

The Influence of the Sociocultural Environment on Psychological and Cognitive Development: Towards a Critical Psychology
La Influencia del Medio Sociocultural en el Desarrollo Psíquico y Cognitivo: Hacia una Psicología Crítica
A influência do ambiente sociocultural no desenvolvimento psicológico e cognitivo: rumo a uma psicologia crítica.

Eduardo Torres Urrutia

Centro de Documentación y Estudios Anarquistas de Concepción, Chile.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1565-5880>

eduardo125@gmail.com

Abstract

Psychology has traditionally been an individual-centered discipline, with a particular focus on internal mental processes such as behavior, learning, and perception. However, this individualistic view has proven insufficient to explain the complexity of human development. This essay proposes a critical analysis that incorporates the sociocultural environment as a key factor in people's cognitive and emotional development. Through this perspective, we argue that power structures and social relations profoundly influence mental health, particularly in marginalized communities, and that psychology, as a discipline, must assume a more active and committed role in transforming these dynamics.

Keywords: Cognition, emotions, social influence, social interaction, critical thinking, psychology, critical psychology, social psychology.

Resumen

La psicología ha sido tradicionalmente una disciplina centrada en el individuo, con un enfoque particular en los procesos psíquicos internos, tales como la conducta, el aprendizaje y la percepción. Sin embargo, esta visión individualista ha sido insuficiente para explicar el desarrollo humano en su complejidad. Este ensayo propone un análisis crítico que incorpora el medio sociocultural como un factor clave en el desarrollo cognitivo y emocional de las personas. A través de esta perspectiva, sostenemos que las estructuras de

poder y las relaciones sociales influyen profundamente en la salud mental, particularmente en los sectores marginados, y que la psicología, como disciplina, debe asumir un rol más activo y comprometido en la transformación de estas dinámicas.

Palabras clave: Cognición, emociones, influencia social, interacción social, pensamiento crítico, psicología, psicología crítica, psicología social.

Resumo

A psicologia tem sido tradicionalmente uma disciplina centrada no indivíduo, com foco particular em processos mentais internos, como comportamento, aprendizagem e percepção. No entanto, essa visão individualista mostrou-se insuficiente para explicar a complexidade do desenvolvimento humano. Este ensaio propõe uma análise crítica que incorpora o ambiente sociocultural como um fator-chave no desenvolvimento cognitivo e emocional das pessoas. Através dessa perspectiva, argumentamos que as estruturas de poder e as relações sociais influenciam profundamente a saúde mental, particularmente em comunidades marginalizadas, e que a psicologia, como disciplina, deve assumir um papel mais ativo e comprometido na transformação dessas dinâmicas.

Palavras-chave: Cognição, emoções, influência social, interação social, pensamento crítico, psicologia, psicologia crítica, psicologia social.

Introduction. Individualist Psychology and Its Limitations

Official psychology has historically examined mental phenomena from a perspective that isolates the individual from their context. This fragmentation, while useful for understanding the internal mechanisms of the mind, fails to capture the full range of factors that influence psychological development. Processes such as perception, learning, and behavior are not exclusively internal phenomena; rather, they are shaped by the social and cultural environments in which they unfold. In this sense, a critical and holistic perspective is necessary to understand how context influences psychic development.

Since the 1960s, various currents within psychology have begun to challenge this individualist view, acknowledging the influence of sociocultural environments on psychological processes (Teo, 2021). Nevertheless, despite these advances, psychology remains largely anchored in paradigms that prioritize the study of the isolated individual. Even as theoretical developments have moved beyond an individual conception of the “object,” psychology continues to privilege approaches grounded in so-called evidence-

based frameworks. In doing so, it excludes from academia and from mental health systems perspectives that integrate the social dimension into psychological analysis—particularly those emphasizing how power relations, dominant culture, and social institutions directly affect individuals' psychic development.

Each theory constructs its own empirical foundation—and that foundation, in turn, sustains it. “That is the circular magic of the sciences: from imagination to theory, from theory to empirical data” (Arnau, 2025, p. 544). Put differently, anything can be explained if an appropriate narrative is constructed.

