

Advances in Subjectivity and Development

# Subjectivity and Development in Rural Contexts



Edited by  
**Pablo Fossa**  
**Verónica Serruto**

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# **Subjectivity and Development in Rural Contexts**

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# **Advances in Subjectivity and Development**

Series Editor: Pablo Fossa

This series focuses on the processes of human development. Subjectivity, for its phenomenological approach to understanding human experience, and development, due to an emphasis on the transformative processes of psychological functions and its interaction with culture. This series is interested in topics such as cognitive development, educational processes, child, adolescent and adult development, socio-emotional development, relational processes, among others, all addressed through theoretical or empirical research.

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# **Subjectivity and Development in Rural Contexts**

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*Edited by*

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*Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile*

**And**

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## CHAPTER 1

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# **SOWING IDEAS: FOUNDATIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL CONTEXTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This introductory chapter has two specific objectives. First, to introduce the reader to the theoretical and conceptual framework addressed in this book. That is, why is it important to discuss subjectivity and development, concepts so relevant to psychology? And second, why focus on using these notions to analyze rural contexts? It concludes that the processes of subjectivation and psychological development have a richness and qualitative nature unique to rural contexts, which allows for a case for a Rural Psychology. Finally, the reader is presented with the structure and thematic organization of this volume to facilitate understanding of the various contributions found within.

*Keywords:* Subjectivity; development; rural psychology; Latin America; cultural-historical psychology

A fundamental question that might guide the reader through this book is: Why focus on subjectivity? Then, another question arises: and why in rural contexts? In these introductory lines, we will initially address the first question and then delve into the second. In exploring these issues, our aim is to unravel the complex relationship between subjectivity and development in settings that are often invisibilized in mainstream academic discourses.

Subjectivity is a central theoretical notion in the social sciences and, more specifically, in psychology, and constitutes the core of the human psyche. Subjectivity is related to consciousness, reality and truth, and reflects how human beings experience and perceive the world, influenced by their emotions, beliefs and past experiences (Levitt-Frank & Shoshana, 2023).

From different approaches in psychology, and particularly from historical-cultural psychology, it is understood that psychological development occurs in a permanent relationship between the person and their context (Cornejo et al., 2018; Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1934). Through our interactions with the world (i.e. significant others, spaces, institutions and culture), we imbue our context with our subjectivity, while simultaneously the context interpellates our subjectivity.

Recalling Vygotsky's famous statement that psychological functions appear twice in human development, i.e. first in the interpsychological space and then in the intra-psychological space (Vygotsky, 1934), we can understand that human development is always social and cultural in nature. The processes of internalization, through which we incorporate psychological functions and skills, and the process of externalization, through which we make sense of the space in which we move, allow us to understand how we affect and are permanently affected by our environment (Cornejo et al., 2018).

Why in rural contexts? Historically, research in general, and psychology in particular, has tended to focus on urban contexts. However, a high percentage of the world's population (43%) lives in areas considered rural (Banco Mundial, 2023), so we could be ignoring certain particularities of this population, which are important when intervening and promoting their development.

Rurality, worldwide, is in constant economic and social transition, especially due to the process of urbanization; this makes it increasingly difficult to draw the line between urban and rural (Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016). The urban-rural dichotomy prevails in the literature and in the way we perceive territories, so that the rural continues to be seen as a deficit, backward and underdeveloped. These factors undoubtedly affect the development of this population.

In this sense, the study of subjectivity in rural territories encompasses the perceptions and experiences of the inhabitants of these areas, influenced by socioeconomic, cultural and environmental factors, characteristic of this environment.

In recent years there has been a growing interest, on the part of psychology, in rural contexts as a novel field of necessary understanding for the development of studies and interventions (Ferreira et al., 2023; Landini, 2010). Although there are some previous and isolated contributions related to the study of rurality, it was in 2013 that the first Latin American meeting of Rural Psychology was held, an event that determined the birth of a new area of research and intervention in psychology.

