

Literature Review

THE RELATIONAL COMMUNITY: TOWARDS AN ONTO-POLITICAL CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

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The article reviews the concept of community from the perspective of community social psychology, with the aim of proposing the notion of relational community as a theoretical tool for understanding and working with indigenous peoples. A literature review of the main community proposals from community psychology is conducted, and political ontology is employed to incorporate the relationship between human and non-human agents. As an example, the Mapuche territory is analyzed, highlighting concepts such as itrofill mognen (all forms of life) and AzMapu (system of coexistence norms), revealing the communication between people, nature, and spirituality. The article concludes that it is necessary to transcend the anthropocentrism of the agency notion in social sciences, in order to incorporate nature as an active participant in indigenous groups. The paper contributes to community psychology by broadening the concept of community, including non-humans in the social relations of indigenous peoples. The analysis invites a decolonization of academic and political practices to address socio-environmental conflicts. Keywords: Relational community, community psychology, political ontology, non-human agencies.

1. Introduction

This article proposes the notion of relational community to understand indigenous communities in Latin America. Building on the concept of non-human agencies introduced by Latin American political ontology, it seeks to enrich the theoretical framework of community psychology. The aim of this contribution is to provide more robust conceptual tools that facilitate work with communities engaged in political resistance to socio-environmental conflicts.

Various studies have highlighted the socio-environmental conflicts arising from extractivist projects intended to be established in Indigenous territories (Blaser, 2013; De la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2014, 2015). As a result, it is necessary to critically reassess the concept of community. The questions that guide this article are: *How does community social psychology conceive of community? How does Latin American political ontology contribute to understanding Indigenous political resistance? and How can the notion of non-human agency enhance community social psychology?* Through these inquiries, the concept of relational community is proposed, emphasizing the need to move beyond the anthropocentrism prevalent in social sciences.

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Methodologically, a critical interpretive systematic review was conducted (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006), that included sources from community psychology, and political ontology. Priority was given to texts that connected the concept of community with social transformation through community praxis. A thematic analysis was conducted using an open coding strategy to identify convergences, differences, and theoretical gaps in the reviewed literature, which allowed for the proposal of the relational community.

The article begins with a review of the concept of community in philosophy and social sciences. It highlights the notion of *koinonía*, whose Greek roots signify sharing and participating in something common. The discussion then develops the concept of community through the lens of the nostalgia for the lost community, as proposed by German thinkers such as Marx, Tönnies, and Weber. Subsequently, the community is reviewed from the perspective of community psychology, considering the theoretical approaches developed over the last ten years, with a deeper exploration of community psychology and its studies on indigenous peoples. The discussion then shifts to the perspectives of Latin American political ontology, which challenges the anthropocentrism inherent in the concept of agency in social sciences, making visible the interrelations and social influences of non-human agents. Based on these ideas, the concept of relational communities is proposed as a framework to analyze Indigenous peoples. The article concludes with an exploration of territory in the context of the Mapuche people, who view nature as an active agent in the ontological and political becoming of their social organization.

2. Methodological approach

To develop the concept of *relational community*, a Critical Interpretive Systematic Review (CISR) was conducted, following the guidelines proposed by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006). This approach combines a systematic search and selection of texts with an interpretive analytical process aimed at theory building, integrating empirical studies, conceptual works, and philosophical contributions from multiple disciplines.

CISR critically examines how the object of study has been conceptualized in the existing literature, identifying ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as theoretical gaps. From this perspective, the present review seeks a generative interpretive synthesis with the purpose of elaborating the concept of relational community.

Accordingly, this study constitutes a critical interpretive systematic review, rather than a narrative review, as it follows an explicit procedure of searching, screening, selection, and interpretive synthesis oriented toward conceptual development.

2.1 Search strategy

The bibliographic search was conducted in indexed academic databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, SciELO, and Google Scholar, in order to ensure broad and multidisciplinary coverage of the literature. The search strategy was organized around three central thematic axes:

1. Community psychology
2. The concept of community
3. Political ontology and relationality

These axes were combined using Boolean operators, employing search expressions such as:

- “Community psychology” AND “community concept”
- “Community psychology” AND “indigenous peoples”
- “Political ontology” AND “community”
- “Relational ontology” AND “community”

In addition, foundational theoretical texts were incorporated to support the conceptual analysis, including philosophical works on community (Álvaro, 2014; Dussel, 2016), classical texts in community psychology (Blanco, 1993; Krause, 2001; Buelga, 2009; Montero, 2004), and key contributions from Latin American political ontology (Blaser, 2012; Escobar, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, studies considered essential for understanding Mapuche relational ontology were included (Bengoa, 1996; Díaz et al., 2004; Mariman et al., 2006; Pairican, 2012).

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Following the interpretive logic of the CISR, inclusion criteria were primarily guided by the conceptual relevance and theoretical contribution of the texts to the objectives of the study. The following were included:

- Articles published in indexed journals and books from academic publishers between 2015 and 2025.
- Publications addressing the concept of community from the perspectives of community psychology and Latin American political ontology.
- Studies focused on Indigenous peoples and human–non-human relations.
- Works adopting critical and decolonial approaches within community psychology.

The following were excluded:

- Grey literature (unpublished theses, reports without peer review).
- Studies adopting exclusively economic or legal approaches that did not address the community dimension.
- Publications prior to 2015, except for texts considered foundational for the historical understanding of the concept of community and for the theoretical construction of the concept of *relational community*.

2.3 Operational definitions of the selection criteria

To enhance the operational clarity of the selection process, the following definitions were established:

- **Conceptual relevance:** texts were considered relevant if they explicitly developed the concept of *community* as a central analytical category, rather than merely using it as a descriptive or contextual term.
- **Contribution to relationality and agency:** studies addressing the notion of non-human agency, relational ontologies, or equivalent theoretical frameworks that problematize the modern separation between nature and culture were included.
- **Indigenous/territorial focus:** works analyzing Indigenous communities or territorial processes from an ontological, political, or sociocultural perspective

were selected, considering territory as a constitutive dimension of community life.

- **Critical/decolonial approach:** texts that explicitly questioned coloniality, epistemic extractivism, or hegemonic epistemologies in the social sciences were included.
- **Disciplinary relevance:** priority was given to publications from community psychology, political ontology, and related fields that engage in dialogue with these approaches.

