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Leonardo Morantes-Africano

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Queering *habitus*: interrogating heteronormative dispositions that reproduce inequalities towards sexual minorities

Leonardo Morantes-Africano 

University of Glasgow, Glasgow

ABSTRACT

This paper engages Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural reproduction, namely that of habitus, symbolic power, and symbolic violence, with the work of queer theorists, to interrogate the theory and practice of heteronormativity. The paper centrally argues that issues of inequalities experienced by sexual minorities are rooted on a received discourse that is normative in nature, and that, if unexamined, will continue to reproduce them. It also argues that negative dispositions towards sexual difference are not innate to human nature but 'learned' via early socialisation. Thus, to advance social justice, disrupting heteronormativity is the right thing to do, and initial teacher education is in a privileged position to help teachers and students with processes of learning and unlearning, necessary for a critical interrogation of received gender/sexuality norms. The first section contextualises habitus against critical interpretations of gender and sexuality. The second section deals with the power of discourse and the symbolic violence exercised by it. The third section explores the role of teacher education to disrupt heteronormativity. The conclusion brings together key conceptualisations to argue that tackling issues of inequality and injustice towards sexual minorities requires a queering of habitus, an acceptance of sexual diversity as natural rather than deviant.

KEYWORDS

Habitus; heteronormativity; initial teacher education; sexual minorities; queer; LGBTQ++

Introduction

Heteronormativity, as an ideology and a social practice, assumes heterosexuality as the foundation of society: a given, natural and universally expected form of sexual identity (Seal 2019, 2020; Griffin 2020; Warner 1993; Wittig, 1981). It also assumes that all other forms of sexual orientation are 'pathological, deviant, invisible, unintelligible, or written out of existence' (Yep 2002, 167). In many contexts, this results in hierarchical categorisations, discursive, and normative dispositions that tacitly or deliberately frame the existence of

CONTACT Leonardo Morantes-Africano  lamorantesa@gmail.com

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sexual minorities in the social space as unnatural, immoral, and in many cases 'as a class with less status' (Orne 2013). This also pertains aspects of gender identities and expressions, which will be explored further below. As an umbrella term, and in opposition to the binaries imposed by heteronormativity that exhaust the field of gender (Butler 1990), the term queer will be used here to mean gender/sexual difference. This acknowledges and celebrates the inherently diverse nature of gender and sexuality, its identities, and expressions. It is also a political move to not only claim pride to counter the stigmas associated with sexual difference, but to assert 'the performative power of language' (Butler 1993, 170): Being queer may not be common but this does not mean it is unnatural. However, caution must be taken to avoid imposing labels on those from sexual minorities who do not identify as queer (World Health Organisation 2016, 3). At the root of issues of inequality and injustice in education and general social practice we normally find an unequal or asymmetric positioning, which in the case of sexual minorities, is expressed in forms that range from subtle but hurtful avoidance of queer people, right through to harassment, discrimination, and other forms of violence. In terms of equality, there have been advancements in matters of fundamental rights for queer people. For example, in the UK the Equality Act (2010) includes sexual orientation as one of the protected characteristics. However, this does not guarantee that people's perceptions, biases, and dispositions towards sexual minorities have been positively affected. In other words, the fact that queer people have the legal right to access education does not mean that they are welcomed and accepted by fellow students or their teachers. As Stafford reminds us (2018, para. 5) societal attitudes towards LGBT people have improved over the years: however, 'Britain might see a peak level of acceptance for same-sex relationships rather than reaching blanket approval'. This ought to concern everybody as gender/sexual minorities do not exist in an abstract realm; they are our family members, students, neighbours, and colleagues. Tackling inequalities is a collective endeavour.

