

Article



# Changeable sexualities and fluid masculinities: The intersections of sexual fluidity with hegemonic masculinity

Rita Grave<sup>1</sup>, Ana R Pinho<sup>2</sup>, António M Marques<sup>3</sup>, and Conceição Nogueira<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

*This article explores the concept of sexual fluidity and its applicability to men's sexual experiences by approaching the surveillance and control of hegemonic masculinity. We carried out semi-structured interviews with 15 participants aged between 20 and 53 who state having experienced sexual fluidity. The analysis conveys how sexuality is a work in progress while highlighting the intersections of masculinities and sexualities in a heteronormative, mononormative, sexually rigid, and hegemonically masculine social context. The results indicate the potential flexibility, malleability, and changeability of all sexual identities, orientations, and experiences when disengaging from a heteronormative approach in sexual relations.*

## Keywords

Sexual fluidity, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, mononormativity, flexibility

<sup>1</sup>University of Porto, Portugal

<sup>2</sup>University of Porto, Portugal

<sup>3</sup>Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, Portugal

<sup>4</sup>University of Porto, Portugal

## Corresponding author(s):

Rita Grave, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Rua Alfredo Allen, Porto 4200-392, Portugal. Email: [anaritaguerragrave@gmail.com](mailto:anaritaguerragrave@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Human sexuality was for a long time assumed to be a fixed attribute, deemed a fundamental and biologically determined human characteristic (Weeks, 1986). However, recent research has begun to reveal how sexuality may not be fixed and instead appears to be rather more fluid (Diamond, 2008). Nevertheless, research about sexual fluidity carries a gender bias not only in its genesis (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Cassingham and O'Neil, 1993; Diamond, 2008) but also in its later compositions (e.g., Mock and Eibach, 2012; Rupp et al., 2016). Lisa Diamond (2008) coined the concept of sexual fluidity in a study involving only women, anchoring it in the female experience. Likewise, subsequent research on sexual fluidity has focused more on women with comparative studies tending to reveal women display a greater capacity for sexual fluidity. However, as Diamond herself explains: "human sexual responses have been shown to be somewhat flexible, and thus any individual should be capable of experiencing desires that run counter to his or her overall sexual orientation" (Diamond, 2008: 11), thereby proposing sexual fluidity represents a potentially human attribute.

Theorizations around sexual fluidity have emerged in a heteronormative social context of male hegemony. This particular social environment fosters heterosexuality and sexual stability as the management norms of human behavior (Callis, 2014; Warner, 1991), and the patriarchal social organization confers the role of the dominant figure on men (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and compulsory heterosexual duties (Rich, 1980). Thus, the theory of sexual fluidity returned its first evidence in a set of studies on female sexuality at a time when the stability of male sexuality was not questioned and with the scope for sexual fluidity attributed more (or exclusively) to women undergoing reinforcement (Diamond, 2008). For these same reasons, carrying out research on sexual fluidity in men holds its importance alongside attempting to access these intricacies, whereby, notwithstanding the overall rise in research, sexual fluidity in men remains understudied (Diamond, 2008; Katz-Wise, 2014). Nevertheless, in the near past, research on sexual fluidity in men has been expanding, however, generally presenting participants who identify as heterosexual while with some flexibility toward expressing their sexuality (e.g., Ward, 2015; Silva, 2016; Carrillo and Hoffman, 2016; Savin-Williams, 2017). These studies thus focus on men who describe their sexual experiences as primarily attracted to women, identifying themselves as heterosexual and, consequently, representing a disturbance to heterosexuality through their elasticity and the malleability of this normative category. Hence, the bias here is heteronormativity (Warner, 1991).

Given these starting points, the main objective of this work involves understanding how sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008, 2016) is lived and experienced by men in accordance with the surveillance and control of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and in full awareness of the scarcity of the debate on sexual fluidity and hegemonic masculinity in the scientific literature. Moreover, this is a study on male sexual fluidity in which the participants are neither *heteroflexible* (Carrillo and Hoffman, 2016) nor *mostly straight* (Savin-Williams, 2017), for instance, they do not feature the malleability of heterosexuality, rather they present a diversity of sexual identities and sexual orientations while experiencing sexual fluidity.

## **Sexual fluidity**

The definition of sexual fluidity expresses an ability for flexibility in sexual responses, dependent on a situation context or time (Diamond, 2008). This spans the capacity for variability in sexual attractions due to situational, contextual, or interpersonal effects and highlights the volatility of sexual desires, behaviors, and identities of an individual. Therefore, the concept encapsulates the potential for changes in sexual preferences over time and according to the context in which the subject is inserted (Diamond, 2008, 2016; Diamond et al., 2020).

Therefore, sexual fluidity amounts to an additional component of sexuality that influences the attractions, fantasies, and affections experienced and expressed throughout life. This reflects an informative concept of the sexual orientations, thoughts, desires, and sexual behaviors in an individual's life history. However, not all people access experiences of sexual fluidity, and not all experience them in the same way (Diamond, 2016). Thus, sexual fluidity refers to a context-dependent flexibility of sexual response, which means a person may (or may not) periodically experience sexual attraction that is not compatible with their sexual orientation and regardless of the sexual identification they choose to display (Diamond, 2016). The work of Diamond (2008) explains that a constant pattern of sexual attractions is not synonymous with immutability. Changes in sexual preferences, desires, thoughts, and behaviors can be a human potentiality (Diamond et al., 2020).

