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Between Harm and Struggle: The Psychosocial Expert Opinion as Critical University Outreach in Traditional Territories

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Abstract

Traditional communities affected by large-scale projects suffer human rights violations and require psychological support given the risks of collective traumatization. This study analyzes and discusses the results of an outreach initiative in which a psychosocial expert opinion report was produced to support a public civil action. Participatory action research method was applied, based on a Community Action Cycle. Visits, meetings, and interviews were conducted with 10 participants from two rural remnant quilombola communities, across five territories in the state of Bahia, Brazil. The results reveal the damages arising from conflict, the disrespect for traditions, struggles, and collective memory, the risk of health deterioration, and the socio-environmental impacts resulting from the installation of a high-voltage power transmission line in quilombola territories. The elaboration of the psychosocial expert opinion was analyzed as a critical academic outreach initiative and for its potential to contribute to the understanding of the urgent social problems faced by these communities.

Keywords: Human rights; Community-institutional relations; Community-based participatory research; Psychology, applied; Quilombola communities.

The production of psychological documents aimed at assessing community demands has increased in recent years (Euzébios Filho et al., 2024; Gonçalves, 2017; Gonçalves, 2024; Leite Júnior et al., 2024; Matsumoto et al., 2024; Tchalekian et al., 2024). The shift in the preparation of technical reports, expert opinions, and assessments from the traditional clientele – the isolated individual – to collective subjects represents both the affirmation of Brazilian psychology's commitment to the fulfillment of human rights and the expansion of its technical capacity to respond to the social problems of the present time.

Among the growing demands placed upon psychology is the need to address the risks of collective traumatization resulting from various forms of institutional violence and human rights violations against community groups (Euzébios Filho, 2023). Brazil is among the countries with the highest rates of homicides of human rights and

environmental defenders, with an average of at least three defenders killed per month over the past 4 years (Amnesty International, 2024). Institutional violence disproportionately affects the most vulnerable groups – Indigenous peoples, Black people, trans people, and women – systematically reproducing long-standing processes of injustice.

Structural injustice has been addressed from a psychosocial perspective since the 1970s in various countries, leading to an epistemic shift in the understanding of the limits and possibilities of the particular sciences and to the growing adoption of critical and transformative theories and methods (Montero, 2006). In this path, the theoretical formulation of Psychosocial Trauma (PST) was initially proposed by Martín-Baró (2017) and later revisited by Euzébios Filho (2023, p. 18), who defined it as "a sociopolitical wound of a collective nature, yet with individual repercussions". The conditions for its manifestation are imposed daily by capitalist society, but this wound emerges collectively at specific moments – such as during socio-environmental conflicts or the implementation of large infrastructure projects, among other institutional actions that, driven by profit, harm communities.

Psychosocial trauma arises from systematic violations that, when accumulated, destroy beliefs, provoke intense emotional reactions, and erode family and community bonds. Events that trigger psychosocial harm can become inscribed in collective memory, producing suffering and directly impacting the health and living conditions of community members. Once the violent situation has taken place – forced displacement, landscape alteration, murder, among others – psychology can contribute to understanding the post-PST context. In such cases, individuals and groups commonly oscillate between two stances: fatalism and awareness (Euzébios Filho, 2023).

The recurrence of psychological harm can either numb community groups – manifesting through bodily, cognitive, and behavioral expressions – or serve as a springboard for overcoming unjust situations. Martín-Baró (2017) analyzed the phenomenon of fatalism as a psychopolitical process and argued that its rupture occurs through the exercise of social struggle. The fatalistic syndrome appears as conformity and acceptance of the present situation as an inexorable fate. Struggle, in turn – understood as "practical critique" of situations of domination and oppression – carries an element of experience and social learning (Costa, 2022).

Numerous examples demonstrate that traditional peoples have historically resisted and organized collectively to fight for their rights, particularly for land and territory (J. Ferreira & Felício, 2021). Nevertheless, situations of violence and vulnerability persist, resulting in socio-environmental conflicts that are potentially traumatic for the affected communities (H. S. Ferreira et al., 2024; Furtado & Paim, 2024).

In many such cases, universities may be called upon to act, mobilizing technical resources to provide supporting evidence in an effort to prevent rights violations and, consequently, psychosocial traumatization (Matsumoto et al., 2024). It is therefore necessary to question the role of the university in this process, particularly that of psychology training programs: what possibilities and methodological procedures available in psychology education can contribute to preparing professionals to address the risks of psychosocial traumatization in communities?