This paper centrally argues that the reproduction of inequalities towards sexual minorities is rooted in a hegemonic heteronormative discourse that defines 'heterosexuality as natural and everything else as deviant' (Donelson and Rogers 2004, 128). Such discourse is received via early socialisation, is internalised, and then produces lasting dispositions that are normative in nature, thus instigating moral judgements towards those deemed as deviant. While some people are able to understand and respect the lives of sexual minorities, many others judge them as wrong and resist to accept them as peers in the social contract, as seen by controversy caused by same sex marriage laws across many jurisdictions (BBC 2014; Human Rights Campaign 2021; Park and Rhead 2014; Townsend 2013). An important aspect of these dispositions is that although they are 'learnt', received, or inculcated, they can be changed. Unless we disrupt the discourse and

practice of heteronormativity, queer people, which includes 1.5 million people in the UK, according to the 2021 census (Office for National Statistics 2023), will continue to be disadvantaged. Education as a sector at the heart of all learning ought to be concerned with this because what we have at stake here is the wellbeing and educational experience of teachers and students. A discourse which favours the view of sexuality as a private matter, and not something that belongs in the classroom, hence enables the micro harassment, offensive remarks, use of derogatory language or altogether exclusion that happens outside the classroom. Thus, I call on initial teacher education to be a strategic ally in matters of social justice; to give teachers and students of all ages the tools to examine critically but compassionately their normative dispositions towards sexual difference. To do this we must first acknowledge it as key learning for initial and continuous teacher education, rather than a subject exclusively private.

To interrogate the theory and practice of heteronormativity, theories of social and cultural reproduction are used here, with specific attention to the notions of habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 2000), symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus is used here to conceptualise heteronormativity as a ‘system of structured, structuring dispositions’ (Bourdieu 1990, 52), with much attention given in the first two sections of the paper to the unconscious and received nature of gender and sexuality norms. In addition to habitus, the notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence are used to unpack the arbitrariness of the norms imposed by the heteronormative discourse, its concealment of power, and the implications for social practice. I argue that our range of responses to gender/sexual difference, irrespective of our own identity and behaviour, are caught in the reproduction of a ‘cultural arbitrary’ (Bourdieu 1990) of what constitutes ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ gender identity and sexual desire.

Bourdieu’s conceptual tools, though mostly focused on the exposition of class inequalities, have been extensively applied to wider sociological issues, including race (Wallace, 2016), feminism (Skeggs 2004; Witz 2004), urban studies (Gamsu 2016), sexual field theory (Ruppel 2020), queer bodily performances in urban spaces (Merabet 2014), ethics of resistance for social movement studies (Samuel 2013), lesbian identity in literature and film (Ross 2004), among others. The analysis presented in this paper acknowledges that although Bourdieu did not overtly explore issues of inequality related to sexual difference, his conceptual tools offer an ‘explanatory power’ (Skeggs 2004) that transcends class inequalities, as will be illustrated here through the links between habitus and heteronormativity. However, as Sayer (2005, 23) contends, we need to modify some of his concepts too, namely that of habitus, to conceptualise its normative orientation towards ‘ethical dispositions’, which Bourdieu scarcely acknowledged. Thus, in addition to exploring the normative side of habitus, I use the work of queer

theorists critically to interrogate heteronormativity. This engagement is necessary in order to bring theories of reproduction up to date because the social space is ever changing. I also argue that we need to contextualise them within a late modern, complex, diverse and ambivalent social practice. Queer theory, as an umbrella term that challenges gender/sexuality essentialism, is largely influenced by feminism and poststructuralism (McCann and Kim 2017), making the discussion presented here an interplay between Bourdieu's theorisations of how inequalities are reproduced, and a post-structural criticality that attempts to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses that maintain them. In doing so, this essay offers a fresh and intersecting perspective intended to contribute to the knowledge of the fields of queer theory, the sociology of education, and initial teacher education.