The theory of sexual fluidity, as we have already mentioned, resulted from a set of studies on female sexuality, with female sexual fluidity more emphasized and subject to wider study. However, there has been a rise in the number of studies on sexual fluidity in men with examples including the research of Katz-Wise (2014), Ward (2015), Silva (2016), Savin-Williams (2017), and Carrillo and Hoffman (2016). Nevertheless,

some of these research studies on sexual fluidity in men depart from heterosexuality and endow this with a flexible or elastic character (Carrillo and Hoffman, 2016). Terms such as *heteroflexible* (Carrillo and Hoffman, 2016), *mostly straight* (Savin-Williams, 2017), *dudesex* (Ward, 2015), or *bud-sex* (Silva, 2016) represent heterosexual men whose sexual experiences extend to flexibility. Our study does not fit this heteronormative bias. The sexual identities and orientations of participants in this study are as diverse as their sexual practices and experiences. Nonetheless, through this and other recent studies that effectively inaugurate the study of sexual fluidity in men, we may access the diversity and volatility of male sexuality that seems to be marked by masculinities, which we shall focus on in the next section.

## **Hegemonic and inclusive masculinities**

Connell (1987) defined hegemonic masculinity as a socially constructed gender configuration that brings together current and cultural responses of the patriarchal system. Here, the male figure is raised to “dominant,” and traits traditionally considered “natural” in men become privileged. Despite some reformulations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to a set of normative prescriptions, symbolically represented, that guide and discipline collective and individual thoughts about what it is and how it is to be like a man (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2006; Santos, 2019). Thus, this constitutes both a regulatory force and an inspiration for male conduct, which is governed by heterosexuality, and marginalizing all sexualities that do not comply with heteronormativity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) has been conceptualizing changes in the dynamics of masculinity which include, for instance, a greater acceptance of men’s sexual diversity (Anderson and McCormack, 2016; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; McCormack, 2012). These changes are emphasized by Anderson and McCormack (2016) detailing men’s expanded openness to broader sexual practices. Therefore, it seems important to retain how social changes have been building more inclusive masculinities while analyzing the effects of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is produced in relation to various subordinate masculinities as well as in relation to women (Connell, 1987, 1995). Therefore, the concept extends to the configuration of gender practices, guaranteeing (or taking for granted) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, which legitimizes the patriarchy (Connell, 1995). The hegemonic masculinity concept makes us recognize the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities through reinforcing one of the central ideas of Connell’s theory: that gender is relational and stems from power inequalities between men and women and among men (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinity, as a surveillance process exercised over men and among men (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019; Santos, 2019), is combined with a stable and rigid (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004) heteronormative (Warner, 1991) and mononormative system (Pieper and Bauer, 2005) that contributes to the social construction of sexualities (Weeks, 1986). In this paper, we make recourse to this framework to study the concept of sexual fluidity and its potential applicability to men.

## **Methods**

The study participants were 15 people<sup>1</sup> with (self-declared) sexual fluidity experiences (Diamond, 2008, 2016). All participants claimed to have experienced changes in their sexual attractions at some point in their lives. Moreover, at the time of recruitment, a form containing a definition of sexual fluidity was filled out, and with each participant asked to identify with that definition as a means of ascertaining the person’s suitability for participation. The recruitment process took place in the Greater Oporto and Lisbon areas, through privileged institutional and private contacts as well as online social groups associated with sexual

diversity. The method adopted proved to be appropriate, given the general difficulties in identifying and contacting potential participants (Heckathorn, 1997). Informed consent was provided and reciprocally signed. Here, all participants were informed in detail about the research and its objectives before explicitly agreeing to participate in this study. Table 1 systematically sets out the characteristics of the participants, with their ages ranging from 20 to 53 years. Names and any other facets that might compromise confidentiality and anonymity are fictitious. All participants speak Portuguese fluently, and we observed a homogeneous group due to the difficulty experienced in recruitment.

