“Passing” and its effects on Brazilian transgender people's sense of belonging to society: A theoretical study

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Abstract

Passing is the research of oneself by trying to look and to be seen as a member of a social group by assuming its features. Individuals performing this process are willing to undergo several physical and behavioural changes to achieve this aspiration. Passing generally occurs among members of minority groups suffering discrimination who want to diminish the psycho-social discomfort of their experience. Examples of passing are the attempts by ethnic minorities to whiten their skin, or the efforts of transgender people to look as much as possible, in the eyes of others, like the gender with which they identify. This paper aims to discuss aspects related to trans people's pursuit of passing, taking the Theory of Performativity of Gender and the Cultural Semiotic Psychology as its theoretical basis. This is a theoretical-reflexive study that will debate the topic based on studies of this topic in Brazilian society.

Keywords

cultural psychology, gender identity, passing, semiotics, transgender
The term passing refers to the process whereby a person adopts the guise of a different group's member in relation to one's race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation. Such a process often referred to enslaved black people passing as white to gain their freedom (Ginsberg, 1996). In Queer Studies, it is associated with the experience of transgender people and whether they are recognized as such. A transgender person is considered passable when she has the appearance of a cisgender person or she is confused by other people as such. Thus, trans people can avoid prejudice due to their being identified as trans by “passing” as cis people. Passing may therefore become a goal for many trans people, as it is a way to live in a community and to circumvent discrimination. It is not uncommon for trans people to engage in several aesthetic procedures to increasingly resemble cis people phenotypically.

Passing also strongly influences the relationships between trans people because, in many cases, the act takes a meaning of superiority and social prestige among trans communities. The phenomenon, consequently, raises the question: why is cis considered more socially desirable? The answer may be that the hegemonic cis-heteronormative culture imposes values about gender, cisgenderism, and sexuality that reduce or exclude the possibility for trans people to have a good life and to be respected. The phenomenon of passing raises great interest in the study of psychosocial relations in complex societies, where intersectionality clashes with monological identity discourses (Bagga-Gupta, 2012). The study of the specific way trans persons experience social belonging can lead to a broader comprehension of the passable/non-passable dialectic, considering the hegemonic culture dominated by cis-heteronormative values.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) stressed the role of what is made public in the construction of our sense of reality. To construct our sense of reality, we rely on what is heard and seen by others as much as what is perceived by ourselves. Moreover, our own sense of existence:

“comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape that is fit for public appearance.” (Arendt, 1958, p. 50).

Hence, to know and ascertain who we are, we need some form of publicity, we need to know how the others see us: we “become” through the gaze of the other. Passing, therefore, acquires a special meaning in the relationships between trans people and society, as well as in the relationships within the trans community. As much as passing provides relief from marginalization, in some contexts, it can also cause suffering. Therefore, it is a phenomenon characterized by complex dynamics that need to be analysed, as they are fundamental for understanding the psychological and social experience of a trans individual. A process such as passing, that simultaneously benefits and troubles the trans community, certainly has effects on the psychosocial development of these individuals. However, it also questions learned approaches to psychosocial phenomena. Indeed, passing cannot be understood in terms of mere social influence or categorization as it challenges and destabilizes the theoretical categories of social psychology.

Therefore, we propose a dialogue between Queer Studies and Cultural Semiotic Psychology to theoretically discuss the role of passing in promoting a specific meaning of social fitness and belonging for trans people. According to Queer Studies, gender is a phenomenon that is socially and culturally constructed through socialization processes and enacted in everyday life. As a construction, gender is not determined by the sexual-physiological characteristics of individuals, and there are no recipes or a correct biologically guided way to “build” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Phenomena like transgender identities show that biological constitution does not have exclusive power over individual gender construction. In the Cultural Semiotic perspective, the person’s psychological development is through constant production and interpretation of signs (Marsico & Valsiner, 2018). In the case of a transgender person, it is possible to think of passing as also a semiotic process (Valsiner, 2007). Particular signs’
production and interpretation guide much of the development of trans people, explaining an important portion of their conduct, as well as the social relations built both inside and outside trans communities, where passing emerges and can be understood as a sign expressing superiority and social acceptance.

The goal of the study is to analyse the role of passing in the psychosocial experiences of trans people, as well as the implications that the pursuit of passing may have on those people. First, we present the theoretical concepts of gender performativity and passing. Then, we analyse the function of passing in social relationships and the most likely consequences of this process on the psychological development of transgender people. The theoretical discussion is supported by the critical discussion and interpretation of trans people's need to fit into the cisnormativity of Brazilian society.

