

# The Construction of Male Identities from the Perspective of High School Students<sup>1</sup>

La Construcción de las Identidades Masculinas desde la Perspectiva de Estudiantes de Secundaria

A Construção de Identidades Masculinas na Perspectiva de Alunos do Ensino Médio

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## Abstract:

**Objective.** To analyze issues related to the construction of male identities in the school context from the perspective of high school students, based on a Cultural Psychology framework. **Method.** Qualitative research composed of a focus group with eight male high school students from a public school in Federal District, Brazil. As a method of analysis, thematic content analysis was used, with an emphasis on interpretive work, which allowed for the creation of four analytical categories. **Results.** Participants associated masculinity with violence, and the role of men as the leading family provider. However, this association was made in a critical tone, and participants attributed their critiques to the exchange with women and friends with different opinions, specifically at school. Although participants often criticized schools' efforts at standardization, they recognized their teachers' efforts in promoting a more individualized experience. **Conclusion.** The analyzed results suggest that considering the voice of students is crucial to the promotion of a culture of peace in schools and further research concerning students' and other school faculty's views on gender and violence should be made. Cultural Psychology can provide powerful theoretical tools to construct deep critical analysis of socially relevant issues, such as hegemonic masculinity and violence.

**Keywords:** hegemonic masculinity, education, adolescence.

## Resumen:

**Objetivo.** Analizar cuestiones relacionadas con la construcción de identidades masculinas en el contexto escolar desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de secundaria, apoyándose en el marco de la Psicología Cultural. **Método.** investigación cualitativa compuesta por un grupo focal con ocho estudiantes de secundaria del sexo masculino de una escuela pública en Distrito Federal, Brasil. Como método de análisis se utilizó el análisis de contenido temático, con énfasis en el trabajo interpretativo, lo que permitió la creación de cuatro categorías analíticas. **Resultados.** Los participantes asociaron la masculinidad con la violencia y el papel del hombre como proveedor principal de la familia. Sin embargo, esta asociación se hizo en tono crítico y los participantes atribuyeron sus críticas al intercambio con mujeres y amigos con opiniones diferentes, específicamente en la escuela. Aunque los participantes a menudo criticaron los esfuerzos de estandarización de las escuelas, reconocieron los esfuerzos de sus maestros por promover una experiencia más individualizada. **Conclusión.** Los resultados analizados sugieren que considerar la voz de los estudiantes es crucial para la promoción de una cultura de paz en las escuelas y se deben realizar más investigaciones sobre las opiniones de los estudiantes y otros profesores de la escuela sobre el género y la violencia. La Psicología Cultural puede proporcionar poderosas herramientas teóricas para construir análisis críticos profundos de temas socialmente relevantes, como la masculinidad hegemónica y la violencia.

**Palabras clave:** masculinidad hegemónica, educación, adolescencia.

## Resumo:

**Objetivo.** Analisar questões relacionadas à construção de identidades masculinas no contexto escolar na perspectiva de alunos do ensino médio, com base no marco da Psicologia Cultural. **Metodologia.** Pesquisa qualitativa composta por um grupo focal com oito alunos do sexo masculino do ensino médio de uma escola pública do Distrito Federal, Brasil. Como método de análise, utilizou-se a análise de conteúdo temático, com ênfase no trabalho interpretativo, que permitiu a criação de quatro categorias analíticas. **Resultados.** As participantes associaram a masculinidade à violência e ao papel do homem como principal provedor da família. No entanto, essa associação foi feita em tom crítico e os participantes atribuíram suas críticas à troca com mulheres e amigos com opiniões divergentes, especificamente na escola. Embora os participantes frequentemente criticaram os esforços de padronização

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das escolas, eles reconheceram os esforços de seus professores para promover uma experiência mais individualizada. **Conclusão.** Os resultados analisados sugerem que considerar a voz dos alunos é crucial para a promoção de uma cultura de paz nas escolas e devem ser realizadas mais pesquisas sobre as opiniões dos alunos e outros professores da escola sobre gênero e violência. A Psicologia Cultural pode fornecer ferramentas teóricas poderosas para construir análises críticas profundas de questões socialmente relevantes, como masculinidade hegemônica e violência.

