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An Integrative Pathway Between Psychology and Public Policy-Making Towards the Governance of Changing Social Scenarios

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Abstract

Contemporary societies are undergoing rapid and profound transformations—economic, technological, social, and environmental—increasingly challenging the capacity of public governance to effectively manage social and structural complexity. In response, new governance paradigms promoting inclusive and participatory approaches are emerging with the aim of increasing the capability of public policy-making to effectively grasp social demands. This paper aims to foster the potential synergies between participatory policy-making and semiotic psychology, building on the constructivist and psychoanalytical frameworks. Moving beyond the traditional, medicalized, and normalizing stances characterizing mainstream psychological approaches, we advocate for a framework capable of addressing the symbolic and emotional foundations of the social reality driving individual and collective behaviors. This is expected to foster the debate about the intersection between psychology and public policy-making, emphasizing the critical role of semiotic dynamics in the structural and political transformations.

Keywords: policy-making; governance; psychology; semiosis; emotions; constructionism

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the potential contribution of psychology—framed within a semiotic approach—to the contemporary challenges of public policy-making in Western societies undergoing profound transformations under the pressures of globalization and neoliberalism. It addresses both the psychological scientific community and policy scholars and professionals engaged in territorial planning, public management, and governance, aiming to bridge disciplinary boundaries in tackling systemic societal issues.

The research problem is twofold. First, policy-making approaches grounded in rational–technical models assume that decision-makers can clearly define objectives, identify all possible alternatives, and evaluate their consequences through systematic cost–benefit analysis. In practice, these approaches face the constraint of bounded rationality, as policymakers operate with limited knowledge about how structural transformations are symbolically and emotionally represented by local actors. Even when technically optimal solutions are identified, implementation gaps frequently arise due to the influence of power relations, vested interests, and the broader relationship with political reality that determines both the framing of problems and the feasibility of solutions. By privileging predictability and quantification, rational–technical models tend to oversimplify complex social phenomena, neglecting value conflicts, feedback loops, and unintended consequences.

Second, psychology itself has experienced a progressive marginalization in addressing collective and systemic challenges [1,2]. This is partly due to the fragmentation of the discipline into increasingly specialized subfields, with limited theoretical and methodological integration, and its over-reliance on an individual-centered, medicalized paradigm [3,4]. As a result, psychology has often focused on normalizing individuals to predefined standards [2,5–7] rather than engaging with the relational and symbolic processes that structure human experience and guide collective behavior. Both domains—policy-making and psychology—thus share a deeper epistemological impasse: they underplay the symbolic, affective, and context-dependent nature of human action, thereby limiting their capacity to respond to contemporary transformations.

In response, this paper has two aims. The first is to advocate for a renewed understanding of psychology that moves beyond dominant, individual-focused representations and reclaims the discipline's capacity to address systemic societal transformations. This involves reframing psychology not merely as a tool for individual well-being or normative correction, but as a lens for uncovering and interpreting the affective and symbolic dynamics underpinning collective life and its cultural transformations. The second is to explore avenues for integrating such an approach into governance-oriented policy frameworks, which are increasingly central to tackling complex societal challenges.

To this end, the paper highlights the distinctive contributions psychology can offer when accounting for how individuals and groups construct social reality through symbolic and relational processes. From this perspective, psychological intervention should shift from primarily addressing individual pathology or wellness to transforming broader social and political fields. Methodologies such as Emotional Textual Analysis (ETA) and Indicators of Organizational Development (IOD) are proposed as tools for exploring context-specific symbolic configurations and affective tensions, thereby informing policies and interventions that are better aligned with local meaning systems.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reconstructs the current social and political contexts in which these issues emerge; Section 3 reviews the state of psychology, focusing on professional models and methodological approaches; Section 4 presents a theoretical framework rooted in constructionist and psychoanalytic traditions; Section 5 outlines how psychology can contribute to contemporary public policy-making; and Section 6 concludes by summarizing the interplay between semiotic psychology and policy-making and identifying directions for future research.

