

# **Reconstructing Knowledge: A Constructionist-Decolonial Approach to Psychosocial Research in Peri-Urban Communities of South America**

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## **Abstract**

The study aimed to understand the psychosocial processes in peri-urban communities of South America through a constructionist-decolonial approach that values the epistemic autonomy and local knowledge of these communities. Grounded in the need to break away from traditional and Eurocentric epistemologies, the research adopted a sensitive and critical perspective, considering the complexity of the lived experiences and resistance strategies of these populations. The methodology used was intervention research, characterized by a dialogic relationship between researchers and participants, allowing immersion in the community's daily life and the analysis of discursive practices through idea association maps. The main findings highlighted the interrelation between subjective and collective processes, emphasizing feelings of neglect by public authorities, the importance of community support networks, and the production of meanings in the face of adversities. The research contributes to the field of Social Psychology by offering a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of oppression and resistance in peripheral territories, reinforcing the need for practices and public policies that are sensitive to local knowledge and narratives. Therefore, the results can inform more effective interventions in contexts of vulnerability, promoting an ethical engagement with social transformation.

**Keywords:** constructionism, decoloniality, intervention research, psychosocial processes, South America.

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## **1. Introduction**

This study highlights the need for a sensitive and comprehensive theoretical-methodological approach to understand the psychosocial processes in peri-urban

communities of South America, which are marked by contexts of vulnerability and systematic violation of fundamental rights. The choice of a robust approach is essential to address the complexity of these populations' experiences, which are often rendered invisible by traditional psychological approaches influenced by Eurocentrism and universalism. In this regard, a constructionist-decolonial perspective is proposed as a fundamental tool to counter this trend, valuing the local knowledge and narratives of communities about their realities and breaking with the Western epistemological monopoly in knowledge production.

The research problem that guides this study involves the need to address the psychosocial processes in peripheral territories from a perspective that understands the construction of subjectivities amidst situations of marginalization and rights violations. Peri-urban communities face complex social, economic, and environmental challenges that directly impact the production of subjectivities and the forms of resistance of these populations. The literature indicates that traditional approaches have failed to recognize the uniqueness of these communities' experiences, perpetuating a colonial logic that marginalizes their voices. Therefore, it is essential to adopt approaches that are sensitive to local dynamics, valuing the knowledge of the communities themselves and enabling a critical understanding of their experiences.

The main objectives of this study are to understand the psychosocial processes in peri-urban communities in South America and contribute to the decolonization of knowledge in the field of psychology. It proposes adopting a constructionist-decolonial perspective that values the epistemic autonomy of the communities and enables the co-construction of knowledge. This involves an active listening stance and dialogue, recognizing the research participants as co-authors in the knowledge production process. Furthermore, the study problematizes how the processes of subjectivation are shaped by the living conditions and experiences of marginalization in these communities, considering their resistance strategies and the ways in which they construct meanings amid adversity.

The justification for choosing the constructionist-decolonial theoretical-methodological approach and intervention research is related to the need to promote a critical and sensitive understanding of the experiences in peri-urban communities. Traditional approaches often fail to capture the complexity and diversity of these populations' experiences, perpetuating a unilateral and Eurocentric view of knowledge. Conversely, the constructionist-decolonial perspective allows for valuing the

knowledge and practices of the communities themselves, recognizing them as valid sources of knowledge. Intervention research, characterized by a dialogic and close relationship between researchers and participants, enables immersion in the daily lives of the communities, allowing researchers to capture the meanings and interpretations that residents attribute to their experiences. This process contributes to the collective construction of knowledge, promoting more effective and culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions. Thus, this study proposes a break with traditional forms of knowledge production, advocating for an ethical and political commitment to epistemic justice and the valorization of marginalized voices in the peri-urban communities of South America.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The constructionist-decolonial approach presents itself as a fundamental theoretical perspective for understanding the psychosocial processes in peri-urban communities in South America. This approach is built upon the articulation between the concepts of social constructionism and decoloniality, proposing a break with traditional and Eurocentric epistemologies that have historically rendered the experiences of marginalized groups invisible.