**Palavras-chave:** Masculinidade hegemônica, educação, adolescência.

## Introduction

In this article, we seek to analyze issues related to the construction of male identities in the school context from the perspective of high school students. Based on the theoretical framework of Cultural Psychology, we suggest that a close look at how men are socialized, and how they co-construct their own identities can help us better understand cultural and historical settings, give us insights into value-making processes, and help promote a culture of peace in different social contexts. These considerations may contribute to other scientific fields, such as Education and the Social Sciences, for instance.

It is important to mention that the Cultural Psychology framework stresses the relevance of the study of meaning-making processes by the active person which involves a dynamic hybridism among different signs (indices, icons, and symbols) in the irreversible flow of time. In this sense, words and images are cultural artifacts provided by the collective culture that can be conceived as psychological instruments that guide, in different manners, people's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Bruner, 1997; Madureira, 2018; Valsiner, 2012, 2014).

As meaning-making organisms (Branco, 2018), we need to attribute meanings to our experiences, to the social reality in which we are immersed, and to ourselves. In other words, we are compulsive meaning builders (Valsiner, 2014). Therefore, the study of meaning-making processes is central in empirical research carried out from the Cultural Psychology framework, as is the case of the research focused on this paper. These empirical researches can help us understand more deeply, socially relevant issues, such as those related to hegemonic masculinity in the context of countries with high rates of violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ population, prevalent in many Latin American countries.

In patriarchal societies – like that of many Latin-American countries – the roles and expectations of men and women are highly divided and violence against women and other marginalized groups is a sad reality. In Brazil, for instance, data from the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea) and the Brazilian Public Security Forum (FBSP), show that 50,056 women were murdered between 2009 and 2019. Over half of these ( $n = 67\%$ ) were black women. In the same period, the chances of a woman being assassinated in her home rose 6.1% while the same probability of a murder happening in urban contexts shrank by 28.1% (Cerqueira, 2021).

More recent data shows a similar pattern. Due to social isolation measures lead by the COVID-19 pandemic, more women were locked in with their partners, and for some of these women, their aggressors. So while the Brazilian Public Security Forum noticed a drop in the charges of domestic violence being made by women, the number of lethal cases of violence rose. When analyzing who was the author of such lethal crimes, 72.8% of the time it was someone known by the victim; most frequently the current partner or spouse, or an ex-partner, 25.4% and 18.1% of the time respectively (Bueno et. al, 2021).

The data shown above illustrates the most severe form of gender-based violence, which is femicide, or the assassination of women based on their condition of being a woman (Brasil, 2015). The rise in cases of femicide draws attention to how the interactions between men and women are established, and raises the question: what could be done to intervene? A close look at masculinity may be essential to better understand such heinous crimes.

According to Zanello (2020), masculinity is constructed on the imperative and the negative. Common sayings such as, “Be a man!” imply another command: “Don’t be a woman.” Masculinity, therefore, would not only be the opposite of femininity, but its rejection. In other words, the masculine socialization process often occurs from the constant denial of femininity. Virility is not something acquired, but conquered. Men may be encouraged to show emotional restraint, aggression, and competitiveness; they are encouraged to take risks, yet discouraged from seeking help; they are prone to misogyny and homophobia and are expected to demonstrate power over others, especially women (Kimmel, 2016; Loewen Walker, 2022; Oliveira, 1998; Welzer-Lang, 2001; Zanello, 2020).

Although men are more associated with cases of violence it is wrong to assume that men are inherently violent. It is necessary to understand the cultural and historical contexts that underlie such conduct. In this sense, it is necessary to understand the different meanings attributed by men of different ages, including teenagers, to these issues.

A pioneer in the studies of masculinity, Raewyn Connell, criticized the focus on male literature revolving solely on the “male sexual role”, considering it failed to view intricacies within men and ignored systemic relationships of power. Instead, Connell coined the term “hegemonic masculinity” which highlights the pattern of practices in which both men and women engage to keep a gender order in which male dominance is upheld (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2013).

