

# People-environment relations in the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil: contributions from a critical Latin American Environmental Psychology

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed several sectors of society in the face of the urgent need to rethink people's relations with their surroundings. This article proposes a possible framework for reading the person-environment relations in the pandemic context, considering the Brazilian scenario. Our argument focuses on analyzing the spatialization of social and racial inequalities, determining factors for the spread of COVID-19, and the differences in its impacts, parallel to other readings that environmental psychology has presented for this context. We assume that more traditional approaches have limitations for understanding Latin American specificities, requiring revisions and reorientations of a theoretical-epistemological character and an ethical-political nature. In the end, we outline some propositions, from a critical perspective.

**Keywords:** urban environments; environmental psychology; social exclusion; social problems; social isolation.

## Resumo

*Relações pessoa-ambiente na pandemia de COVID-19 no Brasil: contribuições de uma Psicologia Ambiental crítica latino-americana.* A pandemia de COVID-19 tem colocado diversos setores da sociedade diante da urgência de repensar as relações das pessoas com seus entornos. Neste ensaio propomos um quadro possível para a leitura das relações pessoa-ambiente no contexto da pandemia, considerando o cenário brasileiro. Nosso argumento se centra na análise da espacialização das desigualdades sociais e raciais, como fatores determinantes da disseminação da COVID-19 e das diferenças em seus impactos, em paralelo a outras leituras que a psicologia ambiental vem apresentando para esse contexto. Assumimos que abordagens mais tradicionais apresentam limitações para a compreensão das especificidades latino-americanas, demandando revisões e reorientações de caráter teórico-epistemológico, e de cunho ético-político. Ao final, esboçamos algumas proposições, a partir de uma perspectiva crítica, para a construção de conhecimentos mais condizentes com a materialidade da vida da maior parte da população.

**Palavras-chave:** ambientes urbanos; psicologia ambiental; exclusão social; problemas sociais; isolamento social.

## Resumen

*Relaciones persona-ambiente en la pandemia de COVID-19 en Brasil: contribuciones desde una psicología ambiental latinoamericana crítica.* La pandemia de COVID-19 ha convocado a varios sectores de la sociedad ante la urgente necesidad de repensar las relaciones de las personas con su entorno. En este ensayo, proponemos un posible marco para leer las relaciones entre las personas y el medio ambiente en el contexto de la pandemia, considerando el escenario brasileño. Nuestro argumento se centra en el análisis de la espacialización de las desigualdades sociales y raciales, como factores determinantes para la propagación de COVID-19 y las diferencias en sus impactos, en paralelo a otras lecturas que la psicología ambiental ha presentado para este contexto. Suponemos que los enfoques más tradicionales tienen limitaciones para comprender las especificidades latinoamericanas, que requieren revisiones y reorientaciones de carácter teórico-epistemológico y de naturaleza ético-política. Al final, delineamos algunas propuestas, desde una perspectiva crítica, para la construcción de conocimiento más consistente con la materialidad de la vida de la mayoría de la población.

**Palabras clave:** ambientes urbanos; psicología ambiental; exclusión social; problemas sociales; aislamiento social.

On March 17, 2020, the first fatal victim of COVID-19 was announced in Rio de Janeiro, an infectious disease caused by a new type of coronavirus spread throughout the world. She was a woman, a domestic worker, who worked in an upscale neighborhood in the city. She lived on the outskirts and, due to the distance, stayed during the week at her employer's house. They had recently returned from a trip to Italy - at that time epicenter of the world's disease - then the victim contracted the virus that led to her death. On March 20, a homeless person reported to two journalists his fear of not having food to eat since people who usually made donations were isolating themselves in their homes. On April 9, in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, in Roraima, where there are lands invaded by gold miners, Alvanei Xirixana, an indigenous Yanomami teenager, died with a diagnosis of COVID-19. On May 7, the police carried out a repossession warrant by removing about fifty homeless families from the Occupation Monte Líbano. In the interior of the State of São Paulo, the State is hitherto most affected by COVID-19. On May 20, João Vitor da Rocha, 18, was shot while delivering basic food baskets to help families during the pandemic period in Cidade de Deus, Rio de Janeiro, during a police operation.