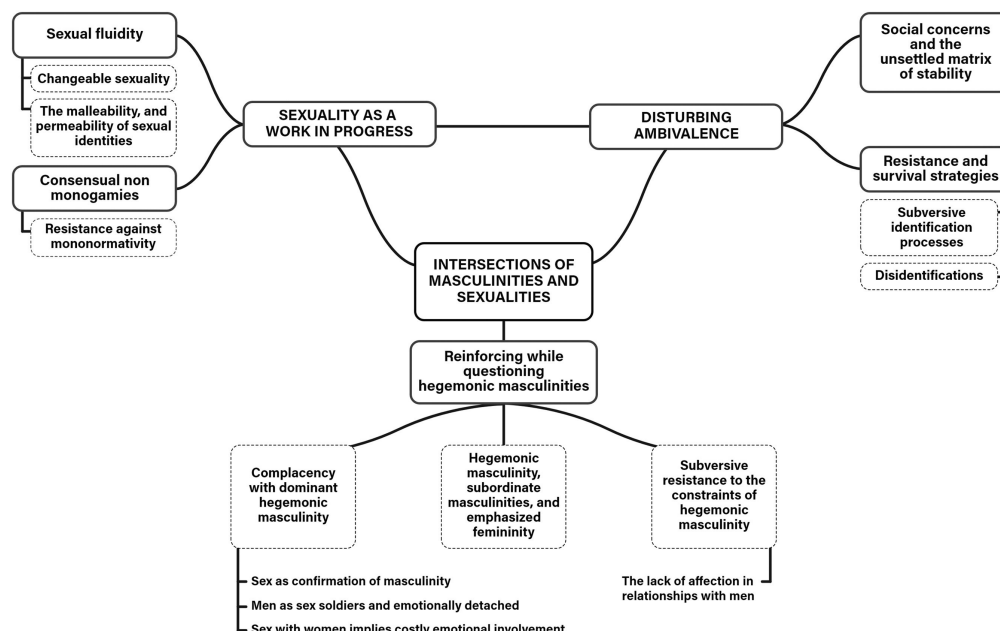
**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

Participants	Age, self-identifications (regarding sex/gender and sexual orientation), country of origin, and education
Alexandre	33, male, bisexual, Portugal, master's degree
Bernardo	34, cis male, bi, Portugal, master's degree
Carlos	53, male, bisexual, but I consider myself fluid, Portugal, bachelor's degree
Diogo	23, male, homosexual, Brazil, attending higher education
Eduardo	20, male, bi to be easier to understand, Portugal, 12th grade
Fabiano	28, male, bisexual, Portugal, master's degree
Guilherme	38, fluid, fluid, Portugal, 12th grade
Henrique	32, male, fluid, Brazil, bachelor's degree
Ivo	30, gender queer, pansexual, India, master's degree
Jaime	29, male, polysexual, Portugal, equivalence to bachelor's degree
Lourenço	24, male, I am not straight, I am not gay, and I am not bi, Portugal, attending higher education
Mário	24, male, bisexual, Brazil, attending higher education
Nelson	48, cis male, bisexual, Portugal, doctoral degree
Óscar	39, queer, queer, Portugal, master's degree
Paulo	42, male, bisexual but perceived as gay, Portugal, master's degree

Participant recruitment ended at the theoretical saturation point when, according to our perspective, the participants in the analysis stopped adding relevant information to meet the study objectives (Fontanella et al., 2008). From April 2019 to February 2020, semi-structured interviews were carried out by a team member, with an average two-hour duration. All interviews were recorded in an audio format and later transcribed *verbatim*.

As our analytical approach, we deployed the thematic analysis of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in keeping with its potential to understand the explicit and implicit meanings of participant narratives, and furthermore enabling us to identify, analyze, and report patterns in participant narratives. This approach aligns with the epistemological positioning of the study, which highlights the meanings of social construction and reconstruction (Burr, 1995). The analysis process was developed by three researchers and followed the six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Excerpts from the interviews were translated from Portuguese to English by the authors. The analytical process provided for the identification of themes, sub-themes, and codes that interrelate with each other in a thematic network. Figure 1 sets out a thematic map summarizing the analysis.





**Figure 1.** Thematic map.

We would duly note this work is not comparable with that of Diamond (2008) for several reasons, including how our study is not a longitudinal approach. Nevertheless, we sought to access participant narratives about their experiences of sexual fluidity, which we then duly analyzed.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto.

### *Sexuality as a work in progress<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout a long period of time, human sexuality was considered a fixed characteristic and an internal truth, which, once determined, could no longer experience variations (Weeks, 1986). In opposition to the idea of the rigidity of human sexuality, participant discourses demonstrated experiences of fluidity. An unpredictable future of sexual desires and preferences is constantly mentioned. In general, participant narratives include changes in sexuality as a constant possibility by appealing to a changeable sexuality (Coleman-Fountain, 2014) as well as highlighting how a sexual present does not dictate their future (Diamond, 2016). Participant discourses address sexuality and sexual experiences as socially constructed and shaped by culture (Foucault, 1994; Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986). Simultaneously, participants encounter meaning in the volatility and variability of their sexuality (Anderson and McCormack, 2016; McCormack, 2012). Bernardo explains how his sexuality is under construction: “It is what I live and experience at the moment! I am exploring...” (Bernardo, 34 years old). Additionally, when talking about his sexuality, Henrique says: “Sometimes I do not recognize what I do today compared to what I did 10 years ago. (...) So, I do not know where I am going... that is the point!” (Henrique, 32 years old).