By shedding light on masculinities as a position of power, Connell and Messerschmidt (2013) emphasize how hegemonic masculinity must be analyzed through its location, time, and within individuals and groups. In addition, the presence of hegemonic masculinity calls for other subordinate types of masculinities to exist. Few to no men are constantly behaving in compliance with hegemonic masculinity. This constant shift invalidates the concept of masculinity – or even femininity, for that matter – as an essentialist matter that someone possesses.

Coherently with a non-essentialist view of identities, defended by different authors in the vast field of human sciences nowadays (as, for example, Galinkin & Zauli, 2011; Hall, 1998; Madureira, 2018; Sawaia, 2014; Woodward, 2000), we can conceive gender identities and sexism as a boundary phenomenon. More precisely: sexism involves the maintenance of rigid and hierarchical boundaries between masculinity and femininity, as discussed by Madureira (2018).

By denying aspects of masculinity as being something inherited, new possibilities may emerge. More specifically, we believe that men play an important role in the creation of a society with social, political, and economic equality between the sexes. For this to happen, however, men must be able to understand their social status in a patriarchal society, be empathetic to those who suffer discrimination, and be willing to cooperate and have meaningful dialogues. In literate contemporary societies, schools can play an important role in promoting democratic values such as the aforementioned, while also promoting other values such as respect, autonomy and justice. In addition, we believe schools can play a vital role in teaching how to value diversity as something to be cherished and not to be seen as a potential threat (Madureira et al., 2021; Paula et al., 2018).

Thus, this research stems from the idea that education can be an important tool in social change. After all, pedagogical practices and social interactions that occur in the daily life of schools promote certain values, even when teachers and other professionals of education are not aware of them (Branco, 2018). In this sense, we agree with the discussion developed by Branco (2018), that:

(...) schools should plan their activities beyond granting their students the mere acquisition of useful knowledge, skills, and abilities to later engage, successfully, in professional activities. They should also, and very importantly, pursue the fulfillment of their mission of fostering the development of ethical, critical, autonomous, morally responsible, and cooperative human beings. (p. 47).

Therefore, schools have a strategic role in promoting values in line with the prevention of violence against women and against the LGBTQIA+ population (Madureira et al., 2021; Paula et al., 2018), a very worrying

problem in many countries, like Brazil. We illustrate this argument about the meaningful transformative potential of education with empirical examples from qualitative research made by the first author under the supervision of the second author. In said research we question: how do high school students understand the process of construction of the male identities?

The general objective of the research in focus was to analyze issues related to the construction of male identities in the school context from the perspective of high school students. The specific objectives were: (a) to investigate students' beliefs about social expectations anchored in hegemonic masculinity; and (b) to explore other ways of experiencing masculinity, beyond hegemonic masculinity, aiming at promoting a culture of peace in different social contexts. This research was conducted with eight male-identifying students in a public high school in the Federal District, Brazil.

## Method

### Design

Inspired by the Qualitative Epistemology developed by González Rey (2005), and in order to better understand the participants' opinions, thoughts, and value-making processes, a qualitative methodology was chosen. According to Chizzotti (2006), a qualitative research methodology "implies a dense sharing with people, facts and places which constitute research objects, to extract from this interaction the visible and latent meanings that are only perceptible to a sensitive attention" (p. 28, own translation). In other words, qualitative research seeks to construct deep analysis of the universe of meanings (Minayo, 2016).

As opposed to a positivist manner of thinking in which subjective aspects are disproved, or even seen as an obstacle to science, a Qualitative Epistemology understands that knowledge is constructed and interpreted through every interaction. Knowledge, therefore, is not just the mere conglomeration of data, but instead, singularity is a legitimate level of knowledge production (González Rey, 2005).

Qualitative research, therefore, favors the immersion and active participation of the researcher and the participants. Since the research was conducted with teenagers, special interest was given to the interaction as it happened during the focal group sessions. Concerning the research's objectives, we consider that opting for a qualitative research has both methodological and educational implications.

A more traditional view of education tends to encourage "vertical" interaction, where the teacher communicates, and students are expected to "absorb" whatever is communicated. Such information - be it related to the subject or to moral issues - should then be remembered and written down to the utmost precision in the form of an evaluation.