The cases reported above, and reported by the press, are part of the complex scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Placed in parallel, an element that determines them is evident: its socio-spatial location marked by inequalities. As researchers in people-environment relations and environmental psychology studies, we asked ourselves about the socio-spatial dimension of life experiences, produced by combining different social determinants in the pandemic context. We propose to make this reflection taking as a starting point the concrete situations that introduce this essay. Suppose it is on the horizon of our field of study to understand human life's socio-spatial dimension. In that case, we cannot avoid considering that these territories' construction does not take place in an egalitarian society free from oppression. On the contrary, the physical space is marked by inequalities, and life in these places, does not fail to express its determinants, even during the pandemic and actions to mitigate it.

We seek to design a possible framework for reading people-environment relationships to understand the impacts of COVID-19 as a psychosocial and geographically situated phenomenon. Among the various contributions, our argument starts from analyzes of the spatialization of social and racial inequalities as

determining factors for the dissemination and effects of COVID-19, parallel to the readings that environmental psychology has been presenting to face these effects.

## **People-environment relations and environmental Psychology in the context of the pandemic**

The first months of 2020 put people from all over the world in a situation of uncertainty. In mid-March, World Health Organization (WHO) pandemic decree formalized speculation circulating with the virus for some months. More than the fear of contagion and all the possible damage related to it, the fear of the unknown and the invisible seems to have reached the globe's population. The unseen enemy has a name, Sars-CoV-2, the new coronavirus.

As fast as the virus spreads and its related morbidity (COVID-19), scientists' action is to overcome the new disease's ignorance. In everyday life, the status of novelty further sharpens fears. It seems to put pressure on the same scientists who, day after day, make their laboratories, microscopes, and reagents real barricades in the discovery of prevention and cure measures.

Despite the sea of uncertainties concerning the pandemic, investigations conducted in the main contamination centers arrive at some findings that have guided public policies in different countries, giving them credibility. An example of this is the health actions stratified according to the demographic distribution of COVID-19, based on national and international studies that demonstrated the age range (older adults) and chronic diseases as factors that enhance lethality (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020). Therefore, due to how the virus spreads, circulation restriction measures have been the most indicated to contain the virus's spread and reduce these groups' incidence (Rocha, 2020). Although the term "social isolation" is used regarding these measures, we see the demand for "physical isolation" since people continue to live together and maintain social relationships in other ways, such as virtuality.

Thus, the direct engagement of health and biosciences in the front lines of care for patients and conducting scientific research regarding measures to prevent contagion, and practical clinical treatments, is highlighted. Coping with the pandemic explains the essential link between science and professional performance in contexts where the public authorities and health authorities have neglected scientific knowledge.

Furthermore, there is greater resistance from the population to adhere to prevention measures. The acceleration in the increase in the number of cases of contagion and deaths is evident. As Laufer (2020) states, amid “pseudo-scientific charlatans” who proclaim the existence of miraculous remedies, and leaders who take dangerous positions, with proposals lacking any factual basis, it is the science that will come to the solution to the problem that arises.

The pandemic scenario’s complexity demands an informed understanding of the effects and implications for people’s lives in its multiple dimensions, considering the different social markers that determine how the impacts affect different groups. In this sense, the humanities field’s contributions focus on issues ranging from more immediate and everyday social relations at broader levels, such as society’s dynamics. Thus, they play a relevant role in addressing psychosocial processes that involve adherence or not to prevention measures, degrees of exposure to contagion, emotional and psychological illnesses and sufferings, experience mourning for the loss of close people, engagement in actions of solidarity, among others.

As an area that builds knowledge in the humanities’ scope, in interface with other knowledge fields, environmental psychology allows us to enter this debate by looking at a commonly overlooked dimension of human experience: the two-way relationships between people (and groups) and their environments. Inserted in the multidisciplinary field of studies of person-environment relations, it focuses on the spatial understanding of social relations and the impact of these relations on the production of (inter) subjectivities. With all the implications, the pandemic context brought from the pace of dissemination to the measures of containment to the advance of the virus opens a fertile ground for analyzing the psychosocial environmental aspects of this collective human experience, located historically and spatially.

Analyzes produced in the heat of the moment give clues about how people-environment relations can be thought of in the current context. Salama (2020) proposes an interdisciplinary cooperation scheme in the production of knowledge about the current context, and for the post-pandemic moment, considering three fronts of interest shared by different areas: a) urban dynamics, with the cooperation of areas such as human geography, urban design and planning, and transportation engineering; b) the socio-spatial implications and

urban life, in which the contributions of environmental psychology are more directly situated; c) questions about new spaces linked to new lifestyles and work, to be thought from ethnographic and anthropological perspectives.