2 | THEORY OF PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER.

Judith Butler (1990), one of the major authors in Queer Studies, proposed the gender performativity theory, which rejects any gender essentialism. The author claims that gender, rather than constituting some sort of “essence” or natural element that is inherent to a person, is a discursive construction. The author thickens and deepens topics introduced by other authors, such as West and Zimmerman (1987). In “Doing Gender,” the authors defended the idea of “a new understanding of gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 1). Similarly, Butler (1990) sustained that dominant groups in society construct a set of narratives regarding men and women, and such narratives govern the way in which individuals perceive and interpret the so-called masculine and feminine persons. From this perspective, gender is a cultural product or, a discursive construct in Butler’s terms (Butler, 1990), and not a natural characteristic resulting from the individual's biological constitution.

Butler (1990) also stated that these practices promote what she called processes of gender crystallization. These practices are sociocultural and discursive means creating and imposing coherence between the biological characteristics of the individual, and elements of a masculine or feminine gender matrix. Gender crystallization creates an image of coherence and continuity between sex and gender, but such coherence is not natural, it is constructed and imposed by a heterosexist society to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990; Salih, 2002).

Butler (1990) defined the idea that sex and gender are material, natural, self-evident, and coherent entities as the “metaphysics of substance.” The author criticized such doctrine based on the experience of people that do not fit in the gender binarism, stating that such cases show that gender is not substantive, but performative, which is also the central assumption of the theory described in this study. Affirming that gender is performative means to understand it not as a substance, but as a set of actions that, routinely repeated by the people, are internalized, crystalized over time, and consequently produce a subjective identity (individual gender identity) which is expressed by the individual in multiple ways (the so-called “gender expressions”).

An essential point in understanding Butler’s theory is to differentiate performativity from performance. The first concept contests the idea of a person by stating that the acts pre-exist the person (and not the other way around). The latter would instead presuppose an autonomous person that pre-exists the acts and executes them. Consequently, the person is constituted by those acts that pre-exist it and that are determined and imposed on it (Salih, 2002). Therefore, Butler (1990) introduced the concept of gender matrix, which consists of a set of determining acts imposed on the person, as characteristics of a specific gender. The author herself used a metaphor in which she compared what she called the gender matrix to a mould to which people have to conform. This is the reason
why the theory of performativity denied the possibility of a free and conscious choice of gender acts and, therefore, performativity should not be understood as performance.

Similarly, Scott (1986) affirmed that gender is a social category imposed on sexualized bodies. Gender is the cultural creation of social roles, behaviours, and subjective identifications imposed on men and women. According to Scott (1986), Butler (1986, 1990), and Wittig (1980), gender is a way to define social relationships between men and women, against any biological explanation or determinism.

Scott (1986) defined gender based on two propositions: (a) gender is a constitutive element of social relationships, which are grounded in the socially perceived and constructed differences between sexes and (b) gender is a way to make meaning of the power relationships and, often, a way to justify them.

Scott (1986) further added that, to build social relationships based on the perceived difference between persons, four intertwined elements are implied. The first element is the symbolic representation of the different genders. For instance, masculinity is represented by symbols of power while femininity by symbols of submission. This element points directly to the semiotic aspect that will be discussed later on. The second element is the variety of normative concepts, provided by religion, education, science, legal or political systems, which regulate the extension and applicability of the symbols. The third element is the social organization of gender. The fourth element is the subjective identity and the personal process of identifying with a gender. All the elements are fundamental for both the formation of gender identity and for the social construction and regulation of the relationships between men and women and their respective place in society (Scott, 1986).

Butler (1990) too recognized that gender constructions are limited by the power structures that created them. Nevertheless, she also reaffirms the possibility of subversion within those limitations. To state that gender is performative implies that gender is “acting,” and thus people can “act it” in a way that may subvert the norm. This seems to be the case for transgender people, as well as for other persons that, though they do not claim a trans identity, subvert binarism or gender norms in some manner.

3 | TRANSGENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY

The transgender category is an umbrella term that includes people who claim gender identities that diverge from those imposed and expected from people of the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person that is born with characteristics such as a penis and XY chromosomes is assigned the male sex at birth. Cisnormative culture, in turn, directs people of the male sex to be identified as men. When the identity of this male person develops accordingly, that person is considered as cisgender, a term used to refer to people whose gender identity matches the identity imposed on them based on the sex they were assigned. When this process does not occur in the socially desired way, the person is classified as transgender. Following the same logic, if this person, having been born of the male sex, identifies as a woman, thus diverging from his imposed identity, that person is considered as transgender (de Jesus, 2012).