This kind of education fails to consider how cultural information is transmitted and constantly transformed within our daily interactions. The way cultural information is transferred is not unchanging. Instead, cultural transmission is bidirectional, and the information shared is subject to a constant process of transformation and innovation (Valsiner, 2012). This bidirectional cultural transmission model assumes that cultural messages in the process of cultural transmission are actively transformed by the participants, an exemplification of the systemic view of Cultural Psychology (Madureira & Branco, 2005; Valsiner, 2012).

Unfortunately, many schools still adopt a more traditional stance in education. Even when their curriculums predicate that they encourage their students to be autonomous, dialogue in the classroom, or that they respect diversity, a close look at the social interactions shows the contrary: a hidden curriculum where students are discouraged from participating and having an active role in their learning processes, where conformity is expected, and gender stereotypes are to be strictly followed (Junqueira, 2010).

Valsiner's (2012) discussion on the bidirectional model of cultural transmission resonates with Paulo Freire's critiques on education. According to the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1987), many schools tend

to promote a banking concept of education, in which the teacher who possesses all knowledge “deposits” their understanding in their docile students. This system inhibits interaction and promotes an unequal and hierarchal relation.

In addition, studies in Psychology, and more specifically in School Psychology, rarely prioritize students’ participation (Marques & Castanho, 2011). Research in school contexts, therefore, must also seek to know the opinion of those to whom the entire pedagogical effort is directed: the students. It is the students who are expected to attend school for most of their days hence, dialogue with them is of fundamental importance for the in-depth understanding expected by the schools.

## **Participants**

Eight male-identifying students from a public high school in Federal District, Brazil participated in this research. Students’ ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old. One volunteer was in his sophomore year, one volunteer was in his junior year, and the six remaining students were seniors. Four volunteers claimed to have no specific religious faith, identifying either as agnostic or atheist. Four volunteers said to profess the Christian faith. Two out of the eight participants worked as apprentices after school.

Students’ participation was voluntary, and their participation could be withdrawn at any moment, at their will. No participant chose to leave the research, although, not all participants were present for all encounters. Two participants were present for all four encounters, one participant was present for three of the encounters, and five participants were present at only two encounters.

## **Instruments**

The instruments used to make this research were stationery supplies, such as paper, glue, and scissors, assorted magazines of different themes, two static images, and two videos. The videos and photos were shown on a portable computer. The encounters were recorded using a smartphone with the agreement of the participants, and the transcripts were typed into a Microsoft Word text editor. For each meeting of the focus group, guiding questions were previously prepared by the researchers based on the research objectives.

## **Procedures**

The research project was presented and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Centro Universitário de Brasília, under the protocol number 3.308.508. The field research entailed a focus group, which met four times, held with the students at their high school on previously assigned dates and times according to the researcher’s and the volunteers’ availability. For each encounter, a classroom containing chairs and a white board was made available by the school. The research lasted three months, starting in April 2019 and ending in June of the same year. Each focal group session lasted one hour and thirty minutes and had a specific theme. The themes were: 1) cooperation; 2) masculinities; 3) education; and 4) closure.

Cooperation was chosen as the theme of the first meeting since this encounter was focused on establishing a bond between the researchers and the students who volunteered. Also, cooperation was specially chosen since this is a value that men are rarely taught, opting instead for competitiveness. Therefore, the first meeting started with an “ice breaker” activity where everyone – including the researcher – presented themselves and had to answer a random question that was drawn from a bag. The questions tended to be comical, while also giving insight into the students’ feelings, routines, and lives.

After the ice-breaker activity, students were asked to divide into two groups and were asked to establish eight rules they considered the most impost for a country to follow. Later, both groups compared their rules

and had to reach a consensus on what rules should be applied or not. Following that, and based on the rules they determined to be the most important for the hypothetical country, the participants were asked to choose the rules for our focus group. The first meeting ended with a debate about a video watched in which boys and girls were asked to do a specific task and were later awarded a dessert. However, the boy's dessert was always bigger.

