

Non-Binary Trajectories as Epistemic Insurgency: On Decolonial Disobedience in Developmental Psychology

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Authors Affiliation	Abstract
<p>Corresponding author: Isabella Alves Alencar de Araujo Psychologist, PhD candidate in the Psychology of Development and Education Program at the University of Brasília, Brazil (PGPDE/IP/UnB). Institutional address: Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade de Brasília, Campus Universitário Darcy Ribeiro, CEP 70910-900, Brasília – Distrito Federal, Brazil E-mail: isabellaalencar@gmail.com ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3923-0383</p>	<p><i>Taking gender dissidence as a form of epistemic disobedience, this article engages critically with dominant paradigms in developmental psychology by interrogating the normative frameworks that regulate intelligibility, pathologised differences, and delimit what counts as “normal” development. Bridging the Cultural Psychology of semiotic dynamics and Decolonial Studies, it examines interview narratives of non-binary individuals, considering how they generate meaning in relation to themselves, alterities, and sociocultural realities. Meaning-making occurs through ambivalent processes that both negotiate with and disrupt modern-colonial logics embedded in psychological knowledge. Four self-defined non-binary adults (aged 26–30) living in Brasília, Brazil participated in this qualitative study, which employed semi-structured interviews, the go-along method, and a reflection group; each functioning as “dispositifs” for the co-construction of narratives. These materials were analysed in an integrated design encompassing all three moments. The analysis unfolds through four interwoven thematic axes: (1) resistance as a constitutive force in meaning-making; (2) the polyphonic character of non-binarity and its entanglements with racialisation; (3) dealing with classificatory regimes such as “gender dysphoria”; and (4) institutional violence in psychotherapy. Therefore, dissident ways of living emerge as a site of insurgent knowledge, destabilising binary logics and activating new ways of knowing, theorising, and existing within and beyond the discipline. By bringing to the centre embodied lives historically erased or pathologised by psychology, the article advocates for an epistemic reorientation grounded in political accountability, situated onto-epistemologies, and commitment to reimagining psychological science in response to the complexities of the present and plural forms of life.</i></p>
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Introduction

In many Psychology programs, Human Development syllabuses remain largely unaltered, both in their epistemic foundations and in the canonical theories they continue to reproduce. They propagate theories that tend to universalise and decontextualise psychological processes, disregarding their entanglement with sociocultural, historical, and geopolitical conditions from which subjectivities emerge. Dominant approaches still rely on classical models that conceive of development as linear, teleological, adult-centric, and organised according to rigid stages mapped onto predefined life periods. These paradigms are now subject to criticism for having historically normalised psychological life, especially in childhood and adolescence, by restricting what is considered a legitimate developmental trajectory and steering individuals toward a narrow and prescriptive notion of “normality” (Lopes de Oliveira, 2023; Overton, 2006; Valsiner, 2006).

At the core of these models lies a restricted notion of subjectivity, modelled upon empirical studies conducted with WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) populations, misrecognised as universal (Henrich et al., 2010). Hence, the theoretical construction of subjectivity within Psychology is inseparable from the operations of whiteness, masculinity, and cisheteronormativity, which function as tacit ontologies delimiting whose lives are rendered intelligible, whose experiences are legitimised, and whose existences are excluded or erased from social life. As Orellana (2016) contends, such regimes of intelligibility not only exclude individuals but cast entire populations as “inhospitable” under colonial-modern developmental logics. Consequently, those who deviate from normative expectations are classified as dissident, and their trajectories relegated to domains of pathology, dysfunction, or abjection (Bento, 2024; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2021).

Psychology has long sustained classificatory regimes that regulate life through normative taxonomies. Gender and sexual dissidence have been targeted by diagnostic labelling, institutional control, and moral surveillance, producing enduring forms of epistemic and material violence. Even after 2019, when the World Health Organisation removed “transsexualism” from its former nosology and reclassified “gender incongruence”, relocating it outside the domain of mental disorders, pathologising logics persist. Sustained by corrective practices, they expose how disciplinary mechanisms continue to govern which lives are deemed intelligible, liveable, or disposable.

To overcome these regimes, a mere reformist adjustment proves insufficient. What is required is an act of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009), a confrontation with the coloniality of knowledge as the matrix that sustains the authority of modern sciences. In this sense, scientific Psychology must be reimagined as a contested field, accountable to those whose voices it has historically silenced and whose marginalisation it has long reinforced (Lemos de Souza, 2025).

