Queering the company might be as simple as allowing people to use their preferred names in their badges and emails - as some people have names in their formal documents that do not match their gender identity - and the bathrooms of their preference. A further step requires actively questioning more deeply rooted gender dynamics: why do people have to perform masculinity to succeed in organizations (Acker, 1990; Billing, 2011)? Why is it so difficult to open space for gender non-conforming bodies and identities in companies (Baggio, 2017; Grant et al., 2011)?

In a first glance, the queer approach leaves more powerful questions than definitive answers. However, the gender dynamics of each organization are particular to that environment. Even though they communicate with broader social processes, they have to be analyzed in the context of that particular organization. In this sense, we understand that new theoretical, as well as field research, must be carried out to deepen the understanding of where, when and how, the emerging queer approach may be used to better balance the evident prevailing injustices of power relations we still find within the organizations, and to assign advantage and disadvantage beyond anachronistic identity categories that no longer reflect the complexity of contemporary society.

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