The second encounter was focused on topics concerning masculinities. To spark the debate and students' interest, two static images were shown for them to analyze. The first image shown was the figure of a man in a black suit tangled up in ropes. Two red hands could be seen around the man attempting to hold him. The second image was black and white and showed the bust of a young man holding his face in his hands. In the spot that his actual face was supposed to be, there was a hole instead. Shortly after analyzing these photos, participants were asked to glance over the magazines that were brought by the researcher and to cut out any picture that symbolized "what it means to be a man in today's society" and glue it on a piece of white paper. A debate was carried afterwards, and participants could show their collages if they wanted.

For the third meeting a short video called "Alike" was shown. This video details the relationship between a dad and his son. Using different colors to express feelings and changes in the soundtrack, the video compares the daily routines of both characters, be it at school or at a corporate job, showing their similarities. Finally, the fourth encounter was planned as the closure of the group. At the beginning of this session, students were asked to do a phrase completion exercise. Next, students were asked to write a feeling they had the most difficulty expressing on a piece of paper. They were instructed not to write their names, to maintain anonymity. Afterward, the papers were collected by the researcher and shuffled and read out loud and a conversation was held with the students about emotions and affections.

Following the end of the focal group, an individual interview was held with each student to ask them what were the key moments, in their opinion, and what aspects of the group could be different or improved. As a final question, students were asked to summarize in one word what it was like being part of that group.

## **Analysis**

Once the focus group meetings and individual interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word text editor to be analyzed. Content analysis with emphasis on interpretive work (Gomes, 2016) was used to better understand students' speech, and beliefs, and specific excerpts from the focus group and individual interviews were selected by the researchers. These excerpts consisted of speeches that expressed aspects of convergence and divergence in terms of beliefs, and other relevant information concerning the objectives of the research.

Next, the excerpts were grouped into four thematic analytical categories created by the researchers to guide the interpretive work, namely: 1) hegemonic masculinity under discussion; 2) other ways of experiencing masculinities; 3) schools and their contradictions; and 4) images and dynamics as fertile methodological resources.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this section, the results and discussion will be presented in subsections corresponding to the previously mentioned analytical categories. This is a common practice in research that involves the use of a qualitative methodology. The names of the participants are fictitious.

## Hegemonic Masculinity Under Discussion

The first analytical category corresponds to the students' perspective on what it means to be a man in today's society. As previously mentioned, hegemonic masculinity - the social pattern of practices in which men are socialized to behave - expects men to deny any trait or characteristic that may be perceived as feminine. Therefore, men are encouraged to show strength and power over others, inhibit signs of emotional distress, and portray an image of being successful and in control (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2013; Zanello, 2018; 2020).

These same characteristics were perceived by the participants. Overall, there seemed to be a consensus among students about what it means to be a man in our society. For them, being a man was related to being the "head of the family" and to playing the role of the "protector". "Being the 'guy' who takes responsibility" and being "tough, competent, hardworking and a father". In summary, being a man seems to be related to overall performance, especially towards work and family life.

As previously mentioned, two participants worked after school. When talking about his routine, Fernando stated how tiresome his day is balancing school in the morning, work in the afternoon, and homework at night. His remark over how tired he was, however, was soon proceeded by the following exclamation: "*There are days that are harder... there are days and days...but it gives you independence. Working gives you a lot of independence, you feel much freer, dude!*".

Fernando's remark calls many things to attention. First, the argument he brought up at how work may lead to financial independence. Especially concerning teenage years, where a wish for more autonomy is curtailed by parental supervision, having a source of income can lead to more independence, and feeling "free" as Fernando mentioned. The moment Fernando states this argument also asks for attention. He started his speech by asserting how tired he is, demonstrating a more vulnerable side. And as previously mentioned, vulnerability is not something expected or encouraged in men. This was soon interrupted when he stated how there are "days and days" and implies that the financial freedom he gets from it makes it all worth it.

When Fernando finished talking, Gustav agreed with him and contrasted his school-life balance. According to Gustav, "*there are days I feel dead, tired...besides school, we have all the extra-curricular activities. There are days we can't even think about school*". Again, we have a show of vulnerability by the participants, especially when related to their obligations and an underlying fear of failure.