To answer this question, this article presents the results of an outreach initiative in which a psychosocial opinion report was produced on the impacts of the installation of a Large Infrastructure Project (LIP) in the territory of traditional quilombola communities in Bahia, Brazil. The objective is to analyze and discuss these results, considering the role of university outreach programs in psychology in responding to community demands.

Psychosocial Opinion as Critical University Engagement

University outreach (the "third mission") has gained prominence in the public debate on the social role played by the 21st-century university. In a systematic review on the subject, Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) analyzed 134 publications on the university's third mission and noted the growing pressure on universities to promote actions that "contribute to society," even as public investment in higher education continues to decline. While being pressed to demonstrate both efficiency and social impact, universities are also called upon to prove their legitimacy and public relevance.

It no longer seems sufficient for universities to rely solely on the endogenous production of academic validity for their survival, as they now find themselves at a kind of crossroads between teaching, research, and outreach (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). The strengthening of university outreach indicates that the results of scientific production can no longer remain confined within institutional walls but must also be subject to the validation of the communities that benefit from their outcomes.

In the Brazilian context, university outreach is understood as a method that integrates practice, theory, and training into a single movement of inseparability between teaching and research. It is defined as "an interdisciplinary, educational, cultural, scientific, and political process that promotes transformative interaction between the University and other sectors of society" (*Fórum de Pró-Reitores de Extensão das Instituições de Educação Superior Públicas Brasileiras* [Forproex, Forum of Deans for Outreach of Public Higher Education Institutions in Brazil], 2012, p. 28). This definition, agreed upon at the Forproex, proposes outreach as a stance of universities toward the problems faced by communities, while simultaneously requiring the development of problem-solving practices. Furtado and Paim (2024) showed that outreach activities can contribute to the production of scientific knowledge and the critical analysis of processes of socio-environmental conflict in quilombola territories.

For psychology education, it is important to consider the role of university outreach in building a bilateral and dialogical relationship with communities, capable of advancing the production of genuinely decolonial knowledge – knowledge that operates through the affirmation of the liberating nature of recognizing the Other (Montero, 2010), historically denied by hegemonic psychology (Carvalho & Costa, 2025). In this direction, community representatives have sought dialogue with specialized centers of scientific production, hoping to forge alliances in confronting the problems they face and to obtain support in their daily struggles to protect their territories and ways of life.

For this study, the demand originated in the second term of 2021, within the History of Social Psychology course of the Psychology program, following an initiative by the quilombola student Tamille Ferreira. At that time, as part of a classroom project, a group of students established contact with the first quilombola community. Subsequently, leaders of other quilombola communities affected by the same enterprise requested the production of a psychosocial opinion on the impacts of the project, consolidating the outreach initiative. The elaboration of the opinion report, therefore, took place as part of a process of dialogical and bilateral interaction between the university and the community. It was not a simple "provision of services" in the traditional, unilateral sense of outreach practices. Given that the production of technical documents in psychology is an essential component of professional training and requires technical supervision by a psychologist duly registered with the professional council, it was found that the perspective of critical university outreach—concerned

with producing tools useful to communities in their struggles against domination and oppression—creates an opportunity for developing professional skills and strengthening the relationship between university and community.

The process of carrying out the outreach activity involved logistical and operational difficulties, which compounded the inherent challenges of working in a situation of socio-environmental conflict. To enable travel to the rural territories where the affected communities were located, the researchers sought support from their university through the Outreach Activities Office and, when that was not possible, relied on their own resources. For this reason, drawing on contributions from Latin American community psychology (Montero, 2006), in the preparation of the psychosocial opinion as an outreach activity, the researchers adopted a perspective grounded in ethical, technical, and political commitment to the fate of the communities and to the defense of human rights—an approach inherent to the profession and to the conception of a public university that is socially and territorially grounded.

Method

This study was developed from university outreach activities carried out by a team of undergraduate psychology students, under the supervision of a faculty member at a university in Bahia, Brazil. The demand for these outreach activities arose from the initiative of an Interinstitutional and Interdisciplinary Working Group (IWG) composed of researchers from the fields of Agronomy, Geography, and Law, from three different public higher education institutions, as well as members of quilombola communities affected by a large infrastructure project. After two years of work, the IWG recognized the need to assess the impacts of the LIP on the mental health and interpersonal relationships of community members.