The Sociocultural Environment and Social Pathologies

We argue that the sociocultural environment profoundly influences cognitive development, especially among the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The dominant culture and the institutions that sustain it -designed to maintain power structures- often generate conditions that foster social pathologies such as alcoholism, drug addiction, neurosis, and other manifestations of what we refer to as “pathologies of poverty.” These conditions are not mere individual anomalies but rather symptoms of a social environment that constrains healthy psychological development.

Social and economic policies that affect the most disadvantaged social classes create environments that hinder the free expression of emotions and perceptions. In marginalized neighborhoods, the lack of access to services, precarious housing, and constant exposure to stimuli that reinforce economic and social inequality generate frustration, alienation, and feelings of hopelessness. These conditions not only affect emotional well-being but also shape individuals' cognitive capacities. Poverty, therefore, is not merely an economic phenomenon, but a determining factor in psychological development.

Psychology inevitably refers to worldviews, to ways of “objectifying” the human, to philosophical positions, ideologies, and particular interests regarding how society should be organized and how human beings should be understood. In turn, these positions do not escape a certain degree of systematization in the analysis of reality and its theory of change. What is understood as “reality” by each school of thought is a question that cannot be ignored, since it is toward that conception that attempts at transformation are directed. At the same time, each conception holds its own idea of what “science” is, and each seeks to impose that conception on others. Success or failure along this line has more to do with issues of power than with methodological problems. Thus, so-called “science” becomes a “rationalization” that justifies a particular ideological stance. (Foladori, 2001, p. 1).

On the other hand, the construction of normality and abnormality is linked to social structure and to the difficulties individuals face in conforming to the norms imposed by society. In this regard, Kernberg (2001) highlights the importance of “object relations” within a context, where there are generally “affectively intense interrelations with caregivers who are part of the environment” (Yeomans et al., 2016); that is, child-rearing and affective processes are collective, not merely individual. However, with respect to normality/abnormality, Foucault (2024) explains that the construction of the normal and the abnormal is framed by how power exerts its dominance over subjects and social organization; power itself is normalization.

Power is normalization, and it is society as a whole that constantly sets this mechanism in motion and, therefore, increasingly produces the separation between the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and the pathological, the licit and the illicit, the central and the marginal. (Touraine, 2012, p. 165).

The Subject’s Involvement in the Social Sciences

Unlike the natural or “hard” sciences, the social sciences—including psychology—face a particular challenge: the relationship between the researching subject and the object of study. In the exact sciences, such as physics or chemistry, a clear separation between the researcher and the object of investigation is assumed. This distance allows objectivity to be maintained, insofar as the conclusions reached are not contaminated by the observer’s subjectivity.

In psychology, however, this separation is far more diffuse. The psychologist, in studying the human being, cannot escape their own humanity. This introduces what several authors have termed implication. Devereux (Parra-Giraldo & Astaíza-Martínez, 2021), Lourau (dos Santos & Hur, 2024), Deleuze (Gómez & Jódar, 2024), Foucault (2024), among others, have theorized how the researcher, being immersed in the very reality they study, cannot be completely objective. Psychology, like other social disciplines such as anthropology or sociology, studies human beings from a position shaped by the researcher’s own experiences, beliefs, and social conditioning.

Within this framework, Georges Devereux argues that all social research is, ultimately, autobiographical (Carman, 2025). This is because the researcher is traversed by the same influences they seek to examine in others. Subjectivity is not an obstacle to be overcome, but rather an inherent component of the research process. From this perspective, the subjective is also objective, since it is impossible to fully disentangle one from the other.

The Impossibility of Objectivity in Psychology

The concept of implication leads to the conclusion that, in the social sciences -including psychology-true objectivity cannot exist. The researching subject is always implicated in their own object of study, and their understanding of reality is inevitably shaped by their own experiences, beliefs, and biases. Psychology, therefore, cannot aspire to the same degree of objectivity as the natural sciences.