The juxtaposition of work and study was a common theme in all the encounters. It is worth mentioning, however, that some participants came from different social backgrounds, and for some families, having their child reconcile school and work was a necessity. In addition, students associated a good performance at school with better chances at entering university and, therefore, having better odds at getting a well-paying job and, eventually, "*being someone in life*". Once more, work is directly linked with a man's value and purpose. He only becomes "someone", a person dignified of any social value once he has secured a job and financial stability. Through this perspective, education ceases to have any other purpose that is not helping students secure a good spot at a university.

During the collage activity where students were asked to select images that represented what society views as masculinity there were plenty of images portraying white men wearing suits, or a white man surrounded by his beautiful, slim, wife and kids. The representation of hegemonic masculinity with being family-oriented and career-driven, however, was not the only example that showed up.

Another frequent association made by students concerning masculinity was with violence. Many examples of images selected by the students portrayed political figures associated with an authoritarian discourse, praise of violence and weaponry, and military status. Photos of men bearing arms were a common thread throughout all collages. Many of these addressed famous political figures that were associated with the far-right political movements which saw an up rise in popularity in recent years in different countries such as those from Latin America, the United States, and some European countries.

In summary, there are deep connections between violence, hegemonic masculinity, and authoritarianism. An “explosive mixture” that has threatened, in different ways, democracy around the world, including a variety of countries in Latin America, such as Brazil.

Although most collages bore striking similarities in their theme, two participants chose photos of women for their collages. When asked about it they brought up an interesting argument about other ways of experiencing masculinities.

## Other ways of experiencing masculinities

The concept of hegemonic masculinity strictly associated with violence, authority, and professional success was highly criticized by the participants. When asked what led them to have such a critical view of this theme, students had different arguments. Richard and Thomas claimed that it was by hearing the experiences of women that they could reevaluate some of their preconceived notions. Both of them chose photos of women to add to their collages as an example of social changes. Thomas included a photo of the pop and R&B singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, who was portrayed on the top half of the page, whereas men in suits and politicians were on the bottom half, to symbolize she “*is above all of them*”.

Richard also drew inspiration from pop culture, referencing women that were cast as the main role in famous superhero movies, or wearing suits and holding guns, and even the photo of a plus-sized actress with the saying “*I feel beautiful*”. These photos were selected by the students as a contrast to hegemonic masculinity. Although showing women in positions of power by doing things that are considered “masculine”, such as holding a gun or wearing a suit, these examples were chosen by them to portray a shift in social status and how different voices are starting to be heard. These remarks signal the importance of representation in media, and, ultimately, at schools, and other educational contexts. Additionally, recognizing and listening to the voices of women from different social backgrounds may be a useful strategy to encourage empathy and accountability by men (Yoshioka, 2018).

Fernando agreed that it was by listening to other experiences and realities that he started reflecting on social issues related to gender. He commented on his family background where his older brother and older sister had very different treatments. Because of that, he claims, his brother is a “*know it all*” and considers himself to always be correct, even when he is wrong. When comparing his brother's social groups to his, Fernando said:

*My brother's generation is different... So, the idea he had, I think everyone had. There was no one to argue with. Or there was, but they were silent. Not today. In my group of friends, everyone talks, and everyone discusses different subjects. We fight a lot and then talk again.*

Fernando's speech illustrates the importance of interacting with people of different opinions to the deconstruction of various prejudices, and to questioning hegemonic masculinity. According to Madureira and Branco (2012), prejudices have deep historical and affective roots. Therefore, well-founded arguments alone are not enough to deconstruct prejudice. After all, they are mobilized and are supported by affective processes. Establishing empathic bonds, therefore, is of fundamental importance for the deconstruction of prejudices and suggests ways in which men can experience their masculinities in other ways.

In this sense, schools can play an important role. The Brazilian Constitution determines that education is a right for all, and it is the duty of the State and the family to provide (Brazil, 1988). Therefore, education is a right for the entire Brazilian population, and schools must accept students from different ethnicities, religious beliefs, affective-sexual orientations, social classes, and gender identities, among others. Making schools –especially public schools – a rich space for differences to coexist in a respectful way.



