

Social Psychology

# Between the limits and potentialities: Reflections on the psychologist's performance at SUAS

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### Abstract

This article begins from the assumptions of Liberation Psychology to support reflections on the role of psychologists in the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS). At first it outlines, then, it presents the trajectory of Psychology as a profession and Social Assistance as a public policy, to later discuss the role of psychologists in this context, problematizing challenges that present themselves in the current situation and the potential of these professionals' performance. The recovery and analysis of recent historical facts in Brazil evidenced the reduction of the State and the deprivation of historically conquered rights, which have materialized in the dismantling of SUAS, demanding strength of resistance to fight these setbacks from the professionals who work there, which also implies working with the oppressed so that they overcome their alienated identities, with a view of building practices committed to social transformation.

**Keywords:** psychology; social assistance; SUAS; pedagogy of the oppressed; Liberation Psychology.

## ENTRE LIMITES E POTENCIALIDADES: REFLEXÕES ACERCA DA ATUAÇÃO DO PSICÓLOGO NO SUAS

### Resumo

O presente artigo parte dos pressupostos da Psicologia da Libertação para fundamentar reflexões acerca da atuação dos psicólogos no Sistema Único de Assistência Social (Suas). Como primeiros delineamentos, apresenta a trajetória da psicologia como profissão e da assistência social como política pública, para posteriormente discutir a atuação dos psicólogos nesse contexto, problematizando os desafios que se apresentam na atual conjuntura e as potencialidades da atuação desses profissionais. O resgate e a análise dos fatos históricos recentes do Brasil evidenciaram a redução do Estado e o despojo de direitos historicamente conquistados, que têm se materializado no desmonte do Suas, demandando dos profissionais resistência para lutar contra esses retrocessos, o que também implica atuar com os oprimidos para que superem suas identidades alienadas, com vistas à construção de práticas comprometidas com a transformação social.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia; assistência social; Suas; pedagogia do oprimido; Psicologia da Libertação.

# ENTRE LÍMITES Y POTENCIALIDADES: REFLEXIONES SOBRE EL PAPEL DEL PSICÓLOGO EN SUAS

## Resumen

Este artículo parte de los supuestos de la Psicología de la Liberación para sustentar reflexiones sobre el rol de los psicólogos en el Sistema Único de Asistencia Social (Suas). Como primer trazo, presenta la trayectoria de la psicología como profesión y la asistencia social como política pública, para luego discutir el rol de los psicólogos en este contexto, problematizando los desafíos que se presentan en la situación actual y el potencial de desempeño de estos profesionales. El rescate y análisis de hechos históricos recientes en Brasil mostró la reducción del Estado y el saqueo de derechos históricamente conquistados, que se han materializado en el desmantelamiento de Suas, exigiendo de los profesionales la resistencia para combatir estos retrocesos, lo que también implica actuar con los oprimidos para superar sus identidades alienadas, con miras a construir prácticas comprometidas con la transformación social.

**Palabras clave:** psicología; asistencia social; SUAS; pedagogía de los oprimidos; psicología de la liberación.

## 1. Introduction

The massive insertion of psychologists in social assistance public policy took place through insertion of these professionals in the structuring of the Unified System of Social Assistance (SUAS); one of the professionals who must compose the teams of the Reference Centers of Social Assistance (CRAS) and the Specialized Reference Centers for Social Assistance (CREAS) in municipalities has to be a psychologist. According to the Technical Reference for psychologist's performance at SUAS, the psychologist must, in this context, carry out interviews, guidelines, referencing and counter-referencing, home visits, institutional articulations, socio-educational and social activities, and facilitate groups, always based on a commitment to the subjects' autonomy, while believing in the potential of the populations served, aimed at breaking the processes of exclusion, marginalization, assistance and tutelage (Federal Council of Social Service & Federal Council of Psychology [CFESS / CFP], 2007).

One of the main points highlighted in research about psychologist's performance at SUAS refers to the lack of understanding that these professionals have about their role and on the specifics of Psychology in this context (Cordeiro,

2018). Another important aspect is the need to promote changes in the practice and training of psychology professionals to improve their performance in public services. In this sense, Senra and Guzzo (2012) state that:

The insertion of the psychologist in the field of Social Assistance requires the construction not only of new methodologies, but of a critical reflection about professional performance in a scenario of profound social inequalities, the constitution of society in the capitalist system, of policies that promise impossible changes of happening (Senra & Guzzo, 2012, p. 298).