The method used was the Community Action Cycle (Costa et al., 2024; Costa, 2025), an approach from Community Social Psychology based on participatory action research and adapted for psychology training purposes. This method is grounded in the principle of action–reflection–action and consists of a series of eight periodic meetings with members of the participating communities. It is a participatory, flexible, and continuous methodology in which the Action Cycle is defined based on the community's demand, with each of the eight meetings having specific objectives, methods, and goals aimed at achieving the overall purpose. The meetings may take place weekly or biweekly, resulting in cycles lasting from two to four months within an academic semester, but they may also occur at variable intervals, depending on the availability of the communities and the implementing team. At the end of each Action Cycle, a collective outcome is produced that functions as an open-ended conclusion – capable of generating new cycles – and which may take the form of an official document, an event, a public act, a psychological report, among many other possibilities. In this case, the psychosocial opinion report was presented as the product of the Action Cycle carried out by the team in collaboration with the communities affected by the project.

Participants

The Action Cycle was developed with individuals and community groups from five territories directly impacted by the LIP, totaling approximately 85 participants. Of the five territories, two are officially recognized as quilombola communities (Territories 1 and 5). The meetings were open and involved two types of participation: individual, in the case of visits to residents closest to the project (a total of 10 individuals directly approached – six men and four women, all over 18 years

old); and collective, in the case of the team's participation in community association meetings (an estimated total of 75 participants, all over 18 years old). Members of the interinstitutional group that had initially requested the project also took part in the process, assisting with the visits and participating in the meetings. In this text, participants are identified in the order in which they are mentioned, with references to the territory and date of the conversation.

Instruments

The main sources of information were the team's field journals and publicly available materials. The primary means of accessing the experiences of community members were conversations and observations of everyday life, as proposed by Spink (2008). No standardized psychological instruments or interview scripts were used.

Procedures

The starting point was the implementation of practical activities, as required by the community psychology course component, in which a group of seventh-semester students was tasked with identifying community needs for the development of a community action project[2]. The activities took place in a quilombola community with which some members of the class already had a prior connection. At that time, the quilombola community association was discussing the impacts of the LIP on its territory and invited the class to develop a proposal related to this demand.

The proposal was accepted on the condition that the team would be able to carry out the community work as an outreach initiative – that is, after the conclusion of the course component and the approval and validation of the community action project. The academic semester was dedicated to this joint construction, which included field visits, informal conversations, and organizational meetings (Table 1).

Table 1
Community Engagement Activities

Date	Activity	Objective
March 25, 2023 (Saturday)	Meeting at the Quilombola Community Association – Territory 1.	First visit: identify community demands.
April 14, 2023 (Friday)	Online meeting with the Interinstitutional Work Group.	Formalize the request.
May 03, 2023 (Wednesday)	Guided tour through the affected territories (Territories 1, 2, and 3).	Second visit: to engage in conversation with community leaders and residents.
May 20, 2023 (Saturday)	Meeting at the Community Association – Territory 2.	Third visit: to engage in conversation with community leaders and residents.
June 05, 2023 (Monday)	Online meeting with the Interinstitutional Work Group.	Approve the plan for the elaboration of the psychosocial opinion report.

After the approval of the plan for the elaboration of the psychosocial opinion report, the team formalized the proposal as an outreach activity linked to an outreach program registered at the university to which they were affiliated. This institutional registration made it possible to access financial resources provided by the Outreach Activities Office to carry out field activities in the second semester of 2023.

For the elaboration of the opinion report, in addition to building upon previous contacts, the team adopted the methodology of eight meetings from the Community Action Cycles (Table

[2] The concept of "community action", inspired by the work of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, better represents the type of socially grounded work the team proposed to carry out than the term "social intervention" (Montero Rivas, 2012).

2) and worked based on the relationships established with the community leaders who welcomed them into the territories.

In total, five community associations were visited across five territories distributed in two municipalities. The meetings at the associations lasted between 2 and 4 hours and were held as part of other events, such as the Agroecological Fair or Black November celebration. In this way, broad participation of interested residents was ensured. Six home visits were also carried out, varying in duration from 15 to 45 minutes, mediated by a community leader. Some conversations took place briefly at the entrance of the houses, while on other occasions the team was welcomed inside, offered food, and engaged in longer discussions. In all visits, the researchers introduced themselves as a team of psychology undergraduates conducting a study on the psychosocial impacts of the LIP on the affected communities. The researchers obtained the participants' free and informed consent to engage in conversations about the topic, which they were willing to discuss.

