

# Community and Politics: Decolonizing Psychology in Brazil

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## Abstract:

In Brazil, the development of psychology as a profession is closely tied to the civil-military dictatorship, which shaped its theoretical and practical approaches. During this period, marked by severe human rights violations, psychology in Brazil was largely influenced by a biological model that placed responsibility for emotional distress on individuals. The field, often seen as colonized, relied heavily on theories and practices from the northern hemisphere. As psychology became regulated during the dictatorship, it primarily served the elite as a tool for private consultation, distancing itself from the broader population. To address this, there is a push to decolonize the field by integrating German Critical Psychology and Liberation Psychology. These frameworks aim to reshape public policies that guide professional training, ensuring psychologists are actively involved in various settings, including schools and communities. Currently, psychology's practice in these areas still reflects a health-centric model, highlighting the need for a paradigm shift. The proposed changes would align the discipline more closely with political realities, address social inequalities, and make psychological services more accessible to marginalized communities.

**Keywords:** *Community Psychology; Decoloniality; Public Policy.*

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## **1. Regulation of Psychology: History and Characterization in Brazil**

The history of psychology is intertwined with historical context and its specific background. So, why is studying the historical milestones of psychology essential? According to Mota et al. (2018), understanding the history of psychology serves as a crucial tool for analyzing and changing phenomena related to both the sciences and the profession.

Thus, studying history becomes a tool for both analysis and action, allowing us to observe what remains constant and what evolves or changes. With this in mind, we propose a review of key historical milestones to be addressed in this work to understand the characterization of Brazilian psychology.

### *1.1 Psychology in Brazil: Historical Reflections of the Military Dictatorship*

The profession of psychology in Brazil was officially regulated in 1962 with the enactment of Law No. 4,119 on October 27, which also established the first curricular framework for undergraduate psychology courses. Currently, the standard academic training for psychologists spans five years and follows a generalist orientation (Oliveira et al., 2017). The curriculum is governed by the National Curricular Guidelines (DCNs), which outline a common national core of competencies and skills necessary for the training of psychologists. These programs require a minimum of 4,000 hours of coursework. The guidelines also allow for flexibility in course design to accommodate the cultural diversity present across Brazil's various states (Conselho Nacional de Educação/ Câmara de Educação Superior, 2023).

According to the 2022 survey conducted by the Federal Council of Psychology (CFP), there are currently 428,791 registered psychologists in the country. The survey revealed that the profession is predominantly composed of young, white, straight-identifying, middle-class women who are graduates of private educational institutions (Sandall et al., 2022). Most of these professionals are engaged in clinical work, with 47% reporting satisfaction with their training. This high level of satisfaction suggests that the type of education provided by private institutions may contribute to a disconnect between training and the broader socio-political realities of Brazilian society (Guzzo et al., 2022).

Boechat (2017) provides an analysis of Brazilian psychology through two major cycles. The democratic-national cycle, spanning from 1930 to 1964, was marked by rapid industrialization in Brazil between two coups d'état. During this period, a capitalist ideology of national development emerged prominently. Various mechanisms were established to create a sense of consensus, aiming to legitimize this process and address

the emerging contradictions. An example of this was the creation of the National Institute of Pedagogy, which sought to expand the application of psychology in education, particularly in career guidance and selection, thereby preparing and directing workers for the growing system.

Thus, psychology played a crucial role in adapting the population to new forms of labor relations and exploitation (Boechat, 2017). From 1930 onward, psychology carved its path in Brazil, working to adapt citizens to a transforming society using its methods and techniques. Due to this role, Boechat characterizes psychology during this period as an "agent of modernization and national development" (2017, p. 62).

During the period from 1964 to 1980, psychology training in Brazil was heavily influenced by the military regime, which led to a predominant focus on clinical and private practice—an approach that continues to this day (Guzzo & Ribeiro, 2019). During Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985), the practice of psychologists in groups, communities, and collectives was severely restricted, as the regime was suspicious of movements that could challenge established power (Yasui, 2010). The government associated these interventions with potential political subversion, repressing approaches that promote critical reflection on social inequalities and community organization. As a result, there was a depoliticization of psychological practice, with an emphasis on individualistic clinical approaches, such as psychoanalysis and behaviorism, to the detriment of social and community-based practices (Birman, 1995).