These criteria were applied systematically during the screening and full-text assessment phases.

2.4 Selection process

The initial search yielded 129 records. After the removal of duplicates and the screening of titles and abstracts based on thematic relevance criteria, 58 publications were retained for full-text review. Subsequently, through an in-depth assessment of their conceptual contribution and alignment with the inclusion criteria, 40 sources were selected to constitute the final analytical corpus. This process was documented through an adapted flow diagram (Figure 1) in order to ensure transparency at each stage.

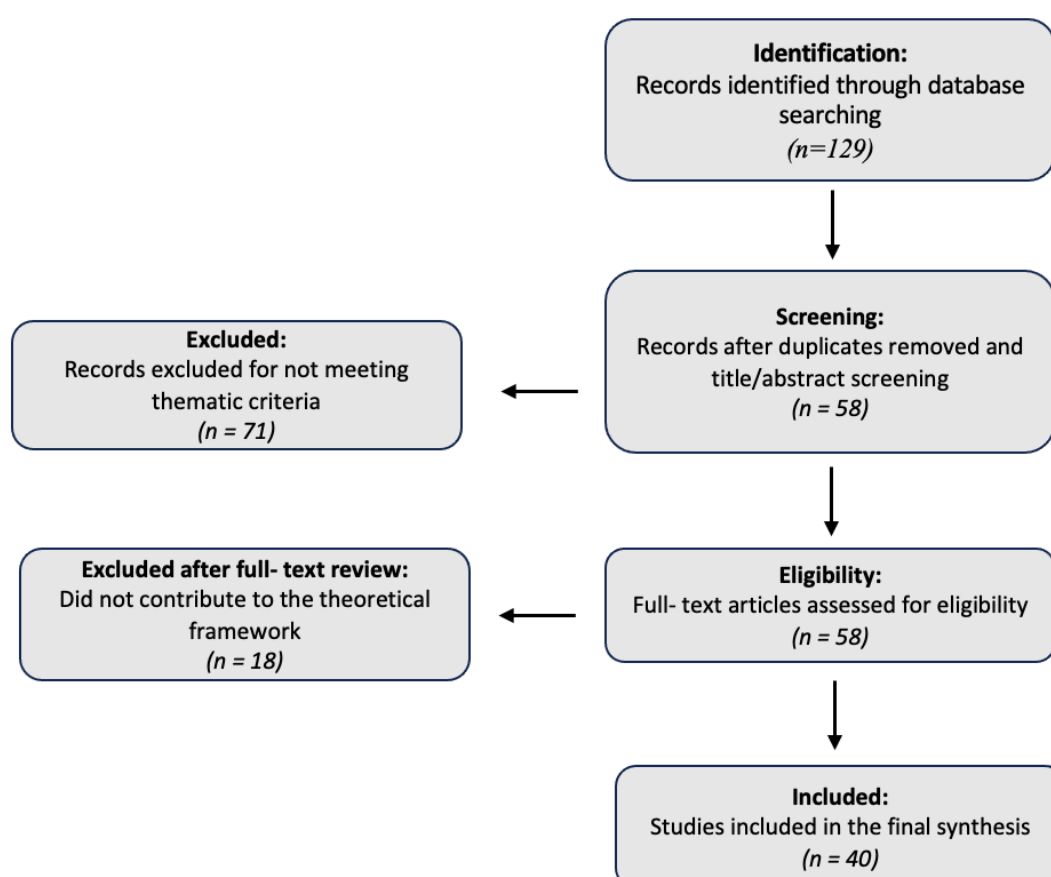


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the study selection process

Inclusion decisions were guided by theoretical relevance, prioritizing works that made a direct contribution to debates on community, relationality, agency, territory, and decolonial epistemologies, consistent with the CISR approach.

2.5 Analytical strategy and interpretive synthesis

The analysis was conducted through an interpretive thematic synthesis, inspired by the principles proposed by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006). The texts were inductively coded, identifying recurring conceptual patterns, theoretical tensions, and emerging categories. This process enabled the progressive construction of a synthesizing argument, oriented toward the development of the concept of *relational community*.

2.6 Thematic analysis process

The analysis was conducted through inductive coding, in which each text was read in depth to identify relevant units of meaning. The unit of analysis consisted of paragraphs or sections that explicitly developed conceptualizations related to community, territory, agency, relationality, and coloniality.

From this process, initial codes emerged, which were progressively grouped into higher-level analytical categories. Examples of the codes used include:

- Community as a human network
- Territory as a setting
- Exclusively human agency
- Non-human agency
- Relational ontologies
- Ancestrality
- Territorial autonomy
- Coloniality
- Spirituality

For instance, excerpts in which territory was described solely as a “context” for intervention were coded as *territory as a setting*, whereas those attributing capacity for action to rivers, mountains, or spiritual entities were coded as *non-human agency*.

These codes were subsequently reorganized into the five analytical categories presented in the article. The grouping process was carried out through constant comparison, identifying conceptual convergences and theoretical tensions across the texts. In this way, the categories were not defined *a priori*, but rather emerged from the interpretive analysis of the corpus, in coherence with the CIS approach.

Based on this analysis, five analytical categories were organized:

Background of the concept of community

A review of contributions from classical sociology, social psychology, and social ecology (Blanco, 1993; Krause, 2001; Álvaro, 2014; Dussel, 2016; Rodríguez & Montenegro, 2016; Osorio, 2022).

Community in community psychology

Approaches emphasizing mental health (Buelga, 2009; Méndez, 2024), territory and subjectivity (Montero, 2004; Krause, 2001), social transformation (Rozas, 2018), rural

psychology (Zamora & Castillo, 2016), and community resistance (Parodi & Galeano, 2016; Morais et al., 2024).

Community psychology and Indigenous peoples

Debates on disciplinary indigenization (Herazo, 2018; Mitchell & Bustamante, 2020), critiques of cultural appropriation (Canham, 2024), and connections with Andean worldviews (Grondona, 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2017).

Political ontology and community

Contributions from socio-environmental studies addressing non-human agency, ancestrality, and autonomy (Escobar, 2015; Blaser, 2012).