This recognition does not mean that psychology lacks scientific value; rather, it requires adopting a critical and reflexive stance toward its own methods. Instead of pursuing absolute objectivity, psychologists must be aware of how their own positions influence their work. In this sense, qualitative methodologies -which value subjectivity and lived experience- can be just as valid as more traditional quantitative methodologies.

On the other hand, some authors, such as Ferenczi (Heras, 2015), due to concerns related to professional confidentiality, continue to view with suspicion techniques that extend beyond the dyadic relationship between therapist and individual. In response to this, Group Analytic Psychotherapy offers an alternative “through a dispositif that resembles mutual analysis, since participants relate to one another horizontally, giving rise to a shared analysis” (Morales et al., 2011, p. 159).

Critique of Psychology as an Instrument of Power

One of the central critiques advanced in this essay concerns the role psychology has played in perpetuating power relations. In many cases, psychologists—alongside other social science professionals—occupy an intermediate position between dominated classes, dominant classes, and the State. From this position, programs and policies are developed that, rather than challenging power structures, aim to help marginalized groups accept their conditions of exploitation in a more “healthy” manner. In this way, psychology may become an instrument that legitimizes the status quo rather than a tool for social change.

It is crucial to recognize that no discipline, including psychology, is free from ideological influence. All knowledge is imbued with values and philosophical assumptions that respond to particular interests. From this perspective, psychology must adopt a critical stance toward the power structures it analyzes, rather than perpetuating a false discourse of scientific neutrality. Otherwise, it risks becoming complicit in the dynamics of domination and exploitation that affect society’s most vulnerable sectors.

Speaking of a single method in psychology is complex, given the diversity of theoretical currents and the lack of a clearly defined object of study. The multiple schools and approaches that have emerged over time -from behaviorism to psychoanalysis- have offered different frameworks for understanding and addressing

human behavior. This theoretical diversity reflects not only the breadth of the field but also the internal tensions characteristic of the social sciences in general, where the researcher cannot remain entirely detached from the object of study.

Psychology encompasses highly diverse approaches that often adopt antagonistic positions and methodologies. These include behaviorism, with its focus on reflexive and operant conditioning; humanism, centered on self-actualization and subjective experience; cognitive psychology, which examines mental processes such as thought and memory; and psychoanalysis, with its interest in the unconscious and internal processes. To these are added more recent approaches such as “neurolinguistic programming”, bioenergetics, and perspectives grounded in embodiment.

Each of these approaches offers a different view of the human being and proposes a distinct method for studying it. Behaviorism, for example, seeks generalizations through the observation of observable behavior and the use of controlled experiments. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, explores the unconscious through techniques such as dream interpretation or free association. Constructivism and social constructivism focus on how social interactions shape cognition and perceived reality, while systems theory approaches the individual as part of a broader set of complex interactions. As León (2013) notes, “we cannot ignore that any reality of knowledge, psychoanalysis included, is inseparable from the sociocultural and historical conditions that make its constitution possible as a theoretical body and as a practice” (p. 309).

Systemic therapy offers tools and communication strategies that can help generate dialogue and safeguard the possibility for the other to have an experience of recognition and legitimacy. These strategies are useful for communication across all supra-individual levels, whether between two people or within society as a whole. (Butikofer et al., 2021, pp. 29-37).

One of the factors resisting the adoption of more community-based or even group-oriented approaches is that certain psychological schools or therapeutic traditions view community or systemic proposals as ineffective. This perception has been constructed largely from scientific currents such as cognitive theory, which is generally oriented toward individual intervention and yields economic returns by being positioned as “the only” effective and evidence-based approach.

By contrast, a form of political hegemony of individual-based devices can be observed within clinical fields. This hegemony preserves positions of power from which ideologies or epistemological and technical stances are exercised, making it difficult to establish new forms of intervention. (Letelier et al., 2021, p. 28).