The experiences of sexuality under construction, as described above, result in a process similar to what Paasonen and Spišák (2018) term the “sexual self as a work in progress.” Participant sexual identities are thereby malleable and permeable. Participants also consider the terms they apply to designate their sexual identity may be insufficient to illustrate their sexual experiences, and additionally stating they have already changed designations while considering more changes may occur in the future. Furthermore, they question sexual identifications, warning they may constitute barriers for some sexual identities and inviting us to think about sexual identities as permeable. One example is the doubts around the most adequate term to sexually identify themselves, as raised by Fabiano: “Hum... so... yes, for now I think that maybe bisexual is the most suitable term but maybe there is another” (Fabiano, 28 years old). Diogo explained that he

identified himself as homosexual from an early age. He always felt a strong alliance with this identification until he experienced variations in his sexual attractions and began questioning this identification:

I do not know how to say I am homosexual if I feel attracted to and have gotten involved with women. (...) But... I became very attached to this image, to this identity. Now that I am getting older (...) maybe I am realizing that maybe I do not need this identity (Diogo, 23 years old).

Alexandre conveys how he has already changed his sexual identification: “until a certain point, I considered myself heterosexual, and now, I consider myself bisexual” (Alexandre, 33 years old). Considering his sexual experience, Carlos believes any single sexual identification faces limitations: “for me, it is a little bit hard to define myself as being exclusively homosexual” (Carlos, 53 years old). Eduardo explains his caution in using the term gay because this seems to limit his sexual diversity:

I am careful about the use of the term gay because I do not identify myself completely with this term. (...) I think gay is very exclusive because it means a man with another man, excluding the possibilities of men and of women, even those who are not binary (Eduardo, 20 years old).

Participant narratives veer away from the idea of rigid sexuality to question the stability of sexual identities and experiences (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004). They highlight sexuality as a social construct (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986) and detail the changeability, malleability, and flexibility of sexuality (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Paasonen and Spišák, 2018), thus illustrating sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008). Moreover, participants challenge the normativities of heterosexuality through their identity subjectivities in a process that implies working with the materials on sexuality available in their culture, time, and space (Wilton, 2004).

Guilherme and Henrique specifically apply the term fluid to their own sexual identification. Both were familiar with the concept and identified with this experience. However, other participants were not aware of the sexual fluidity concept as expounded by Diamond (2008). Nevertheless, they described changes in sexual attractions because of situational, contextual, or interpersonal effects, highlighting the volatility of sexual desires, behaviors, and identities (Diamond, 2008; Diamond et al., 2020). Participants reported flexibility in sexual responses, dependent on a situation, context, or time, and claimed to periodically experience sexual attraction that was not otherwise compatible with their sexual orientation. Regardless of the sexual identification chosen, they experienced changes in their sexual preferences, desires, thoughts, and behaviors (Diamond, 2008, 2016), as illustrated by Diogo:

What is happening with my sexuality and with my attraction? (...) Ten years ago - it is almost a decade now - I assumed myself to be and the world assumed me to be homosexual, sexually attracted to men (...) But I did not need a penis to attract me anymore. This sexual attraction for my (girl) friend and for this other girl arose suddenly and unexpectedly (Diogo, 23 years old).

Participant narratives challenge notions of male sexuality as static (Silva, 2018) and meet the conception of Diamond (2008, 2016) as regards sexual fluidity, which portrays sexuality as a cross-cutting domain while undermining the scientific and political discourse that characterizes sexual orientation as innate, stable, and binary (Callis, 2014). Thus, sexuality appears to be this kind of symbolic instability in which culturally produced identities demonstrate a tendency to shift and mutate (Wilton, 2004; Weeks, 1986). Furthermore, participant conceptions of sexualities and identities are guided by diversity. They report other sexual and emotional experiences that are alternatives to normativity as ways of relating other than monogamy (De Graeve, 2018).

In Western cultures, monogamy presents itself as the preferred and prevalent relational pattern, perceived as the only valid way to establish intimate, emotional, and/or sexual relationships (Cardoso, 2017; Green et

al., 2016). Monogamy is regulated by mononormativity (Pieper and Bauer, 2005), as it implicitly accentuates (heterosexual) monogamy within the rules of “normality” and “naturalness.” This ideal becomes normative and socially reinforced through cultural, institutional, and legal mechanisms (Ferrer, 2018). However, participants allude to resistance against mononormativity despite the external reactions caused by the destabilization to the idea of fixed sexualities, as we will discuss below.

In the participant discourses, there are several references to consensual non-monogamies (CNMs), a term used to describe the romantic and intimate relationships negotiated among more than two people and, for this reason, are not sexually and/or emotionally exclusive (Conley et al., 2012). Some participants criticize and reject the institutionalized monogamous system: “I do not believe in monogamy. (...) We are too complex to be reduced to one person.” (Mário, 24 years old). Several participants express their unfulfilled desires and preferences: “There are things I would like to try, whether it is threesomes... I don’t know... Swing, group experiences...” (Bernardo, 34 years old). Other participants describe their ideal relationship: “I was idealizing the idea of a relationship. Hum... And it ended up being this idea of... Can I have a boyfriend and a girlfriend at the same time?” (Jaime, 30 years old). Some participants turn their desires into experiences: “I was able to do what I wanted. I have been in group sex with couples, I have been in hetero sex groups, I have been in men’s sex groups, I have been sexually involved with two women...” (Carlos, 53 years old).