Psychology focused on rural contexts does not pretend to be a speciality within the discipline, but seeks to contribute knowledge and understanding of the particularities of the life and development of the population living in these localities (Ferreira et al., 2023). Unlike a hegemonic perspective, between the rural and the urban, psychology focused on rural contexts emphasizes the value of rurality in itself and not to the detriment of the urban.

For example, some research, such as that of Durón-Ramos et al. (2020), highlights that people in rural contexts tend to develop a strong connection with nature, which in turn is associated with pro-environmental behaviors. This connection is explained by the personal perception they have of the environment, which, in rural contexts, is more significant for personal development such as attitudes toward the environment.

However, we recognize that rurality is composed of both strengths and constraints that intervene in the development of its inhabitants. This especially impacts children and adolescents in rural contexts in Latin America, who face significant challenges and limitations in accessing economic resources and basic services such as education and quality health care. However, as Clark et al. (2022) note, despite these adverse circumstances, it has been observed that young people in rural areas are less involved in criminal activities and also develop a stronger connection with the extended family.

However, findings have also been identified that express urgent attention to rural people, especially children and youth. For example, Wen (2015) identified that in rural China, children who were abandoned by their parents due to migration for better work and income reported high levels of loneliness and social anxiety. On the other hand, Nadorff et al. (2023) identified that living in these areas during childhood was associated with an increased risk of depressive symptoms in adulthood, with education and socio-economic status being crucial factors in future mental health.

From this perspective, Rural Psychology is an area of psychology that has been dedicated to the study of the processes of development, identity and subjectivation in rural contexts (Landini, 2015). This, not from a hegemonic perspective, but on the contrary, with the interest of emphasizing the value of rurality in itself and not to the detriment of the urban. Historically, psychology and other disciplines have always explored rurality through the lens of the urban. That is, we value the strengths and criticize the disadvantages of the rural, according to the strengths and

disadvantages of the urban. Rural psychology, on the contrary, has sought to explore the richness of rurality itself. That is, to explore and describe the psychological, educational, interpersonal and cultural phenomena that take place in rural contexts. Likewise, Rural Psychology attempts to explore the complex relational web between the person and his or her context in rural territories.

In this way, the subjectivity of people who have developed in rural contexts is full of their territory and cultural context. This is not to say that the same is not true in urban contexts. However, the processes of subjectivation and psychological development have been less explored in rural contexts than in urban contexts.

Psychology as a discipline, like many others, has always been an urban discipline. Universities, research centers, educational research and intervention, clinical research and mental health research and intervention centers are mainly located in urban sectors (Landini, 2015).

This is, at least, curious, since the percentage of rural territory in the world in general, and in Latin America in particular, is much higher than urban territory. In the case of Chile, for example, a country located in the south of the South American continent, the National Policy for Rural Development understands rural territory as that which is generated as a result of the dynamic interrelationship between people, economic activities and natural resources, characterized mainly by a population density of less than 150 (inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), with a maximum population of 50,000 inhabitants, whose basic unit of organization and reference is the commune. In this way, the Chilean Rural Development Policy proposes the following communal classification:

1. Predominantly rural communes are defined as those where more than 50% of the population lives in census districts with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.
2. Mixed communes are defined as those where between 25% and 49% of the population lives in census districts with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.
3. Predominantly urban communes are defined as those where less than 25% of the population lives in census tracts with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>.

In the case of Chile, for example, 83% of the territory is rural (ODEPA, 2024). Something similar occurs in the other countries of the same continent.

Historically, research has shown that in rural sectors there is a higher percentage of poverty, worse and less access to basic services, more precarious housing and problems of displacement and connectivity (ECLAC, 2011; Reyes et al., 2022). While rural territories are defined, among other things,

by the main economic activity of the place, the problems of rural-urban migration by young people have further problematized the economic and technological development of rural sectors. This is because the youth population constitutes a relevant age group for the economic development of communities (ECLAC, 2011; Reyes et al., 2022). Due to this, some strategies to promote the economy and development of rural sectors have been to reinforce the return and maintenance of the young population in rural sectors (FUNASUPO, 2021). Along the same lines, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a city-countryside migration in different parts of the world (in the opposite direction to traditional rural-urban migration), which has led new generations to settle and move to rural areas in search of a better quality of life, space and tranquility. Psychological, social and community research will have to explore the consequences of this new post-pandemic phenomenon and will be able to describe the effects of social and cultural integration in the rural sectors of Latin America and the world.