Psychospace, or the Constitution of the Self Influenced by a Social Ecology

Psychospace can be defined as the necessary space for the establishment of healthy object relations and, more broadly, for normal affective development. This concept is used in social psychiatry (particularly by some Argentine psychiatrists) to describe the relationship between the environment, spatial or ecological arrangements, and the way individuals internalize culture through the relationship between space and object relations. We will draw on a psychological explanation of how the limited space available to populations living in poverty contributes to certain pathologies and maladaptive behaviors, which are further intensified by the ecological environment.

These ego-syntonic forms, which depend on a given ecology, cannot be considered potentially creative or capable of generating systems of satisfaction, nor do they facilitate emotional development within interpersonal relationships. Rather, the social frame of reference implies a context without which pathology does not exist, since pathology arises only in human beings as social animals. (Fiasché, 2003, p. 111).

It is within the sociocultural environment that there is the greatest propensity for the emergence of pathologies, which are due to social causes rather than solely hereditary ones. One form of emotional survival can be found in adolescent groups that, by creating identity-based bonds, establish emotional ties that contain traumas or pathologies resulting from family experiences that are often violent.

To understand psychopathology, it is necessary to recognize that every subject undergoes processes of internalization involving representations of external objects, representations of the self, and the affects that accompany both representations. That is, all individuals hold an image of the people around them, another image of themselves, and emotions that accompany each of these images respectively. These are acquired throughout developmental processes via significant relationships. (Fernández & Rodríguez, 2013, pp. 57–64).

As a way out of situations of affective complexity, counterculture -particularly among young people-may emerge. This phenomenon has two dimensions. One is the creative and transformative process, which Piaget summarized by stating that human beings transform the world and are transformed by it. In this sense, counterculture is in constant transformation and functions as a true engine of change. However, counterculture and its intentionality can also lead to processes of deterioration and marginalization. This means that its paths may be either highly generative or profoundly self-destructive, making it difficult at times to assess whether the trajectory will lead toward creativity or toward self-destructive marginality.

There is currently robust evidence showing that inequalities in living conditions are associated with lower life expectancy, poorer self-perceived health, and reduced access to healthcare services, as well as with a higher prevalence of mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, alcohol and substance use, and schizophrenia (Jiménez-Molina et al., 2021).

It is not poverty itself that produces illness, but rather the culture associated with poverty that becomes pathogenic. As previously noted, this is due to fundamental ecological elements: the habitat of marginalized populations, illiteracy, overcrowding, alcoholism, minimal living space, and limited green areas. Anthropologists may offer a different perspective when observing cultures with low economic development but strong social space and healthier object relations. In contrast, within the culture of poverty in large cities, the space for development is more constrained, and individuals are continuously bombarded with desires for goods that consumer society simultaneously denies them.

Fiasché (2003) notes that Winnicott was a strong advocate of the theory of the operative transformation of the self, as opposed to theories of adaptation when such adaptation reaches levels of excessive submission of the personality.

This theory explains the potential of the mental apparatus and the possibilities for development of the inner world through such transformation. (...) Winnicott (in Fiasché, 2003) viewed the adaptive theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, advocated by Hartmann within Ego Psychology, as an anti-dialectical and authoritarian conditioning system that does not accept conflict as a basis for enrichment. In short, the recognition of conflictual experience constitutes a fundamentally creative mental phenomenon. However, when individuals live in marginality, subjected to the anxieties of survival, this level of awareness cannot be achieved, because people immersed in misery experience conflict violently, often channeling it into delinquency. (Fiasché, 2003, p. 65).

On the other hand, Dr. Fiasché (2003) develops the theory of “psychospace” as a generator of psychopathologies, introducing a fundamental concept that must be considered: environmental space.

It can be stated that pathology linked to culture cannot be separated from space... psychospace is an element that must always be taken into account when we are confronted with a given pathology, since pathology always occurs within a specific space. This leads us to ask: what space does each person need in order to organize their inner world? This is not independent of the ideal habitat that each person must have -considered even in metric terms- which the individual needs in order to move from union, bonding, and attachment toward individuation. Therefore, we are referring to how large

the space must be for each person to feel accompanied while simultaneously having the existential freedom to choose to be alone (Fiasché, 2003, p. 89).