The Mapuche case

Studies on Mapuche relational ontology, territory, and spirituality (Mariman et al., 2006; Melin et al., 2017; Rojas et al., 2020). These categories were not established *a priori*, but rather emerged from the interpretive process, in coherence with the inductive logic of the CISR.

As a result of the interpretive synthesis process, a synthesizing argument was constructed that articulates the five analytical categories transversally. It is argued that Latin American community psychology has expanded the understanding of community toward political, subjective, and territorial dimensions, yet it continues to operate on anthropocentric assumptions that locate agency exclusively in humans. This framework comes into tension with the relational ontologies of Indigenous communities, in which nature, ancestors, and other beings actively participate in collective life. From this tension, and drawing on contributions from Latin American political ontology, the concept of relational community is proposed as a theoretical category that enables the understanding of forms of community organization grounded in more-than-human relations, territorial autonomy, and ancestrality.

2.7 Analytical rigor and reflexivity

The analytical process was conducted by the author. To strengthen interpretive credibility, the following strategies were implemented:

- The development of analytical memos throughout the coding process, documenting theoretical decisions and emerging reflections;
- Iterative review of the analytical categories across the analysis;
- Reflexive discussion of the findings with academic peers in the fields of community psychology and critical studies, as a form of *peer debriefing*.

These strategies ensured internal coherence, analytical transparency, and epistemological reflexivity, rather than relying on quantitative reliability criteria characteristic of positivist approaches.

2.8 Ethical delimitations and scope of the study

This study is based on the analysis of secondary literature, including ethnographic research, historical studies, and previously published academic works. No direct

testimonies from Indigenous community members collected by the authors were included, due to ethical considerations. The incorporation of situated narratives from Indigenous communities requires processes of informed consent, agreements regarding the use and return of information, and collective validation, aspects that exceed the methodological scope of the present study.

The testimonial excerpts included in the manuscript correspond to material published by other authors and are used for illustrative and analytical purposes. In coherence with an ethical and decolonial perspective, the decision was made not to generate new primary sources without participatory protocols and community agreements in place.

This decision is acknowledged as a limitation of the study, insofar as it restricts direct access to the lived experiences of relational communities. Nevertheless, we argue that the systematic analysis of existing literature makes it possible to establish a theoretical framework that lays the groundwork for future empirical research developed in direct collaboration with Indigenous communities and Indigenous scholars, under situated ethical protocols.

3. Background of the concept of community

It is possible to trace the concept of community in Greek philosophy, under the notion of *koinonía*, which comes from the word *koinos*, meaning "the common" or "the shared" (Álvaro, 2014). This concept delineated forms of association between individuals in the public or private life of the city:

Plato and Aristotle use the term *koinonía* (from *koinos*: what is common to several, often translated into Spanish as "community" (...). The Greeks spoke of *koinonía* to refer to the different forms of communal life that took place either in the public sphere of the city (*polis*), essentially political, or in the private or domestic sphere of the house (*oikos*), by definition non-political (Álvaro, 2014, p. 12).

Koinonía was later adopted by Christian religious communities, which emphasized group solidarity to strengthen the Christian faith. The bread was shared, and prayers were made, where the apostles ensured that the believers lived in harmony and friendship. As Enrique Dussel suggests:

(...) "Community" is what has everything in "common" (*koiná* in Greek) (...). The "mob" becomes a community, it becomes "people" (*laós* in Greek, *ham* in Hebrew). In the community, everyone is a person for other persons; the relationships are practical, and the praxis is one of charitable love: each one serves the other for the other's sake in the friendship of all with all. Therefore, everything is common. "Let us imagine an association of free men," said one author; this would be, precisely, a community where individuality is fully realized in full communal communication. The community is the real subject and the driving force of history; in it, we are "at home," in safety, in common. (Dussel, 2016, p. 13-14).

Blanco (1993), Krause (2001), Álvaro (2014), Herazo (2018), and Osorio (2023) review the concept of community from sociology, highlighting the contributions of Tönnies, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. These authors view community with nostalgia, due to the fact that in the 19th century, during the rise of capitalism, traditional forms of life were left behind. Industrialization, the division of labor, rural-to-urban migration, and

capitalism contributed to the loss of the communal, which led German critical thinkers to lament this transformation. The relevance of the concept of community arises from the emotional relationships it fosters and its association with human well-being, which it offers in the face of the challenges of urban life.

Blanco (1993) provides an overview of the background of community from the perspective of social psychology, reviewing authors such as Tajfel, with the concept of social identity, Sherif and his analysis of social norms, Ash and his reflection on the effects of group pressure on individual judgments, and Lewin with his emphasis on the relevance of the group in shaping individual behavior. What these social psychologists have in common is the importance of the group in the constitution of the psychological subject. By placing the groups of belonging in the realm of psychological influence, social psychology shifts the analysis from the individual to the microsocial level.

Blanco (1993) reviews Park's human ecology, Alihan's social ecology, and Lewin's psychological ecology, all of which emphasize the notion of territory. This corresponds to the environment where community interactions take place. Blanco (1993) presents a territorial hypothesis as follows:

(...) the shared physical territory fosters continuous and close interaction from which a common social reality emerges, defined by norms, values, beliefs, behavior patterns, language, etc., from which the individual is somewhat nourished and that ultimately become visible in their way of acting. And that territory can simply be the neighborhood, the street corner (...) (p. 15).

With these background contributions, it is understood that the concept of community has a prolific tradition in sociology, social psychology, and ecology. Sociology contrasts collective solidarity and the feeling of community belonging with individualism, labor contracts, and the emphasis on private property in capitalism. From social psychology, the community incorporates concepts and findings from the psychosocial view of the group. From ecology, it retrieves the connection between territory and community as the substrate of interpersonal relationships.

3.1 *The community in community psychology*

From community psychology, the concept of community has undergone various conceptualizations. On one hand, there is an approach that associates community with mental health and social support, as suggested by clinical-community orientations (Buelga et al., 2009) and community health perspectives (Méndez et al., 2024). On the other hand, Montero (1998), continuing the tradition of social psychology (Blanco, 1993), characterizes community as a group situated in a specific territory and time, where it develops an identity:

A dynamic, historically and culturally constituted and developed social group, preexisting the presence of researchers or social workers, which shares interests, goals, needs, and problems in a specific space and time, and collectively generates an identity, as well as organizational forms, developing and using resources to achieve its objectives (Montero, 2004, p. 96).