The central claims of this paper are: first, that a habitus informed by a heteronormative discourse is morally oriented, generating dispositions towards queer people that if unexamined, can lead to symbolic or other forms of violence. Second, and in relation to the above, that negative dispositions are not innate to human nature but the product of a received heteronormative discourse, and that such dispositions (habitus) can change through a critical engagement with one's own values' system. And third, that because part of the problem is the learning and internalisation of normative dispositions towards sexual minorities, the issue centrally concerns education. Thus, I posit initial teacher education at all levels (primary, secondary, and post-compulsory education), as a strategic ally to enable the disruption of heteronormativity. The paper is organised in the order outlined above. The first section contextualises habitus against critical interpretations of gender and sexuality. The second section deals with the power of discourse and the symbolic violence imposed by it. The third section briefly explores the role of initial teacher education in disrupting heteronormativity. The conclusion brings together key conceptualisations to argue that tackling issues of inequality and injustice towards sexual minorities requires a queering of habitus, an acceptance of sexual diversity as natural rather than deviant.

Habitus

Here I start to unpack the ideology of heteronormativity by conceptualising it as the structuring structure that regulates our dispositions towards sexual minorities. For this I use Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, defined as the processes of early socialisation central to the development of long-lasting dispositions, that generate structures of thought and action (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 2000; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Bourdieu's definition of habitus changed over the years moving from being operational – that is, oriented towards unconscious action – to a more fluid continuum that changes when agents are confronted with a new habitus in a new habitat (field). In other

words, ‘the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field’ (Reay 2004, 432). The important point here is that habitus is not deterministic and fixed, it can be transformed. What is lacking in these conceptualisations of habitus is the formulation of what Sayer (2004, 2005) calls ‘lay morality’, or the dimension of social life that understands people as evaluative beings, responding to each other in referential ways, as we judge others according to what we consider right or wrong. I consider this extremely important to an understanding of the habitus conceptualised in this paper, not as a theory of subjectivity located within the social, because this could limit our understanding of social life (Skeggs 2004, 30), but as a moral classifier: a system that helps us organise experiences, thoughts and feelings to make sense of the world. Desmarchelier (2000, 238) likened Bourdieu’s habitus to a roadmap that we consult to guide us where to go next. The map of heteronormativity only has one road and one direction to go: straight. Any deviation means that you will be lost, and the righteous will judge you for not following the natural path. I take issue with the imposition of this habitus, as the configurations of human sex-gender-sexuality are more nuanced, complex, and diverse than the structure of heteronormativity.

This affects us individually as well as collectively and concerns not only those discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. It affects everybody. Given that a habitus shared by individuals who occupy similar positions gives rise to the idea of ‘collective habitus’ (Scambler 2015, para. 3), a ‘common sense’ approach to heterosexuality imposes on people ideals and expectations, as well as moral classifiers of what is normal versus what is deviant. The power of heteronormativity lies in the imposition of what Butler (1990) defined as the ‘heterosexual matrix’: an invisible norm that does not appear as constructed but as ‘natural’, reductively conflating sex, gender and sexuality. In order to understand how we internalise the rights and wrongs of sex, gender and sexuality, and consequently judge each other, it is important to untangle the three: Tredway (2014, 164) explains that sex is one’s physical configuration, traditionally male or female; gender is one’s performance of self, either masculine or feminine; and sexuality is the attraction to others whether of the same or different sex, producing the categorisations of homosexuality or heterosexuality. An important issue here is that sex is visible, whereas gender and sexual orientation are not. However, a heteronormative habitus inculcates very specific types of configurations: a man has to be masculine and heterosexual, and a woman feminine and also heterosexual, with everything else deemed unnatural. The notion that people should be heterosexuals to be accepted in the social space is inculcated through early socialisation – by family, friends, schooling, the media, and in many cases religion (Epstein 1994; Moon 2010). From a very early age children are forced into gendered types of play, pronouns, and

clothing, and tacitly (or otherwise) praised or chastised for their gender performance. A gendered habitus is inculcated as a norm, which 'classifies people, practices and objects as masculine and feminine' (Sayer 2005, 24). Such norms are not the same as rules or laws (Butler 1990), they are forms of social power that produce 'the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted' (Butler 2004, 48).

