

## PUBLIC POLICIES AND PSYCHOLOGY: INTERSECTIONALITY, CRISIS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION



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### ABSTRACT

The text analyzes the intersection between public policy and psychology, using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and Secchi's policy cycle to critique racialized power structures. It highlights the role of the SUS and the CAPS as spaces for practical decolonization, confronting the Foucaultian biopower that individualizes guilt. It proposes an anti-racist agenda with decolonized training, strengthening of the SUS and Restorative Justice, articulating theory and action to face necropolitics and epistemicide.

**Keywords:** Bioecological model. Public policies. Intersectionality. Biopower. SUS/CAPS. Decolonization.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THEORETICAL BASES OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND THE INSERTION OF PSYCHOLOGY

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1996; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) transcends a mere theory of human development: it is configured as a critical map to decipher how individuals and collectivities negotiate their existence in intertwined systems of power. From microsystems — such as families, schools, and community networks — to macrosystems — legislation, cultural norms, and structures of colonial domination — the bioecological perspective reveals that "development" is not an isolated phenomenon, but a web of interactions crossed by racial, gender, and class hierarchies. In Brazil, where most of the population declares itself black or brown (IBGE, 2023), this lens exposes historical wounds: structural racism is not an abstract "datum", but a concrete operator that shapes access to health, decent education and housing. Black women, for example, embody this perverse intersectionality: in addition to confronting sexism and epistemicide — the systematic destruction of marginalized knowledge, such as ancestral healing practices — they carry the burden of job insecurity and invisibility (T. M. M. Abad & Abad, 2021). Policies that ignore these intersectionalities fail to promote equity, reducing themselves to fragmented and disjointed actions.

For Souza (2007), public policies are not mere technical protocols, but "government in action" — a living process that reflects (and reproduces) social contradictions. Secchi (2014) radicalizes this idea by proposing a dynamic cycle of seven interconnected stages: from the identification of the problem (who defines what a "public problem" is?) to the extinction of programs (who decides when a policy "dies"?). This approach is not linear, but spiral, requiring permanent dialogue with social complexities, such as the racial inequalities that structure access to rights (A. Abad, 2017). In this context, the APA Guidelines (A. Abad, 2022) for psychological practice in diverse contexts offer a crucial axis to operationalize Secchi's policy cycle. Guideline 01 (2017), for example, which emphasizes intersectionality as a product of multiple social contexts, can guide the solution-formulation stage, ensuring that mental health policies do not treat "depression" as a universal phenomenon, but as an experience mediated by race, gender, and class. Guideline 02 (2017), which requires psychologists to confront their own categorical biases, is vital at the implementation stage, where institutional biases can distort well-intentioned programs—such as a CAPS that excludes traditional healing practices as "unscientific."

Psychology, as a scientific and practical field, assumes a central role in the construction of public policies committed to social justice and equity, which requires a break with hegemonic paradigms (biomedical reductionism, scientific colonialism, etc.), which have historically made traditional knowledge invisible and naturalized power hierarchies.

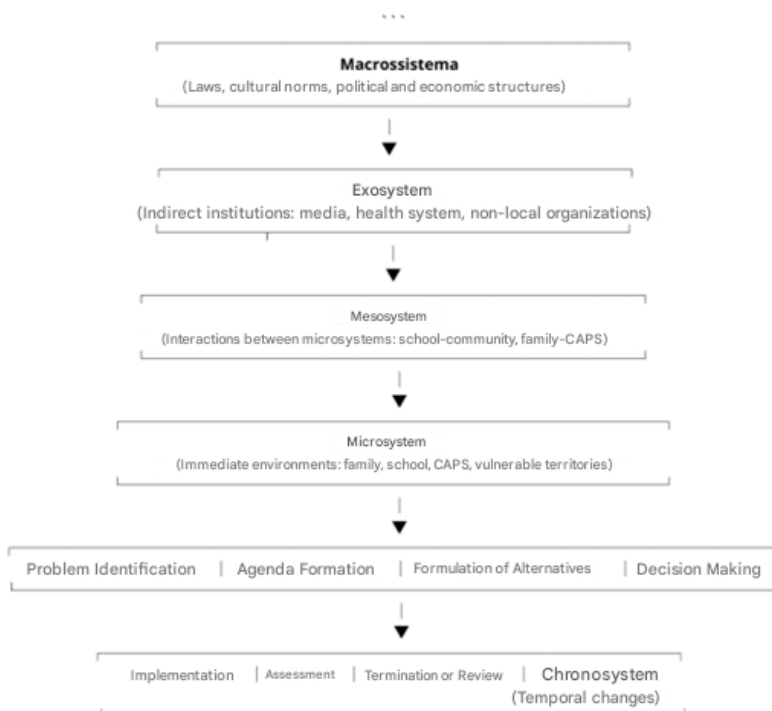
In Brazil, the Unified Health System (SUS) — one of the largest public systems in the world — is a laboratory of this tension between theory and practice. The Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPS), for example, only emerged as an alternative to asylums thanks to the insurgency of social movements that denounced psychiatry as an instrument for controlling undesirable bodies. Psychology, in this scenario, does not limit itself to evaluating policies: it reinvents them. By incorporating territorial knowledge — such as quilombola ancestral healing or conversation circles in peripheries — the CAPS illustrate how Bronfenbrenner's bioecology gains flesh and blood. It is not just about "adapting" policies, but about decolonizing them. This reinvention concretely challenges Foucaultian biopower: by replacing verticalized protocols (which pathologize peripheral bodies) with horizontal practices, the CAPS shift the logic of state control to community governance, transforming public policy into a space for the dispute over narratives and rights.