Analyzes of urban dynamics, which focus on coping with social isolation, have been privileged in the discourses that environmental psychology produces at that time. In this sense, the productions that address the criticism of the rupture between urban space and nature indicate maintaining health and well-being in the pandemic context. Samuelsson, Barthel, Colding, Macassa and Giusti (2020) reflect on the importance of nature in the urban environment in times of social isolation. The hypothesis raised by the team is that, in urban contexts of high population density, there is a positive effect of direct contact with green spaces in the city on people’s well-being, mediated by social interactions at a distance and contact with the external world. According to the authors, we are victims of a global disappearance of public space due to the privatization of urban land, accentuating cities’ problems in health crisis times.

Given the urban dimension in the pandemic experience, Salama (2020) highlights the little attention given in reports and by the media to the contexts where poverty is concentrated, in informal settlements and slums in the global south. According to the author, an explanation would be that crises are the norm in these contexts, and there is not necessarily something new to be highlighted. To mitigate negative consequences and produce positive intervention actions, architects and urban planners, and we add part of the epidemiologists and health managers, would need to establish new lenses to reach these people’s real-life conditions to obtain relevant results.

To situate specific contributions from people-environment studies in environmental psychology, Aragonés and Sevillano (2020) proposed three axes that systematize different themes and concepts in the area thought about in the current pandemic context. The first axis encompasses studies on risk perception, which point to the relationship between emotional states and the degree of perceived risk, and the importance of the information conveyed to elaborate this perception. The second axis focuses on the dimensions of human socio-spatial behavior, highlighting aspects related to the experience of confinement in the domestic environment, such as privacy control, feeling of crowding, levels of distance in interactions (proxemic), sharing

of workspaces, and study. On the third axis, mention the emergence of new neighborhood relationships as a topic to be explored after confinement. In their analysis, the authors take as a basis the Spanish (and European) reality experienced by both.

Tonello (2020) addresses the psycho-environmental theory of behavioral limitation and learning derived from his experiences when reflecting on what we can learn from the pandemic from environmental psychology. According to the author, the perception of lack of control over the situation is the first step in this model, making it impossible to achieve what we want. A second step is the attempts to regain freedom, taking as an example the breach of social isolation rules. In the last step, there is the learning of impossibility, in which it is understood that the limitation to daily behavior is transitory and has a broader public health objective.

When analyzing the symbolic, identity, and affective dimension of people-environment relations in social isolation measures, Riva and Wiederhold (2020) argue that we are simultaneously facing different dilemmas: stress with the disease, the crisis of the sense of community, and the disappearance of places in our daily experience. On the last point, the authors highlight the concept of place as a differentiated space, to which we attribute values or meanings. They then argue that social isolation measures are “destroying our sense of place” (p. 277). On the one hand, make it impossible to go to the places that characterized everyday life and give meaning to identity. Also, the house becomes a non-place because it no longer has limits due to the multiple functions, especially when adults and children live together in small spaces. The authors conclude that without places, the sense of identity is lost.

The works cited bring together reflections based on theories and scientific knowledge that are part of environmental psychology's broad scope (Moser, 2018; Steg, Van Den Berg, Groot, 2013). This same scope underlies the content of materials produced by specialists in the field as a way of guiding and focusing on the discourses circulating about the best ways of coping with the moment of social (and physical) isolation caused by the pandemic, shared on digital media and intended for the general public. In these materials, suggestions for daily practices are presented that seek to reduce the negative impacts (e.g., stress, fatigue, anxiety) on the experiences of restricted circulation and physical isolation, provide positive emotions and improve coexistence during confinement. Generally, the

suggestions address the notion of a restorative environment, the home environment and family life (e.g., establishing routines, defining moments of privacy, keeping the house organized or redecorating it, delimiting spaces for each activity); and contact with nature (e.g., contemplating the outside environment through the window or balcony, cultivating and observing plants, listening to nature sounds like birdsong or the noise of the sea, using your imagination to view natural images)<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the importance of these contributions for some groups and for the provision of scaffolding to support an experience as new and disturbing as the pandemic causes, the complexity of social reality, when viewed from a critical perspective, questions readings that they do not highlight the territorial dynamics involved in person-environment relations.