According to Gergen (2009), social constructionism maintains that knowledge and subjectivity are constructed through social and discursive interactions. This implies that social reality is not a fixed or natural entity but rather a product of the relationships and discursive practices developed in everyday life. From this perspective, the ways of being and understanding the world are multiple and variable, depending on the interactions and socio-cultural context in which they occur. In the context of peri-urban communities, social constructionism allows for the appreciation of local knowledge and forms of resistance that emerge in the face of rights violations.

Furthermore, the decolonial perspective goes beyond a simple critique of Eurocentrism, proposing the deconstruction of the epistemic hierarchies established by Western thought. Authors such as Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (2000) argue that the coloniality of power and knowledge has imposed a system of domination that disqualifies the knowledge produced on the margins of modernity, including the knowledge of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other historically oppressed populations. Decoloniality, therefore, seeks to value the epistemologies of the Global South, reclaiming the centrality of local knowledge and the narratives of the

communities themselves about their realities. This valorization is crucial to challenge the hegemonic forms of knowledge production that exclude, marginalize, or even pathologize other forms of knowing.

The combination of social constructionism and decoloniality enables a more sensitive and critical approach to subjectivity, especially in the context of peri-urban communities. The production of subjectivity in these communities is marked by complex processes in which experiences of exclusion, violence, and marginalization shape the ways of being, existing, and relating to the world. As pointed out by Fanon (2008), the processes of subjectivation in contexts of oppression involve not only the internalization of power structures but also forms of resistance and resignification. In South American peri-urban communities, individuals construct their subjectivities amid adverse conditions, such as lack of access to fundamental rights, economic precarity, and systematic violence.

Authors like Deleuze & Guattari (1995) emphasize that the processes of subjectivation are engendered by social and political structures that, in this specific context, perpetuate inequalities and exclusions. At the same time, these processes are permeated by forms of resistance and the creation of new meanings, highlighting the complexity and dynamism of subjectivities in peripheral territories. The constructionist-decolonial approach, by valuing the narratives and experiences of the communities themselves, allows for an understanding of how individuals constitute themselves amidst the tensions between oppression and resistance, emphasizing the importance of considering the multiple dimensions that traverse the processes of subjectivation.

Within the scope of psychosocial processes, a concept that designates the interrelationship between subjective (individual) and collective (social) dimensions in how individuals understand and interact with reality (Spink, 2010), we understand that the constructionist-decolonial perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of vulnerable communities. Especially in peri-urban contexts like the one studied, psychosocial processes are marked by experiences of exclusion, violence, and resistance, requiring theoretical approaches sensitive to the complexity of these lived experiences.

In this sense, the constructionist-decolonial approach proposes an expanded view of psychosocial processes by recognizing that they are constructed in social interactions and are profoundly influenced by power structures operating at both

macro and micro levels. This means that, to understand psychosocial processes in peri-urban communities, it is necessary to consider both the individual aspects of subjectivity and the collective and discursive practices that constitute social reality. Decoloniality adds to this understanding by critiquing the coloniality of knowledge, emphasizing the need to value local knowledge and practices as legitimate forms of meaning-making.

By adopting this perspective, the study enables a critical and engaged approach that recognizes the voices of communities as valid sources of knowledge and considers the complexity of experiences lived in contexts of vulnerability. This aligns with the notion of "epistemic justice" proposed by Fricker (2007), which involves correcting the systematic injustices that occur when certain groups are unjustly disregarded as knowledge producers. In the context of peri-urban communities, the constructionist-decolonial approach seeks to break with colonizing practices that negate or silence the experiences of these populations, instead proposing the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue and the appreciation of local narratives.

In this way, the constructionist-decolonial approach not only broadens the understanding of psychosocial processes in peripheral territories but also points to the need for psychosocial interventions that are culturally sensitive and politically committed. By recognizing the centrality of the voices and knowledge of the communities themselves, this perspective contributes to the development of practices that promote autonomy and resistance, enabling the creation of new meanings and ways of being amid adversity.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach of this study was intervention research, a strategy characterized by its critical and engaged nature, whose objective is not limited to understanding the social reality of peri-urban communities but also aims at the collective construction of knowledge through dialogue and the valorization of local narratives, in which the active participation of those involved is essential.