2. Global Transformations Challenge Public Policy-Making

Contemporary societies are experiencing increasingly frequent and disruptive transformations that deeply affect both their structural functioning and the conditions regulating collective life. The socioeconomic and political changes associated with globalization —marked by the outsourcing of manufacturing, the growth of service economies, and the emergence of precarious work and gig-economy labor markets—initially produced economic growth but subsequently revealed significant industrial decline, job displacement, and rising income inequality [8,9]. Parallel to these trends, digital technologies have spurred innovation and productivity but have also generated new digital divides and forms of social inequality [10], particularly in aging populations facing declining birth rates.

These economic and technological shifts have been accompanied by profound cultural transformations. A key feature is the increasing individualization [11,12] that drives individuals to disengage from traditional social structures (e.g., class, family, religion) and construct their identities through personal choices and individual responsibility [13], often under conditions of heightened dependence on market forces. Such transformations

directly challenge existing policy-making and governance models, demanding substantial reconfiguration [14].

Modern public administration must address complex, interconnected, and often unpredictable issues with conflicting stakeholder interests that challenge traditional hierarchical and linear decision-making models [15]. At the same time, the decline of public trust in government, influenced by perceived inefficiency, corruption, and political polarization [16], makes this purpose even more challenging as this erosion of legitimacy undermines citizen compliance, engagement, and participation in the production of public value [17]. The increasing ideological divide in many Western democracies [18] contributes to the polarization of the public sphere expressed through populist rhetoric [19], which in turn further destabilizes trust [20,21], fueling a dangerous vicious cycle.

Overall, the broader dynamics of modernization and globalization have exponentially increased environmental variability, along with the complexity of communication, organizational structures, productive systems, and social relations [22,23].

Increasing social conflicts and structural tensions have resulted from these transformations. Among the most disruptive are the crisis of traditional democratic and party systems, the growing disconnection between civil society and institutions, the erosion of political representation, the proliferation of protest movements and populist dynamics, and the persistent instability of financial and economic markets. Taken together, these phenomena mark a profound rupture in established social and institutional structures, generating an urgent need for new frameworks and instruments of governance.

In parallel, public management and policy-making practices are undergoing a significant transformation, often described as the shift from "government" to "governance" [24,25]. This paradigmatic transition entails both a redefinition of how policies are conceived and the mechanisms through which they are implemented. Concepts such as open government, active citizenship, subsidiarity, and participatory or deliberative processes exemplify the trend toward more inclusive and distributed political decision-making [26–28].

The growing emphasis on governance reflects a renewed interest by public administrations in promoting shared responsibility and encouraging the active involvement of social actors traditionally situated outside formal political spheres [29,30]. As a result, non-institutional agents are increasingly recognized as co-protagonists in public decision-making, contributing to a redefinition of the boundaries and practices of public action.

These shifts also highlight the need for policy design and implementation that are more sensitive to the specificities of the social environments they address. There is a growing demand for policy interventions capable of meaningfully engaging with the plural, dynamic, and context-dependent demands emerging from contemporary networks of social actors [31–33]. However, this imperative coexists with declining citizen engagement, driven by the erosion of trust and legitimacy in public institutions.

3. Operational and Conceptual Shortcomings of a "Medicalized" Psychology

Contemporary psychology remains predominantly oriented toward curative interventions, often modeled on the medical paradigm [34,35]. This orientation reflects the broader emergence of a therapeutic culture in Western societies, in which individuals are increasingly viewed as intrinsically vulnerable and in need of professional support [36]. As a result, everyday difficulties are progressively medicalized, normalizing reliance on psychological and therapeutic services as routine responses to life challenges.

The dominant public image of psychology—and of the psychologist, frequently conflated with the psychotherapist—aligns closely with this cultural framework. Psychology is often associated with the private space of the consulting room, where the primary objectives

are restoring mental balance, healing trauma, eliminating symptoms, and re-establishing a presumed state of "normality." Even in organizational and educational settings, psychologists frequently adopt logics borrowed from psychotherapy, focusing on improving interpersonal communication, managing conflict, promoting well-being, or reducing bullying. Such aims are framed as restorative processes designed to return individuals or groups to an "acceptable" state of functioning defined by socially normative expectations.