Table 2
List of Meetings in the Community Action Cycle

Date	Activity	Objective
1st Meeting: September 02, 2023 (Saturday)	Initial conversations about the plan, and participation in the Theater of the Oppressed activity at the Quilombola Association – Territory 1.	To familiarize the team with the community group and define the next visits.
2nd Meeting: September 16, 2023 (Saturday)	Visit to the community – Territory 1. Meeting with leaders and residents at a community member's house.	To survey perceptions regarding the LIP in the territory. Learning about the community's history of struggle.
3rd Meeting: September 23, 2023 (Saturday)	Visit to the community – Territory 1. Meeting with a group of residents at the Community Association.	To engage in collective discussion about the impacts of the LIP on the community. Define the itinerary for visits to other affected territories, accompanied by a community leader.
4th Meeting: October 07, 2023 (Saturday)	Visits to the homes of residents directly affected by the LIP – Territories 3 and 4.	To listen to the accounts of residents living closest to the LIP.
5th Meeting: October 31, 2023 (Tuesday)	Meeting with residents directly affected by the LIP – Territory 3.	To listen to the accounts of residents living closest to the LIP.
6th Meeting: November 11, 2023 (Saturday)	Meeting with residents directly affected by the LIP – Territory 4.	To listen to the accounts of residents living closest to the LIP.
7th Meeting: November 18, 2023 (Saturday)	Participation in the Black November event at the Community Association – Territory 1.	To present the partial results of the fieldwork to the community for collective reflection and synthesis.
8th Meeting: November 19, 2023 (Sunday)	Participation in the Black November event at the Community Association – Territory 5.	To present the partial results of the fieldwork to the community for collective reflection and synthesis.

Note: LIP — Large Infrastructure Project.

After the completion of field activities, in the first semester of 2024, the information was organized, and the psychosocial opinion – delivered in its final version to the IWG members in July of that year – was prepared. The document was used in a Public Civil Action filed by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office against the institutions responsible for the LIP, aiming to halt the project and repair the damages caused to the affected quilombola communities, given that the enterprise failed to comply with Article 6 of Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which requires prior, free, and informed consultation with communities in such situations.

Although the fieldwork was conducted as an outreach activity, the basic ethical principles for research involving human participants were observed, in accordance with Resolutions No. 466/2012 and No. 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council. The community leaders requested and authorized the development of the work, accompanied the team in the territories, and introduced the researchers to participants, who were duly informed and invited to take part in conversations aimed at the preparation of the psychosocial report.

Results

The first notable aspect of the results concerns the feeling of injustice – that is, the perception of non-recognition of the autonomy and rights of traditional communities. For almost all participants, the LIP – a High-Voltage Transmission Line (HTL) – was understood as something that would worsen life in the community. Only one resident, a small-scale farmer, believed the project could bring benefits and thus regarded the community's broader concerns as unfounded. When asked about his expectations for the future of the community, it was observed that, among all participants, he was the one with the weakest ties to the territory, as he had not grown up there and had spent most of his adult life working in another state, in southeastern Brazil. The farmer had returned only a few years earlier, acquired a property in the territory, and maintained a productive backyard, with expectations of expanding his family enterprise. His main concern, according to his account, was to pass the business on to his son, who helped him occasionally but also had weak connections to the territory and intended to move elsewhere in the future.

For this resident, the idealization of some benefit from the HTL for the territory seemed tied to his hope of remaining there – and of involving his young son in the same work so that he would not have to migrate to another region, as the father once had (Participant 1, Territory 4, March 05, 2023). This experience is extensively documented in the literature as uprooting resulting from the forced removal from ancestral lands, leading to the migratory flows that formed much of the urban peripheries of cities such as Salvador, São Paulo, and Brasília. When individuals leave their life territories – where their families have roots, can sustain themselves, and watch their children grow – to seek opportunities in large cities, they become vulnerable to a form of anguish triggered by the loss of territorial reference (Gonçalves Filho, 1998).

In all other testimonies, feelings toward the project ranged between two positions: fear/despair and revolt. On one hand, the lack of knowledge, uncertainty, and absence of accurate information were perceived by most residents as signs of imminent harm. On the other hand, the hope that the project would be halted was sustained by others, who expressed a sense of revolt, believing that their fundamental right to prior consultation had been violated. During the collective meetings, when discussing the LIP's impacts on community life, residents generally expressed some degree of indignation – especially regarding the responsible company's concealment of information and the lack of prospects for improvement in their communities.

In an informational meeting attended by representatives of the company, the mediating body – namely, the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (INCRA, National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform) – and members of the community, an intense process of disrespect toward the autonomy of the affected community was observed, marked by repeated statements from institutional representatives claiming they were there to "give voice" to the community. The reactions made it clear that the community perceived it as violent to suggest that they "had no voice" while they were actively voicing their objection to the fact that the project had begun without observing the protocol of prior consultation established by ILO Convention No. 169. This communicative impasse revealed an asymmetry of power between institutional representatives and community members. Attempts to establish a symmetrical communicative relationship did not advance, and a community leader summed up the situation by saying: "If I'm not allowed to speak, then I don't want to listen either" (Participant 2, Territory 1, March 25, 2023).