One of the debates regarding the concept was generated by Krause (2001) when synthesizing the concept by highlighting two aspects. First, an ideal notion of community that emphasizes friendship and trust. Second, it is associated with the geographic territory as the setting for the development of community life. The author critiques both

aspects, as on one hand, the conception of an ideal community is not applicable when groups face conflicts or tensions that prevent healthy coexistence. On the other hand, postmodernity is characterized by virtuality, where communities unfold without relying on the geographic aspect, with the virtual being a platform for interrelation and communal life.

Krause (2001) proposes a concept of community based on the subjective, which in community psychology has been addressed through the sense of community, representing the feelings of belonging to a group. She divides the subjective into three aspects. The first is belonging, which is the sense of being part of a group. The second, interrelation, is the communication between the various members. Finally, common culture, which is the network of shared meanings within the community.

In 2004, Montero revises the concept as a result of the questions raised, emphasizing the sense of community:

A community is a group in constant transformation and evolution (its size may vary), which, through its interrelation, generates a sense of belonging and social identity, with its members becoming aware of themselves as a group and strengthening as a social unit and potentiality (Montero, 2004, p. 100).

This definition is associated with the "sense of community," which refers to the feelings of belonging that members have towards their group. Sarason (1974), thirty years before Montero, had defined the sense of community as follows:

Perception of similarity with others, a conscious interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain that interdependence by giving or doing what is expected of them, the feeling of being part of a larger, stable structure on which one depends (Quoted in Montero, 2004, p. 103).

Rodríguez & Montenegro (2016) propose updating the concept within the framework of contemporary society, characterized by individualism, competition, and isolation. They consider it essential to highlight power relations in the contexts of community work, evidenced in discrimination, subalternization, and the relationship with private companies and public policies. They understand the multiplicity of agents with whom it is possible to articulate towards emancipation. They suggest that teams should be able to visualize resistances and contribute to strengthening them.

Zamora & Castillo (2016) develop the concept of community within the framework of rural psychology, highlighting how its meaning has evolved in response to changes in rurality. While the traditional view conceived the rural community as a homogeneous, stable space linked to agricultural production, it is now recognized for its dynamic and heterogeneous nature. The notion of community is not limited to a fixed territory but is shaped through social networks, power relations, and processes of economic and cultural transformation.

Parodi & Galeano (2016), within the framework of Brazilian community social psychology, consider the community as an ethical space of coexistence that enables solidaristic relationships. The community is seen as a place where the suffering caused by humiliation and social oppression can be processed, allowing individual anguish to be transformed into collective understanding. They argue that the community facilitates critique and social transformation through popular education, public policies, and social movements.

Rozas (2018) critiques the concept of community, arguing that it has been functional to the state apparatus of public policies, which has relegated it to a passive role in the face of social and political processes. He proposes a framework based on the community social subject, grounded in the social actor, emphasizing its active character. Following Hall, the author incorporates popular culture as those knowledges in tension with the dominant culture, but which are shaped by power relations. He includes the working-class social subject, women, and indigenous people to visualize and understand the political struggles of communities in their historical contexts.

Osorio (2022) suggests that the community can be considered from a functionalist, a substantivist, and a structural approach. The functionalist perspective defines it based on emotional, psychological, and intentional aspects, while the substantivist approach focuses on group dynamics, geography, institutional, and political dimensions. The structural perspective emphasizes both the territory and the intersubjective realm, highlighting that community relations occur within a specific time and space, concluding once the objectives have been achieved, and potentially re-emerging when new goals are established.

Morais et al. (2024) discuss the concept of community in relation to people experiencing homelessness. They consider the community as a space of resistance and solidarity against neoliberal individualism. They argue that the community is more than just a geographical space; it is a network of mutual support relationships. From this perspective, they endorse the role of community psychology in promoting the empowerment and organization of vulnerable groups.

Based on the reviewed perspectives, it is possible to establish that community psychology has approached the concept of community from multiple perspectives, reflecting its complexity and evolution. The community is revealed as a construct in constant redefinition, oscillating between the subjective and the structural, the territorial and the symbolic, and articulated in terms of power relations, identity, and collective action. The community is highlighted as a space of resistance to power with the potential for social change.

Nevertheless, despite the prolific development of the concept, it is evident that community psychology maintains an anthropocentric view, considering only humans as members or agents of the community. Although it takes the territory into account, this is defined merely as the place where community life unfolds. Moreover, it fails to recognize the cultural specificity of indigenous communities in its notion of community. For these reasons, the following section reviews the perspectives of the sub-discipline concerning indigenous peoples.

3.2 Community Psychology and Indigenous Peoples

The specialized literature on community psychology with indigenous peoples highlights a connection with concepts derived from the Andean world, such as *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), aimed at strengthening its linkage with social policies in Ecuador (Grondona, 2016). Similarly, it emphasizes the notion of *Suma Qamaña* and its significance in community intervention (Gutierrez et al., 2017).

There is a Mexican theoretical trend aimed at decolonizing certain concepts in community psychology, such as the concept of community and the sense of community. Herazo (2018), based on Maldonado (2015), proposes replacing the term "community" with "communality," a notion derived from the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, which

would be based on aspects that emphasize a collective "we" over the individual "I." Additionally, it highlights territory, collective work, reciprocity, decision-making in assemblies, and festivals and rituals as spaces for social cohesion.

Dutta (2018) criticizes the traditional concept of community in community psychology for being colonial and hierarchical, perceiving communities as homogeneous and pre-constituted groups associated with suffering and the need for external intervention. This perspective perpetuates domination and excludes communities as producers of knowledge. The author proposes to reconsider the concept through a dialogical and politicized approach that recognizes the agency and self-determination of communities, avoiding deficit-centered research and promoting non-hierarchical relationships, where communities are seen as thinking entities on equal terms.