According to Butler (1990, 6) the 'biology-is-destiny formulation' can be resisted when gender is not understood as the causal result of sex or fixed as sex. Indeed, 'even if the sexes appear to be binary in their morphology and constitution' (Butler 1990, 6), there is no reason to assume a gender. This poses significant considerations for an understanding of gender separated from sex, in that gender as an internal and non-visible aspect of identity affords masculinity in a female body and femininity in a masculine one, or indeed postmodern levels of fluidity, or non-binarism that ultimately reject essentialism. The same applies to sexuality, in that in addition to the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality and pansexuality are now also recognised as forms of sexual orientation, making the configurations much more nuanced, complex, and diverse than those inculcated by a heteronormative habitus. Emerging language has been extremely useful to acknowledge this, for example the 'alphabet soup' LGBTQQIP2SAA of gender identity and sexual orientation now includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit (2S), androgynous and asexual (BBC 2018). For brevity, many use LGBTQ+, however the long version reflects a postmodern challenge to the binaries of the past. It is important to acknowledge that the acronym still conflates sex, gender, and sexuality: for example, intersex is biological; transsexual relates to gender identity and gender expression; whereas lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual relate more to sexual desire, or lack thereof in the case of asexuality; leaving two-spirit, queer and questioning to relate to both gender and/or sexuality. The existence of intersex shows that biology can be fluid, a transgender identity and expression shows that gender can be fluid too. Disrupting the binaries of heteronormativity is a necessity in order to rewrite the discourse that associates alternative gender/sexuality configurations with deviance.

Yet, from a very early age, people unconsciously acquire structures of thought and action, as well as the language and moral dispositions to judge and be judged according to received standards of gender performance and sexual attraction. However, as I outlined earlier, our habitus is not immutable. If a young person grows up with an awareness of the possibility of alternative configurations of gender and sexuality, other than the binaries imposed by heteronormativity, the reproduction of the harms of heteronormativity can be disrupted. This will be explored in section three of the paper by positing initial teacher education as an ally to matters of social

justice. Before that, it is important to examine the power of discourse to inform our personal and collective dispositions towards sexual minorities. This leads on to the next section which focuses on what Bourdieu (1990, 6) conceptualised as ‘symbolic violence’, understood as the imposition and inculcation of ‘a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary mode of imposition and inculcation (education)’. The type of education explored here relates to the learning of a received discourse that is imposed and inculcated, rather than the work that happens through curricula. Unpacking the symbolic power imbued in the discourse of heteronormativity is an important step to disrupt its unethical consequences.

Symbolic power and symbolic violence

Thus far, I have argued that a heteronormative habitus not only informs our dispositions towards sexual minorities but that such dispositions are normative in nature, in that the norms of gender and sexuality do not merely refer to rules or customs but to moral classifications of right and wrong, implying a ‘standard of normalisation’ (Butler 1990, 41), or as Bicchieri, Ryan, and Alessandro (2018, para. 19) posit, norms are ‘a grammar of social interaction’. Here I take the analysis of the theory and practice of a heteronormative habitus further. I use the notions of symbolic power and symbolic violence to argue that a) the discourse of immorality associated with being born into a sexual minority is received and misinformed rather than innate to human nature; and b) that it harms everybody, in that both the moral judge and the judged are trapped in an unexamined discourse of gender and sexual norms.

Yep (2002, 168) defines heteronormativity as a ‘form of violence deeply embedded in our individual and group psyches, social relations, identities, social institutions, and cultural landscape’. As a discourse, it finds strength in numbers, as statistically the vast majority of the population identify as heterosexual. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 17), the misrecognition of the imposition of objective truths and the way they are imposed is an act of symbolic violence, in that the action and the contents imposed are not seen as an imposition but as legitimate. This helps us to elucidate how the symbolic power of heteronormativity lies in the inculcation and reproduction of a discourse that hegemonically imposes certain truths while silencing others. As Foucault (1972) asserts:

all manifest discourse is secretly based on an ‘already-said’; and that this ‘already-said’ is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a ‘never-said’, an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark (25)