## Schools and their contradictions

Although students recognized that school can play a vital role in socialization and inclusion, they also had plenty of objections to how the education system is organized. One of the main disapprovals of the school system students had was how certain things were imposed. When asked if they had felt any kind of imposition by their school, the uproar was immediate. Even the more restrained students were yelling in agreement.

The participants' reaction to this question is, in itself, an interesting indicator in terms of analysis. As Valsiner (2012) reminds us, “human psychological life, in its form mediated by signs, is of an affective in nature” (p. 251). In other words, the affect-cognition unit must be considered as a mediator of the relationships between subjects and culture, especially concerning the meaning-making process. After all, we humans create meanings for the relationships we establish with the world from our feelings. These feelings are, in turn, culturally organized from the use of signs. Thus, in few words, feelings are semiotically mediated emotions (Valsiner, 2012).

Therefore, in the study of psychological phenomena, it is not possible to properly analyze affect-cognition units outside culturally organized contexts. This is a clear example that illustrates the fundamental importance of the effective incorporation of the concept of culture in psychology, whether in theoretical discussions, empirical research, or in professional interventions in different fields of psychological science (Bizerril & Madureira, 2021).

It is curious to observe how the guiding question about a possible “imposition” by the school could generate a reaction so charged with affection. A question about school and education more broadly seems to have mobilized their feelings. Considering that school has been a cultural context in which the participants have dwelled for most of their lives, it is not surprising.

Most students did agree that schools tried to impose certain aspects on students. They criticized the budget that would be spent on uniforms that would require all students to wear the same outfit, including shirts, pants, jackets, and backpacks – instead of just the t-shirt uniform they usually wear. On this topic, Richard said, “*they will standardize even the sneakers, the jackets, so basically we are standardized in everything we are going to do from now on (...) what we are going to wear, what we are going to think, what we study*”. In his comment, Richard suggests how schools can be a political tool to seek control of people.

Thankfully, we, humans, are not like machines that are passive to exterior influences. Instead, we are active constructors of meaning and engage bidirectionally with the cultural contexts, being modified as we modify it. The suggestion for standardization is in line with Valsiner's (2012) critical discussion of the unidirectional model of cultural transfer. Therefore, despite authoritarian and imposing attempts, governments will never be able to fully control how we act, think and feel. It is pertinent to mention the strong and persistent authoritarian tradition present in the history of Brazilian society, in sheer contradiction to the romanticized view of Brazil as a “peaceful and tolerant paradise” (Chauí, 2017; Karnal, 2017; Madureira & Fonseca, 2020).

After Richard's comment on the school uniforms, students also questioned why the money spent on such an endeavor couldn't be directed towards financing an arts program or rebuilding the school's lab. They mentioned in a very inspired way how teachers would plan activities and bring resources, paid for out of their pocket. They reminisced on the day a Chemistry teacher had her college friends help her bring liquid nitrogen to show the students for an experiment.

While discussing such topics, students expressed the contradictions they perceived at school, concluding that school and educational policies are different things. Whilst one aims for standardized results and ways to prepare students for entrance-level exams, schools can adapt their curriculums and provide more individualized experiences. They listed, as an example, a festival the school has every year where different teams must compete. The teams are assigned randomly so students from different classes must interact and cooperate. Their assignments revolve around the pre-established school curriculums and community services,

while also encouraging other skills. For example, for this year's festival, teams had to write, produce, record, and edit a short film on historical subjects.

The selected examples indicate some of the numerous contradictions present in the schools, as social institutions. On one hand, there is a school that seeks to nurture cooperation and creativity, on the other hand, this same school is inserted in a historical and political context that has prioritized standardization. Still, schools hold the potential to change, and we believe that dialogue and art can be a fruitful resource in this sense. In order to promote dialogical practices in school, it is essential to recognize the existence of complex challenges. As discussed by Paula and Branco (2022), from the theoretical contributions of cultural psychology and dialogical psychology, the intention and motivation of teachers to promote dialogical practices are necessary, but not sufficient. A more attentive analysis for the metacommunicative dimension is necessary; one that encompasses affective aspects of communication that are present in the daily interactions between teachers and students that occur in the school context (Paula & Branco, 2022). In short, we should consider the fundamental importance of affective aspects.