Thus, the choice of intervention research, anchored in Social Constructionism, allows for the social interactions and meanings attributed by the participants to be centrally considered in the analysis of subjectivities. According to Cordeiro et al. (2023), this perspective emphasizes that meanings are produced and negotiated in everyday interactions, which implies that researchers must be open to the shared

construction of meanings with the participants through deep immersion in the community's daily life.

The study was conducted in a peri-urban community located in a metropolitan region in southern Brazil. Comprising approximately 500 families, the community faces conditions of extreme social vulnerability, living in an area characterized by precarious housing, insufficient basic sanitation, and inadequate urban infrastructure. Additionally, the region is marked by socio-environmental risks, particularly due to its proximity to a river basin, which generates significant environmental impacts. Recurrent flooding during the rainy season further worsens the situation, intensifying the risk and vulnerability of the population. The difficulty in accessing essential quality public services, such as education and healthcare, contributes to the social marginalization of the inhabitants, configuring a complex and challenging context for the research.

Data collection was conducted through everyday conversations that occurred during the researchers' immersion phase in the community's daily life, which allowed the building of trust between researchers and residents. These informal interactions took place through the researchers' continuous presence in the community, during walks around the neighborhood and visits to local businesses. The topics explored in the conversations included experiences with environmental risks, survival strategies in the face of economic hardship, relationships with public authorities, and forms of community organization. The collected data were recorded in field diaries immediately after the interactions, preserving the fidelity of the participants' expressions and narratives.

The data analysis was based on the constructionist-decolonial perspective, focusing on the participants' narratives and experiences. For the analysis of the material collected in the everyday conversations, following the transcription phase and initial reading, as the first categories and themes began to emerge, the methodological tool of constructing idea association maps was utilized to explore, organize, and visualize the relationships between the emerging themes in the participants' discourses. In summary, these maps are visual tools that allow researchers to identify and organize the formal aspects of linguistic construction present in the participants' speech, as well as the repertoires used in this construction and the dialogic nature of meaning production.

Thus, by systematizing the analytical process through these maps, a more structured and comprehensive understanding of discursive practices becomes feasible, highlighting how meanings are constructed, shared, and contested in everyday interactions.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The experiences of peri-urban communities reveal the profound interrelation between subjective and collective processes, echoing Martin-Baró's (1986) ideas on the importance of understanding subjectivity in contexts of oppression. In everyday conversations, residents expressed feelings of insecurity and their relentless struggle for survival, as evidenced by the excerpt below:

*When it rains, we don't sleep well; we are always afraid that the water will invade everything. (Maria)*

This suffering narrated by Maria connects to collective suffering resulting from the living conditions in the periphery. This perspective reinforces the idea that the production of subjectivity is not an individual phenomenon but is shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors (Spink, 2004). Analyzing discourses on "abandonment by public authorities," "state negligence," and "community solidarity" makes it evident that collective processes shape subjective experiences. This aligns with Deleuze & Guattari's (1980) studies on the production of subjectivities and how individual experiences are traversed and shaped by collective dynamics and vice versa.

The sensitive listening process to local knowledge during interactions with the community highlights the need to decolonize knowledge, an approach advocated by Walsh (2009), who argues for valuing knowledge produced by historically marginalized populations. During the discussion circles, one of the residents, a local shopkeeper, expressed his perception and dissatisfaction with the absence of public authorities in the community, emphasizing the importance of community networks as the main means of coping with adversities:

*We are forgotten here. They promise asphalt, they promise sanitation, but it never comes to fruition. It's us for ourselves. (João)*

This account demonstrates how knowledge and resistance are constructed from everyday experiences in a process that escapes the Eurocentric logic of knowledge

production. Decolonizing knowledge, therefore, means recognizing that community knowledge is fundamental in understanding and confronting social vulnerabilities, aligning with Paulo Freire's (1974) perspective, which advocates dialogue and the appreciation of popular knowledge as a path to awareness and social transformation.