Mitchel and Bustamante (2020) present a critical perspective on community psychology, arguing that it carries colonial, Eurocentric, and hegemonic elements. They recognize the potential for decolonization within the discipline, where, for example, indigenous concepts can be incorporated into its theoretical framework to reflect on notions of community, territory, and empowerment. They propose the decolonizing role that community psychology can play both in indigenous peoples and in the dominant society.

Canham (2024) questions the concept of community in community psychology, considering it anthropocentric and colonial, as it excludes indigenous and Afro-descendant cosmologies that view community as a relational network encompassing humans, nature, ancestors, and all living beings. From a decolonial perspective, he proposes "relationship" as a concept based on interconnectivity and the rejection of colonial hierarchies. He opposes universalism and attempts to integrate indigenous epistemologies into psychology, as he views this as part of the colonial logic of appropriation. He argues that the separation between humans and nature in Western epistemology has justified territorial dispossession and the oppression of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

John et al. (2025) examine community relationships and their influence on the participation of Indigenous peoples in healthcare in Canada. They conclude that health is holistic and relational, that community connection is important for identity and care, and that community relationships foster engagement with health.

According to the discussion, community psychology with Indigenous peoples has been adopting approaches aimed at decolonizing concepts derived from Western epistemology in order to understand and strengthen the dynamics of these communities. A debate can be observed regarding whether or not to indigenize community psychology, as proposed by Herazo (2018) and Mitchel & Bustamante (2020), yet Canham (2024) opposes this idea, considering it cultural appropriation. Despite this debate, the Indigenous perspective in community psychology is essential for reconfiguring it in a more inclusive and respectful manner of these worldviews.

Based on the above, it is evident that the notion of community has been problematized by community psychology, as traditional views of the concept do not allow for an understanding of the organization of Indigenous peoples. Despite these critiques, there are aspects related to the agency of non-human entities that have yet to be explored by the subdiscipline. Therefore, the following section reviews political ontology.

3.3 *Ethical–political position of the researcher*

The researcher positions themselves within this debate from the perspective of the principles of **Latin American community psychology** (Montero, 2004), which hold that any action or intervention involving communities should be guided by an **ethical–political commitment** to addressing concrete needs or contributing to the resolution of locally situated problems.

From this standpoint, the **indigenization of community psychology** (Herazo, 2018; Mitchell & Bustamante, 2020)—for example, through the use of Indigenous linguistic and conceptual frameworks—acquires meaning insofar as it is **useful for community strengthening**, while simultaneously avoiding the forms of **cultural appropriation** critiqued by Canham (2024).

4. **Latin american political ontology**

Latin American political ontology originates from the ontological turn in anthropology (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Descola, 2001; Viveiros de Castro, 2013), and its main references are Latin American anthropologists (Blaser, 2013; De la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2014, 2015). One of its analytical focuses is the socio-environmental conflicts in indigenous and Afro-descendant territories, caused by extractivism and investment projects such as hydroelectric dams, wind farms, oil, mining, forestry, and salmon farming, which target land and maritime centers for business intervention.

The term ontology is used to reflect on how social groups understand the entities and relationships in reality. They consider that ontology is built from group practices and stories about their lives (Blaser, 2013; Escobar, 2015). On one hand, groups dynamically construct the worlds they inhabit through their actions and traditions. On the other hand, ontology refers to the narratives or stories that communities have regarding their history, present, and future, such as myths and legends, which hold teachings about the origin of their culture and transmit values necessary to preserve their ways of life.

Escobar (2014 and 2015) refers to the ways of life of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities as relational ontologies, because in these worlds, both human and non-human life, encompassing nature, the universe, people, animals, and events, are interconnected. There are no isolated or meaningless elements; rather, everything, including accidents or diseases, would be the effect of certain actions, revealing a network of interdependence. Relational also means that the world is not independent of the actors, but is constructed through relationships. Things are what their relationships make them. For example, it has been found that certain indigenous communities attribute diseases not only to biological disorders but also to transgressions of the laws of nature or a loss of balance in relationships (Díaz et al., 2004; Rojas et al., 2020)

To understand relational ontologies, it is necessary to refer to the concept of agency in the social sciences, which refers to the influence of human beings in society. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an agent is one who produces an effect (Giddens, 2006). However, the anthropocentrism of the concept has been questioned because it assumes that only humans are agents, excluding other entities capable of exerting power. Thanks to discussions around the ontological turn and political ontology, it has been recognized that agency is not exclusively human but extends to non-human entities (Blanco et al.,

2020). This reconfiguration of the construct has been helpful in understanding the influence of non-humans, such as nature and spirits, in indigenous societies.

For Escobar (2014), indigenous and Afro-descendant worlds in Latin America are engaged in an ontological struggle for the life and survival of their cultures and ways of life in their territories. These worlds have been historically threatened and besieged since the colonialism of the 16th century and are currently under attack by neoliberal projects, mostly extractivist in nature, that disrupt the course of traditional life in order to impose various practices in the name of development, destroying ecosystems and the ways of life tied to nature².

Based on the previous review, it can be argued that political ontology contributes to the concept of community, as it considers that relational ontologies build their ways of life in close connection with nature. The natural world is an active agent, not only as the inhabited territory as proposed by ecology (Blanco, 1993), but also as a subjectivity integral to communal life.

4.1 Relational communities in political ontology

This section provides a theoretical reading of community organization within relational ontologies. The concept of relational communities is proposed to refer to indigenous groups that consider nature and the supernatural³ as influential agents in their social organization.

Escobar (2015) argues that indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are deeply interconnected with their territory, since, by expanding the range of agents, the territory and nature influence their social life. This perspective contrasts with the notion of community in modern social theory, which has been exclusively constructed around human emotional relationships, in opposition to the intersubjective dynamics of society (Blanco, 1993; Krause, 2001; Alvaro, 2014; Herazo, 2018; Osorio, 2023).

From the perspective of political ontology, the concept of community extends to include the diverse beings, both human and non-human, that inhabit the territories. Non-human entities include elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, caves, or forests, as well as spiritual entities that populate them.