The discourse of heteronormativity is tacit, not written as a manifesto; nobody signs up for it. It exists as the product of history, producing and reproducing individual and collective practices through schemes of perception, thought and action which tend to ‘guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 54). It carries the teachings, denunciations and judgements historically made by, for example, religion, medicine, psychiatry, and law about the pathologies, immoralities, and transgressions of existing as a queer person. And who would dare to question such authoritative institutions with their legitimacy to categorise right and wrong? Yet, many people, including teachers and students, perform according to this unconscious internalisation of a heteronormative habitus, without critically questioning the reasons behind the rules and conventions they follow. This affects teacher-student relationships as well as peer interactions, as many may unconsciously struggle to accept differences and/or associate particular forms of language to a queer person, ultimately causing an unwanted ‘othering’. For Bourdieu (1991, 5), the production and reproduction of the legitimacy and normative correctness of language, largely ignores the socio-historical and practical function of language. The consequence of this is the masking of its social genesis, thus producing the illusion of its legitimacy. Discourses conceal ‘relations of power between speakers and hearers’ (Thompson, in Bourdieu 1991, 7). From this point of view, a heteronormative discourse must be treated as an instrument of action with the power to become unquestionable, a common sense and a correctness that renders alternative voices as illegitimate, deviant, and wrong. From a critical perspective, questioning the language and associations that come to mind when thinking about sexual difference is a first step to reshape our habitus.

Although views on homosexuality have in places improved over the last two decades (Poushter and Kent 2020), I argue that past moral judgement aimed at sexual difference still pervades in our present. For example, according to Mohr (2001, 786), ‘a majority of the polled American public claims homosexual acts are immoral in all circumstances.’ Powell and Beth Foglia (2014, para. 5) remind us that homosexuality was listed as an illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until the 1970s. The World Health Organisation removed sexual orientation from the International Classification of Diseases in 1990 (Cochran et al. 2014). Clements and Field (2014, 523) report that public opinion towards homosexuality and gay rights in the UK was overwhelmingly negative in the 1940s and 1950s, improved in the 60s, had a setback in the 1980s due to the AIDS epidemic, but resumed a positive trajectory from the 1990s up to the time of the report. Overall, the historic pathologisation of sexual difference (Foucault 1978) has profound consequences for a collective habitus that,

misinformed or not, carries a great deal of power when it comes to the moral judgement of perceived choices and lifestyles that does recognise gender/sexual identity and desire as innate. As Solomon (2014, S4) reminds us, ‘a behaviour can be avoided; an identity is integral and therefore warrants acceptance or even celebration.’ Although over the years there has been some progress to make forms to discrimination against someone because of a protected characteristic unlawful (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2016), the current situation for queer people is still challenging. Stonewall (2017, para. 3) reports that ‘nearly half of LGBT young people are bullied for being themselves at school’ and that ‘1 in 5 LGBT people have been the victim of a hate crime or incident in the last year’. I argue that this is the legacy of a discourse tarnished with particular forms of language and negative associations which then become part of our unconscious scheme of thought, warranting some people the apparent right to express a hostile disposition towards queerness.

The symbolic power concealed in a heteronormative discourse categorises people through arbitrary hierarchies that cannot be ‘deduced from any universal principle’ nor can they be supported by ‘any sort of internal relation to “the nature of things” or any “human nature”’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 8). When queer people are categorised as a different class of human with less status, ‘a process of discrimination develops to ensure continued stigmatisation, separation, and status loss.’ (Orne 2013, 232). As Goffman (1963, 7) asserts:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often un-thinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents (4)