From this critical standpoint, the article articulates the Cultural Psychology of semiotic dynamics (Valsiner, 2014) and Decolonial Studies as scaffolds to unsettle dominant epistemologies in Developmental Psychology. The convergence of these traditions opens pathways for historically situated, politically engaged, and ethically implicated inquiries. Within this dual perspective, Human Development is no longer conceived as linear unfolding, but as an open-ended movement made of continuous negotiations within symbolic systems embedded in sociocultural, historical, and geopolitical formations. By emphasising contradiction, ambivalence, and semiotic movement, this perspective aligns with decolonial critiques that frame subjectivity as a site of struggle, marked by colonial histories, power asymmetries, and dissident resistance. Inequality, violence, and refusal of normative scripts become constitutive forces in the emergence of relationality, meaning, and self.

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Highlights

Psychology has long sustained classificatory regimes that regulate life through normative taxonomies. Gender and sexual dissidence have been targeted by diagnostic labelling, institutional control, and moral surveillance, producing enduring forms of epistemic and material violence.

To overcome these regimes, a mere reformist adjustment proves insufficient. What is required is an act of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009), a confrontation with the coloniality of knowledge as the matrix that sustains the authority of modern sciences.

Non-binary self-expressions bring these tensions into sharp relief by unsettling the cisheteronormative grammar that undergirds Western modernity and its colonial foundations. Their narratives of lived experience reveal how classificatory regimes are historically produced and sustained through intersecting discourses, including religious, political, legal, medical, media, and psychological apparatuses, which disseminate the binary logics at the core of scientific knowledge. Far from neutral, such categories operate as regulatory mechanisms governing the conduct of individuals and groups.

Situated in the Global South, in Brasília, Brazil, this research takes non-binary lived experience as a locus of epistemic disobedience. Gender dissidence is approached as a critical force that unsettles how Psychology conceptualises, intervenes in, and positions itself in the world. Through a methodological assemblage grounded in situated, relational, and embodied listening, the study investigates the semiotic dynamics, entangled with and resistant to cisheteronormative matrices, which constitute dissident trajectories and the ongoing formation of self among those who position themselves beyond binary gender conventions.

Methodological Pathway

This qualitative study engaged four adults (aged 26–30), self-characterised as non-binary and residing in Brasília, Brazil. The methodological design involved three interconnected research procedures.

The first phase consisted of individual interviews focused on participants' life trajectories. In the second, participants engaged in the *go-along* method (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003), in which they guided the researcher through spatially significant places that activated affective memories and embodied narratives. The third procedure was a reflection group, in which three participants interacted around resonances and dissonances related to gender, enabling collaborative meaning-making and processes of self-transformation (Marková et al., 2007).

The data resulting from the three encounters with each participant (1,154 minutes of audio) were fully transcribed and analysed through a semiotic-dialogical approach, marked by tensions, ambiguities, and resistances, and examined through decolonial lenses attentive to rupture, silence, and affective inflection. All procedures were conducted with ethical rigor, following approval by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings at the University of Brasília (CAAE: 82862124.2.0000.5540).

Partial Findings and Ongoing Conversations

The four thematic axes presented below emerged from a dialogical, embodied, and situated pre-analysis of the data, grounded in the relational dynamics of researcher/researchee encounters. They delineate zones of meaning that contest dominant psychological logics and affirm dissident life as a generative epistemic force.

Resistance as a constitutive force in meaning-making process

Beyond explicit manifestations, such as performances, political alliances, or dissident collective participation, resistance emerges as a constitutive dimension of psychological life (Chaudhary et al., 2017), playing a particularly important role in the trajectories of dissident groups facing prejudice and discrimination. Resistance is not limited to direct opposition; it also arises in everyday negotiations with others and with institutions that interrogate the subject and constrain normative meanings. As a force within internalisation, it sustains meanings that resonate with dissident signs circulating across the sociocultural landscape, creating openings for the invention of other ways of existing.

Operating at the interface between self and world, resistance fuels reflexive processes that intensify when subjects are displaced from spaces, bonds, or expectations normatively assigned to them. In this study, it emerges as a subtle yet potent force within movements of internalisation and externalisation. By unsettling naturalised semiotic networks, resistance reconfigures feelings, understandings, and experiences of existence. Across the narratives, discrimination and non-belonging generate a sense of estrangement, a refusal to belong. Participants often engage in practices of self-permission to (re)exist

beyond normativity, reorganising experience, disrupting hegemonic constructions, and affirming dissident life as both an ethical stance and a commitment to continue living otherwise.