In these ontologies, territories are vital spaces-times for all communities of men and women; but they are not only that—they are also the space-time of interrelation with the surrounding natural world, which is an integral part of it. In other words, the interrelation generates scenarios of synergy and complementarity, both for the world of men and women and for the reproduction of the other worlds that surround the human world. Within many indigenous worlds and some Afro-descendant communities in Latin

² According to Escobar (2014, 2015), relational worlds are in conflict with other forms of life, which he refers to as dualistic ontologies, corresponding to the modern colonizing world. The adjective "dualistic" refers to the epistemological and ontological foundation of these worlds in Cartesian dualism, which separates mind and body, subject and object, and has derivatives in the division between nature/culture, reason/emotion, civilized/savage, among others.

The dualist ontology supports the modern way of life, which separates nature from culture, considering culture as superior, arising from the control of nature. The natural world is thought to be inhabited by wild forces that must be tamed for the emergence of civilization. This vision has laid the foundations for the dominant culture to intervene in territories in the name of development and progress, seen as pillars of civilization.

³ Descola (2001) refers to the supernatural as the spiritual world of indigenous peoples.

America, these material spaces manifest as mountains or lakes that are understood to have life or are considered animated spaces (Escobar, 2015, p. 33).

Relational communities would be interdependently linked to the territory, with the territory being another member of the community. Alternatively, this can be explained inversely: the ancestral community would be part of the inhabited territory. The concept of relational community expands its human social boundaries to incorporate non-humans, as they are seen to have the capacity for agency. The community would no longer be an exclusive space for humans in a self-contained interaction, but rather, humans would be socially and emotionally linked to nature. For instance, the Mapuche perceive rivers and mountains as beings with whom one can engage in dialogue and to whom certain spiritual protocols must be respected, such as offerings and ritual permissions before undertaking activities in nature. This is exemplified by the following testimony from a conversation in a Mapuche community:

An elderly man spoke firmly and clearly: "The little lake [Neltume] has great power, and its owner may become angry if disturbed." A woman sitting beside him supported his view: "And the lake [Neltume] is connected to the volcano by very fragile veins." Subsequently, another woman, speaking urgently from a corner, said: "Volcanoes are very quarrelsome, they are tricky; one must approach them with respect. They send messages to each other through thunder. And as we all know, they have even fought here. The [Villarrica] volcano left the [Choshuenco] volcano maimed in a fight they had. They can also cause earthquakes" (Rojas cited by Rojas et al., 2020, p. 8).

In the framework of community relations, reciprocal affections emerge in the interaction between humans and nature, exceeding an anthropocentric approach. In this way, it is understood that, for indigenous communities, mountains can express emotions such as joy or anger resulting from the actions of community members. As a result, events like accidents or illnesses might be attributed to the actions of spirits, in response to certain human transgressions (Rojas et al., 2020).

The territory is conceived as something more than a material base for the reproduction of the human community and its practices. To capture that "something more," it is crucial to address ontological differences. When speaking of a mountain, a lagoon, or a river as an ancestor or as a living entity, what is being referenced is a social relationship, not a subject-object relationship. Each social relationship with non-humans may have its specific protocols, but they are not (or not only) instrumental or utilitarian relationships. Thus, the concept of community, initially centered on humans, expands to include non-humans (which can range from animals to mountains and spirits, depending on the specific territories) (Escobar, 2015, p. 33).

In response to the anthropocentric limits identified in both community psychology and modern ontology, the notion of *relational community* proposes understanding community as a web of relationships between humans and non-humans, in which territory, memory, spirituality, and other beings actively participate in the configuration of collective life.

4.2 *Autonomy and ancestry in relational communities*

In his studies on Afro-descendant communities located in various areas of Colombia, Escobar (2015) shows that they obey a series of motivations, highlighting the search for autonomy and ancestry, which underpin their organization, territorial occupation, and defense against capitalist projects that threaten their way of life.

Autonomy refers to the communities' aspiration to exercise control over their own territory and resources, according to their traditions and beliefs. Autonomy gains significance in the context of the ecological crisis caused by the indiscriminate use of technologies for environmental intervention, whose consequences threaten life, such as soil degradation, droughts, and the extinction of living beings.

Autonomy refers to the creation of conditions that allow for changing the norms of a world from within. It can encompass the defense of long-standing practices, the transformation of others, and the invention of new practices (Escobar, 2015, p. 35).

Ancestrality is understood as the way in which the autonomy desired by the communities is realized, based on the cultural traditions of their ancestors. These customs pertain to the beliefs and practices regarding the relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural. This ancestral mandate is the only way that communities see to preserve and defend life.

(...) Activists refer to "ancestrality" as the ancient, sometimes very ancient, occupation of a given territory; the continuity of an "ancestral mandate" that persists today in the memory of elders, and is testified by both oral tradition and historical research, as well as by long-standing historical experience (Escobar, 2015, p. 27).

Therefore, ancestrality constitutes an ontological difference between relational communities and capitalist society, because these traditions have been targeted for extermination or invisibilization by modernity. Ancestrality is a fundamental part of relational ontology, which, in this sense, looks to the past in order to build a desired future. In contrast, modernity operates based on the future, understood as progress and development, to the detriment of ancestral traditions.

Despite the aforementioned, relational communities also incorporate elements of modernity to survive, whether in the form of technologies, social networks, or a reinvention of traditions. It is necessary to adopt a non-essentialist and non-culturalist perspective of ontologies, as there are processes of hybridization and mestizaje, where relational ontologies are permeated by modern elements to continue with their goals of ancestrality and autonomy. This does not diminish political resistance, as there are contested territories where relational ontologies resist capitalist projects.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is possible to argue that *relational communities* constitute the social body of relational ontology and are characterized by incorporating, within their discourses and practices, political elements of autonomy and a reclaiming of ancestrality.

Table 1. Summary of the concept of community in the social sciences

Discipline	Main concept	Description
Greek philosophy	Koinonia.	The common and the share in the public and private space of the polis.
Classical sociology	Nostalgia for the lost community.	Capitalism broke community relations. The community associated with social welfare.
Social psychology	Social identity. Social influence.	The influence of the other on identity. Peer pressure influences social perception, decision making, and cognition.
Social ecology	The territory.	Environment where community relations develop.
Community psychology	Wellbeing and social support.	The community associated with community mental health.
	Sense of community.	Subjectivity and the sense of belonging to the community.
	Community social subject.	Critical and active communities in social transformation.
	Space of solidarity.	Resistance to humiliation and social oppression.
Community psychology with Indigenous Peoples	Communality	The "we" takes precedence over the "I". Importance of the land, collective organization, and celebrations.
	Relation	The interconnectivity of indigenous cosmologies.
Politic Ontology	Relational community	Importance of nature and supernatural for indigenous people.
	Non-human agencies.	Rescue of ancestral traditions.
	Ancestry and autonomy.	Search for political autonomy.