For a long time, non-conformity has been associated with abnormal behaviour, perversion, and transgression of gender/sexuality norms. Many people avoid the proximity of visible queerness based on a historical misrepresentation of it as a ‘mental illness’ (American Psychological Association 2008). In extreme cases, they feel validated to bully, harass, or physically attack what they would consider gender or sexual deviance. Franklin’s (1998, 7) research into the motivations of perpetrators of hate-crime towards gay men in America, commonly known as ‘gay bashing’, found that such violence was the extreme expression of ‘cultural stereotypes and expectations regarding male and female behaviour.’ Paradoxically, the attackers did not consider themselves to be homophobic. She conceptualised the assaults on sex-role non-conformists as ‘a *learned* form of social control of deviance rather than a defensive response to personal threat’ (my emphasis). This type of ‘learning’ is what I conceptualise here as a heteronormative habitus acquired unconsciously and normative in nature:

particular dispositions are not necessarily an agent's free will, nor determined by structures, but come from the interplay between the two, created and reproduced unconsciously, 'without any deliberate pursuit of coherence ... without any conscious concentration' (Bourdieu 1984, 170). In other words, many perpetrators of discriminatory practices are the victims of a received mentality that, I argue, is not innate to human nature. Sexism and male dominance may instigate homophobic crimes to save 'masculinity from all feminisation' (Fraïseé & Barrientos 2016, 66). Thus, the misrecognition of the imposition on them of ideas and ideals of gender/sexual norms and behaviours (a cultural arbitrary), is also a form of symbolic violence. When people act on those unexamined principles of what constitutes right or wrong, natural, or deviant gender identity and sexual orientation, they harm themselves by harming others. Having a moral stance is different from feeling validated to mistreat others.

The obvious response to this is not to have harsher laws to penalise those who act viciously towards sexual difference. This would not be compassionate, as a great number of us might still have particular, received structures of thought of what is normal gender identity and sexual behaviour; I argue instead that learning about sexual difference is the right thing to do, and initial teacher education has a part to play here. This is important because the daily lived reality of queer people is riddled with existential anxieties, with simple acts such as holding same-sex partners' hand in public being reported by the Equalities Office and Mordaunt (2018a, 1) as one of the social practices feared by two thirds of their research respondents. A further major concern here is that those with a received heteronormative habitus may have the power to make decisions that affect the wellbeing and prospects of those whom they reject. This would include policy makers, managers, and teachers, only to name a few. The range of responses of people towards queerness extends from full acceptance to outright hostility, and Orne (2013, 229) argues that the latter makes queer people exist 'in the line of fire'. The unequal positioning of queer people as inferior on the grounds of a constructed discourse of immorality must be disrupted as an imperative to advance the projects of democracy and social justice. It does not make sense to talk about equality without extending it to all humans, regardless of their demographics. When we trace the etymology of demography (demos as people and graphos as written) we can see how some people are written and constructed. Demographic assumptions pervade our understanding of who needs and deserves support and who does not. I argue that this concerns education on the grounds that 'learnings' can be unlearned. Our habitus is flexible and can be modified to support us to recognise difference for what it is: diversity, not deviance. Thus, the next section explores the role of education to advance social justice by disrupting the unequal positioning of queer people and the subsequent inequalities that stem from it.

Queering habitus

In addition to the unconscious, received, and internalised aspects of habitus, we must also look at the ways in which our dispositions can be modified. Far from deterministic, a habitus has to be understood as a continuum that allows the possibility of a ‘trajectory that enables conditions of living that are different from initial ones’ (Reay 2004, 435). Processes of learning and unlearning can enable a reconfiguration of some of our schemes of thought and action, especially those based on a received morality that posits sexual difference as wrong, or on fixed binaries that limit the contemplation of gender and sexuality as fluid and diverse. I consider this learning and unlearning, about ourselves and others, a core function of education. Teachers are in a privileged position to enable a reconfiguration of habitus by critically engaging with root causes of negative dispositions towards sexual difference of their students, rather than using punitive measures that seek to discipline subjects, as this would only add to the cycles of violence inflicted on each other. I argue that to counter a heteronormative discourse that is discriminatory, we need a habitus grounded on notions of ‘fundamental equality’, recognising that ‘all humans are of equal worth’ and ‘should be awarded equal respect and concern’ (Barry 2001, 478). This principle could be used as a structuring structure that underpins our thoughts and actions when dealing with difference. By critically engaging with our beliefs, assumptions and biases, we can reconfigure those dispositions and ingrained ideas that are harmful to ourselves and others. Thus, I call upon initial teacher education to become an ally in matters of social justice by supporting the professional formation of critical, reflective practitioners. A critical and ethically driven habitus can help us to resist imposed agendas that thwart the advancement of social justice, as illustrated below.