The process of developing critical awareness occurred as community groups and residents realized that the project was seeking environmental licensing without carrying out the prior

consultation to which the communities were entitled. This reflection led to cognitive associations with other histories of disrespect, particularly those experienced during the process of self-affirmation as quilombola descendant communities. In the case of Territory 1, the families were related by kinship to residents of other nearby quilombola communities. These communities underwent a process of fragmentation and division, with a highway cutting through their territory. In another quilombola territory, a similar LIP was implemented, once again disregarding the participation of the communities, which now find themselves equally affected. This fact is significant, as it helps explain the recurring fear, voiced especially by older residents, that the new enterprise may be yet another violation of the communities' rights. Indeed, the collective concern that this project – like other developments that have negatively impacted and continue to affect quilombola territories – might further generate anxiety-provoking processes of equal or greater consequence, particularly among elder residents, being felt as a profound act of disrespect toward their long-standing struggle for community recognition. It also fuels fears that younger generations may lose the right (or the desire) to remain in the territory and may become victims of other forms of violence resulting from possible forced displacement toward urban peripheries.

As one elder resident said, firmly and emotionally, during a collective meeting: "What will happen to my grandchildren? They [those responsible for the LIP] want to drive our young people off this land, to the streets, to fill the outskirts of Salvador?" (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 23, 2023). One resident said that, to her, the project was a "work of death, something that will destroy a part of everyone's life" (Participant 2, Territory 1, September 16, 2023). Another resident, a small farmer, stated forcefully:

> You [those who are not from the community] need to understand that this is quilombo land – it's sacred land. You have to walk barefoot to feel it, till your feet get blisters (...) People are getting sick because they wear these rubber sandals instead of going barefoot or using leather. The rubber isolates you, so you can't feel the earth anymore (...) that's why everyone's getting sick and dying. (Participant 4, Territory 1, September 23, 2023)

On another occasion, when asked about his rootedness in the territory, the same farmer explained that "Sometimes it hurts to maintain this root. The land is the God of the plant. Without the land, the plant cannot live" (Participant 4, Territory 1, September 16, 2023).

There is a shared understanding within the community that public authorities are not listening to the population – an ongoing reality. People feel they are deliberately kept uninformed, and that those who resist may be putting themselves at risk for not knowing what the long-term consequences of the project will be for their way of life: "It's as if we didn't matter at all" (Participant 4, Territory 1, September 16, 2023).

The way community members learned about the project was recounted repeatedly by different people, with indignation and anger:

> Nobody here knew anything. We only found out about it [the LIP] because of our students, which are now at the university. (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 23, 2023)

> [The news about the project] took everyone by surprise, because there's no way out. Everyone's afraid because we won't be able to stay [near the project site], and it's risky for those with a heart condition. (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 02, 2023)

> We from the community heard about an informational meeting in Feira de Santana and decided to go. When we arrived, everything was already mapped out and organized, and we saw that the community was inside the mapped area – but not within their project. For them, the community didn't exist. When we found about this, and that it was an energy transmission line, it seemed very

> dangerous. I personally had anxiety attacks and lost many nights of sleep. With each meeting I attended, as I learned more about that transmission line, things only got worse for me. (Participant 5, Territory 5, November 19, 2023)

As a result of fear and the lack of precise information, both individual conversations and group meetings revealed a pervasive sense of powerlessness – as one woman living near the construction site put it: "The weak can't stand up to the powerful" (Participant 6, Territory 3, October 7, 2023). She expressed fears about the devaluation of her property and possible risks to her and her family's health, especially for the children. One of the most frequently asked questions from residents was: "Who will benefit from this project?" (Participant 7, Territory 3, October 31, 2023) – and the usual answers from the residents themselves were: "Certainly not us" (Participant 8, Territory 3, October 31, 2023). "There was no compensation whatsoever. And even if there were, where would we go?" (Participant 9, Territory 2, May 20, 2023); "We kept asking ourselves: why was this line installed without talking to the community?" (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 02, 2023).