Thus, starting from a perspective of analysis that considers the geopolitical relevance of knowledge as a fundamental element for understanding human-environmental phenomena, to think about such contributions and their relevance to Latin American social reality, it is worth noting that their references for production are North American (mostly the United States) and European contexts. In particular, in the field of environmental psychology, they follow the tradition of emphasizing relationships with built spaces (e.g., residence, institutional environments) and with urban space, focusing on the evaluation of reactions to specific environments, the functionality and effectiveness of spaces, the adaptation, and accommodation to spatial configurations. It also maintains an interest in a symbolic and evaluative dimension of spaces, using concepts recognized as identity and attachment to the place.

Despite advances and developments in scientific production in the area, Pol (2007) already pointed out the persistence of biases in this production. Despite advances towards the incorporation of social issues, individualistic models for explaining behaviors still prevail. Rätzl and Uzzell (2019) stated that individualistic approaches - dominant in psychology itself and echoed in environmental psychology - assume, in a universalizing reading, individuals as independent cells, isolated from social relations and who act with selfish interests. Then, the cognitive and behavioral dimension in the environment (in a restricted sense of these dimensions) stands out, considering it simultaneously provider and receiver of behaviors and cognitions, and as a consequence, it gives it the status of an objective and independent reality (Wiesenfeld, 2001), which segments

and separates objectivity and subjectivity, environment and person.

A second aspect, associated with the previous one, is discussed by Wiesenfeld (2001; 2005) when looking at a positivist heritage that continues to produce the gap between the demands of the contexts and the theoretical and methodological resources mobilized answer them. The author also implies the absence of an ethical pronouncement without announcing the values and principles that guide postures and actions. Finally, also in agreement with the author, we observe the scant reference to the political dimension (closely related to the ethical dimension); an essential aspect considering the historical, social, political, economic, environmental specificities of peripheral countries in the capitalist system, which suffer the effects of colonization processes, the genocide of native peoples, slavery.

As a result of these reflections, it is worth asking: what are environmental psychology contributions to think about the people-environment relations in the pandemic COVID-19 in the Brazilian context, understanding it as part of the Latin American continent? Suppose we consider that more effective strategies to combat the virus's spread involve the quantitative restriction of the spectrum of human-environment interactions. In that case, we question how these interactions occur in the pandemic context in spaces that do not correspond to the norms most commonly addressed in studies in the area (e.g., urban informality, peripheries, institutionalized spaces, and more).

We understand that the answers to these questions go through adopting a critical lens regarding reality and how the person-environment relations occur in a material and historical, concrete, and socio-spatially situated way. Here we join Milton Santos (2004), assuming criticism as a political task and science-oriented construction towards a broader social (and environmental) problem. As the author states, despite the risks (and resistance) that such an undertaking causes, "it is not a time for courtesies" (p. 24).

In a similar direction, Costa and Mendes (in press) propose a genuinely Latin American reading of the pandemic's effects on our peoples. As they claim, Martín-Baró's critical realism is necessary, which is opposed to a positivist conception and a methodological idealism that is not characteristic of the movement of the real. When considering the necessary measures to reduce and delay the contagion measures of COVID-19, it becomes evident a "superlative" of the foundations of our

society, in an essentialist view of the individual, disconnected from social dynamics; and that such measures become problematic when their limits threaten the maintenance of the system itself.

From this perspective, we propose to reflect on environmental psychology's contributions to thinking about the pandemic in Brazil and considering its insertion in the Latin American continent, which involves the problematization of scientific production in the area and the necessary incorporation of debates on the spatialization of inequalities that historically make up social formation in our continent. Despite the specificities of each country, Latin America has its territory marked by the standard process of colonial exploitation and genocide of the original peoples, by the enslavement of people of African descent, by the condition of dependence imposed by the international division of labor, by imperialist interference and by the constitution of a brutally unequal, racialized and patriarchal class regime. These aspects have consequences for the history of the constitution of both ruralities and the formation of Latin American cities. Furthermore, Brazil, inserted in this context, serves as a case that exemplifies the asymmetries and disputes inherent to the continent's urban land occupation processes.