The academic training of psychologists was also impacted, with a significant reduction in space for critical discussions and collective-oriented interventions (Lane, 2005). Many professionals engaged in critical psychology were persecuted, imprisoned, or exiled, further consolidating the dominance of the individualistic clinical model (Guzzo, 1996). It was only after the country's re-democratization, beginning in the 1980s, that more socially engaged practices began to be revived, influencing the training and practice of Brazilian psychologists with a renewed focus on issues of inequality, human rights, and social participation (Guzzo, 2010).

In the late 1970s, the democratic-popular cycle began, characterized by the rise of social movements. With changes in the system of production and reproduction, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the coup in Chile, capitalism became deeply rooted. As in the democratic-national cycle, this new cycle developed ideological mechanisms to sustain itself. The ideology of social commitment became a hallmark of this period, limiting the possibilities of human liberation to political participation, focusing on the radical defense

of participatory democracy. Boechat (2017) notes that, as in the previous cycle, psychology adapted and played a role in accordance with Brazil's historical and political context.

The creation of the Federal Council of Psychology (CFP) and the Regional Councils of Psychology (CRPs) in the 1970s marked a pivotal moment for the regulation of the psychology profession in Brazil, within a broader historical context of state control and growing institutionalization of professions. Established by Law No. 5,766 on December 20, 1971, these councils were tasked with regulating the practice of psychology, overseeing professional conduct, and ensuring that practices adhered to ethical and technical standards. The establishment of the CFP and CRPs did not occur in isolation but was the result of a long process that involved psychologists' efforts to consolidate the profession, while also reflecting the contradictions of a time marked by political repression (Yasui, 2010).

This regulatory process, initiated during the military regime, was influenced by the government's attempt to control the growth of professions and their professional associations, ensuring that these were aligned with the regime's interests (Lane, 2005). Psychology, due to its direct engagement with subjectivity and its potential for critiquing the social order, was seen by the regime as requiring strict supervision, which was one of the reasons for the creation of the CFP. The regulation aimed to ensure that psychologists' practices were restricted to a more technical and apolitical approach, in line with the depoliticization promoted by the regime (Jacó-Vilela, 2024).

Initially, the councils played an ambiguous role: on the one hand, they represented a step forward in the legitimacy and regulation of psychology as a science and profession in Brazil; on the other, they were tools for limiting more critical and socially engaged practices, consistent with the repressive context of the time (Guzzo, 2002). Thus, the creation of the CFP and CRPs reflected a tension between state control and the need to affirm psychology as a legitimate and autonomous profession, a goal that was only fully realized after the dictatorship ended, when psychology began to take a more critical and socially engaged stance (Birman, 1995).

### *1.2. Redemocratization of Brazil: Impacts on Psychology as a Science and Profession*

The process of democratization in Brazil was marked by a series of social, political, and cultural movements that, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, pushed for the end of the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and the restoration of democratic freedoms. The gradual political opening, known as "*distensão*," began during Ernesto Geisel's presidency

(1974-1979) and was intensified under João Figueiredo (1979-1985), amid growing economic crises, social and international pressures, and the weakening of the military regime (Skidmore, 1988).

A crucial milestone in the redemocratization process was the emergence of broad social and union movements that, from the late 1970s onward, challenged repression and demanded political changes. Among these, the “*Diretas Já*” movement (1983-1984) was central, bringing millions of Brazilians together to demand direct elections for the presidency. Supported by political leaders, intellectuals, artists, and organized civil society, this movement represented a significant shift in political power dynamics, forcing the dictatorship to gradually concede (Almeida, 2007).

Concurrently, the labor movement, particularly the strikes in the São Bernardo do Campo region led by unionists such as Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, played a crucial role in pressuring the military regime and articulating demands for labor rights and political freedoms (Keck, 1992). These movements helped create the conditions for the democratic transition, which culminated in the indirect election of Tancredo Neves by the Electoral College in 1985, symbolically marking the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of a new phase of democratization in Brazil (Lamounier, 1989).