Community members understood that the LIP had been designed to cut right through their territory, offering no benefits to the population – and even posing evident risks. It was common to hear fears about possible electric discharges, concerns about grounding wire fences located near the towers, tree pruning, risks to livestock, farming, and other concerns. It was also frequently mentioned that the layout of the project reproduced existing inequalities in the territories, benefiting mainly the large landowners – who were allegedly receiving compensation from the company for the installation of towers on their properties:

> We want to know what the gains for our community will be (...) I even heard from some people [in the community] that we're small fish, that we'd never beat the landowners, who were the first to make deals [for compensation]. (Participant 8, Territory 2, May 20, 2023)

> Some people are already receiving compensation [but without transparency] – it's being done individually, not collectively. They haven't presented any form of compensation for the territory. (Participant 9, Territory 2, May 20, 2023)

For a community leader from Territory 1, the lack of technical information and collective discussion about the project's real impacts reinforces the sense of insecurity, as implied when he said: "People suffer from lack of knowledge" (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 2, 2023).

Amid the spread of imprecise information, some residents said they felt pressured to accept small compensations from the company in exchange for authorizing the installation of towers on their properties. In collective meetings, when asked about compensation, one of them remarked that "for the people [those who got compensation], money is money" (Participant 4, Territory 1, September 16, 2023) – meaning that they would hardly refuse to allow the installation of towers on their property in exchange for some payment, regardless of whether the amount was fair. Moreover, the issue of compensation was never discussed in assemblies among the quilombola residents, preventing them from organizing a collective response that took their shared interests into account. On several occasions, researchers heard that co-opting individuals and fragmenting the communities' organizational capacity was part of the companies' modus operandi: "It's persecution!" (Participant 3, Territory 1, September 23, 2023).

Some community leaders emphasized that their right to self-determination and the respect for their consultation protocols would only be recognized if the communities joined forces to "put up a fight" (Territory 1, September 23, 2023; Territory 3, October 31, 2023). A resident recalled that in other quilombola communities where a LIP had already been installed, the company's approach

had been similar: gradual and without dialogue with local associations, leaving them unable to oppose the project. Amid so many struggles and hardships, one community leader said that at times they feel like leaving, because "when you become too rooted, you see the suffering coming and there's nothing you can do about it! (Participant 4, Territory 1, September 16, 2023). In Territory 1, the community was fighting against real estate speculation and irregular land occupation, which had altered the landscape and destroyed the intangible heritage of the local quilombola population.

The fight against the negative effects of this large infrastructure project thus appears as a struggle in defense of the community's living territory. The leaders expressed indignation and appealed for support from university research and outreach groups. They said they felt vulnerable, since it was dangerous for them to engage in certain struggles, as other quilombola comrades had been murdered while defending their lands (Participant 10, Territory 1, October 7, 2023). Researchers also heard reports of community leaders who had been co-opted to defend corporate interests, or accused of receiving money and spending it on goods and trips. This internal fragmentation, mentioned by participants, is a characteristic of the process of psychosocial traumatization widely described in the literature (Boechat et al., 2024; Euzébios Filho, 2023; Martín-Baró, 2017).

Other testimonies highlighted concerns about the integrity of the territory – that is, the impact of the LIP on the landscape: "Today, our landscape, our beautiful environment, they took it away from us; because now, in this beautiful scenery, there's a tower standing tall, cutting right through our quilombo, our territory" (Participant 5, Territory 5, November 19, 2023).

Some residents said they had been having trouble sleeping after a tower was installed near their homes. Others reported having recurring nightmares after finding out that a power transmission line would cross their territory:

> When I found out about this transmission line that was coming and would take away everyone's peace – and when they started explaining what was going to happen here in the community [the works] – I couldn't sleep at night anymore, and neither could my daughters. They asked me what was going to happen and what would become of us. I didn't know what to say, and that got me scared. (Participant 5, Territory 5, November 19, 2023)

> To this day, no one has been able to find peace because of this transmission line. During thunderstorms, we can feel the increase in electrical discharges; no one sleeps properly anymore. (Participant 6, Territory 3, October 07, 2023)

These concerns were reported repeatedly in conversations and meetings about the impacts of the LIP on quilombola territories. When researchers asked community members what they were doing to cope with the situation and, as much as possible, ease their worries, a common response referred to the creation of consultation protocols. One of the outcomes of the collective concern brought about by the project was that several communities began seeking partners to help produce technical documents that could support their struggles. The development of these materials was discussed jointly by residents, university representatives, and other civil society organizations, respecting the autonomy and responsibilities of each group involved. The final outcome indicates a process of collective awareness about the possibilities of working together to defend the rights of the communities.

An example of this bilateral and dialogical relationship was the production – by the communities themselves, with support from IWG members and other entities – of their own consultation protocols, to avoid being caught off guard and to prevent future rights violations. In these protocols, community members emphasize that decisions are made collectively in in-person

assemblies, after everyone has had the opportunity to participate and contribute to the group's understanding of the issue – particularly giving voice to the elders.