In participants' accounts, resistance appears both in contexts of confrontation, "*I would explode to defend what is mine*" (Participant 1, sic), and in quieter, intimate inventive forms: solitary self-(re)invention through symbolic resources and digital media, or conversations with trusted friends that trigger deep reflections on self, other, and world. Even discreet, these practices mark meaningful departures from normative imperatives. Resistance thus emerges as a key operator for rethinking development as continuous negotiation in the act of becoming and (re)existing, marked by the polyphony of lived experience, agency in displacement, and the ongoing reinvention of self in relation to culture.

The polyphonic and negotiated character of non-binarity, and its intersections with race.

Non-binarity emerged in the narratives not as a fixed identity or third gender, but as a polyphonic sign activated through tensions, negotiations, and affective displacements within the cisheteronormative order. It operated both as a disruptive force that unsettles normative grammars and as a dynamic field of experimentation, enabling individuals to imagine and project alternative futures. This process allowed for nuanced and singular interpretations, where non-binarity became a space of inquiry, openness, and "*play*," "*a space to test things out*," as Participant 1 stated. These narrative movements do not seek to stabilise another identity category, but to inhabit ambiguity and resist the cisheteronormative matrix by inventing alternative conditions for (re)existence.

Participant two emphasised that identification with non-binarity could not be disentangled from their experience as a racialised subject. In this context, it represented not only a refusal of gender norms, but a refusal of the category of the human itself: "*I didn't really feel part of the little group of humans*," they stated during the collective reflection group. In their account, gender dissidence intersected with ethnoracial exclusion, producing a condition of ontological dislocation:

So, the questioning [about being non-binary] started with lesbianhood, [...] but settling into that identity came from a racial issue. [...] I think that even if I didn't identify as non-binary, I could still want to be a woman or a Black man, but society doesn't let us be people. [...] I think saying 'lesbian and non-binary' is kind of redundant. I also think that being Black... [laughs] You're already outside.
(participant two, semi-structured interview)

Here, non-binarity surfaces as a refusal to comply with racialised legibility norms. It is a mode of resistance grounded in the impossibility of fully inhabiting whiteness, cisness, or normative gender positions. In these crossings, non-binarity disrupts categorical coherence and enacts modes of self-definition that escape capture, by identity regimes and disciplinary frameworks alike.

Negotiating classificatory regimes such as "gender dysphoria"

One of the most critical insights emerging from the analysis concerns the need to reframe the notion of gender dysphoria. Rather than reflecting an innate rejection of one's body due to "gender incongruence," participants' narratives reveal that dysphoria often arises from the rejection of sociocultural meanings imposed upon bodies by normative sex-gender systems. The body becomes intolerable not in itself, but because of the signs projected onto it, signs that fix, regulate, and punish whatever exceeds binary legibility. Through cultural interpellations and semiotic networks, legitimacy is unevenly distributed, rendering some embodiments intelligible while marking others as deviant or erroneous.

In the accounts of Participants 1 and 3, dysphoria surfaces at the intersection of objectification, hypersexualisation, and intersubjective violence, especially when their bodies are read, categorised, or acted upon in ways that reinforce rigid associations between sex, gender, and social expectations, particularly those linking female/woman/feminine and male/man/masculine. The discomfort they describe, often experienced as rage or a sense of error, does not stem from within, but from repeated confrontations with a system that denies multiplicity and divergence. What is often internalised as personal inadequacy is, in fact, the sedimentation of violent normativity.

This perspective reveals dysphoria not as the result of intrinsic misalignment, but as a sociocultural effect, an embodied response to being misread, coerced, and denied under classificatory regimes that demand legibility and coherence. Repositioning dysphoria in this way exposes the regulatory logics embedded in diagnostic practices and opens conceptual space to rethink dissident embodiment beyond the binary of congruence/incongruence, foregrounding instead the political and epistemic violences that render certain lives unliveable.