This optimal distance is a concrete situation. What has been lived as an experience within a given physical space may later also be lived on an affective level. However, if a person has not internally configured a physical space that contains the optimal distance between themselves and the object, and if this factor is combined during development with other pathogenic components, their affective capacity will lack the possibility of moving along a spectrum from closeness to distance and resolving itself in a healthy and creative way. Experiences predominantly come first from the outside; therefore, there is no learning if the habitat does not allow for the discrimination of that difference.

In those houses -in marginalized neighborhoods- where ten people often live together, frequently relatives, relationships become entangled, carry a strong incestuous charge, and it is not always clear who is whose child. This promotes disregard and confusion. Later in life, when the person may have access to adequate “psychospace,” they are not always able to take advantage of it, because the primary environment has already been internalized and incorporated into their inner world. This internalization is accompanied by a form of violence that is not related to current experience, but rather to the high degree of irritability that invaded their inner world during childhood. Nevertheless, fixation on the pathological condition will also depend on the degree of the individual’s constitutional emotional plasticity.

The social contradiction surrounding exposure of private life or personal information illustrates how excessive social control -even at the expense of freedom- has been transformed into a new normalized practice among an increasing number of social media users. Cameras and facial recognition systems are demanded, an external enemy is constructed, individuation is sought through fear of the other, privacy is closed off in the real world, yet all personal information is surrendered in the digital realm.

Byung-Chul Han (2018) argues that today we no longer hesitate to reveal personal data, even without being compelled to do so. We even feel an imperative need to expose ourselves. We no longer resist the collection, storage, transmission, and resale of hundreds of thousands of data points about us. No one will rebel against Google or Facebook. This lack of control represents a serious crisis of our freedoms. Given the sheer volume of data we so readily share, the very idea of data protection has become obsolete. From being victims of state surveillance, we have become accomplices and voluntary participants in the system. We deliberately relinquish our spheres of protection and expose ourselves to digital networks that penetrate us and render us transparent.

Higher levels of inequality erode social cohesion, producing greater levels of conflict and making individuals more vulnerable to environmental stressors. Conversely, higher levels of social cohesion can mitigate the adverse effects of socioeconomic deprivation on mental health (Jiménez-Molina et al., 2021).

Neighborhood Ecology within the Framework of Social Ecology

To define, in a certain way, what we understand by ecology, when we speak of neighborhood ecology we are referring to the set of relationships and interactions that exist between human beings and other living beings within their environment under specific conditions. Quijano (2013; Agosto, 2018) explains that the ecological system comprises natural and human elements linked through relationships of mutual dependence, among which are relief, climate, rivers, soils, human beings, plants, and animals. In this system, the characteristics of each element are explained by natural causes (physical, chemical, and biological). Human beings intervene as a special living entity because they depend on natural resources, but they also have the capacity to modify them rapidly, whether with positive or negative effects (Agosto, 2018; Quijano, 2013).

Bookchin (1999) then introduces us to an explanation of what social ecology is, and its relationship with nature. He argues that non-human nature is essentially an evolutionary phenomenon that is constantly changing, despite our tendency to think of it in fixed and static terms. Social ecology, as such, recognizes that nearly all of our current ecological problems originate in deep social problems. Social ecology can be understood as a relationship between domination/hierarchy and the subjugation/exploitation of resources, species, peoples, tribes. It has an anti-capitalist component—or more precisely, a radical critique of power and hierarchy as modern explanations for human supremacy over other species, as well as the supremacy of some peoples over others in the name of the market and production. In relation to the market and power, this author argues that we tend to blame technology itself or population growth for environmental problems whose causes actually lie in the market, that is, in profit-driven commerce rather than the equitable distribution of goods; in industrial expansion driven by power rather than by the satisfaction of human needs; in the identification of progress with corporate self-interest rather than with cultural and ecological advancement. In short, we tend to focus more on the symptoms of a severe social pathology than on the pathology itself, directing our efforts toward limited goals whose achievements are more cosmetic than curative.