Participants in this study present discourses of uncertainty, change, and variability in sexuality. In a dialogic process, they expose traditional and historically constructed conceptions as “truths” of sexuality (Foucault, 1994; Tiefer, 2004). Guilherme, 38-year-old, explains to us his ideal relationship, which departs from the current and hegemonic discourse about long-term monogamous couples (Klesse, 2006) but also presents the difficulties he anticipates with this experience:

And it is quite complicated, and it is very stupid what I am going to say, I am aware of that, but it is quite complicated to (...) ok, me having other people and the other person having other people too?! Well, yes, yes... One thing is you, another thing is the others, and it is very primitive this feeling, it is like a caveman, I know that but... Aah! I think it is normal to feel that way, but I think I could do that. I must evolve to that level of thinking, though I think humanity will evolve in that direction... We are not monogamous! (Guilherme, 38 years old).

Similar to the findings of Sheff (2006), even if developed from an exclusively heterosexual perspective, participants in our study also reinforce and recreate power structures in their relationships. On the one hand, Guilherme appeals to his ideal of relationships and, on the other hand, acknowledges his weakness in overcoming the jealousy barrier (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2017), conceiving polyamory as an experience that would be more reassuring if lived exclusively by himself. Thus, Guilherme explains:

The ideal relationship (...) would be with a couple that did not get along with each other. It would be a girl (...) and a man (...) and me in the middle. I mean, I would have sex with her and with him. And he and she would not have sex with each other (...) but I would be... I don’t know... the link in the triangle (Guilherme, 38 years old).

In Guilherme’s view, he could have multiple partners, but his partners could only be with him. The Klesse (2017) analysis of the work of Deri (2015) highlights the role of jealousy as a tool adopted by men to control women, which thereby exposes the link between jealousy and power. Our work moves away from a heteronormative perspective of relationships, as illustrated in the narrative from Guilherme, who idealizes a polyamorous relationship with a man and a woman. However, we consider the dynamic presented by Guilherme displays the complex and intersubjective relationship between power and control, which is typically heteronormative (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2017). As mentioned in the work of Sheff (2006), Guilherme seems to recreate patriarchal power structures based on domination and control. The difference lies in the “other,” who is not exclusively a woman but rather anyone who is available to be part of the relationship.

Henrique's experience is different. Henrique and his husband live in an assumed open relationship, but this relationship implies certain negotiations:

I am married but I am in an open relationship (...) we allow other people to come into our relationship and have sexual practices, but we cannot do it alone. It is always the two of us together, and other people can join, that is our agreement up until right now, but I know that things change (Henrique, 32 years old).

Henrique and his husband agree to only have sex with others if they are together; either they do it together or not at all (Barker and Langdridge, 2010). In the analysis of Sheff (2006) about poly-hegemonic subcultures, accessing multiple partners becomes complex due to the scope for the other partners to attain greater success in the relationship dynamics, leading to a consequent loss of power in the relationship. The agreement between Henrique and his husband reduces this risk. However, it is important to note that Henrique himself highlighted that this agreement might change because sexuality is a work in progress.

## **Intersections of masculinities and sexualities**

At the intersections between sexualities and masculinities, participants emphasize a dualism. On the one hand, discourses illustrate an unrelenting search for sex as a confirmation of masculinity, appealing to their sexual activities as an identifier of their masculinity: "before, I used to have sex as a way of existence (...), I needed to have sex to know who I was (...), and I always had a very active sex life, since a very young age" (Diogo, 23 years old). Thus, as in the work of De Graeve (2018), many of these participant narratives tend to draw on stereotypically masculine sexual scripts that construct men's needs as sex soldiers, that include the search for a lot of sex, and who are emotionally detached (De Graeve, 2018; Grave et al., 2020; Kimmel, 2006). On the other hand, participants also describe the lack of affection they feel in sexual relationships between men:

I would like to exchange more affection with men and I do not, because... normally, men fornicating do not have any kind of... it is something more simple, pure and harsh (...) It is completely straightforward and sometimes it is dirty, it is strange (...) because it is between men (...) it is between the two of us. Ah! It is terrible [laughs] (Guilherme, 38 years old).

Participants in this study explain that affection and emotions arise more easily in sexual relations with women, while in sexual relations with men, sexual performance focuses mostly on sexual and physical involvement. "I was capable of having a heterosexual relationship hum.... maybe more for emotional purposes than for physical aspects. And maybe I was capable of having a homosexual relationship just for the physical purpose and not for the emotional one" (Carlos, 53 years old),

Based on their personal experiences, all participants evoke a distinction between affective relations developed with women and sexual relations without affection developed with men. The exception was Henrique, who had developed affective relations with only men, an experience susceptible to change, as we have been arguing.

Therefore, participants reinforce the dominant hegemonic masculinity by playing the role of a man devoid of emotions when in sexual entanglements with other men while affection is allowed in relationships with women, which, in this case, are not a threat to masculinity loss. As pointed out by Connell (1987), this hegemonic masculinity is constructed both in relation to other subordinate masculinities and in relation to women. Thus, the hegemonic masculinity of participants of this study undergoes construction in relation to emphasized femininity, highlighting the submissive role of women in sexual and affective relations. These dynamics lead to the recognition of the asymmetrical relationship between masculinities and femininities in keeping with the unequal power relations between men and women and among men (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, participant masculinities, which are equally subordinated and

deemed inferior or deviant as they are not exclusively heterosexual (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Santos, 2019), conflict with the dominant model. They simultaneously reinforce hegemonic masculinity through gendered differences in sexuality and emotionality and react against it:

I am a person who likes affection, and it has to be inherent to sex. (...) When it does not happen [affection], I do not feel totally fulfilled because I feel that something is missing (...) that is very important (Alexandre, 33 years old).