Institutional violence in psychotherapy

All four participants reported having accessed psychological care at some point, with Participants 1 and 3 describing these experiences as marked by trauma, symbolic violence, and ethical violations, particularly when dissident expressions surfaced. Their accounts reveal how clinical encounters often function not as spaces of care and shelter, but as sites of cisheteronormative coercion. These experiences challenge the epistemic and ethical foundations of Psychology and expose the persistence of classificatory regimes that pathologise non-normative subjectivities.

Participant 1 (P1) recalls his first therapy session at age 15, after coming out as bisexual. Compelled by his mother, he was sent to a psychologist described as “*extremely unpleasant*” and “*traumatic*,” who integrated Spiritist beliefs and reinforced normative gender roles. Rather than acknowledging the violence in a romantic relationship, the psychologist positioned P1 as emotionally responsible: “*I had to take care... to be a rehab clinic for straight men*”. When sexuality came up, it was pathologised through speculation: “*Maybe that’s why you THINK you’re into women.*”

Later, while seeking access to chest surgery, P1 encountered further barriers. A psychologist embedded in psychoanalytic and cisnormative assumptions delayed his report and evoked reductive tropes, “*penis envy*,” “*Did you play soccer?*” Anticipating such scrutiny, P1 performed scripted masculinity for another therapist: “*I loved football, toy cars, everything!*” His account shows how intersubjective regulation, grounded in cisheteronormativity, conditions bodily autonomy on the enactment of legible masculinities.

Participant three began therapy around age six and describes a trajectory marked by epistemic invalidation. In adolescence, psychologists repeatedly asserted, “*You’re too feminine to be trans,*” a discourse they internalised due to the authority of those delivering it: “*If the psychologist said it, they must know me better than I know myself.*” Even in adulthood, one therapist attributed their queerness to childhood trauma. Now a Psychology undergraduate, P3 critiques the profession’s curricular silences: “*We study very little about race, gender, or dissident sexualities. Even normative sexuality is barely addressed.*” These reflections expose the field’s systemic unpreparedness and its complicity in reproducing the very violences it purports to confront.

Non-Binarity as a Decolonial Trajectory

This article advances a critical interrogation of Developmental Psychology’s complicity with colonial-modern regimes of intelligibility that continue to pathologise dissident trajectories. Through an epistemic alliance between the Cultural Psychology of semiotic dynamics and Decolonial Studies, it foregrounds non-binarity not as a third place or fixed identity, but as a generative locus of ontological rupture and insurgent knowledge production. Narrated through tensions, negotiations, and refusals, the lived experiences of non-binary individuals expose the fragility of binary logics and invite a radical rethinking of what constitutes development, subjectivity, and recognition.

By shifting from fixed ontologies of being to ongoing processes of becoming, this research contests the classificatory matrices that have historically organised psychological knowledge. Dissident trajectories emerge as a disruptive force that challenges hegemonic categories and calls upon Psychology to reconfigure its theoretical, ethical, methodological, and practical commitments.

This epistemic stance demands a critical reading of contemporary phenomena, attuned to the normativity historically (re)produced in how we interpret, intervene, and attribute meaning. In a field still tethered to universalising models, the participants’ accounts, particularly those involving institutional violence in therapeutic contexts, underscore the need to view psychologists not as neutral observers, but as historically situated professionals, ethically accountable and open to transformation.

Psychology, then, is called to reposition itself as a field in motion, porous to the complexities of the present, committed to listening without domestication, and to cultivating conditions for more liveable, plural, and just ways of existing.

Statements and declarations

Authors' contributions

Isabella Alves Alencar de Araujo was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, preparation of theoretical materials, and manuscript writing. Maria Claudia Santos Lopes de Oliveira contributed to the preparation of theoretical materials, supported data analysis, and assisted in the development and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors critically reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

Ethical Considerations

Although the present article does not include any data that could compromise the identity of participants, it is important to note that the study, based on the first author's doctoral dissertation, was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Human Sciences at the University of Brasília (CEP/IH/UnB), under protocol number CAAE: 82862124.2.0000.5540. All procedures complied with Brazilian regulatory standards for research involving human beings (CNS Resolution No. 510/2016).

Consent to Participate

All participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study and provided their free and informed consent to participate by signing a written informed consent form. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Consent for Publication

Participants consented to the academic publication of their anonymised narratives. All identifying details have been removed or disguised to protect participants' confidentiality and integrity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Data availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the narratives and the need to preserve participants' confidentiality, the data are not publicly available. Anonymised excerpts may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate ethical justification.

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