Contrary to the common stereotype that traditional communities lack specialized technical knowledge, what was actually observed is that, alongside ancestral knowledge and the accumulation of practical experience through political resistance, quilombola community associations have gained increasing legal and academic grounding as a result of policies expanding access to higher education. As a result, their organizational capacity is now well consolidated, and in cases that require deeper expertise on a given matter, they seek the support of partners such as university researchers. The present account arises from this circumstance.

Discussion

The results reveal the harms resulting from the socio-environmental conflict caused by a large infrastructure project across different territories. The participants' statements confirm the disrespect toward the communities and their traditions, struggles, and collective memory, all of which are intrinsically tied to the territory and the preservation of the landscape. There was a clear concern among the population about possible effects on the physical and mental health of quilombola people resulting from the installation of the high-voltage transmission line. Equally present was the fear of a slow and gradual expulsion of new generations from the territory toward large cities – a process of forced displacement that could ultimately lead to the death of the community's way of life.

These results directly relate to those observed in other similar studies addressing the risks of collective human rights violations in quilombola communities (Boechat et al., 2024; Gonçalves, 2024; Matsumoto et al., 2024).

In situations where the State – which should protect individuals' rights – becomes the main perpetrator of violence, the communities find themselves vulnerable and in need of technical support from other actors, such as universities and civil society organizations. Matsumoto et al. (2024) analyzed the case Quilombola Communities of Alcântara v. Brazil before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in which the Brazilian State was condemned for violating the rights of 32 quilombola communities. The authors highlighted psychology's contribution to this and other struggles of traditional peoples through the production of technical expert reports:

> the practice of producing psychosocial technical documents, such as psychosocial expert opinions or reports, grounded in methodologies and concepts drawn from reflections within Liberation Psychology – and more specifically from Psychosocial Trauma – can serve as important expert or documentary evidence in various legal proceedings, including those related to land and housing rights, confronting State violence, and reparations for environmental disasters, among others. (Matsumoto et al., 2024, p. 94)

It is worth asking what role university outreach in psychology should play in responding to the concrete needs of Latin American traditional peoples. The answer lies precisely in the call of Liberation Psychology – which presupposes a prior liberation from traditional psychology – in the sense of standing alongside community struggles without relinquishing the responsibility of carrying out technically rigorous work. The methodology of the Community Action Cycles and the establishment of bonds with the community made it possible to conduct a robust gathering of information on the experiences of the communities facing the installation of the transmission line crossing their ancestral territories.

In another study on the impacts of large infrastructure works, Gonçalves (2024) participated in a socio-affective mapping project with three quilombola communities literally traversed by a federal highway (BR) in Maranhão and observed that

> pain is predominant, cumulative, and renewed over time, as its causes have not ceased but rather intensified – with the increase in truck and automobile traffic, noise, and vehicle speed over the years. There is revolt, indignation, insecurity, and fear, along with the prospect of this pain worsening due to the possible duplication of the lanes in the highway, given the uncertainty over where the hundreds of families living near it would relocate, under what conditions and with what resources, and the intensification of all factors that already cause so much suffering. (p. 121)

In such situations, outreach activities can contribute to strengthening the community in its struggles and aspirations, offering additional resources in its historical process of resistance. This is not to claim – or even assume – that university outreach or the various forms of engaged psychology (referred to as community, critical, political, or liberation psychology, among others) will lead revolutionary processes, but rather to emphasize the responsibility that universities, especially public ones, bear in relation to the suffering of the population. After all, Brazilian public universities have historically been spaces of and for the elites, and only in recent years has access for working-class populations expanded through affirmative action policies. Therefore, at this moment when communities are gaining access to universities and transforming the traditional questions posed by research, it is crucial to advance the production of outreach experiences carried out in, with, and for the communities (Montero, 2006).

As Boechat et al. (2024, p. 137) state, based on an outreach project alongside a quilombola community in Rio de Janeiro,

> psychosocial intervention plays a fundamental role in understanding the mechanisms that perpetuate political violence and its effects on victims. Through on-site observations, interviews, and bibliographic analyses, it was possible to highlight the complexity of the violence experienced by the community, going beyond visible manifestations to encompass deeply rooted psychological and social aspects. Once the impacts are understood, it becomes imperative to direct efforts toward implementing public policies that promote the overcoming of political violence and the strengthening of the quilombola community. The *Direito ao Território Quilombola* (DATEQ, Right to Quilombola Territory) Outreach Project, through its initiatives, emerges as an essential effort in this process. The university coordination, workshops, interviews, engagement with public agencies, and development of a Psychosocial Care Plan demonstrate the commitment to catalyzing effective change.