However, the transition was negotiated and marked by concessions, resulting in a "pacted transition," where sectors of the military and civilian elite retained some power during the new democratic period. This process culminated in the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, which consolidated the return of the rule of law and the expansion of civil and social rights (Benevides, 1986).

### *1.3. Social Movements in Brazil: Advocating for the Implementation of the 1988 Constitution*

Considering that history of psychology is deeply intertwined with historical and contextual factors from which it emerges. Regulated as a profession in Brazil in the 1960s, psychology was established and developed amid a reality characterized by the strengthening and presence of social movements, including feminist, Black, and LGBTQIA+ movements. In a context marked by a military regime and a society undergoing rapid industrialization, the field of psychology evolved in response to these emerging social movements and their new demands (Mota et al., 2018).

The creation of the Unified Health System (SUS) in Brazil, established by the 1988 Constitution and regulated by the Organic Health Laws, was the result of a lengthy process of political and social struggle involving various social movements, academics, and health

professionals. SUS emerged as part of the achievements of the Brazilian Health Reform, which developed in the context of the country's redemocratization following the military regime and represented a response to the demand for a universal, public, and equitable health policy (Paim, 2008).

Social movements were central to the establishment of SUS. Among the key actors was the Health Reform Movement, which began in the 1970s and involved health professionals, unions, academics, and users of health services. This movement articulated criticism of the existing health model in Brazil, which until then was characterized by a fragmented, dual system with a limited and low-quality public network for most of the population, and a private network serving the elites and workers with access to social security (Escorel, 1999). Additionally, health was viewed merely as the absence of disease rather than a social right.

The proposal of the Health Reform Movement was to promote a new conception of health based on the principles of universality, equity, and comprehensiveness, understanding health as a right for all and a duty of the State. This perspective was supported by Giovanni Berlinguer (1983) and Paulo Freire, who influenced critical thought on health as part of the struggle for social rights (Carvalho, 1996). It was believed that public health needed to be reformed to serve all citizens regardless of their socioeconomic status (Teixeira, 2009).

The process of establishing the Unified Health System (SUS) was solidified during the 8th National Health Conference held in 1986, which became a milestone by bringing together representatives from various segments of society and formulating proposals for including a universal health system in the new Constitution (Paim, 2008). Following this conference, health was recognized as a social right in the 1988 Constitution, and SUS was conceived as a decentralized public system, financed by the State and with participation from civil society. However, the implementation of SUS also faced challenges, such as inadequate funding and internal political tensions, which affected the quality and equity of the system over the years (Carvalho, 1996; Paim, 2008).

In the 1990s, discussions on psychology education gained prominence, culminating in 1992 with the first Meeting of Course Coordinators for Psychology Training, organized by the System Councils and known as the Serra Negra Meeting. This event included 93 of the 103 psychology training institutions in Brazil at the time. The discussions focused on the guiding principles of education and how to integrate them into the curriculum and internships (Oliveira et al., 2017).

As a result of this meeting, the CFP developed the Serra Negra Letter in 1992, which outlined the fundamental principles for psychology training courses. These principles included: the social and ethical commitment of psychology to Brazilian reality; a pluralistic basic education with an emphasis on regional context; criticality as a guide for professional analysis and practices; political awareness; and the conception of the human being as a dynamic whole embedded in material reality.

In 1996, the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (No. 9,394, December 20, 1996) was enacted, establishing the structure and duration of educational programs and defining the desired profile of graduates. The concept of a minimum curriculum was replaced by disciplinary frameworks focused on developing competencies and skills. Due to disagreements and debates regarding these competencies and skills, consensus within the second committee of experts assigned to the task was only reached in 2004. In that year, the National Curriculum Guidelines (DCN) for undergraduate psychology programs were published (Resolution CNE/CES No. 8, May 7, 2004). In 2011, the document was revised concerning the psychology teaching degree with the approval of Resolution CNE/CE No. 5, March 15, 2011 (Oliveira et al., 2017). In 2023, an update was regulated (CNE/CES, 2011; 2023), with Resolution CNE/CES No. 1, October 11, 2023, introducing a greater emphasis on the technical and practical aspects of training (Perez, 2023).