## Images and dynamics as fertile methodological resources

The main concern in all encounters was how to keep these moments interesting and meaningful for the participants while staying true to the objectives of the research. Using images and applying dynamics proved to be a fertile methodological resource in this sense. As previously mentioned, two static images and two videos were chosen to spark debate during the encounters. This choice was not accidental.

As commented by Madureira (2016), images are cultural artifacts that bear the potential to channel human actions, thoughts, and emotions. Therefore, images have great potential to be used for the analysis of historical and cultural phenomena, and educate others about certain times and places, but also to reach higher affective levels of generalization that words, themselves, are not enough to grasp. Especially when researching topics that may be triggering to some, using images can be an interesting methodological option to understand thoughts, feelings, practices, and preconceived notions in a safer environment.

The use and creation of images, as cultural artifacts, can be extremely fertile in the context of qualitative empirical research as a methodological tool, as well as a pedagogical tool, to encourage debates and critical reflections in schools, especially in the context of our contemporary images-based societies (Madureira, 2018; Madureira & Barreto, 2018; Santaella, 2012).

The chosen images sparked interesting debates about masculinities and allowed students to express themselves. More specifically, to express themselves and their thoughts, and feelings in front of other men. When asked about his participation in the research during the individual interview, Anthony said: *“there are things I never commented. That I never sat down to talk about.... So, it was a very different thing...I learned a lot from the boys, too”*.

The images and dynamics used, therefore, were fertile methodological resources for the analysis of different relevant social phenomena such as masculinities, paternity, school, and education. In addition, they were useful resources for promoting dialogue among the participants. From static images, collage activities, animations, and varied dynamics, a group of men could talk about a subject that is routinely silenced to men: their feelings. Since art is a way of rescuing “the ways of the sensitive” (Schlindwein, 2010), there is no way to disregard images as fertile methodological tools in the field of psychological science (Madureira, 2016).

The present research sought to highlight the importance of teenagers talking and being heard as well. Students are often silenced, whether in their daily life, at school, or even in academic research (Barreto, 2016; Marques & Castanho, 2011). Breaking the silence can be strategic with men who so often are heard about many issues such as politics, religion, or law - to name a few - but are rarely heard when talking about their emotions. Therefore, the formation of spaces where they can talk and listen, knowing that feeling vulnerable is normal, is a first step towards the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity.

## Conclusion

The analyzed results suggest the importance of research which entails the active participation of students. Furthermore, research with other members of the school environment should be done to allow for a deeper understanding of the topic of gender and education. Carrying out such research, however, should be done cautiously. Since these topics can be delicate and polemical topics to some people, it is important to find ways to approach participants and analyze their beliefs, while also respecting the sensitive nature of these topics. In this research, images proved to be a fruitful methodological option. The use of images as methodological resources could be further investigated in future researches in psychology.

A focal group was also a pertinent choice since it promoted the active participation of the students and an in depth immersion of the researcher. On the other hand, the research faced some limitation, specifically concerning the assiduous participation of students. Being able to reconcile school activities and the focal group proved to be too demanding for some participants and participation decreased throughout the study. A deeper analysis of one's beliefs, feelings and values system, perhaps could best be accomplished through individual interviews.

In summary, empirical researches carried out from the Cultural Psychology framework can help us to construct a deep analysis of socially relevant issues, such as issues related to hegemonic masculinity in the context of countries with high rates of violence against women and the LGBTQIA+ population, as is the case in Brazil. As previously discussed, there are deep connections between hegemonic masculinity, violence, and authoritarianism: an "explosive mixture" that has threatened democratic systems around the contemporary world, including a variety of countries in Latin America. Cultural Psychology can provide powerful theoretical tools to face the challenges of our time, by contributing to the promotion of a culture of peace, and by contributing to the respect for democratic principles and human rights.

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## Notes

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