However, it cannot be ignored that sex/gender construction takes place within a context, which imposes limits to such constructions, marginalizes people who approach those limits, and violently excludes those that cross them (Salih, 2002; Butler, 1990). Even if sex and gender are cultural products and, therefore, fluid, that does not mean that they are entirely open to any type of transformation and reconstruction. Gender construction—even the most subversive—can only happen within the limits imposed by the dominant power. Phenomena such as passing are evidence of those limitations that weigh even on gender subversion (Duque, 2013).

Salih (2002, p. 63) stated that “gender is not just a process but a particular type of [sociocultural] process [that involves] ‘a set of acts repeated within a highly rigid regulatory context.’” Therefore, it is impossible to talk about gender or gender identity without talking about gender expression, which is the means through which gender is manifested, and its acts are executed. Butler (1990) also stated that “there is no gender identity behind gender expression; identity is performatively constituted by its own ‘expressions’ that are supposedly its results.” (p. 25).
Therefore, it is possible to conclude that language and discourse construct the gender matrix that is imposed on people. Its effect is the generation of culturally intelligible persons, who identify with the gender construction imposed on them and which is incorporated through gender acts and expressions that, effectively, constitute the so-called gender identity (Butler, 1990).

Starting from a critical perspective on Freudian theory, Butler (1990) also discussed the idea of gender embodiment. Part of human sexuality is homosexual and expresses a desire towards the same-sex parent. Once rejected as morally unacceptable, the desire is kept alive through the embodiment that is the process of internalization of the desire and its expression through bodily modifications to become what they once desired and were not allowed to desire: a person of the same sex. The gender melancholia (Butler, 1995) can partially account for cisgenderism. It is relevant but not sufficient to fulfill the heuristic value of the theory of performativity. Subjective factors as the gender embodiment cannot alone account for the process of construction of the individual gender identity. As it is impossible to think about an individual subject separated from the context, Scott (1986) acknowledged the relevance of psychodynamic theories to account for gender identity. However, she stressed the risk that this would restrict the concept of gender to the family relationships and to the individual psychological development, overlooking the eminently social character of gender relationships. Social, politic, economic, and power systems also concur with the constitution of gender. The processes of internalization and embodiment described by Butler (1990; Butler, 1995) can take place only in the context of those systems. The a priori produce norms and meanings that make embodiment possible.

The collective and symbolic dimension of gender is also represented in its narrative dimension. Hochdorn, Faleiros, Camargo, and Cottone (2016), for instance, discussed the narrative aspects of gender in a study with 14 trans women in three different contexts (workplace, prison, and private spaces). They showed how the social narratives about gender are structured from the symbolic processes varying according to the different contexts. “Indeed, different contexts shape different discourses, producing different representations of others and oneself” (Hochdorn et al., 2016, p. 228).

Hochdorn et al. (2016) underlined that the trans persons built their own genders from symbolic coordinates—that is the discursive, semantic, and normative resources available in a given socio-cultural context. Gender is also a linguistic matter, which is not just acted but also spoken. Language, a semiotic system, orients the social relationships and fills them with discourses charged with sexualizing and gendering meanings. Those discourses contribute in return to the production of binary and heteronormative representations that Butler (1990) and Scott (1986) consider the grounding of the social matrix of gender in the West. Hochdorn et al. (2016) also noted an important difference between the life contexts. Namely, in the public sphere (workplace and prison), the discourses tended to promote the conformity of gender identities to heteronormativity. In the private sphere of the domestic environment, instead, the construction and legitimation of fewer binary identities were promoted.

Apparently, there is no free choice in actions or expressions, as social norms establish a limited range of available gender styles (Salih, 2002). That is clearly seen among transsexual people. Their condition is subversive in itself. However, within their subversion, they are also aiming at achieving physical similarity to the dominant group (cisgender people), for even transsexual people are part of this society that limits gender expression to what is acceptable as masculine or feminine. Therefore, people who identify as men or women tend to pursue body styles acceptable to the genders with which they identify, this phenomenon is known as passing (Duque, 2013).