In 1998, the Brazilian Association of Psychology Education (ABEP) reformed the curriculum for psychology programs to better align with Brazil's social realities. This reform aimed to ensure that psychology training addressed not only the technical aspects of the profession but also the country's social and political contexts. The revised curriculum emphasized integrating professional practice with social justice issues, inequalities, and cultural diversity, reflecting a broader movement to make psychology education more relevant to the Brazilian context. This approach aimed to strengthen the connection between theory and practice, preparing psychologists to effectively address real-world challenges and contribute meaningfully to society (Oliveira et al., 2017).

In 2005, the creation of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) in Brazil began, formalized in 2005, resulting from a long process of evolution and restructuring of social assistance policies. Initially, Brazil faced a fragmented and unequal system, but the 1990s were marked by intense debates and conferences, such as the 1st National Conference on Social Assistance in 1995, which were crucial for the formulation of a more cohesive system. The National Social Assistance Policy (PNAS), developed in 2004,

established important guidelines, while the Organic Law on Social Assistance, approved in 1993, provided an essential foundation (Brasil, 1993; 2004; 2005).

The SUAS was formally established by Law No. 12,435 in 2005, creating an integrated and decentralized system that coordinates actions among different levels of government and organizes social protection. The implementation of SUAS involved setting norms, guidelines, and creating responsible agencies, promoting a participatory and inclusive public policy (Brasil, 1993; 2004; 2005). At this point, there was a significant influx of psychology professionals into this field. In 2013, the Center for Technical References in Psychology and Public Policies (CREPOP) produced a document outlining the standards for the actions of our category within this public policy, titled Technical References for the Work of Psychologists in Specialized Reference Centers for Social Assistance (CREAS) (CFP, 2012).

In 2019, Law No. 13.935 was passed, mandating the inclusion of psychologists and social workers in public schools throughout Brazil. However, the implementation of this law, which requires municipalities to create and regulate these positions, has yet to become a widespread reality. To practice in educational settings, psychologists are not required to have specific training, although some institutions may demand a postgraduate qualification. The undergraduate program includes a Supervised Curricular Internship, which must account for at least 15% of the total course workload, with additional emphasis on internships requiring a higher workload (Brasil, 2023). For those seeking a specialist title in educational psychology, the Federal Council of Psychology requires passing an exam that includes specific content and proof of three years of experience in the field. Postgraduate opportunities, such as *Lato Sensu* specializations and *Stricto Sensu* Master's and Doctorate programs, are also available for further training in school psychology.

Considering the unique socio-cultural context of Brazil, there is a critical need to develop a psychology practice specific to the educational field that departs from an ahistorical and neutral conception of the discipline. It is essential to adopt a critical and contextually relevant approach that avoids perpetuating relations of oppression within educational settings (Guzzo et al., 2019). Furthermore, the current Code of Ethics, established in 2005 and primarily focused on clinical practice, should be revised to reflect the realities of school-based psychology. The evident gap between professional training and the practical demand of the Brazilian context underscores the necessity for a more focused and contextually appropriate education for psychologists.



## **2. Community Psychology: Challenges to build Decolonial praxis in Brazil**

In a country with a complex history of colonialism<sup>4</sup>, systemic inequalities, and diverse cultural contexts, integrating decolonial approaches into Community Psychology requires confronting entrenched norms and practices that may perpetuate these inequalities. The challenge lies not only in adapting psychological theories and methodologies to be more culturally relevant and inclusive but also in fostering genuine collaboration with marginalized communities to ensure that their voices and perspectives are central to the development of effective and equitable psychological interventions. Thus, while the push towards a decolonial praxis holds the promise of a more inclusive and responsive field, it also reveals significant difficulties and limitations in transforming established paradigms and practices within Brazilian psychology (Guzzo, 2001; 2010; 2016).