## **Spatialization of inequalities in the COVID-19 pandemic**

Understanding the specificities of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Brazilian context, seen as an expression of the Latin American reality, reveals some elements that outline the spatialization of social and racial inequalities. Even though the disease affects the most diverse social strata and age groups, the variation in its effects can be observed when disposing of people in different territories, showing the depth of social inequalities and their aggravations, highlighted by the pandemic. Social inequalities are evident in the Brazilian case when considering the country's regionalization process, the territorial occupation rate, the urbanization processes that occur at different rates and intensities, the centralization of resources and wealth, and the periphery in large cities. This study analyzes such elements as the processes of urbanization in the specificity of Brazilian social formation, the spatiality of inequalities, the impacts of contagion and deaths by COVID-19 in different territories, affecting these places' social groups.

The production of spaces in capitalist sociability does not guarantee a sustainable relationship with the environment or life in the territories where the essential elements of human dignity are guaranteed when we think of most of the population. On the periphery of the system, socio-spatial relations are highlighted, characterized by aspects such as the lack of access to decent housing, drinking water, and basic sanitation, the formation of peripheries and slums, and the treatment of war by the State for the people living there, deaths of rural and indigenous populations by militias financed by landowners. The production and occupation of spaces is a historical process with economic, political, and social determinations, which reveal each reality's specificities. People live their daily lives and the relationships with their surroundings. Spink (2018) discusses, for example, the occupation of slopes in areas at risk as part of the process of urbanization and state divestment. In this sense, the author argues that susceptibility and vulnerability to risk are intrinsically associated with the use and occupation of urban land and that understanding about risk perception, far from being understood from an individual perspective, need to shift to the complexity of social action and the daily dynamics of the residents of these areas.

The cities, under the capitalist logic, are marked by two fundamental aspects that make them an essential instrument for capitalism itself: they serve as a structure to dynamize commercial relations, concentrating occupied and surplus labor force, goods, capital, and means of consumption; and it functions itself as a commercialized space, serving market mechanisms, that is, in addition to its use-value, the capitalist urban space, is exchange value (Carlos, 2015; Harvey, 2012; Lorena, 2012), which inevitably implies the dispute for space by particular social groups (Rolnik, 2015). Another essential capitalist urban development aspect derives from the tendency to concentrate, implying a logic of subordination on non-urban spaces, making urbanization an expansive process. This aspect is evident in the increase in the world urban population and, in particular, Brazil.

The commercialization of soil in Brazil took place with the land law of 1850, which also served to maintain the large property as a predominant form, especially in the countryside. At the turn of the 1900s, cities gained greater importance, especially in the country's southeastern part, with the growth of urban commercial and financial bourgeoisie, attracting workers who

emigrated from the countryside, emphasizing African descent people from slavery. Since then, cities already marked by inequality have begun to be structured, in which the State has invested in urban improvements in the neighborhoods of the ruling classes, while for the working class, the formation of tenements and occupation of hills remained, in addition to the formation of a surplus of unabsorbed labor that, in many cases, starts to inhabit the streets (Lannoy & Jesus, 2017).

This population, poorly absorbed by the urban space and living on/from the streets, has since been markedly black due to the lack of conditions given to people of African descent who were previously enslaved for their insertion in a labor market still incipient. The turn of the 19th to the 20th century was marked by replacing the labor employed in Brazilian lands with the incentive to paid work by European immigrants and the encouragement of internal migration (Holston, 2013). The political intention with the encouragement of European immigration fulfills a "double strategic objective: to whiten and Europeanize the city and, in the face of the abolitionist shock, to disqualify black labor" (Shucman, 2014, p. 101). The consequences of this process still reverberate today: in the world of "free work," black people are left with less financially valued occupations and functions such as housekeepers, street vendors, cart drivers/collectors, street cleaners, and, today, informal and/or intermittent work (Oliveira, 2016).

The intensification of urbanization in the country took place from the 1930s, with Vargas industrialization. The industrialization happened with the shift of the Brazilian accumulation pattern from the agrarian-exporter to the urban-industrial, which drove the rural exodus, the urban population growth and the social and racial division of city space (Silva, 2006). Most migrant people settled on the outskirts of cities, usually in irregular subdivisions and illegal housing, since they did not have access to housing through the real estate market (Maricato, 1996). In addition, urban and sanitary legislation made it possible to eliminate tenements in urban centers, where black people coming from slave labor were concentrated, pushing them to the peripheries (areas of little interest to real estate capital), under the association's argument such villas with disease, dirt, promiscuity, and crime (Caldeira, 2000).