4 | PASSING IN THE TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE

Passing refers to the act or process of passing as someone of a different condition from the one of the person who is passing (Ginsberg, 1996). Historically, the term refers to American black slaves who sought freedom by passing as white free citizens (Ginsberg, 1996). In the patriarchal slave society of 19th Century North America, crossing the “colour line” was an act of extreme subversion. Many social categories are recognized as conventional or contingent,
such as income, marital status, and nationality. However, race and gender are commonly considered natural and unchangeable conditions, whose subversion affects the natural (and maybe divine) laws on which society is based. Such implicit belief is still so strong that even mainstream social sciences consider, without hesitation, gender and “origin” as independent variables in any research design. In the North American context, the term passing was also applied, by extension, to women who cross-dressed as men to access professions precluded to them (Ginsberg, 1996). By analogy, passing is currently used in the case of a person to whom sex was assigned at birth and that, for some reason, is passing as someone from different sex. Such phenomenon is frequent, and even necessary, amidst transsexual people who—being in the process of sex transition—are faced with the need, socially imposed or not, to look more and more like the people with whose gender they identify, thus confirming the performative processes considered by Butler (1990).

Regarding this phenomenon, Duque (2013) analysed the four factors that characterize and regulate passing: spatiality, violence, outfit, and physical appearance. The author stated that spatiality legitimizes or inhibits the identifications desired by persons. For example, a corporate environment can inhibit trans identities and expressions, whereas pro-LGBT environments can have the opposite effect. Such spaces, however, do not unequivocally guarantee individuals’ intelligibility. Therefore, they can be read in a variety of ways and decisively influence constructions on masculine and feminine bodies.

Regarding the second aspect, one of the most important functions of passing is protection against violence, occurring both in a context of transphobia and in the context of peer exclusion and rejection. In the latter, what happens is a search for non-passing signs and the highlighting of differences with cisgender people. Those factors will determine to what extent and whether each person will engage in passing or not, and which of the contexts mentioned above will be the most influential. The central issue in this case (and in passing as a whole) seems to be the pursuit of recognition, be it through identification or differentiation, in daily relationships (Duque, 2013).

Duque (2013) stated that, essentially, persons aim to be recognized as a man/woman to avoid violence and exclusion, or as different, empowered, and brave to avoid exclusions, criticism, and other (symbolic) violence perpetrated by fellow transgender people. Those two possibilities are not rigidly fixed or binary as transgender people often move from one to the other, depending on the context of each interaction. Those that pass less, in theory, have fewer possibilities of accessing the first context. The author also considers other variables such as race, class, and age that have also a decisive influence on the processes of social recognition involved in passing.

Based on the stories of transgender people’s painful experiences, especially transsexual people and travestis, we can state that being transgender is something extremely undesirable from a social point of view. Generally, it is expected that people performatively adjust to the gender they were assigned at birth. Breaking this social code causes prejudice, rejection, and repulsion. Drastic consequences upset the lives of these people, who are frequently kicked out of homes, schools, formal work environments, and see their intimate relationships directly affected (Oliveira & Romanini, 2019). According to Ginsberg (1996), passing is “a source of cultural anxiety, for both the categories ‘non-white’ and ‘woman’ are differences that affirm the supremacy of the ‘white’ and ‘man’ ones in the hegemonic ideology” (p. 5).

Family, school, community, university, health services, and work are all realities that contribute, in a negative way, to the creation of cisgender persons. They are just bodies that must be indoctrinated to literally follow the gender stereotypes assigned to their biological sex (Oliveira & Romanini, 2019, p. 443).

However, it appears that issues related to social rejection relatively soften as passing increases. That is, as a trans person approaches gender patterns that people identify as belonging to the gender they are performing, their discomfort tends to decrease. This fact suggests that gender ambiguity is something causing more discomfort than being transgender in itself.

That model imposes cisgender uniformity to all people, including trans people, who suffer a certain pressure to be socially considered successful. The process involves the use of hormones and plastic
surgeries, including sex confirmation surgery, to resemble as much as possible the hegemonic cisgender models. (Garcia & Pereira, 2019, p. 11).

Thus, the intelligibility of “what a person is” becomes a fundamental condition for being accepted (Oliveira & Romanini, 2019). We can conclude that gender, within this logic, is a fundamental element for the constitution of humanity and the social recognition of a person, and consequently, also of their self-recognition, construction of subjectivity, and self-concept.