This lack of affection evoked by most of the participants constitutes a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. The desire for affection, commitment, and cultivating emotions presents itself as a transgression to masculinity. In line with the findings of Sheff (2006), study participants skirted the margins of the contested boundaries of masculinities. They were complicit with dominant hegemonic masculinity while also actively countering some of its constraints (Sheff, 2006). Thus, they both reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) and question it in protest and resistance. These results are also illustrative of IMT and portray the changes masculinities have been undergoing. Participants express more emotional commitment, a desire for affection, and embrace experiences once coded feminine (Anderson and McCormack, 2016). Therefore, participants exhibit truly inclusive behaviors (Anderson and McGuire, 2010; McCormack, 2012). However, social opposition is mentioned by participants due to the ambivalence of sexual experiences, which are alternatives to normativity and unbalance the prevailing stability of sexuality (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004):

Have I been monogamous because I am naturally like that? Or because I have a notion that it is right, or it is more correct to be that way? I think that's it. If I thought like that, "ok, come on, be honest", probably I would not have avoided a lot of situations like I did, and I would have enjoyed the moment, wouldn't I? (Nelson, 48 years old).

## **Disturbing ambivalence**

In this study, participants presented alternative proposals to normativity as their own conceptions of sexuality and identity did not match the heteronormative, mononormative, stable, and rigid ideal of sexuality and hegemonic masculinity (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Pieper and Bauer, 2005; Warner, 1991; Wilton, 2004).

As previously stated, discourses and practices around CNMs are recurrent in the participants' narratives (Conley et al., 2012). Several participants explain how they live and experience their CNMs, permanently negotiating with the predominant system of heteronormative, monogamous, and hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Warner, 1991). However, they suffer social and external resistance: "Ah, who accepts that?! Polyamory... it is still very complicated nowadays (...) socially, it is very complicated" (Guilherme, 38 years old).

Participants also negotiate their experiences with sexual fluidity within the scope of accepting change, volatility, and variability in their sexuality (Diamond, 2008, 2016). Furthermore, these participants reject sexual stability as the norm (Callis, 2014) and face concern around ambivalence in the form of stigma and discrimination because of the non-normative character of their sexualities. Society expects sexual orientation and sexual identity to be kept stable throughout an individual's life via sexual experiences consistent with that orientation and identity and correspondingly non-changeable. Henrique, along with other participants, admits to having experienced an internal conflict when he began experiencing changes in his sexual attractions. "I wanted to know if I am normal or if I am not normal...what is that?" (Henrique, 32 years old). Concerns about ambivalence focus on variability and change as well as the fixed and categorical non-rigidity of sexual identity. In response to the actual experience of discrimination, Guilherme replied:

In my face! Completely! “Oh, Guilherme, we are here, at night, going out, who would you go home with?” Me: “Pff, so many people, I don’t know!” “Man, I cannot even go on with this conversation! It does not make any sense to me! You must be out of your mind! (Guilherme, 38 years old).

Guilherme puts forward examples of going out with friends, highlighting expressions that his friends usually use. Ivo also explains how his sexual and affective experience is marked by normativity:

My friends... they do not trust me, whenever I say, “I have a date”, they assume that I am going out with a man. It’s always like that. And if I go out with a woman, they get surprised (Ivo, 30 years old).

Thus, we observe that the concerns toward ambivalence gain in scale within a social system that establishes monogamous (and heterosexual) couples as “natural,” ideal, and morally upright and, consequently, stigmatizes non-monogamous alternatives as “unnatural,” dysfunctional, or even perverse (Conley et al., 2012). We may also perceive how sexual stability is privileged, resulting in discrimination and confusion toward changes in sexual attractions or desires (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004). Participants describe a heteronormative and mononormative system of male hegemony, which accompanies their lives:

Someone who is heterosexual doesn't see his/her (...) life explored from that point of view, (...) [he/she] presents a boy or a girl, as being his or her boyfriend or girlfriend, and everything is ok, it's cool. Whereas... someone who is gay or lesbian, introducing someone of the same sex to the family will generate some concern (Fabiano, 28 years old).

As stated above, in negotiations with hegemonic masculinity, participants make constant and sincere appeals to resistance as a means of surviving the hostilities of normativity by adopting a questioning attitude. Paulo’s excerpt illustrates his view of experiencing sexuality in a society defined by norms that limit diversity:

They lock us in boxes, as hetero, as bi... whatever, (...) boxes that they do not have to lock us in. I mean, we must decide for ourselves! And we can put ourselves in boxes but let us be the ones to close our boxes and open them (Paulo, 42 years old).