In the same perspective, Saraiva (2017) points out that social assistance often reproduces the movement that it seeks to overcome. This fact, added to the permanence of a coercive look by most professionals working at SUAS and practices that locate in the individual the reason for their poverty and vulnerability, makes social assistance, besides not fulfilling its function, recurrently to camouflage the problems inherent in a society marked by inequality. Thus, the following work aims to reflect on the performance of psychologists in the Unified Social Assistance System, highlighting difficulties of their “to do’s” in this context, as well as the potential of their performance. Issues will be questioned based on the presumptions of Liberation Psychology, in which it is the role of the psychologist to help the oppressed to overcome their alienation, personal and social identity, accompanying them on their historic path towards liberation (Martín-Baró, 1996), seeking to build practices that distance them from authoritarian actions and to favour the realization of collective and ethical actions which favour life, the possibilities of existence and resistance.

## 2. Development

### 2.1 Social assistance in Brazil

In order to better understand the role of the psychologist at SUAS and some challenges that are presented to professionals at this juncture, it is necessary to recognize the trajectory of psychology as a profession and social assistance as a public policy, once historical conditions make certain considerations essential for the study of any social phenomenon (Yamamoto & Oliveira, 2010). Considering

that there is little space for a detailed review of the historical contexts mentioned above, and since the objective of this article is not to expose the subject exhaustively, what is intended is to outline the most relevant aspects that have shaped the current behaviors of psychologists in the SUAS. Conducts that, even today, are crossed by a hegemonic discourse that is tutelary and assistentialist and that, many times, prevent the emergence of contradictions that foster social transformation (Romagnoli, Neves, & Paulon, 2018).

Social assistance, even though it is an old practice, acquired the character of public social protection policy in the Federal Constitution of 1988, and was regulated in 1993, by the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS), which defines social assistance as a social security policy, a component of the social security tripod, together with health and social security (Brazil, 2005). By definition. It is also a “citizenship right, with the prospect of guaranteeing the basic needs of the vulnerable segments of the population due to poverty and social exclusion” (Brazil, 2005, p. 14).

In 2004, the National Social Assistance Policy (PNAS) was promulgated, presenting the guidelines for the effectiveness of social assistance as a citizenship right and the responsibility of the State. In 2005, there was the Basic Operational Standard, presenting the structural axes necessary for the implementation and consolidation of the SUAS, which is a non-contributory, decentralized public system, whose function is to manage the social assistance field of Brazilian social protection. At SUAS, social assistance actions are organized based on the territory where people live, their demands and needs. Programs and services must be carried out in the most vulnerable regions, priority attention should be given to families with records of fragility and the presence of victimization among their members. The social assistance actions in the SUAS are organized by basic social protection and special social protection of medium and high complexity, which are developed and coordinated by the public units: CRAS, CREAS, Specialized Reference Centres for Homeless Population (POP Center), and, in a complementary way, through the SUAS Private Social Assistance Network (Brazil, 2005). Basic social protection deals with actions of social surveillance, prevention of risk situations, and the strengthening of family and community bonds. On the other hand, cases that are involved with the violation of rights, correspond to special social protection.

During the last three decades, there has been a progressive increase in social protection in Brazil, involving the expansion of universal service networks, expansion

of benefits and promotion of equity. This construction involved significant advances in the protective responsibilities and in the social assistance policy offered, in addition to the consolidation of institutional and operational arrangements (Jaccoud, Bichir, & Mesquita, 2017). Nevertheless, Saraiva (2017) points out that an emblematic issue with regard to the role of public social assistance policy configures itself as a point of convergence between two diametrically opposed structural orders, the Democratic State of Law (a juridical-political order founded on equal sovereignty of all who make up society) and capitalism (an economic order that depends on inequality and on the constant production of misery to exist), so that social assistance deals with the consequences of poverty production without fighting its causes.