4.3 The territory in the Mapuche relational community

In this section, the concept of relational community is exemplified through the case of the Mapuche people. Their ideas about territory and the agents that compose it are outlined.

The Mapuche are an indigenous people of Latin America, inhabiting parts of the territories of Chile and Argentina. They are known for maintaining their cultural heritage and actively resisting Inca colonization (15th century), European colonization (16th century), and Chilean colonization (from the 19th century to the present day). The word "Mapuche" comes from Mapudungun (their native language), where "mapu" means

land and "che" means people, thus signifying "people of the land," reflecting their spiritual connection to nature. Despite facing historical marginalization from national states, the Mapuche have managed to preserve their traditions, language, and worldview (Bengoa, 1996; Mariman et al., 2006; Melin et al., 2017; Pairican, 2012).

For this people, the territory is the "mapu," conceived as a space full of life, "mognen." The "itrofill mogen" refers to life in all its manifestations, bringing together people, beings of nature, and supernatural entities. Their territory is called "wallmapu" and is divided into four main parts, known as "meli wixan mapu," which refers to the four directions: "puel mapu" (east), "pikun mapu" (north), "gülu mapu" (west), and "willi mapu" (south). Additionally, the "wallmapu" contains three different dimensions: the "nag mapu," which is the concrete land one walks on; the "minche mapu," which is the underworld; and the "wenu mapu," which is the territory of the sky, encompassing the universe (Melin et al., 2017).

From this perspective, the balance between the natural world and the human world is maintained as long as the norms of the AzMapu⁴ are respected. The AzMapu is the set of rules governing behavior in relation to the natural environment. Each community has its own AzMapu, which dictates how they should interact with elements of nature, such as mountains, the sea, forests, and so on. This reveals that the territory is not just an environment; it is an extension of the community social body. The transgression of the balance between humans and non-humans is referred to as yafkan, which manifests in diseases, climate changes, and calamities (Rojas et al., 2020)

The following quote reflects the agency attributed to nature and the consequent importance of communication with the members of communities that inhabit rural areas:

This is why a mountain speaks (zugukey ta wigkul) just like a river; they deliver messages, announcements, just like the animals and birds that live there. Therefore, the CHE must respect this and converse with the owner of the mountain, the river, or the lawen or natural remedies that exist there. The Gen or owner is the one who allows the ixofillmongen (all forms of life) to find their balance and for this balance to persist over time. Thus, as some elders tell us in their stories, when the Gen is not respected, they leave to other places, and this causes all forms of life under their protection to be threatened (Melin, et al 2017, p. 18-19).

To inhabit their lands, the Mapuche have organized themselves around the concept of "lof," which is the basic family organization, described as a territorial space composed both of the natural characteristics of the territory and the patrilineal families that inhabit it (Mariman, et al., 2006). The "lof" can be grouped around a "rewe" (altar) of a "nguillatuwe" (ceremonial place), which reveals the importance of the spiritual in the conception of the territory. A more extensive form of organization is the union of nine "rewe," known as "ayllarewe" (Melin et al., 2017).

The individuals who hold ancestral roles within the community, such as "machi" (healer), "ngenpin" (ceremonial officiant), and "longko" (family and community leader),

⁴ The AzMapu is understood as a system of norms and codes that allow for harmonious coexistence between the Mapuche and with the "itrofill mogen" (all forms of life, including both human and non-human) that make up the "mapun" (ecosystem). For the Mapuche, humans are seen as just one being among the many existing forms, playing a role as protectors or caretakers of the environment. The Mapuche recognize organic beings, the "ngen" (spiritual guardians) and "newen" (spiritual beings), with whom they must live in harmony to ensure the "küme mognen" (the good living) for all (Melin et al., 2016).

as well as those who have developed a sensitivity to the biosphere, are able to spiritually connect with the forces and spirits of nature. These individuals explore a distinct perception of being Mapuche, one capable of sensing, intuiting, dreaming, and feeling-thinking in relation to the natural environment. The main spiritual entities they communicate with are the "ngen" (spiritual guardians of nature), "newen" (natural forces), and "kuifikeche" (ancestors).

For them, it is important to know and use ancestral toponymy to name their territory, as their ancestors highlighted the properties of their lands through their native language, properties that have been lost due to colonization. This represents a cultural heritage that allows for the reconstruction of a cartography that decolonizes the sectors they currently inhabit (Melin et al., 2017). An example is the names of a sector called Kurakautin:

The Spanish name "Piedra Cortada" (Cut Stone) corresponds to "Kura Kaxün" in Mapuche. This word, from which the current name of the city-town of Kurakautin likely emanates (where *kura* means stone and *kaxün* refers to the idea of "cut," "cutting," or "that which cuts"). This term also gives rise to the name of the Cautín River in its castellanized form of the Mapuche word *kaxün* (or *katrün*) *leufü* (Cautín River), due to the characteristics of the river from the mountain range to the plains, which contains sharp stones, where the ancient Mapuche extracted stone for building various utensils such as *toki* (axes), spear tips for hunting, and for *weychan* (warfare). Thus, we encounter a double Mapuche toponymic connotation in this territory: the place "cut stone" and the river now known as Cautín. (Melin et al., 2017, p. 42).

Historically, there has been a struggle between the territory defined by the Chilean nation-state and the indigenous way of conceiving *Wallmapu*. This reveals an ontological conflict, which can be considered an equivocation⁵ (Viveiros de Castro, 2013), regarding the different meanings that the word "territory" holds for each ontology. For the Chilean state, the territory associated with nature is conceived as a reservoir of resources that can be distributed, occupied, and exploited. On the other hand, for the Mapuche, the territory is *mapu*, the space where the life of the "lof" unfolds, which includes both the human and the non-human. *Mapu* is inhabited by the *itrofill mogen*, where the *AzMapu* governs social behavior. This territorial conflict has resulted in land usurpations, as well as processes of defense and reclamation⁶.