The Government Equalities Office (2016, 11) reports that ‘homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, harassment and language remain a major problem in education’. Moreover, they report that this happens across schools, colleges, and universities, which supports my argument that this should be considered an important issue of equality in education. This concerns initial teacher education across all sectors (primary, secondary, and post-compulsory), and its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (Ofsted 2019). However, research suggests that teachers have little examination of equality issues during their initial teacher training or as part of continuing professional development post qualification (Clark 2010; The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2003; Fahie 2016; Ferfolja and Robinson 2004). I argue that a major constraint on this is the increasing neoliberal trends of competence-based training in teacher education (Furlong, Cochran-Smith, and Brennan 2013), that prioritise instrumental learning over other forms of learning that do not lead to employability (Ball

2016). Neary (2019, para. 8) argues that from this point of view it is difficult to provide a rationale to learning about gender and sexual difference, 'beyond responses to homophobic or transphobic bullying'. As previously outlined, a compassionate answer to bullying could be an honest discussion about perceptions, biases, and moral judgements. This could help to unpack whether negative dispositions are based on a received, heteronormative discourse. A critical engagement with it could not only prevent forms of violence and segregation but avoid the use of reactive measures that punish individuals for ideas and behaviours unconsciously acquired through early socialisation. A key concern here are the families of children and young people who withdraw children from lessons related to LGBT issues, as was seen in Birmingham, UK in 2019 (Parveen 2019).

It is important to remember that a habitus is a product of history. For a restructuring of habitus, we must engage critically and metacognitively with our individual and collective past. The formation of reflective practitioners also requires an engagement with ethics and morality (Brookfield 2017), because as Sayer argues (2005, 12) 'a' 'critical theory' 'that takes no interest in normative implications is a contradiction in terms'. Thus, I argue that a postmodern approach to teacher education should deal with equality, diversity, and inclusion through a critical and conscious exploration of our moral stances towards difference, which applies to both teachers and students. This extends to aspects of equality, diversity, and inclusion beyond gender/sexuality, in that issues related to race, ethnicity, social class, disability, among others, intersect here. Teacher education programmes must avoid tokenistic approaches such as displaying rainbow flags during Pride Month or mentioning LGBTQ+ rights in passing without any historical contextualisation of their significance. This would only show that they are not familiar with their meaning or not prepared to talk about it. Instead, the challenging but necessary examination of our dispositions could be a first step to learn/unlearn metacognitively about the processes and contents of learning, allowing our habitus its 'permeability and ability to capture continuity and change' (Reay 2004, 431). The key messages here are that changing our habitus is difficult, but it is possible, and that in not talking about inequalities and injustices we condone their reproduction.

Matters of inequality affecting sexual minorities should concern all stakeholders in education and indeed wider society, otherwise we are neglecting their wellbeing, and right to exist in society. They need to be talked about, otherwise our habitus will continue to be oblivious of the struggles of sexual minorities. Amnesty International (2021, para. 1) reminds us that '[a] round the world, people are under attack for who they love, how they dress, and ultimately for who they are.' At the time of writing this paper the initiative to Ban Conversion Therapy (2023) was still lobbying to be enacted by the UK government, despite years of campaigning for its abolition

(Farley and Lawrie 2021). Campaigners report that 7% of LGBT+, 10% of asexual and 13% trans people have undergone or been offered conversion therapy (para. 2), which includes ‘medical, psychiatric, psychological, religious, cultural or any other interventions’ (para. 1) aimed at erasing, repressing, or changing the sexual orientation or gender identity of a person. The concerning question here is whether teachers ignore the fact that their students may be being persuaded by their families, healthcare providers or faith organisations that they need corrective therapies (Equalities Office and Mordaunt 2018b, 14). The idea of sexuality as something private that has no place in educational spaces, as questioned by Connell (2015) and Gray (2013) reifies the closet as the preferable space for queer people to be. This issue has been widely discussed by Bersani (1995), Eribon (2004), Rasmussen (2004), Sedgwick (1990), and Warner (1993), among others. I argue that educators, regardless of the age group they teach, can harness their symbolic power to positively influence their students on matters of social justice. This is especially important for children and young people within cultures or families with fixed heteronormative values.