### *2.1. Training in Psychology: Notional guidelines, curricular content and professional training*

According to CensoPsi 2022 (Sandall et al., 2022; Guzzo et al., 2022), most psychology professionals in Brazil are young women, from the middle class, predominantly from the Southeast region, graduates of private institutions, white, and heterosexual, with a preference for clinical practice. To address the issue of psychology education in Brazil, it is crucial to understand the demographics of the field (Guzzo et al., 2022). The CensoPsi 2022 (Sandall et al., 2022) reported that at the time of the survey, there were 428,791 registered psychologists with the Federal Council of Psychology (CFP), with a significant concentration in the Southeast region, although there has been an observed expansion into other regions of the country compared to previous surveys. The data indicates that the profession is predominantly young, mostly female, and diverse in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The survey reveals that 67% of psychologists graduated from private institutions, with 47% expressing satisfaction with their training. However, it is important to consider the criticality of education, as programs that promote a critical perspective tend to receive

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<sup>4</sup>Recognizing the historical development of Brazilian psychology, we face challenges in changing the inherited characteristics from its importation and the disruptions experienced during the dictatorship. Therefore, we advocate for the need to conceptualize psychology as a community-based practice. Community Psychology, as a field dedicated to understanding and addressing social issues through community engagement and straightening, faces unique challenges in Brazil, particularly when striving to build a decolonial praxis. This endeavor involves critically examining and rethinking the colonial legacies embedded within psychological practices and knowledge systems (Guzzo, 2001; 2010; 2016).

more rigorous evaluations. This prompts reflection on the profile of professionals that the country has been training for the field of psychology (Guzzo et al., 2022).

Regarding areas of practice, most psychologists show a preference for clinical work, especially those trained in private institutions. The second area of greatest interest is social psychology, followed by health and hospital settings. Among graduates of public institutions, there is a growing interest in teaching. Other areas of practice receive less interest, with fewer than 13% of responses. Thus, the professional category is predominantly composed of women, white, heterosexual, trained in private institutions, with a predominant focus on clinical practice (Guzzo et al., 2022).

Perez (2023) highlights several key issues in Brazilian psychology. The study finds a significant imbalance in the emphasis on theory, practice, and ethics within professional documents. Notably, there is a lack of clarity regarding the field's purpose and social role, with concepts like social justice and transformation mentioned in a vague manner. The Professional Code of Ethics (CFP, 2005) focuses heavily on ethical and political issues, while technical and theoretical aspects are underrepresented. The Curriculum Guidelines (CNE/CES, 2011; 2023) predominantly emphasize theoretical foundations, with the 2023 version improving on technical-operational aspects but neglecting ethical-political dimensions. The Technical References (CFP, 2013; 2019; 2020) offer detailed discussions on ethical-political and technical-operational issues but lack a strong theoretical base. Perez (2023) concludes that the field needs to achieve consensus on its purpose, balance work dimensions, and develop practices that address Brazil's diverse cultural, economic, and political context.

## *2.2. Challenges to Decolonize Psychology in Brazil*

Decolonizing psychology in Brazil faces complex challenges rooted in its history, practices, and professional structure. Brazilian psychology, heavily influenced by imported theories and practices, often fails to align with local cultural and social realities, maintaining a predominant focus on clinical practice that limits its application in broader community and social contexts. The lack of clear intentionality in documents and guidelines results in uneven practices that are disconnected from the actual needs of society. Although there are efforts to integrate psychology into public policies, effective implementation and adaptation to social changes remain problematic. In summary, decolonizing psychology in Brazil requires a critical review of existing practices, greater integration with the country's cultural and social realities, and a continuous effort to adapt professional training and practice in a more inclusive and equitable manner.

A challenge encountered in our practices relates to the issue of technique. Throughout its history in Brazil, the techniques employed by psychology have consistently sought to meet social demands. The interests served fluctuate between those of the dominant classes and those aimed at supporting the emancipation processes of the exploited classes. This issue, combined with the colonized history of psychology programs, highlights the need to review our theoretical and practical foundations (Jacó-Vilela, 2024).