An interesting example, relevant to this discussion and regarding the social recognition of gender is the experience of some cisgender women that are high-performance athletes. Some of them become so muscular that, in the eyes of society, they lose their femininity, and begin to be mistaken for men, despite their identifying as cis women. Some of them speak of difficulties when trying to use the women's bathroom, being frequently kicked out by other users or cleaning staff, claiming that they are men. One athlete tells of a time when she had to raise her blouse and show her breasts to prove she was a woman and be allowed to use the women's bathroom (Jardim, 2018). They do not have intelligible bodies.

For that reason, Amara Moira Rodovalho (2017) suggested that the idea of cis and trans identities also includes the element of social recognition, which goes beyond the simple subjective identification with these identities (as though one thing could occur independently from the other). She defined cisgender women as “those women that, having been raised as women due to the genitals they were born with, exist for themselves and society under the identity of woman” (Rodovalho, 2017, p. 373). This implies that the intrasubjective aspect is not enough to define cis/trans identities, as also the intersubjective one is necessary. Social recognition is part of the process.

To achieve social recognition, it is fundamental that the individual adjusts to the normative model of their gender. This brings them legitimacy, intelligibility and saves them much trouble in social dynamics. Obviously, being trans will never entirely stop being an issue. That is why “passing” as a cis person is so fundamental. Let us now go back to the points defined by Duque (2013) that are crucial for recognition and gender passing. The outfit also plays an essential role in passing, as, at an intrapersonal level, it materializes the image that the persons construct of themselves. In contrast, at an interpersonal level, it fulfills the expectations of how one socially expects to see a masculine or feminine person.

Lastly, maintaining an appearance and a physical shape similar to the socially desired standard (a muscular, masculine body and a slim feminine body) is essential in passing, for it strengthens gender intelligibility through identification with what is considered aesthetically beautiful and desired (the pursuit of the desired standard is a process also occurring among cis people, but in this case, it lacks the layer of gender intelligibility) (Duque, 2013).

For what concerns the aspect of physical appearance, the focus is on the body dimension. It is common for trans people to undergo sex confirmation surgeries, such as procedures to alter breasts and hormone therapy. These interventions are frequently quite invasive and can have a twofold motivation: first, the individual's desire to have a body with the characteristics of the gender they identify with, and, secondly, a need to adjust to what would be socially expected of that gender. In this respect, we see passing as a decisive factor in people's decision to undergo this kind of intervention (Almeida, Santos, Diniz, Aguiar, & Pereira, 2019).

We can add to the list formulated by Duque (2013), other critical passing aspects such as enacting (Weinauer, 1996) and social name (Hatje, Ribeiro & Magalhães, 2019).

Passing is more than just transvestitism. To successfully pass as white people, escaped slaves had to become white. In a way, physical appearance was the easiest part of the process. Many slaves, for instance, had fair skin because they were the illegitimate children of black women raped by their white masters (Ginsberg, 1996; Weinauer, 1996). The most challenging part was to fully enact the white condition, to forget years of slavery with all its ingrained mindset and body colonization. Thus, passing involves several different levels of enactment: “imposture on the level of his own language” (Weinauer, 1996, p. 45), being always present to oneself and remembering to
“behave” like a “white” or a “male” person, being responsive to others’ reactions and be aware of how others see oneself. The enactment of passing is located “where the boundary between appearance and reality collapses” (Weinauer, 1996, p. 46).

One of the ways we are called to reality is through our own name. Seeing as most names are strongly linked to a gender, the difficulty of utilizing one’s social name in documents is frequently an obstacle to passing and the consequent social acceptance of a body that does not match its name. Transgender people frequently recount embarrassing experiences of being called by their birth name in social contexts. Wittmann (2019) talked of this in a study:

Thomas (a trans man) recounts that once, at a doctor’s office, he was called by his birth name and all the thirty people present in the room stared at him. A small child, who was at his side, was promptly pulled away by the mother, who warned him: “Careful!” Not using social names is a lack of consideration that, amongst other issues, leaves transgender people vulnerable to behaviours of abjection, rooted in ignorance of their rights and disgust for their existence. (pp. 102–103)

This story shows that being immediately recognized as transgender through one’s name can result in social rejection, to the point that a person is considered dangerous, for the simple reason that they do not respond to the impositions of cis-heteronormativity.

Thus, surgical and hormonal interventions mostly have the purpose of building a new meaning for specific body parts and, at other times, of erasing from the body any and all the characteristics that refer to the gender with which the person does not identify (Meneses & Viana, 2017). This makes the person more passable and protects them from being accused of not being a “real” man or woman due to this or that characteristic.