Conclusion

A heteronormative habitus produces a gendered subject with structures of thought and action that consciously or unconsciously carry a moral disposition towards sexual difference. The way we were raised determines our original conditions, however these are altered and shaped by our individual trajectories growing up. This means that learning, or indeed unlearning about preconceived ideas of queerness, can lead to a more understanding and inclusive social practice. A habitus that involves deliberate exposure to gender/sexual diversity in terms of identities and expressions can help us to connect with those we used to avoid or reject. This is an important step to tap into the flexible nature of habitus, in that although our structuring structures may originally judge sexual difference as wrong, such received discourse can be revisited. For this we need to critically, and perhaps uncomfortably, engage with the received discourse of gender/sexuality norms; to understand that language is not a function of the speaker, but a system of signs passively assimilated by the individual through processes of early socialisation. A habitus that conceptualises sexual difference as immoral is likely to warrant the reproduction of derogatory language or unfair practices towards sexual minorities, thus disrupting it is the right thing to do.

As the title of the paper suggests, I propose that queering our habitus can help us interrogate the symbolic violence experienced by many through the inculcation of unexamined norms. To do this, I have placed education as a strategic ally in matters of social justice, in that educators have the symbolic power to help students to engage critically with their dispositions towards

difference. By bringing ethics into such engagement a new lens is added to try and reconfigure, resist and/or redefine received discourses of what constitutes right or wrong gender/sexuality expression. I also propose that we need education and educators to be 'out' and proud in their stance against inequalities affecting minorities across the world. Pride is not only the realisation of one's identity but the celebration of one's ability to confront systems of oppression. This 'coming out' against injustice, publicly asserts our stance on matters of injustices towards sexual minorities too. This sends a positive message for queer people about the affirmation of their identity and the possibility of a positive relation with the self (Johnston 2016). By the same token, our silence on matters of inequality conveys the message that such topics are shameful and must remain in the closet. The more culturally diverse discourse there is, alongside visibility, media representation, proximity to LGBT+ teachers, students, and allies as role models, the more we can nurture acceptance and understanding of difference. Positive developments on this in wider social practice include recommended terminology to use when talking about LGBT people and equality (GLAAD 2012; 2016), the introduction of non-binary language and pronouns in communications (Griffin 2020; Stonewall 2022), the mainstreaming of queer culture in popular media (Staples 2019; Vázquez-Rodríguez, García-Ramos, and Zurian 2021), and the 'coming out' of sportspeople (Anderson et al. 2021; ESPN 2021). I argue that these moves towards visibility and representation can help us to queer our habitus and foster acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ people. In order to modify a heteronormative habitus, we must recognise that queerness already exists in the world, and that difference is not a pathology or an abnormality. Queering our habitus is a proposal to embrace difference by rewriting the stories we have been told, or that we are still telling each other, about the sins, deviances, and immoralities associated with being born non-heterosexual. A central message here is that we must challenge the unequal positioning of sexual minorities, otherwise the reproduction of inequalities will continue. Queer people are not inferior, somehow incomplete, or individuals to be avoided.

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Notes on contributor

Leonardo Morantes-Africano is originally from Colombia and has been living and working in the UK since 2006. He works as an initial teacher educator in Newcastle upon Tyne and is completing his doctorate in education at the University of Glasgow. His research interests include social justice, gender studies, and critical pedagogy.

ORCID

Leonardo Morantes-Africano  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4316-2910>

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