Participants are struggling to fit in these boxes as Paulo explains. They move across the variability of sexuality, trying to handle the rigid boxes that society constantly presents. Paulo’s narrative aligns with Sara Ahmed’s (2006) conception about sexual orientations and how the spaces are already oriented, which makes some bodies feel in place and not others. These orientations—which Paulo calls boxes—affect what people are allowed to do and point them to their futures, that which they are moving toward. Orientations also keep open the scope for changing directions and finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear the common ground, where we can find hope in that which goes astray (Ahmed, 2006: 569–570). There are constant references to resistance and survival strategies that constitute subversive identification processes through which participants neither assimilate nor reject the dominant heteronormative, monogamous, male-hegemonic culture (Conley et al., 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Warner, 1991). Simultaneously, they negotiate their identities in a reconstructed actualization as a practice of irony and critique (Grave et al., 2019; Muñoz, 1999):

I find it a bit weird to call myself bisexual, or gay or straight. (...) if they ask me, I do not know what to answer, and a lot of people ask me that question (...) I know it is not asked with malicious intent, but it is a question... So strange, because... That is a word! A word they found to describe our sexual relations. So, if I have relations only with a boy am I going to be gay? Even when everything can happen with a girl? Or, if I have relations with both sexes, am I going to give myself a name just because of that? Do I depend on that? (Lourenço, 24 years old).

Participants present survival strategies that operate simultaneously inside and outside of the dominant public sphere (Muñoz, 1999). Participants disidentify themselves with the ideological constraints implicit in an identity parameter nurtured by contemporary society concerning categorical rigidity and heteronormativity (Muñoz, 1999):

In the end, a label does not make much sense. We end up needing one to exist, right? In order to say to the other, to say to the world, “ah, I am this” and we have this obsession of having to label, of putting a label on everything (Diogo, 23 years old).

Like Diogo, Óscar also explains his position by reinforcing the previous discussion presented in this analysis. He exposes sexuality as a work in progress while presenting a disidentification with fixed and rigid identity categories. Óscar recognizes the importance of labels for certain experiences, but he acknowledges they may be reductive in other cases because they mark experiences that are not otherwise contemplated in socially constructed sexual standards:

I think labels are good for visibility, for people to identify and not feel alone while they are growing up (...) However, I do not think they have...that things have stagnated, and what is real today is not real tomorrow. It is... we are people and people evolve and, fortunately, we are always learning, and we are always changing, by... by experiences. On the one hand, there are labels, categories. On the other hand, I think things are more fluid and more variable over time and over a person's moment (Óscar, 39 years old).

The hostilities of the public and dominant spheres are felt in the non-normative experiences of the participants, limiting variability in sexuality, and resulting in some subversive identification processes of those who cannot find identity certainties. Participant experiences do not follow conventional scripts of sexualities and relationships, involving a disorientation in how conventional scripts are arranged in a sexual disorientation that slides quickly into social disorientation because it disturbs the order of sexuality (Ahmed, 2006; Wilton, 2004). We accessed narratives of people with fractured identity experiences who neither assimilate the dominant ideology nor reject it. They work for its transformation and reconstruction (Grave et al., 2019; Muñoz, 1999). In other words, participants work with and against normative constructions, strengthening their marginalized position that has historically been constructed as impossible, unthinkable, and impractical (Muñoz, 1999).

## Conclusion

In this work, we set out to explore the concept of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008, 2016) and its appropriateness to understanding men's sexual experiences. Additionally, we sought to understand how they lived and experience sexual fluidity in accordance with the surveillance and control of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Through participant narratives, we discuss sexuality as a work in progress that is socially constructed and shaped by culture (Tiefer, 2004; Weeks, 1986). Participants question the stability of sexual identities and experiences (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Silva, 2018; Wilton, 2004) through their malleable and permeable sexual identities (Paasonen and Spišák, 2018). This information is expressed by all the participants who so often stated they were either unsure or felt that the nomenclature currently available for sexual identity and sexual orientation might serve their purpose but continuously underpinned by many “maybes” of an unforeseen sexual future. Thus, they illustrate sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008), having at some point in their lives felt variations in their sexual attractions despite the diversity of the sexual identities that they choose to adopt. Therefore, they contribute to deconstructing gender bias by challenging the assumption of static male sexuality (Silva, 2018).

Furthermore, participants presented alternative proposals to that of normativity. They question the monogamous system because of the desire or experiences of CNMs (Conley et al., 2012; De Graeve, 2018; Sheff, 2006) and reject the traditional hegemonic ideal of sexuality and affectivity that exclusively contemplates monogamous long-term couples (Klesse, 2006). At the intersections of masculinities with sexualities, participant masculinities reinforce the dominant hegemonic masculinity even while reacting against it in protest and resistance by exposing the plurality and permeability of masculinities (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Sheff, 2006). The negotiations of masculinity that participants present reveal how multiple forms of masculinity can coexist in a horizontal alignment (Anderson and McGuire, 2010). Not only do the participants construct hegemonic masculinities but they also reject them and propose more inclusive masculinities, which unveils changes in men's gendered behaviors that constitute an important shift in the practices of masculinities (Anderson and McCormack, 2016). However, these modifications are not absolute, with non-inclusive contexts prevailing, and social constraints still remain significant whenever sexual practices are not normative.