The experience reported here indicates that university outreach can be valuable both in addressing community demands and in strengthening the educational process – including in complex endeavors such as drafting a psychosocial expert opinion report. However, building proximity and bonds with the community requires a longer period of interaction, which, in this case, was achieved through activities carried out as part of a mandatory curricular component. This shows that it is necessary to take seriously, in the daily life of the university, the constitutional precept of the *inseparability of teaching, research, and outreach*, and to elevate these three pillars of university education to the same level of importance (Costa, 2018).

It is understood that university outreach is at a turning point, as universities are increasingly being called upon to respond to social problems, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. This work requires an explicit political commitment to engage with social movements, as recommended in one of the principles of Brazilian university outreach: "The University must take part in social movements, prioritizing actions aimed at overcoming inequality and social exclusion in Brazil" (Forproex, 2012, p. 38). According to the National Policy on University Outreach formulated by Forproex, this relationship

> must be guided by competence, critical thinking, and autonomy, while also seeking to preserve the autonomy of these movements, establishing with them horizontal, partnership-based relationships, and thus renouncing any impulse toward control or co-optation. This is one of the spheres of University Outreach in which the guideline of dialogical interaction becomes central. In engaging with social movements, the University grasps new forms of knowledge, values, and interests, which are important for the education of professionals better equipped to promote ethical, human, and sustainable development. (Forproex, 2012, p. 47)

The results of this work illustrate adherence to this principle of outreach practice. It is possible that the choice to stand alongside the communities in investigating the psychosocial impacts of the construction of a major infrastructure project may limit the capacity to present other perspectives and nuances of such a complex circumstance. However, every study is limited by its conditions of possibility, its theoretical and methodological choices, and its ethical-political commitments. Such limitations must always be acknowledged when the work arises from the demands of the communities themselves rather than from the initiative of the justice system. Nonetheless, from the standpoint of valuing a critical approach to university outreach, it is considered that the proposed task was carried out adequately and coherently. As reported, the psychosocial opinion was requested by the community and prepared by a team composed of seventh-semester psychology students and a psychology professor registered with the professional council. Furthermore, although one of the team members was a quilombola from one of the affected territories, the process of systematically building the team's relationship with the communities took place over the course of one academic semester, during which the outreach action plan was developed and approved. Once completed, the technical psychosocial opinion was delivered to the community leaders and to the IWG, becoming part of a Public Civil Action filed by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office in defense of the rights of the quilombola communities affected by the LIP.

Conclusion

The analysis of the process of preparing a psychosocial expert opinion as an outreach activity shows that, in the face of a scenario of ongoing violence, disrespect, and dehumanization, university outreach presents itself as an important resource both for quilombola communities and for the qualified training of future psychologists. The experience described demonstrates that the integration between university and community can go beyond traditional academic production, fostering a critical dialogue that combines technical rigor with the ethical and political commitment indispensable to addressing contemporary social challenges.

In practice, the construction and preparation of the psychosocial opinion, based on the participatory action research method and the Community Action Cycle, revealed the importance of understanding the specificities and complexity of the collective demands raised by the community – particularly in contexts marked by human rights violations and institutionalized violence. The articulation between these spaces of knowledge made possible not only the identification of harm and the risk of collective psychosocial traumatization but also the development of strategies for community resistance, such as the creation of their own consultation protocols.

From an educational perspective, the university plays a central role in building a critical psychology capable of training professionals committed to ethics and social justice. The hands-on experience in these socio-environmental conflict settings allowed for a deeper understanding of traumatic processes and strengthened students' capacity to act in diverse contexts—producing opinions that, in addition to their technical dimension, also embrace the ethical and political aspects

essential to safeguarding community rights. It is understood that the outreach initiative described also contributes to advancing current scientific knowledge about psychosocial opinions in quilombola communities facing socio-environmental conflict.

It is acknowledged that this study has limitations regarding its ability to adequately assess the potential and scope of university outreach in psychology training. The intention is not to propose generalizations, but rather to offer a qualitative, comprehensive, and critical analysis of the nuances and possibilities of outreach practice in psychology – at a time when discussing the quality of university outreach in undergraduate and graduate programs has become increasingly relevant. After all, the debate on the requirement to incorporate university outreach into undergraduate and graduate curricula tends to evolve toward a more substantive question: "What are the actual contributions of outreach practices to the communities?"

Therefore, the articulation between the knowledge and practices of universities and communities can advance through university outreach, toward integrative actions that promote active participation by community members, ensuring that academic work translates into collectively built initiatives aimed at strengthening social struggles.

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