The discourse of scientific racism and the resulting practices contributed to this process, primarily through the hygienist movement formed out of the elite, which advocated the improvement of race and

declared themselves against black and “mestizo” people majority of the Brazilian population. The cleaning of houses had a background in low-income families’ moral sanitation, considered threats to society given their dangerousness attributed to moral degradation, degeneration, and vices transmitted from generation to generation (Coimbra, 2006). These bases strengthened incisive interventions in low-income populations, such as disciplinary practices, and legitimized these peoples’ concentration in certain territories, which are still criminalized today.

Such features of Brazilian urbanization remain until the present, even with subsequent implementation of housing policies, which are generally insufficient and aimed at strengthening the bourgeois sectors that operate in the housing market. Thus, this historical formation of cities and the demographic explosion process in urban centers is updated today in the high population density in peripheries, hills, and slums, predominantly inhabited/lived, by black people. Subnormal housing, such as slums, tenements, and irregular subdivisions, corresponding to 12.50% in Brazil, occupied mainly (68.32%) by the black population (Oliveira & Souza, 2015). These territories are marked by intentional precariousness: in addition to concentrating pockets of poverty, essential public services (access to water, public sewage, garbage collection, electricity, health equipment, social assistance, education, culture) are insufficient when compared to the wealthiest regions of cities, which denotes the unequal treatment of Brazilian State to low-income populations/territories and contributes to perpetuating the social inequalities that are already pungent in the Brazilian context.

Another direct impact on people living in such territories is (i) human mobility and time relationship. The dependence on public transport imposes limits on circulation through cities. It was created to serve business people interested in real estate speculation and not the population’s demands (Caldeira, 2000). Public transport in cities, in general, is expensive, precarious, crowded, and time-consuming: in São Paulo, for example, an average person spends 2 hours and 43 minutes to make journeys such as home-work / place of study (Rede Nossa São Paulo & Ibope Inteligência, 2018). In this sense, the city’s daily life imposes a relational dynamics of dispute for space-time that creates tensions and generates a series of conflicts, in addition to wearing out bodies daily, generating several consequences for people’s lives.

Other elements are combined with this process, composing the cyclical determinants of inequalities in the city’s lifeways. Elements of recent history in the scenario in which the pandemic reaches Brazilian lands affect the ways and possibilities of its confrontation. Shortly after the enactment of the 1988 letter, several Latin American countries, including Brazil, entered a process of neoliberal counter-reforms under the baton of the Washington Consensus, which imposed an agenda of deregulation of the financial and labor markets, greater openness for foreign capital, and significant privatization of public goods. As privatization increased, there was an increase in unemployment, precarious working conditions, restrictions on public investments, especially in social policies, increasing social inequality, and precarious public services. Furthermore, the neoliberal agenda brought with it a hyper-commodification of the urban space, with the privatization of public spaces, the increase in urban enclaves for the wealthy classes, and an increase in the restriction for the poorest of access to public elements of urban life such as security, leisure, necessary urban infrastructure and the increasing housing deficit (Farias & Diniz, 2018).

Between 2003 and 2016, Brazil went through a time when, without reversing the neoliberal agenda’s structural elements, it implemented some policies representing counter-trends in this scenario, with increased employment, the minimum wage, and social policy investment. From the urbanization model’s point of view, there were no significant changes in the structures already described. For example, the main housing program in this period, *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, was far from significantly interfering in inequality of access to housing and the housing deficit, favoring the gains of large construction companies and real estate speculation (Carlos, 2015). Also, public security policy has reinforced its character of war against peripheral territories, further militarizing these territories’ actions and raising mass incarceration, contributing increasingly to these places’ criminalization and prisons’ overcrowding with their residents.

As of 2008, however, with the arrival of a new crisis of capitalism, the political and economic instability in Latin America increases, leading to coups d’état and/or electoral victories that carry with it a process of a more marked resumption of the neoliberal agenda, in some cases led by authoritarian governments. The fiscal adjustment and the counter-reforms were adopted in Brazil and started in 2015, which has caused a sharp

increase in unemployment, informality, and a series of cuts in public investments. Among the measures of this period, the approval of Constitutional Amendment 95 is highlighted. It froze spending on health and education for 20 years, starting from the 2016 budget. The labor reform's approval, which makes working conditions and labor rights historically conquered more flexible, and the pension reform's approval, which are impositions that further undermine the living conditions of the Brazilian working class, especially of the poorest people.