Rurality, then, constitutes a challenge for psychology, not only at the level of research but also at the level of intervention, since it must consider the particular needs and processes of subjectivation specific to the rural world (Reyes et al., 2022).

Rural psychology does not seek to counterbalance the historical urbanization of psychology. On the contrary, it seeks to stop homologating urban and rural descriptions by acting as if they were the same thing. This does not allow us to understand the richness of rurality in itself, but neither does it allow us to take different actions and measures on phenomena that are specific to the urban and not to the rural (Landini, 2015). In the words of Landini et al. (2023): “Why does it seem natural to work exclusively with urban samples when we intend to generalize results or when we are thinking in terms of the general population? To deny in this case the relevance of incorporating rural subjects in our samples would be the same as denying the relevance of including men or including women in psychological research” (Landini, 2015, p. 22).

In conclusion, growing up in rural areas represents a mixture of challenges and benefits that affect the development and subjectivity of its inhabitants. However, in order to develop projects that have an impact on their improvement and quality of life, it is necessary to know and understand the nature of the processes of historical-cultural subjectivation that take place in the inhabitants. Therefore, there is a need to research and understand these areas, their particularities and needs, not only to improve the quality of life of their inhabitants, but also to contribute to science and policy in a more inclusive and effective way.

So, going back to our beginning: Why subjectivity and development in rural contexts? Because rurality has historically been less researched in psychology, even though in the world in general, and in Latin America in

particular, the largest percentage of territory is rural. Moreover, because the person-context interaction, so emphasized in cultural-historical psychology, becomes even more relevant in rural territories, where contact with the land, nature, institutions or basic services, and the community in general is much closer and constitutes an important part of identity.

Thus, what we seek to explore in this book has to do with the processes of subjectivation in rural contexts, the future projects of young people and adolescents, the—permanent and inevitable—dialogical relationship between the rural and the urban, the value of education, the cult of working on the land, the future as emancipation from the place of origin, the countryside as the return home, the dialogical relationship between school and community, and the dynamic and dialectical temporal relationship between the present and the future, as well as the generational relationship between rural parents and urban children. This book deals with these and other phenomena linked to the psychological experience of rurality.

### **ABOUT THIS BOOK**

This book is made up of two sections. The first is entitled *Subjectivity and Development in Rural Education*. In this section Fossa, Serruto and Rochet (in this volume) present an exploratory study on educational transitions. The work entitled ‘From the countryside to the city’ explores transitions from rural to urban school education, highlighting phenomena that facilitate or hinder the transition process. On the other hand, the authors show the subjective evaluations that students make about rurality and the social representations of urban life. Through a non-hegemonic perspective, the authors show the value of rurality and urbanity in themselves, and do not value one to the detriment of the other cultural context.

Next, Martins Andrade and Ferreira Leite (in this volume) show how the educational space occupies an important place in the development and production of subjectivity. The work of these authors addresses the life projects of young people from rural communities studying at the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), located in northeastern Brazil. Through a qualitative study, the authors conclude that the IFRN is understood as an opportunity for life change, due to the set of actions it develops, such as research activities and reflection on reality, training for a future profession and transmission of knowledge that can be applied in their rural communities. The authors conclude that these aspects contribute greatly to the development and important subjective changes of rural youth.

Subsequently, Prado Sakai and Marsico (in this volume) develop a theoretical study of the Family Farm Schools (FFS) in Brazil and their contributions to the dialogical education of young people from rural backgrounds.

The FFS form a network of schools distributed throughout Brazil created by family farmers and local leaders from educational experiences in the countryside. The main characteristic of these schools is the adoption of the Pedagogy of Alternation as a mechanism for sharing education between school, family and community. In this chapter the authors carry out a literature review of different articles related to Alternative Pedagogy and the impact of FFS on students and their communities, on the one hand, and the life and professional projects of rural youth, on the other. From a theoretical perspective of cultural psychology, the authors understand the school as a frontier space between family, community and professional training, as well as a space for dialog and construction of meanings that guides the future of young people.