However, there is a large number of transgender people who construct a gender identity based, above all, on an outfit and gender performance (Meneses & Viana, 2017). They may conduct low-impact interventions on their body, such as change their hairstyle and shaving, without necessarily resorting to hormones and surgeries. Thus, they reclaim their gender status conserving the characteristics of a different gender to the one with which they identify. In this case, they are not necessarily trying to pass, but to achieve gender recognition independently of how well they pass in the eyes of others. Generally, these people meet higher resistance and prejudice than people who are better adjusted to cis-heteronormativity.3

We cannot keep accepting, never questioning it, the pathologized and outdated hypothesis that the only way out of transgender identity is the development of bodies capable of fulfilling the requirements and demands of clothing that society imposes. The transgender body must be legitimized as it is. (Lanz, 2014, p. 185)

Cis-heteronormativity, therefore, refers to the social demand that people adjust to the pattern of gender and sexuality previously defined for them based on the gender they were assigned at birth (Pelúcio, 2012). Cis-heteronormativity is supported by strong power mechanisms that regulate behaviour based on gender, and any attempt to defy those normative mechanisms incurs grave social consequences for the individual (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993; Salih, 2002).

Obviously, those aspects differ when talking about trans women or trans men. We know that an unavoidable issue regarding gender relations is sexism, or “male domination” (Bourdieu, 2001). Consequently, the social experiences of a trans man and a trans woman are different once they are socially recognized. That is because the mechanisms of control and regulation act much more strongly on bodies recognized as feminine than on those recognized as masculine (Silva, 2017). Generally, the experience of trans women is lived as much more challenging than that of trans men.
There are trans men’s stories proving that, once they had been recognized and accepted as men by their peers, they began to be much more respected and included in male dynamics and sexist jokes, as you can see in Lucas’ testimony (Hatje, Ribeiro & Magalhães, 2019):

Lucas: [...] one thing I noticed with friends in general, and it is so crazy because people are treating me more like a man, let’s say, how they act, it’s more in the sexist sphere. It is this thing, let’s put it this way, they’re not treating me like a chick anymore. It’s so crazy now, it really happened after my decision, I presented my documents and people saw things were serious and now people, it’s incredible, because they haven’t been treating me like a chick, you know. The way society behaves got me like, wow, now it seems I’m starting to get what it’s like for people who are considered boys from birth, even going through bullying (GF). (p. 138)

In this case, the interviewee Lucas recounts how his experience changed once he managed to modify his name in documents. He gained greater social acceptance of his gender and experienced the feeling of being treated as a “real man.” Thus, he began to experience the privilege of masculinity.

Trans women, on the other hand, suffer rates of violence and murder that reach alarming levels, especially in Brazil. That is why trans women pursue passing even more intensely, as a way of protecting themselves. A participant in Silva’s research (Silva, 2017) said that she felt like a chameleon, who must adapt to the environment so as to not attract attention to her being trans. Trans women, therefore, suffer twice for being both women and trans. The statistics of violence and murder make evident the repulsion that society feels for this group, and how passing can provide safety to these women (Silva, 2017).

5 | A DIALOGUE WITH CULTURAL SEMIOTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Performativity theory promotes important discussions regarding gender issues in a social context, implying the symbolic dimension to understand individual dynamics in a process such as passing. To deepen the theoretical understanding of passing, one also needs a solid theory of the relationship between signs and their role in the construction of the person’s identity. The semiotic cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2007) brings some interesting ideas to the analysis of passing. The general tenet of semiotic cultural psychology is that psychological processes are semiotic, that is the psyche is a process of constant production, interpretation, and demolition of signs. Any element of material and immaterial human reality is potentially a sign (language, outfit, gestures, images, etc.), as a semiotic resource, whose meaning is constructed in the context of social relationships. My outfit when I go to work, for instance, is a message both for myself and for the other. Its interpretation will be guided by the socially available discursive practices, but everyone will produce a particularly personal interpretation in the end. One’s dress is a semiotic resource that can be used to regulate the other’s conduct (e.g., sending a message about sexual availability, gender identity, mood, professionalism, social status, etc.) but also to regulate one’s own psychological experience (e.g., sending a message to the self about confidence, empowerment, etc.). Interpretation is a process guided by the internalization of social suggestions disseminated in the environment (e.g., the shared meanings about heteronormativity embedded in shop windows) but it is also very personal. Interpretation is the space in between that allows the dynamics between continuity and discontinuity in psychological and social life.