However, conducting intervention research in the peri-urban community presented challenges that reflect the concerns of authors like Spink (2013) and Lane (1996) regarding the need for an investigative practice committed to local contexts and realities. During interactions with participants, it became clear that interpreting experiences could not be limited to a reductionist analysis. The approach should consider the multiplicity of meanings expressed in the residents' statements. For example, during a walk through the community, the researchers encountered a group of children playing in the dirt street. When asked about their school routine, some reported having to skip classes to help their families with household chores or small businesses. One of them, Ana (10 years old), commented:

*I even like school, but sometimes I have to help my mom. We need the money.*

This statement reveals the dilemmas faced by families, who often prioritize immediate survival over formal education. The complexity of these peri-urban experiences requires methodological sensitivity from researchers to capture the multiple layers of meaning present in discursive practices.

In this sense, the use of idea association maps, for instance, was a strategy that allowed for visualizing connections between individual experiences and collective processes, providing an analysis that aligns with the proposals for constructing knowledge based on lived reality (Spink, 2013). This methodological stance reaffirms the importance of the active participation of subjects in the research process, a principle advocated by Lane (1984) when addressing Social Psychology as a field committed to transforming social reality.

The results of this research have important implications for the field of Social Psychology, especially in reaffirming the relevance of the constructionist-decolonial approach in investigating contexts of vulnerability. By highlighting how residents' discourses reflect processes of resistance and meaning-making, the research dialogues with Gergen's (2009) studies, which emphasize the role of discourse in the formation of subjectivities. The conversations collected showed that the processes of



subjectivation are shaped by power relations and discursive practices present in everyday life. The importance of community support networks as a form of resistance, for example, points to a production of meanings that occurs in collective practices, once again reinforcing the understanding that subjectivity is socially constructed (Spink, 2004). Moreover, the use of idea association maps provided an analysis of the interrelations between concepts such as "vulnerability," "resistance," and "distrust in public authorities," highlighting the richness of the decolonial approach in enabling a more sensitive and contextualized understanding of peri-urban realities (Walsh, 2009).

Despite the contributions of this study, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations, as pointed out by Spink (2013) and Lane (1996), regarding the complexity of research in social contexts marked by inequality. The scope of the intervention research was limited, focusing on a single community, which does not allow for the generalization of the results. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research implies that the interpretations are tied to the specific interactions between researchers and participants, which may vary in different settings. For future research, it would be relevant to adopt methodologies that enable a longitudinal analysis, exploring the dynamics of psychosocial processes in other peri-urban territories within and outside Brazil. Including participatory methodologies, as advocated by Freire (1974), could also deepen the understanding of the production of subjectivities and resistance in different communities.

Another important perspective would be to incorporate critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001), investigating how meanings related to vulnerability and resistance are reproduced and challenged in social interactions. By continuing to invest in approaches that value the decolonization of knowledge, it will be possible to further integrate the voices of communities into theoretical and practical reflections in the field of Social Psychology.

## **5. Conclusions**

The study revealed that life in peri-urban communities is marked by a complex interrelation between subjective experiences and collective processes. Everyday conversations with residents highlighted a constant feeling of abandonment by public authorities, materialized in statements about the lack of infrastructure, security, and rights. However, they also emphasized the importance of community support networks

as strategies of resistance and coping with adversities. Statements from participants, such as Maria and João, illustrate a collective experience that is subjectively permeated by frustration but also by solidarity and struggle. The analysis of the discourses, through idea association maps, allowed for visualizing the connections between themes such as "vulnerability," "resistance," and "distrust in public authorities." These findings underscore the need for a sensitive and critical theoretical-methodological approach that recognizes the production of subjectivities in specific sociocultural contexts and values local knowledge, aligning with decolonial perspectives.

This study contributes to Social Psychology by bringing a constructionist-decolonial perspective to the analysis of psychosocial issues in peri-urban territories in South America. By valuing the voices and experiences of the residents, the research promotes a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of oppression, resistance, and solidarity that characterize these contexts. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of participatory methodologies that are sensitive to local realities, highlighting the relevance of discursive analysis in understanding the processes of subjectivation.

The study's results provide valuable insights for the formulation of public policies and psychosocial interventions in contexts of vulnerability. They point to the need for actions that promote social inclusion, the valorization of community networks, and the creation of spaces for dialogue between public authorities and the community. Health, education, and social assistance professionals can utilize these findings to develop more integrated and reality-sensitive interventions in peri-urban communities, thereby promoting a more ethical practice committed to social transformation.

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