With all these elements mentioned above, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil is disastrously consolidated. When we look at the city, there is a dynamics of spreading the disease that is analogous (or the same) to the distribution of socio-spatial inequalities. The rates of contagion and the number of deaths vary according to the territory in which we live, remembering that this territory is segregated by class and racial belonging. The possibilities of physical isolation to prevent the spread of the virus are not likely to occur equally. Silveira and collaborators (2020) map the coronavirus's spread in Brazil and pay attention to the fact that public transport plays a central role in its dissemination in cities and metropolitan regions. For the authors, "the diffusion of COVID-19 is related to the territorial division of labor, in its most diverse scales, materialized in the urban network" (Silveira et al., 2020, p. 29). Suppose we consider the dependence on public transport by the populations of peripheral regions and the occupation of jobs that make it impossible physical distance and remote activity. In that case, we understand how these dynamics of flows and housing are compounded in the greater exposure to contamination by these groups.

People living on the periphery, hills, and slums, in general, are unable to isolate themselves, both due to the fact that many people share the same house/room, as well as the need to continue working/circulating to be able to guarantee income and livelihood, be they workers essential sectors or subjected to informality or unemployment. These are the people who need to travel in precarious and crowded public transportation.

In turn, access to health services and ICU beds is also brutally uneven. The city of São Paulo, the epicenter of the pandemic in Brazil, concentrates 60% of the ICU beds in the Unified Health System in the city's wealthiest and most central areas and in peripheral territories where approximately 2,375,000 people are concentrated no hospital bed was available at the moment (Rede Nossa

São Paulo, 2020). There were also differences between confirmed cases and numbers of deaths: in the first half of April, 279 cases were confirmed in the prime region of Morumbi with seven deaths; in Brasilândia, the peripheral region of the city, there were 89 confirmed cases and 54 deaths. It is worth mentioning that long before the pandemic, the mortality rate in the city was already uneven according to the zip code of residence, reaching 23 years of difference between the best and the worst index (Rede Nossa São Paulo & Ibope Inteligência, 2019)

The fact that black and brown people are concentrated in peripheries, hills, and slums, with all the difficulties related to access to goods and services, makes them even more vulnerable. Also, in São Paulo, the risk of death for black and brown people is 85% higher than for white people. The black population is the one with the most preventable health problems in the country, precisely because they are under the most significant influence of social determinants of health: precarious living and working conditions, without access to adequate sanitary conditions, food insecurity, wear and tear of the body by work activity that performs. In addition, 80% of the black population depends exclusively on the Unified Health System, in which even many of them feel racially discriminated (Ministério da Saúde, 2015).

Given the above, we understand that health is not a natural fact of everyday life, nor can we think about it (and produce it) dissociated from its spatial components. Thus, there is a challenge to think of approaches that consider this inseparability.

## **The pandemic and the crossroads of environmental Psychology**

The analysis of the socio-spatial production of inequalities in Brazil from a historical perspective provides essential elements to understand that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it is intensified in territories that are structurally marked by racialization and periphery, erected outside a formal system of access to the city, housing, and work. Besides, precariousness is even more evident when such socio-spatial relations are present in a time of crisis in the neoliberal model of reproduction of life and the worsening of political and economic instability in Latin American countries.

It is not by chance that many official narratives of combating the pandemic (including scientific ones) consider the individual solely responsible for guaranteeing



and maintaining their health, housing, and working conditions as if life were possible outside of socio-spatial relationships. Therefore, we affirm the importance of this lens of analysis to understand the relationships that people establish with their surroundings and situate health and disease processes, considering them from the localized conditions.

Analyzing the pandemic and the experience of the current moment from the historical perspective of the socio-spatial constitution of cities in the Brazilian (and Latin American) context places environmental psychology at a crossroads. What paths to consider aspects of the person-environment relationship after this profound collective experience made it clear that “the king is naked”? How can we bring power relations, inequalities, submission and resistance movements from/into places, into our analyses? How to incorporate these aspects into an object, person-environment relationship?

Considering some of the applied guidelines of environmental psychology in the context of the pandemic identified previously (e.g., suggestions of individual practices that seek to reduce the negative impacts on the experiences of restricted circulation and physical isolation from guidelines for shaping a healthy environment, and the importance of the contact with nature), as well as the main focus of analysis of research based on individual, universal and a-historical understandings of the classic concepts studied (e.g., variations in risk perception, attachment and place identity, and more), seems vital to us problematize the area.