Thus, beyond what we have come to understand through the media and other sources, the main ecological problem is not pollution, the extinction of whales, or the hole in the ozone layer. It is a much less popular explanation among environmentalists: it is a social problem.

Quijano (2013; Agosto, 2018) opens another line of analysis regarding our ecological problem: the issue of space for human settlements. Populations generate demographic expansion, which in turn becomes a problem. When we speak of demographic expansion, we are also speaking of the spaces required to accommodate it.

To reference some discussions on space and urban planning, we find in the 1930s several alternatives that remain as valid today as they were then. At that time, different options for construction and planning of working-class neighborhoods were debated, prioritizing quality over quantity. All housing was to be abundantly supplied with drinking water, as well as electricity to provide hygienic lighting; the size of rooms was to correspond to the number of people living in them; the materials used were to respond to the climatic conditions of each locality; all houses were to have an individual patio and a community garden as an indispensable complement to a pleasant and healthy family and collective life (Masjuan, 2000).

As a compelling example of all the above, cardiovascular diseases constitute the leading cause of death globally, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where the largest proportion of the world's population lives. Air pollution, both indoors and outdoors, caused by fine particulate matter is a major risk factor for these diseases (Lopez-Jaramillo et al., 2025). Will psychology continue to ignore the root causes of these problems, tending more toward becoming a business than a community-based social good?

Toward a Critical and Transformative Psychology

Psychology cannot remain detached from the power struggles that shape people's everyday lives. From this perspective, we propose that the discipline must assume a more active role in transforming the social relations that generate pathology. A critical and social approach to psychology must reject positivist explanations that seek to objectify human behavior without considering sociocultural factors. Instead, it should promote active listening to subjective narratives, recognizing that emotions, values, and perceptions are deeply shaped by the sociocultural environment.

Critical psychology is grounded in the premise that mental health cannot be separated from the material and social conditions in which people live. By intervening in power relations and contributing to social transformation, psychologists can help build a more equitable society, one in which pathologies arising from exploitation and exclusion are less prevalent. This approach draws on anti-psychiatric and counter-psychological theories that challenge the normalization of domination and advocate for the subversion of structures that perpetuate oppression. At the same time, it addresses the distance some authors attempt to establish between what is defined as the object -the psyche-separated from the soma. In this sense, trauma

can only be understood insofar as an event acts upon the body, generating a mnemonic trace in the unconscious: something that cannot be symbolized but nonetheless leaves an imprint on the body (Messina, 2021).

It is also necessary to recognize that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the formation of the psyche is a construction rooted in the subject's primary experience in relation to an other-object. In this regard, Liliana Messina (2021), through an illustrative example, refers to breakdown as a "fear" of displeasure, in which soma and psyche are colonized by forms that ultimately shape lived experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work highlights the need for a critical and transformative psychology that incorporates the sociocultural environment as a key factor in cognitive and emotional development. By acknowledging that power structures and social relations profoundly influence mental health—especially among marginalized groups—it challenges the traditional individualistic view that has long dominated psychology.

Psychology cannot be reduced to the analysis of an isolated individual, since the environment in which a person develops plays a central role in shaping the psyche. Social pathologies such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and neurosis are not merely individual problems but symptoms of a social context in need of transformation. A holistic and social approach is therefore essential for addressing mental health in a more effective and just manner.

Furthermore, the concept of implication underscores that psychologists, like anthropologists or sociologists, cannot fully separate themselves from their object of study. The researcher's subjectivity is inherent to the research process and must be acknowledged as such. Rather than striving for an unattainable objectivity, psychology should critically reflect on its own methods and on how the researcher's position shapes the analysis of reality.

Finally, an important critique is directed at psychology as an instrument that can perpetuate power relations. Instead of merely legitimizing the status quo, the discipline must adopt an active stance in challenging the structures that sustain oppression and exploitation. Only through a psychology committed to social justice can we contribute to the creation of a more equitable and mentally healthy society.

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