In the next chapter of this section, Sánchez, Reyes, Bejarano and Noreña (in this volume) present us with a methodology that allows preschool teachers working in rural communities to recover cultural practices from specific communities in order to signify them from a child development perspective and transform these practices into educational resources available to preschool teachers, preschool children and the community at large. By brilliantly integrating symbolic action theory, cultural psychology and semiotic cultural constructivism, they develop a unique ethnographic case study. The authors conclude that the metacognitive process of the participant, a rural teacher in Colombia, and the meaning of her educational practices provide a privileged setting for promoting the preschool development of children in rural schools.

Finally, in the last chapter of the first section, Ríos (in this volume), based on research conducted in the Andes and the Amazon region of Peru over five years, reflects and provides evidence on four key aspects that are current and in tension when addressing the topic of social-emotional skills. First, he analyses the multiplicity of nomenclatures, frameworks and typologies of a wide range of existing social-emotional skills; then, he describes the universal or relative view of social-emotional skills in different cultural contexts; and finally, he explores the end or means view of social-emotional skills, delving into the role of social-emotional skills in improving academic performance in rural contexts.

In summary, the first section of this book addresses, from different contexts, phenomena and countries, the relationship between rural contexts and educational processes.

Then, in the second part of this book, the section entitled ‘Subjectivity and Development in Rurality in General’ is developed. This second section begins with the work of Sebastián, Grudechut, Zamorano and Cayul (in this volume) which describes and analyses the process of insertion that a group of researchers in the psychology of adult learning carried out in the context of rural extension in a region of northern Chile. This process led to

the development of an adult education manual and the implementation of workshops on adult education concepts and practices. The authors' reflections are framed in the traditions of Paulo Freire's popular education, Lev Vygotski's cultural-historical approach and the neo-Piagetian approach to development and learning of Étienne Bourgeois and Jean Nizet. Sebastian et al. (in this volume) discuss the processes of subjectification and identity construction that take place at the confluence of actors involved in rural extension.

Subsequently, Rafael Silva dos Santos, María da Graça Silveira Gomes da Costa and Jáder Ferreira Leite, taking the phenomenon of youth from a historical-cultural perspective in conjunction with the Constructive-Interpretive Theory of Subjectivity, analyze the subjective meanings of political participation of rural youth within the National Youth Collective of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). To achieve this objective, they carried out an exploratory study with three young people of 21, 23 and 27 years old, respectively. The results show that young people identify as activists, incorporating the principles and values of the MST in their subjective meanings. Relocation to camps with their families, participation in Landless Youth meetings, mobilization actions and meetings were crucial for the development of their subjectivities. The construction of subjective meanings about being a landless youth is oriented toward collective tasks related to the movement, demonstrating a subjective sense inseparable from praxis. On the other hand, the authors describe a feeling of "debt" to previous generations. At the same time, young people open new paths for the movement with active political participation in various organizational instances of the MST. They believe that participation in the National Youth Collective can promote personal development, seen as a training cycle that influences the life trajectories of its members, by providing experiences in various political spaces within the MST.

Next, Enno von Fircks (in this volume) describes the symbolic field of action of a given rural area, analyzed within an autoethnographic example. In this chapter, the author shows that the specific field of action of a rural area is based on strongly interconnected and interdependent actions. For this purpose, the author constructs a theoretical model of action that is applied to specific actions within the rural living area, showing that the transitions between actions, myths and ghosts are smooth and that these elements continuously nurture on each other. According to Enno von Fircks (in this volume), this allows boundaries to become blurred and constantly creates new syntheses, so that the interconnectedness of the rural area emerges through the interconnectedness of its related actions regulated by myths and ghosts. The author concludes that rural areas are an important place to live and dwell, and are characterized by strong links to specific networks that need particular elaboration from a psychological perspective.