To this end, we recognize that, for example, risk perceptions, relationships with places, isolation strategies or their impediment to occur, the way of experiencing urban mobility at that moment, relationships with the home, among other experiences, are concretely distinct, mobilizing various rationalities and emotionalities, impregnated by social labels such as class and race, sexual orientation, generation, that unfold, often in forms of violation of rights and violence. Thus, it is recognized that alienation and ambivalence in the domestic space and the public space, especially for minority groups, are quite different by people who experience it in a non-normative way. This understanding calls into question the exacerbation of romanticized discourses by people who live in privileged spaces in parallel to the processes of stigma and discrimination in dangerous and segregated territories.

By making explicit, the inequalities inherent in Latin American reality, revealing ideological aspects and

power structures crystallized by capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism in the production of cities and living in the countries that compose it, the hegemonic and Anglo-Saxon and Eurocentric bases are strained both in the scope of knowledge production, as well as in the perspectives of applicability, of the contributions arising from environmental psychology. An ethical and political pronouncement for the area is also demanded, aimed at recognizing these inequalities.

On the one hand, the socio-spatial experiences perpetrated by the reality of COVID-19, as if operating a denunciation of the truth of the area, explain the already historical limitations of a body of knowledge that, at times, uncritically incorporated hegemonic elements of psychology in the direction of what Martín-Baró (1986/2011) called it scientific mimicry. On the other hand, it opens up the possibility of deepening a critical Latin American environmental psychology, which problematizes the person-environment experience and brings historical reflection, in a situated, embodied, and localized way about the production of territories and subjectivities, considering their crossings by colonialism (and imperialism) in Latin America.

This movement causes the complexification of classic concepts of environmental psychology, such as apolitical and universal processes, by proposing that their dynamism and mediations be unveiled, as the productions of a specific society, in a given historical time.

Thus, in a critical exercise effort, seeking to rescue the ethical-political dimension of environmental psychology (Wiesenfeld, 2005), we propose some guidelines for research and action in this area:

- Reorient the focus of analysis on the normative domestic space to the multiplicity of spaces and configurations of the people-environment relationship;
- To give up the concept of “universal” subject, placing reading in the geopolitical context and inequalities in which subjectivities and people-environment relations are built;
- Expand the individual focus to collective and community experiences and practices;
- Make methodological choices that emphasize the active role of participating people, prioritizing participatory strategies;
- Redefine intervention objectives beyond well-being and quality of life on an individual scale, mainly incorporating social transformation orientation.

By using such propositions, we approach those theorists in environmental psychology (Farias & Diniz, 2018; Rathzel & Uzzel, 2018; Wiesenfeld, 2001; 2005) who take the critical perspective as necessarily intrinsic to the knowledge that it builds since it recognizes that the social reality, unequal from the point of view of class, race, gender and generational, interposes the processes and people-environment relations. This perspective brings to light, not as a background, but as the structuring of subject-space relationships, the different and unequal forms of disposition of bodies, and the constitution of (inter) subjectivities in cities. It then means that the concepts that give identity to the area have their understandings shifted to incorporate tensions, contradictions, movements, and concrete dynamics to distance themselves from their abstract and universal uses.

Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth considering that the area's productions need to be understood in their potential and limitations by themselves. While the generalizing lens blurs concrete people and their diverse material conditions of life, for the benefit of a generalizing view, we understand that a specific look at the distribution of territorialization of the disease allows us to access another layer of the phenomenon at hand. We can produce new responses when the primary indicator of contagions and deaths from COVID-19 is not age or comorbidities but the postal code (when it exists).

Perhaps this historical moment allows the area, without neglecting its accumulations, to overcome approximations of the people-environment relationship, paradoxically speaking of an abstract and disincarnated subject of the space that constitutes that is constituted by it. With this, more than possible contributions that the area can make to the pandemic moment, it can itself benefit from this tragic historical moment that, experienced as a crisis, provokes new transformational movements. From a critical perspective of science and society itself, it is subject to the law of movement and renewal (Santos, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> See publication of the Asociación de Psicología Ambiental (PSICAMB) on April 27, 2020, available at [https://www.facebook.com/PSICAMBasoc/?tn-str=k\\*F](https://www.facebook.com/PSICAMBasoc/?tn-str=k*F)

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