Another significant challenge lies in academic training, which has historically focused on the traditional clinical model, placing community-based and contextual practices—better suited to addressing the needs of marginalized populations—in the background (Guzzo, 2001). The absence of a consistent dialogue with the country's social reality is noted by authors like Perez (2023), who emphasizes the lack of a clear intentionality within Brazilian psychology regarding its social role. This lack of purpose makes it difficult to articulate decolonial practices that acknowledge and value the multiple cultural, economic, and political dimensions of Brazil.

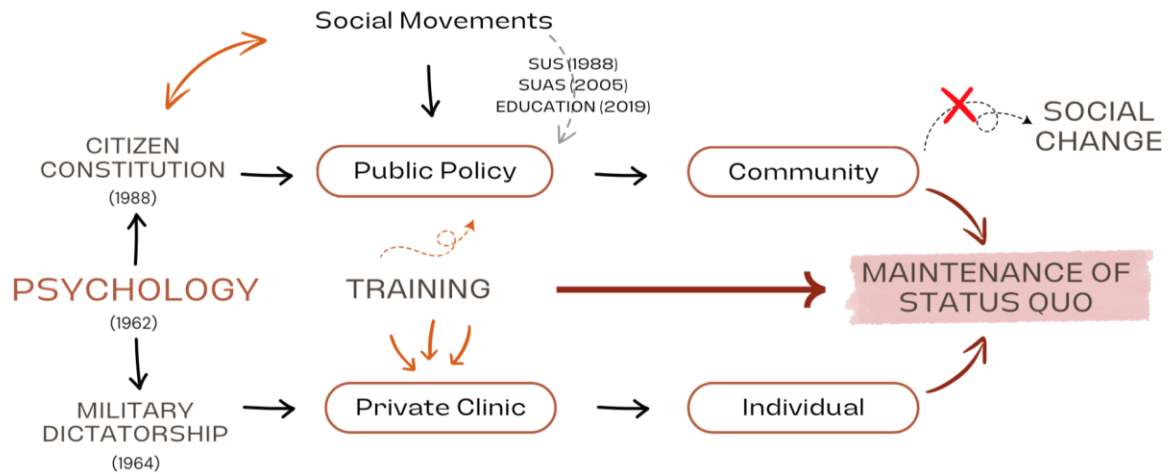
Decolonization also faces structural barriers, such as the organization of public policies and institutional resistance to practices that challenge the Eurocentric and individualistic paradigm (Lane, 2005). While efforts have been made, such as the creation of the Technical Reference Center in Psychology and Public Policies (CREPOP) to guide psychologists' work in public policies (Guzzo & Ribeiro, 2019), greater engagement of the profession is still needed in practices that promote social justice and take into account the realities of local communities. This includes the need for balance among the ethical, technical, and theoretical dimensions of psychology, something the profession is still far from achieving (Perez, 2023; Bicalho et al., 2024).

Therefore, decolonizing psychological practice in Brazil requires a profound transformation in how psychology is taught, practiced, and conceived. This involves revising curricular guidelines and technical frameworks, as well as adopting a more critical and contextualized stance toward the Brazilian reality, recognizing the contributions of social movements, and promoting a commitment to social transformation (Guzzo, 2016; Guzzo, 2018).

### **3. Conclusion**

Considering everything that has been presented so far, we have constructed a visual diagram to synthesize the main points, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Image 1. Paths that psychology takes in Brazil.



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While social movements have increasingly advocated for the inclusion of psychologists in public policy, the training and professional practice of psychology have not fully adapted to this context, remaining predominantly rooted in the clinical model. This disconnection highlights a critical gap: although public policies acknowledge the presence of psychology, their impact on community and desired social changes is limited. The profession's current trajectory shows that while psychologists are recognized within public policy frameworks, their role often falls short of driving the transformative social changes that these policies aim to achieve. Thus, addressing this disconnect between training and practice is crucial for ensuring that psychology not only participates in but actively contributes to meaningful social transformation.

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