⁵ The concept of equivocation was coined by Viveiros de Castro (2013) to refer to how the same words (homonyms) can have different meanings depending on the ontology that uses or interprets them.

⁶ From a historical perspective, it is revealed that the Mapuche have been deterritorialized from the Wallmapu since the Spanish invasion of the 16th century. With the establishment of the Spanish in the Mapocho Valley, the submission, expropriation, and colonization of the "pikunmapu" (northern land) began, leading to a massive migration to the other areas of the territory. After the negotiations (coyagtun) held with the Spanish in the second half of the 17th century, it was established that the Wallmapu would remain from the Bío Bío River southward (Pairican, 2012). Following the occupation of Araucanía in the late 19th century, the Mapuche were left with only 5% of their land, marginalized and categorized as poor peasants (Bengoa, 1996). Later, with Salvador Allende's agrarian reform in the 1970s, they managed to recover part of their land but were once again dispossessed under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1973. With the arrival of democracy in 1990, a new bureaucracy for resolving ethnic issues was established, enabling the purchase of land from private individuals under the Indigenous Law, allowing them to recover a small portion of the territory (Pairican, 2011). Today, conflicts have intensified due to the presence of the forestry industry, which causes ecological and social harm to surrounding communities.

Thus, the idea of “territory,” while being a wingka concept rooted in Western thought to account for forms of material or symbolic appropriation generated in the context of power relations over geographical space, has acquired and adopted fundamental importance in the Mapuche discourse within the framework of their political, cultural, linguistic, and economic claims and collective rights. In such a way that it is understood that these rights cannot be exercised unless there is first recognition of the territorial dimension in which each of these aspects is enacted (Melin et al., 2017, p. 13).

From the perspective of hybridization and mestizaje processes, the Mapuche case illustrates how relational ontologies engage with modernity without being subsumed by it. In this situation, modern elements are selectively appropriated and re-signified to support territorial defense, collective memory, and political autonomy. For instance, technologies and legal discourses may be mobilized to articulate claims over ancestral lands, while cartographic tools, social networks, and institutional languages are reworked to sustain relational ties with territory, ancestors, and non-human beings (Melin et al., 2017).

From this perspective, hybridization does not entail a dilution of relational ontologies, but a dynamic process through which they persist and adapt within contested socio-political contexts. Rather than diminishing political resistance, these hybrid configurations often strengthen it, particularly in territories where relational ontologies confront extractivist and capitalist projects.

Based on what has been discussed, it is possible to illustrate the relational community in the Mapuche people, which reveals the influence of nature as the bearer of life (mogen). For them, the community's balance does not depend solely on humans but is sustained by harmonious coexistence with nature (itrofill mogen), and communication with non-human agents (ngen, newen, and kuifikeche), following a specific normative system (AzMapu).

What has been reviewed reveals the territorial conflicts that the Mapuche have historically faced with the state of Chile, where they have been dispossessed of much of their land. This is why it is essential to expand the comprehensive framework of community psychology to decolonize its practice, transcend anthropocentrism, and promote territorial rights in socio-environmental issues.

4.4 *Practical implications of the notion of relational community*

Considering territory as an active agent in the social life of communities implies that institutions engaged in interventions must respect local cultural codes, safeguarding the boundaries established around sacred places, as well as respecting ceremonies, calendars, rituals, and symbolic practices specific to the local culture.

In terms of local diagnostics, it is necessary to consider not only human actors as part of community relational networks, but also to incorporate territory itself as a constitutive element. In this regard, participatory mapping methodologies acquire particular relevance (Melin et al., 2017).

From a research perspective, it becomes necessary to incorporate theoretical frameworks derived from political ecology and environmental law, including concepts such as rights of nature, ecocide, sacrifice zones, and extractivism, which allow for an expanded understanding of the care of nature and its social impacts. This perspective is consistent with studies that analyze the psychological and political experiences of

communities affected by ecological degradation and extractivism, highlighting processes of resistance and territorial defense (Barnwell et al., 2020).

Social research should adopt a participatory orientation, in which both the community and the researcher are actively engaged in the topic under study. Researchers should become familiar with the territory, move through it, and engage in ethnographic or qualitative approaches in order to understand the significance of nature within community life.

This approach raises ethical dilemmas that must be addressed, as institutional practices may lead to cultural appropriation or epistemic extractivism, producing technical knowledge that holds deep spiritual meaning for the community. To avoid these pitfalls, methodological strategies such as participatory research, the return of results, co-authorship with local knowledge holders, respect for limits on what may be published, and the non-instrumentalization of ceremonies or spiritual beliefs should be incorporated.

5. Conclusions

Throughout the text, it has been possible to trace the trajectory that the concept of community has followed within part of Western social thought, reviewing sociological, psychosocial, ecological, and community psychology foundations, and identifying its main theoretical bases, internal tensions, and epistemological limits—particularly in relation to territory, subjectivity, and agency.

Based on this review, it was shown that one of the key differences between the notion of community within the social disciplines and that of political ontology concerns the attribution of agency. While community psychology has tended to locate agency exclusively in humans, political ontology expands it to encompass the relevance and influence of nature and spirits within relational ontologies. From this distinction, the concept of relational communities is proposed to characterize Indigenous and Afro-descendant territories shaped by relations with non-humans, territorial autonomy, and ancestrality.

To illustrate relational communities, the article draws on the Mapuche understanding of territory, highlighting a relational ontology in which territory and other beings actively participate in community life, in contrast to modern conceptions of community.

The concept of relational community has practical applications in participatory research, community intervention, and the design of public policies, programs, or social projects that recognize the agency of nature within Indigenous communities. This perspective makes it possible to rethink intervention strategies beyond instrumental approaches, strengthening frameworks that consider territories as collective subjects of rights and as spaces for the production of meaning, affect, and political action in socio-environmental conflicts.

This article contributes to community psychology by linking it with political ontology through the theoretical proposal of relational community, which integrates both human and non-human community agents. This approach expands the concept of community and offers tools that decolonize the understanding and intervention of socio-environmental and territorial issues.

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