The structuring of SUAS took place during the Lula's administration (2003-2010), which combined an economic policy of capital interests with the implementation of a series of programs and initiatives aimed at the poorest segments of the population. Marques and Mendes (2007) use the Bolsa Família Program – Lula's administrations central program to combat poverty – as an example. According to the authors, the cash transfer program really did alter the conditions the benefited families; however, it did not promote changes in the structural determinants of poverty.

In other words, the last problem related to Bolsa Família lies in the fact that Lula's government didn't change the determinants of Brazilian structural poverty. And, even if it had pursued policies that would have altered this logic, some of them would have an impact in the medium and long term, which would justify treating the income granted through Bolsa Família as a right and not as something dependent on a program, liable to be extinguished without Brazilian society participating in the decisions (Marques & Mendes, 2007, p. 21).

It would have been more appropriate for Bolsa Família, instead of a government program, to be transformed into a minimum income right for families. This possibility, however, contradicted the more general policy of the Lula administration, which had a tendency to transform social protection guaranteed by the State into a protection of the less benefited (Marques & Mendes, 2007).

As of 2016, with the removal of Dilma Rousseff as president, a radical neoliberal agenda was adopted under the administration of Michel Temer. Among the reforms articulated in the Temer administration, we highlight the Constitutional Amendment number 95, also known as the Constitutional Amendment to the Public Expenditure Ceiling, which amended the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 to institute the New Tax Regime, limiting the growth of Brazilian government spending for 20 years. In practice, Amendment number 95 dramatically decreases the federal government's budgeted resources for education, health, welfare and social assistance, severely damaging the quality of public services and increasing social and economic inequality. It implies compromising the sustainability of public facilities and social assistance services, interfering with protection through these services and the continuity of work at the CRAS and CREAS (Azevedo, 2016).

In the same way, the labour reform, Law number 13,467/2017, which was approved on July 13, 2017, stands out. It promoted a set of changes related to "workers' rights" and "employer duties". The modifications concern vacations, hours of rest, legal actions, flexibility in working time, forms of hiring and remuneration, among others, becoming an instrument for deconstructing social rights. This reform resulted in job insecurity, reducing the population's access to benefits, and encouraging more workers to migrate to informality, making them more vulnerable (Krein & Colombi, 2019). At the same time that the labour reform proposes the expectation of an increase in the population that will need social assistance services. Amendment number 95 weakens the SUAS to the point of making it difficult for it to continue programs and services offered to meet the demand already existing.

In the words of Chomsky (2002, p. 3):

Neoliberalism is the economic and political paradigm that defines our time. It consists of a set of policies and processes that allow a relatively small number of private interests to control as much of social life as possible in order to maximize their individual benefits.

In Brazil, the alignment of neoliberal policies with growing reactionary values culminated in the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, who has constituted "a Brazilian model of hyper-reactionary neoliberalism" (Krein & Colombi, 2019, p.

2). During the first year of the Bolsonaro administration, the Public Pension Reform, presented through the Proposed Constitution Amendment number 06/2019, was enacted in November 2019, representing yet another blow to the Brazilian worker, because it maximizes the exploitation of the labour force and makes their living condition even more precarious.

It is worth mentioning that Brazil is among the most socially unequal countries in the world and, as explained above, the country has experienced a deepening of these inequalities, aggravated by the radicalization of the neoliberal socioeconomic model and the rise of the extreme right wing, so securing public responsibility for social assistance is essential. Despite the unfortunate situation and the obstacles needing to be overcome, SUAS aims to guarantee access to public care in the State for people in situations of social vulnerability excluded from other protective systems. Currently, millions of families, through a network of social assistance services, have minimal support at their disposal to assist them in the task of caring for and providing for themselves. Thus, in addition to the necessary improvement for social assistance to fulfil its role, it is urgent to resist the dismantling of what has been built so far.

## **2.2 Psychology in Brazil yesterday and today**

Psychology was regulated as a profession on August 27, 1962 and, less than two years later, in March 1964, there was a military coup and the establishment of a dictatorial regime that lasted 21 years. It is in this scenario of fundamental rights suspension that Psychology develops in Brazil, marked by elitism and the scant consideration of social demands (Yamamoto & Oliveira, 2010).