Secchi (2014), when defending policies as adaptive processes, reminds us that cyclicity is not neutral: each stage of the cycle carries power disputes. When anti-racist movements push for the formation of the agenda, demanding that black genocide be treated as a public health crisis, they are rewriting the rules of the game. Psychology, here, is a co-author: by translating street demands into mental health indicators (such as the impact of racism on the depression of young black people), she transforms data into political weapons.

## **BIOECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS IN THE PUBLIC POLICY CYCLE**

The integration between Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and Secchi's (2014) public policy cycle reveals a complex architecture of interactions between social systems and decision-making processes. Each level of the bioecological model—from the microsystem to the macrosystem—acts as a force field that shapes and is shaped by the stages of the policy cycle (figure 1).

**Figure 1** - integration between Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and Secchi's public policy cycle (2014)



## MICROSYSTEM AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

In microsystems — immediate environments such as families, schools, and vulnerable territories — the implementation of policies gains materiality. For example, the CAPS (Psychosocial Care Centers) operate in this layer, mediating the relationship between users and mental health protocols. When a policy is implemented without dialogue with local dynamics (e.g., night hours incompatible with the routine of informal workers), it fails in its purpose, evidencing the need for continuous adaptation — a central principle of Secchi.

## MESOSYSTEM: ARTICULATION BETWEEN ACTORS

The mesosystem — interactions between microsystems, such as the family-CAPS or school-community relationship — is where contradictions are negotiated. The evaluation stage of the policy cycle, for example, depends on this articulation: a mental health program will only be effective if community agents, psychology professionals, and users collaborate to identify gaps. The absence of this synergy explains why universalist policies, such as the SUS, often come up against fragmented local realities.

## EXOSYSTEM: INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURAL POWER

The exosystem — indirect institutions, such as the media or the health system — influences the formation of the agenda. For example, media coverage of police violence can pressure governments to include "black genocide" as a public health agenda. However, these institutions also reproduce hierarchies: when the media criminalizes peripheral territories, it reinforces stereotypes that distort the stage of identifying the problem, prioritizing "security" over "human rights".

## MACROSYSTEM: NORMS AND COLONIALITY

The macrosystem—laws, cultural norms, and economic structures—defines the limits of what is possible. In the decision-making stage, for example, anti-racist policies come up against a legal system that, historically, has naturalized inequality. Law 10.639/03 (which includes Afro-Brazilian history in the school curriculum) only emerged after decades of pressure from black movements, illustrating how the macrosystem resists change until crises destabilize it.

## CHRONOSYSTEM: TEMPORALITY AND REVISION

The chronosystem—changes over time—is critical to the phase of retiring or revising policies. Programs created in the 1990s, such as the first CAPS, needed to be restructured to incorporate contemporary demands (e.g., trans identities and mental health). The persistence of structural racism, however, shows that some revisions are superficial: policies die on paper, but their structures of oppression remain.

## CHALLENGES AT THE INTERSECTION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

Psychology, in this scenario, operates as a bioecological mediator: by translating individual suffering (microsystem) into collective demands (macrosystem), it challenges the fragmented logic of the policy cycle. When a psychologist at a CAPS uses conversation circles to link depression to structural racism, he is not only implementing a policy, but rewriting its guidelines in real time. This fluidity, however, comes up against resistance: the exosystem (e.g., pharmaceutical industry) profits from the medicalization of life, opposing decolonizing practices.

This intertwining between systems and cycles reveals that effective public policies require more than competent technicians: they require epistemic vigilance to denaturalize hierarchies and political courage to transform microsystems into trenches of social justice.