The semiotic cultural psychology assumes that minimal levels of subjective tension are indispensable to one’s development. From this assumption, Marsico and Tateo (2017) developed the concept of tensegrity. The second idea is the cogenetic logic (Tateo, 2016), which can contribute to understanding the dynamics of passing in the social and psychological experience of trans people.

Marsico and Tateo (2017) describe the self as “a dynamic semiotic system in constant evolutive tension, rather than a system in equilibrium adapting to the environmental changing conditions” (2017, p.18). In the same vein, the
theory of gender performativity also challenges that same notion of balance and continuity in persons’ experiences. Also, Butler (1990) stated, that the subjective construction of gender identities and its expression does not necessarily lead to the coherence that cisnormative culture expects and imposes on persons. Still, once such imposition exists, it could be said that coherence between sex, gender identity, and gender expression becomes the individual’s pursuit. This is evident in the phenomenon of passing as demonstrated in some of the cases analysed by Duque (2013). In a way, it becomes the final frontier. This last adjustment seals the socially imposed coherence that, when reached, grants transgender individuals a “pass” to certain social privileges.

However, performativity theory contests the viability of such coherence, since an increasing negligible number of individuals break up with the socially produced symmetry between biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression and do not conform to the binary gender matrix. The existence of these identities produces tension both in the social sphere—with specific sectors of society delegitimizing such identities—and individually—as transgender and/or non-binary persons face inner conflict.

Another relevant consequence of the gender performativity perspective is the role of temporality. The naturalization of gender categories excludes any developmental perspective, while the phenomenon of passing stresses temporal development through the negotiation of identity, gender, and expression. In its original meaning, “passing” indicates a liminal condition, a temporary configuration of elements (such as enactment, appearance, and public gaze) which is functional to the achievement of “freedom” (De Luca Picione, 2020a). Without this developmental aspect, passing can become a new social “cage,” as the experience of the Brazilian participants seems to suggest. The social psychology of gender should seriously consider the developmental nature of psychological processes, and the negotiation of different configurations of the self. In this sense, Marsico and Tateo (2017) argued that human psychological life is driven by tension and ambivalence rather than by equilibrium and stability—the authors call it tensegrity, that is the constant state of tension that maintains an organism simultaneously stable, flexible, and functional.

Tensegrity is what allows for movement and development, as it is in relationships of tension that new meanings, regarding the world and the individual psychological and emotional experience, are built according to the cultural semiotic perspective (De Luca Picione, 2020b; Valsiner, 2007, 2014). This is particularly evident in relation to gender, as conceiving new categories that go beyond the classic masculine/feminine binary is a movement that in itself promotes tensions. Nevertheless, it is precisely thanks to that tension that the construction of new identities is possible.

Yet when tensions are too strong, they can result in ruptures, aggressive behaviours, and issues, both at intersubjective level—as we see in narrative disputes in different sectors of society regarding the truth about gender—and at intrasubjective level, which can lead to significant psychological suffering such as depression.

A central concept in performativity theory in dialogues with Cultural Semiotic Psychology is the idea that masculine and feminine, when treated as rigid categories, are limiting and repress what is situated in between them. In this regard, Chaudhary and Shukla (2017) stated:

“We as a society need to understand that dignified social recognition can only be achieved if the nomenclature of the gender category as a whole is newly constructed and framed so as to incorporate the existence of a third gender as a normal, socially approved, dignified gender category (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2017, p. 38).

Such process of deconstruction and amplification of the gender category discussed by Chaudhary and Shukla (2017), demands the identification of new tensions that go beyond the classic masculinity versus femininity dichotomy. Something relevant in this regard is the cogeneric logic presented by Marsico and Tateo (2017), which aims to comprehend human experience not through rigid dualities, but through triads including elements that are defined in agreement with each other (Tateo, 2016). An example of cogeneric order would be to conceive the opposite of white as “non-white” instead of considering “black” as the only possible opposite of white. Thinking in this way opens up infinite possible meanings for what is not considered as “white.”
Based on cogenetic logic, we claim that to think in terms of masculine/non-masculine and feminine/non-feminine, in place of the traditional binarism would be more productive. Conceiving the meaning of masculinity and femininity in this way can help us to facilitate the deconstruction of the gender binary proposed by Chaudhary and Shukla (2017). “Non-masculine” and “non-feminine” as fields of meaning can include and allow for the emergence of new gender categories. Passing comes into play in this process of reconfiguring relationships and boundaries between different genders.