In the final years of the 1980s, movements of change in the psychologist's performance erupted, due to openings in the job market in public health services to psychologists, who were encouraged to reinvent their practices in order to contribute and respond to the needs of populations they were not used to work with (Bock, 1999). At that time, the slogan of social commitment was adopted as a guide for psychological practices and, subsequently, several actions were carried out by psychologists and entities of Brazilian psychology aiming at building practices committed to Brazilian society (CFESS/CFP, 2007). A notorious fact in the documents intended on guiding the work of psychologists. According to the document *Parameter for the performance of social workers and psychologists in the Social Assistance Policy* the

role of a psychologist must be committed to social transformation, focusing on the needs, objectives and experiences of the oppressed (CFESS/CFP, 2007).

Often, social assistance public policy and the roles of psychologists in this context both end up working in synchrony with a political-economic order that goes against the assumptions of psychology and social assistance, which means they are opposite to practices committed to social reality and to the promotion of quality of life of people and communities that contribute the elimination of any forms of exploitation, violence and oppression. This is one of the main challenges that are presented to professionals in this context, although the role of the psychologist in social assistance is intended to be committed to social transformation and to the needs, potential, objectives and experiences of the oppressed, the evidence of this history of commitment to the elite is present and unfolds in behaviors that can pathologize and objectify SUAS users. As explained by Romagnoli et al. (2018, p. 245):

[...] the psychologist's performance is often disregarding the complexity, the multiple crossings and the users' own differences, naturalizing their practice as apolitical and individual. Disregarding the political effects of these interventions, for example, in the production of miserable subjectivities, pathologized subjectivities, (re) production of less subject subjects, subjugation [...].

In this sense, Saraiva (2017, p. 45) points out common sayings by professionals in socio-assistance services about their users, in which the distorted look, often directed at this audience, is evident.

“These people are like that”. Poor, silent, relaxed, loose, exploitative (for, whenever possible, taking advantage of the State, living on varied benefits), irresponsible (for insisting on making so many children, even in the face of so much poverty and difficulty in raising them). Unstructured [...]. They commonly refuse the service that is offered to them, with little commitment to change their lives. They look after their children poorly, repeatedly offering negative examples. Neglectful. Simply because “these people are like that”. “These people”: the way in which many professionals refer to users [...] An intensely pejorative view [...]

This is derogatory discourse that produces subjects that, to a certain extent, tend to meet the expectations under which they are envisioned. This self-worth is a common feature of the oppressed, resulting from the introjection they make of the oppressors' view. After hearing so much that they are incapable, that they know nothing, that they are indolent, they end up convincing themselves of this supposed incapacity (Freire, 1987). This population does not understand the reason for their pain is in the perversity of the social, economic and political system in which they live, but in their incompetence (Freire, 1996). To reinforce that, thinking and acting this way means to strengthen the power of the system, making them connive with a dehumanizing order.

Evidently, views carried with prejudice are barriers to any type of communication and, without communication, the psychologist's work is not only limited, but unworkable. The gaze not only sees, but says, touches, attributes meanings and possibilities of existence. It is a gaze that has repeatedly been used as a powerful instrument of classification, hierarchizing, discrimination and docilization of bodies; a gaze that, in order to be exercised, has silenced what it sees (Saraiva, 2017) and, in line with Freire (1987), it can be said that silencing someone is not just denying him/her the word, but depriving him/her of his/her own humanization, because man only humanizes himself/herself in the dialogical process of humanizing the world. The creative word emerges from the encounter, from the recognition of consciences, and from the recognition of oneself. An encounter, that, in order to occur, requires being together, side by side, without being oppressive or oppressed, because only then can the psychologist practice produce salutary effects.

The psychologist can develop practices that objectify or humanize people, that allow or prevent people from taking control of their own existence, since it is observed that, at least theoretically, the slogan of social commitment as a guide for psychological practices was adopted. It is up to each of the psychologists, with the ethical choice of committing themselves to a praxis that allows the human being to develop their potential, to become the subject of their own history and to be aware of their own reality.