## **PSYCHOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL GUILT AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE**

Foucault (1987) He did not describe biopower as a mere theory: he exposed an algorithm of domination that transforms structural violence into individual dramas. The bioecological model helps to unravel this operation: macrosystems (such as the media and neoliberal policies) produce narratives that attribute poverty to "lack of effort" or obesity to "bad choices", ignoring food deserts — urban areas with scarce access to fresh food, dominated by ultra-processed foods — and inequality in access to nutritional information. Imagine a public campaign against obesity that blames a single mother in a favela for "poor food choices," while ignoring that her neighborhood has more soda advertisements than street markets: that's where biopower operates, converting inequalities into personal failures. A blatant example is public health management: campaigns against obesity, for example, blame individuals for "inadequate food choices", while ignoring food deserts in peripheries (Brazilian Institute for Consumer Protection, 2020) and the ultra-processed food industry that dominates poor territories. Psychology, as a scientific and practical field, assumes a central role in the construction of public policies committed to social justice and equity — which requires a break with hegemonic paradigms, such as biomedical reductionism and scientific colonialism, which have historically made traditional knowledge invisible and naturalized hierarchies of power.

Foucault (1987) emphasizes, however, that this game is more subtle: biopower not only controls bodies, but also fabricates truths. When traditional midwives are replaced by hospital protocols that despise ancestral knowledge, it is not just a technical change — it is epistemicide on an industrial scale. Psychology, by reinventing policies such as the CAPS, confronts this dynamic by legitimizing subalternized knowledge. Instead of reducing psychological suffering to individual diagnoses, the CAPS promote conversation circles where the community identifies structural causes (e.g., racism, unemployment), challenging the medicalization of life and repositioning public policy as a tool for epistemic justice.

## **PROPOSALS FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA: DECOLONIZING FOR PRACTICE ETHICAL AND CHALLENGING STRUCTURES**

The theoretical bases discussed — from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to Foucault's critique of biopower — require concrete actions that confront the coloniality of power and necropolitics. Below, proposals for a transformative agenda, articulating theory, policy and social justice:

### **ANTI-RACIST TRAINING: DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE**

Education is a macrosystem that reproduces or challenges hierarchies. To break with the colonial logic, it is proposed:

- Insertion of authors such as Lélia Gonzalez (2020) and Bell Hooks (2000) in 40% of the bibliographies of psychology and public policy courses;
  - Example: Replacing disciplines such as "Traditional Clinical Psychology" with "Mental Health and Intersectionality", using works such as Black Feminism (Gonzalez).
- Partnerships with African universities for knowledge exchange:
  - Create programs to co-supervise research on mental health with universities in Angola and Mozambique, prioritizing topics such as ancestral cures and the impacts of colonialism on subjectivity.

### **STRENGTHENING THE SUS AND SUAS: FROM DISCOURSE TO MATERIALITY**

The SUS, as an exosystem, reflects the tension between universality and structural racism. To transform it:

- Professional stability with a salary floor for SUS/SUAS psychologists and career plans with promotion by anti-racist training:
  - Link functional progression to certification in courses such as "Racism and Mental Health" (minimum workload of 120 hours).
- Intersectoral protocols in 100% of CAPS by 2027:
  - Integrate health agents, social workers and community leaders in care flows, with a focus on vulnerable territories.

### **CONFRONTING NECROPOLITICS: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS WITH TRAPODER**

Necropolitics—defined by Achille Mbembe (2019) as the "power to dictate who lives and who dies" — operates in chronosystems, perpetuating genocides. To combat it:

- Restorative Justice Centers in municipalities with high rates of femicide:
  - Prioritize cities where the murder rate of black women exceeds 10/100 thousand inhabitants (such as Salvador and Recife).
  - Structure: Each center will have psychologists, popular jurists and terreiro leaders, focusing on cases of domestic violence and LGBTQIA+phobia.
- Media campaigns coordinated by peripheral collectives:

#### ARTICULATION WITH THE THEORETICAL BASES

- Bioecological model: The proposals integrate microsystems (CAPS), exosystems (SUS) and macrosystems (educational policies), following Bronfenbrenner's logic of interdependence.
- Secchi Cycle: The implementation stage is strengthened with intersectoral protocols, while the evaluation includes anti-racist indicators (e.g., reduction in psychiatric hospitalizations of young black people).
- Biopower: Restorative Justice confronts necropolitical logic by transferring the power to "judge" from the State to the community, dismantling the fabrication of "individual guilt".

#### CONCLUSION

The intersection between the bioecological model, Secchi's policy cycle, and Foucault's critique of biopower points to a promising path toward anti-racist and decolonized public policies. When psychology assumes its political role, it goes beyond diagnosing flaws: it redefines the rules of the game. The APA Guidelines (2017), by emphasizing intersectionality as a product of multiple social contexts, offer valuable guidance for the formulation of solutions. In addition, they demand that psychologists confront their own categorical biases, showing that social justice can only be achieved by dismantling systems that individualize guilt and silence dissident knowledge. In this scenario, the SUS presents itself as both a beacon of hope and a field of dispute: its universality will only be fully achieved when it confronts the racial hierarchies that still shape its best intentions.

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