In a heteronormative and mononormative context of male hegemony (Connell, 1987; Pieper and Bauer, 2005; Warner, 1991), with its prevailing order of sexual stability (Ahmed, 2006; Callis, 2014; Wilton, 2004), the sexual fluidity of participants results from an implicitly negotiated and reflected process with costs of subversion, disidentification, marginalization, and sensations of nonbelonging (Grave et al., 2020; Muñoz, 1999). Participants present sexual identities as political fictions that do not fail to be experienced as "real," just like any other social construct, with additional invitations to the deconstruction of normative and binary notions of sex and sexualities (Ahmed, 2006; Wilton, 2004). Therefore, participants allude to a state of socially misunderstood identity transit combined with the effects of hegemonic masculinity, whose power and efficacy appear not to be radically shaken in guiding their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Thus, we are witnessing a reorientation of interpersonal, emotional, and sexual relationships. Models of relationships that depart from normativity are emerging, and sexual (and/or romantic) relationships are becoming something that interrelate with achieving mutual pleasure in the present time coupled with an important degree of debate and negotiation through emancipating the subject within the confines of the politics of truth (Foucault, 1994).

It is thus important to reference the difficulty in recruiting participants with the group of participants in this study turning out homogeneous. Future research would benefit when able to analyze the intersections of class, ethnicity, age, and other categories of belonging. Nevertheless, this research proves to be innovative not only in its focus on analyzing men's experiences of sexual fluidity under the lens of hegemonic masculinity but also because it considers participants whose sexual orientations and sexual identities are malleable and not exclusively allocated to heterosexuality as otherwise happens in most studies on male sexual fluidity (e.g., Ward, 2015; Silva, 2016; Carrillo and Hoffman, 2016; Savin-Williams, 2017). These studies focus on men exclusively or primarily attracted to women that identify themselves as heterosexual even though their sexual activities reflect disruptions to heterosexuality. Participants in this study are neither "straight with a pinch of bi" (Carrillo and Hoffman, 2018) nor "mostly straight" (Savin-Williams, 2017), for instance. By contrast, they have diverse experiences of sexual identities and orientations while experiencing sexual fluidity. Therefore, this research differs from most studies on sexual fluidity in men because it does not take heterosexuality as its starting point and thereby also reinforces the erosion of the prevailing heterosexual hegemony. We disengage from the hetero norm and propose the permeability, flexibility, and malleability of all sexual orientations, identities, and experiences. Thus, our proposal is based on the changeability of human sexuality that remains under constant and continuous construction.

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## ORCID iD

Rita Grave <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5659-9556>

## Notes

1. The recruitment process specifically explained that we were targeting participants who identified themselves as men with experiences of sexual fluidity. It was with this knowledge and consent that we conducted the interviews. However, during the interviews, three participants problematized the term ‘man’ and correspondingly evoked alternative terminologies for self-identification in the sex and gender system. As it is our intention to respect diversity and personal identity desires, we would point out that Guilherme presents himself as “fluid,” Ivo as “gender queer,” and Óscar as “queer.” The remaining self-identifications vary between “male” or “cis man” as described in the table of participant characteristics. No trans men participated in the study. It should be noted that we considered these self-identifications did not invalidate the inclusion of these three participants in the study because, like the others, they presented experiences of sexuality marked by masculinities.
2. The expression *work in progress* is used by the authors Paasonen and Spišák (2018), referring to the sexual self. In this paper, however, we consider sexuality to be a work in progress not only in the realm of identity but also in a general sense.

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## Biographies

**Rita Grave** holds a degree in primary education from the University of Minho, and she is a Psychologist and Master in Psychology by the University of Porto – Faculty of Psychology and Education Science. Currently, she is a doctoral student with a PhD grant (FCT: SFRH/BD/132267/2017) conducting research on sexuality and masculinity at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto, Portugal. Her research interests include sexualities, gender, and intersectionality. [anaritagueragrave@gmail.com](mailto:anaritagueragrave@gmail.com).

**Ana R. Pinho** is a licensed psychologist, by the Portuguese Order of Psychologists, and a Master in Clinical and Health Psychology. She is a PhD student of the Doctoral Programme in Human Sexuality at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto. Her areas of interest and scientific production focus on sexualities, sexual health, gender studies, and sexual assistance. [psic.anapinho@gmail.com](mailto:psic.anapinho@gmail.com).

**António Manuel Marques** holds a PhD in social psychology and is a coordinating Professor at the School of Health of the Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal. He participated in projects and published in the fields of gender, sexuality, and health. [antonio.marques@ess.ips.pt](mailto:antonio.marques@ess.ips.pt).

**Conceição Nogueira** holds a PhD in social psychology. She is an Associate Professor with Aggregation at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto and director of the PhD Program in Human Sexuality of the same faculty. She is the author of several books (national and international), book chapters, and articles on the

theme of Gender Studies, Sexualities, and Feminisms. She is the coordinator of several international and national projects. [cnogueira@fpce.up.pt](mailto:cnogueira@fpce.up.pt).