### **2.3 Psychology with the oppressed: an action that enhances life**

The public policy of social assistance, in order not to act as a lackey to the economic system, needs to initiate from the needs (both actual and potential) of

those for which it is intended, and it is crucial that these subjects are included in the construction and evaluation of this policy, so that they can leave the condition of mere objects, which reduces men to things. This is only possible with the concrete care of experience of users, producing policies that transform social dynamics and create other institutions, relationships and social landscapes (Saraiva, 2017). In this sense, the contribution of Liberation Psychology, conceived by Martín-Baró, is fruitful, as it is characterized as a critical approach that starts from the social reality experienced by marginalized people in order to build a theoretical body capable of helping them to overcome their alienated identity. The social psychologist plays an important mediating role in this process, by accompanying the subject in his historical path towards liberation (Almeida, Silva, Braz, Crispim, & Melo, 2015).

Ignácio Martín-Baró was a Jesuit priest, theologian and psychologist. He was born in 1942, in Spain, but he lived most of his life in El Salvador, where he completed his degree in Psychology in 1975, at the Universidad Centro-Americana José Simeón Cañas (UCA), and became a professor at the same University. In his work and personal history, political engagement for social justice stands out, strongly influenced by the Salvadoran reality of his time, which was marked by social inequality, authoritarian governments and civil war. As consequence of his political engagement, he was assassinated on November 16, 1989, by an elite squad from the army of El Salvador, on the premises of UCA. By the time he was executed, his work was already internationally known, leaving an extensive theoretical legacy of articles and books. He is recognized as a propeller of the renewal of the Latin American psychology (Martín-Baró, 2017).

According to Mendonça, Souza and Guzzo (2016), Martín-Baró, who were inspired by Liberation Theology, Marxism and popular movements in Latin America, erected his work aspiring a Psychology that placed itself at the service of the poor in their struggle for liberation of historical and social barriers that hinder their possibilities of governing their own destiny, based on the denomination Psychology of Liberation. In the words of Martín-Baró (1996, p. 22):

[...] if the psychologist, on one hand, is not called to intervene in the socio-economic mechanisms that articulate the structures of injustice, on the other hand, he is called to intervene in the subjective processes that sustain and

make these unjust structures viable; if it is not up to him to reconcile the forces and social interests in struggle, it is up to him to help find ways to replace violent habits with more rational ones; and even if the definition of an autonomous national project is not in his field of competence, the psychologist can contribute to the formation of an identity, personal and collective, that responds to the most authentic demands of peoples.

In order to clarify how relations of domination are constituted, which are responsible for producing a reality of inequality and social injustice, the concept of alienation will be briefly discussed from the perspective of Martín-Baró. For the author, alienation is the state in which a social class expresses the interests of the dominant class to the detriment of their own interests, presenting themselves in an objective and subjective phenomenon.

In the objective dimension, it concerns the social division of labour in capitalist society because, by appropriating the product of labour, “one sector of the population acquires power to impose its interests, while the alienation of the fruit of their labour leaves the other sector of population powerless to advance their interests within the social system” (Martín-Baró, 2012 as quoted in Mendonça et al., 2016, p.28). In the subjective scope, alienation is understood “as an objective impotence and dissatisfaction, as a real need and expropriation; however, together with a false conscience” (Martín-Baró, 2012 as quoted in Mendonça et al., 2016, p. 28). Here we speak of the dominated classes assuming the values, actions and social practices of the dominant class as their own, in a way that they do not see/deny the social conditions, or, using Martín-Baró’s own term, they create a “false conscience” of their own reality, limiting the apprehension of what’s real and its determinations.

It is in this sense that Martín-Baró (2012) declares to be inspired by Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” and claims awareness (successive awareness-raising processes) as a way to promote the reversal of alienation of people and the construction of social changes. Since the process of historical liberation from oppressive relations requires forms of organization and political practices capable of changing the basic structures of the exploitative social organization, the Martinbarian thesis is that social

liberation supposes a step from social alienation to social identity, that is, to move from the persistent awareness (individual and immediate interests) to a class consciousness (oriented towards satisfying the needs corresponding to the interests of the social community of the oppressed). This involves changing the values and aspirations of the oppressed, with organized collective activities, aiming at the necessary transformations of objective social structures (Mendonça et al., 2016, p. 29).