What has been discussed so far provokes some necessary discussions on passing. First, we need to consider the process of passing contributes to the production of new gender identities and expressions. Passing reconfigures the boundaries between genders, but it also makes evident the permeability of such boundaries (Duque, 2013). It is because of such permeable nature that passing is so important and desired by a significant number of trans people, since passing grants them a sense of adjustment and social belonging (Bento, 2006; Duque, 2013).

However, recognizing the importance of passing for trans communities and realizing its social and affective function for these individuals does not mean that we cannot question it, as passing is also used as an instrument to reproduce a binary matrix. Passing can even hinder the possibility of developing new categories, as proposed by a cogenetic perspective, if it is used merely to increasingly promote the development of individuals that pass, thus excluding individuals that do not pass. After all, another essential element for the construction of new categories of gender identity and expression is the existence of people who do not pass and often maintain hybrid and non-defined gender expressions that can create several possibilities for new constructions. The dialectic relationship between the categories “passing” and “not passing” can lead to such an outcome.

**6 | FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The goal of this article is to present a few considerations on Butler’s theory, as well as on the contributions offered semiotic cultural psychology, to discuss the question of passing and broaden the knowledge on this phenomenon. Passing, as a common issue in the daily life of transgender people, involves questions on gender, culture how identities are constructed, and the importance of social recognition in the process.

In this context, the idea of gender performativity proposed by Butler is fundamental to understand gender as an action that is performed day by day in the public context of social relationships. In this framework, gender is a process constructed by acts. This vision breaks away from the socially widespread idea that gender is part of someone’s essence, and a natural consequence of their sex.

Thus, passing emerges as a phenomenon associated with individuals’ attempts to perform their gender in such a way to diminish tensions related to their way of being. These attempts aim at being accepted and lessening social rejection caused by not following cis-heteronormative impositions.

Besides, semiotic cultural psychology defends the importance of tensions in the development process. The cogenetic logic (Tateo, 2016) challenges the idea of binary concepts. This is also radically relevant in understanding passing as a phenomenon that challenges dualities, such as masculine vs feminine, cis vs trans, passing vs not passing. The cogenetic logic invites us to re-consider these pairs not necessarily as opposites, opening many possibilities for the construction of new paths in the space in between these concepts and their negative opposites.

On the one hand, this study reinforces the importance of the construction of passing for some transgender people as a means to survive and to acquire some level of intra and interpsychological comfort. On the other hand, the study also problematizes the quest of passing, as it may reinforce dualisms and the cis-heteronormative logic that should be deconstructed.

We consider it essential that future research in Cultural Psychology focuses more and more on the phenomena related to gender identity and expression. Especially regarding the topic addressed in this work—gender embodiment and passing—there are several semiotic processes involved. Our study addressed, at a theoretical level, some of the meanings involved in the performance of passing by trans people. The Theory of Performativity strongly emphasizes
socio-cultural and political aspects and leaves a gap in the understanding of the psychological dimension of gender expression. We claim that the gap can be filled by understanding the meanings of passing for the individuals, through qualitative empirical studies in this direction enabling us to deepen the aspects discussed in this work.

We therefore believe that the Theory of Performativity combined with Cultural Semiotic Psychology helps to understand how semiotic dynamics act in the performance of individuals’ gender. By discussing passing in a greater depth, one can improve the quality of psychological support provided in hospitals, clinics, communities, or any other place. It will acknowledge the difficulty that trans people face in dealing with a society that has predominantly cis-heteronormative values. In the end, the need for passing communicates how much we need to change as a society.

In this way, we would like to leave an open space so that these reflections can be helpful to guide the psychological practice, in its different modalities, with regard to work on gender and its different expressions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

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ENDNOTES
1 According to Jesus (2012), travestis are persons who live according to feminine gender roles, but do not recognize themselves neither as men nor as women. They recognize themselves as members of a third gender or as a non-gender.
2 This element also depends on other social factors, such as socioeconomic class and race. According to Carvalho (2018), this need to adjust to cis-heteronormativity and consequent passing is stronger in contexts of greater social vulnerability. In a high and middle-class context, amidst white youth in urban centers, “non-binariness” is perceived as more acceptable.
3 According to Jardim (2018): “cisgenderity, as much as heterosexuality, constitutes a political, social regimen that regulates our lives. Thus, it seems to me that, currently, considering transfeminist discussions that have arisen in these past few years, the queer concept of heteronormativity needs to be broadened, so as to also encompass cisnormativity.” (p.135).

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