Martín-Baró (1996) declares that, when it comes to pointing out some contributions of Latin the American psychology to universal psychology, Paulo Freire's method of education literacy stands out. According to him, awareness was a historical response to the shortage of words, personal and social, of the Latin American peoples that not only prevented people from reading and writing the alphabet, but, above all, from reading themselves and writing their own history. For Freire (1981, p.112), awareness is “the process by which, in the subject-object relationship, the subject becomes able to perceive, in critical terms, the dialectical unity between him and the object”, an invaluable concept for the psychologist committed to social transformation. According to the author, what characterizes the oppressed as with a servile conscience, in relation to the master's conscience, is to make themselves almost an object and become almost a conscience for the other, and emancipation necessarily goes through the formation of a critical conscience that permits the transformation of this objective reality that makes them be this being for the other.

Although the fact of becoming aware does not necessarily lead to freedom, this awareness is indispensable to the reversal of the alienation process, because the veil of rationalizations that justify the demeaning situation of the peoples must be broken for necessary changes to occur. Favouring this process of emancipation in humans is one of the greatest potentialities of the psychologist's work and, even so, there are no simplistic formulas to achieve this goal, since each conjuncture will present different complexities and crossings. In short, the central question that the psychologist must ask, regarding his practice, refers to what role he/she is playing in society, that is, from whom, for the benefit of whom and, above all, what concrete historical consequences have resulted from the work they have produced (Martín-Baró, 1996).

Thus, recognizing the limits imposed by reality to the resolution of problems arising from a marginal insertion in the social structure, it must also be recognized that the work of the psychologist not only has the potential to understand the experiences of the oppressed, but, above all, gives a voice to their trajectories and the values built from them, producing supportive effects to their experiences of life, tradition and culture, which will result in their effective participation in the world (Saraiva, 2017), a participation that may engender the transformation in the social structures which produce inequality, which is what we call life-enhancing action.

Acting differently, breaking prejudices and old paradigms, requires a commitment by the psychologist to the social world, aiming at changing the population's living conditions. It is a question of placing psychological knowledge at the service of building a more just society "in which the welfare of the less fortunate is not done over the malaise of the majority, in which the achievements of some does not require the denial of others, where the interests of the few do not demand the dehumanization of all" (Martín-Baró, 1996, p. 23). Furthermore, the work with the oppressed includes, undoubtedly, challenging popular groups to critically perceive the violence and injustice of their own concrete situation (Freire, 1996).

### 3. Final considerations

Social assistance has a central role in tackling inequalities, guaranteeing social minimums and universalizing social rights and, therefore, its improvement must be continuous so that it can achieve the objectives for which it was designed. Faced with the reduction of the State and the plundering of historically conquered rights, in addition to fighting for the necessary advances in the scope of SUAS, it is necessary to fight and resist the dismantling of what has been achieved so far, without being content in corroborating the maintenance of a cruel political-economic order.

Among the difficulties of SUAS' psychologists, stand out the lack of understanding of their role in this public policy, their feeling of helplessness in the face of the limits of their performance and the permanence of assistance and reactionary practices. Thus, it is reiterated that the insertion of psychologists in the field of social assistance requires, above all, critical reflections on professional performance in a scenario of profound social inequalities, aiming to avoid split concepts between the individual and society, linked to technicalities that result in

actions excessively prescriptive that offer a risk of corroborating the naturalization of misery.

One of the main objectives of the psychologist at SUAS is to act through a logic of awareness and as a protagonist of the subjects and this doing requires, above all, the spoiling of authoritarian stances, from those who believe they have the knowledge of what is good or desirable for the other, because it is only in this way that it is possible to build other possibilities of existence together, to enhance lives and produce effects of resistance and transformation of social reality. It is considered that the metamorphosis in the psychologist's work has been initiated, but it lacks many advances for the definitive abandonment of the naturalizing visions that still characterize it. In this sense, as has been explained, the theoretical framework of Liberation Psychology is configured as a fruitful instrument, which continuously reiterates who are the adversaries in the search for a more just society, that is, practices and conceptions that silence rights and contribute to the maintenance of a degrading political-economic order.

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