This medicalized orientation assumes two core elements: (1) theoretical frameworks explaining deviations from "normal" functioning, and (2) a clearly defined object of intervention. In medicine, pathologies are identified through measurable biological markers and treated through standardized protocols. Psychology, however, lacks an equivalent epistemological foundation: deviations from "normality" are often conceptualized through abstract constructs (e.g., neuroses, self-esteem, adaptation) that are difficult to operationalize and measure. Consequently, psychological interventions tend to produce outcomes that are subjective and context-dependent, such as increased self-awareness or emotional regulation, which are inherently difficult to quantify.

This conceptual vagueness contributes to the persistent ambiguity of psychology's professional identity, often conflated with or overshadowed by other social figures—ranging from corporate coaches and wellness consultants to media commentators or even fortune tellers [37]. Moreover, many psychological goals, such as "adapting individuals to their contexts," risk ambiguity and even normative misuse: the same concept can serve emancipatory objectives (e.g., social reintegration) or coercive ones (e.g., compliance under authoritarian regimes). Unlike medicine, which focuses on concrete pathological entities, psychological practice often struggles to define clear and invariant targets of intervention and to link them to standardized, scientifically validated methods.

These conceptual and methodological weaknesses raise ethical concerns. Interventions risk becoming prescriptive tools aimed at regulating individual behavior to align with socially accepted norms of what is "appropriate" or "correct" [38]. Such frameworks rely on inherently asymmetrical power relations between practitioners and clients, which may generate resistance and limit the legitimacy of the intervention itself.

The implications extend beyond professional practice to public policy. Policies based on instrumental rationality often assume individuals to be rational agents pursuing shared desirable outcomes. However, this approach underestimates conflicts arising from divergent interests and from hierarchical decision-making logics based on the "one best way." In practice, policy outcomes are often unpredictable and contested, as illustrated by phenomena such as the "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBY) syndrome [39], where collective decisions generate localized opposition and social conflict.

4. A Semiotic Psychology Unfolds New Potential Interventions

Over the last four decades, semiotic approaches [40,41] in psychology—emerging at the intersection of social constructionist [42,43] and psychoanalytic frameworks [44,45]—have enabled a fundamental reconceptualization of the discipline's objects of inquiry. Rather than mirroring the medical model, which frames psychological phenomena as individual "deficits" requiring correction, these approaches focus on crises that occur within the relationship between individuals and their social contexts. Such crises emerge when historically situated systems of meaning fail to provide individuals with symbolic resources to deal effectively with external conditions of reality [46–48].

From this perspective, external reality does not exist independently of the categories used to experience it; instead, what we perceive as "reality" is a product of our affective symbolization of it. In other words, the first categories through which we engage with reality are inherently emotional, attributing intentionality and meaning to events

and objects (e.g., feeling anger toward a nightstand that "hurt" one's foot). This semiotic process—central to unconscious functioning as theorized by Freud [49] and later reconceptualized by Matte Blanco[1] [45]—highlights how meanings are not neutral representations but emotionally charged constructions [41].

Semiotic psychology thus emphasizes the contextual dependency of psychological phenomena: a single behavior may carry radically different meanings depending on the cultural and relational settings in which it occurs [50,51]. This implies a paradigm shift from an individual-centered psychology to one concerned with how minds construct and share meanings within relational, cultural, and institutional contexts [41]. In this view, emotions are not simply responses to external stimuli ("I am angry because my partner left me") but symbolic tools through which reality is co-constructed and shared (e.g., "I symbolize my home as a place where I am protected and understood").

This shift away from the curative and normalizing aims of mainstream psychology—largely subordinate to medicine—opens new avenues for disciplinary development. It enables psychology to construct its own objects of inquiry instead of borrowing them uncritically from ordinary language and treating them as "pathological deviations". Instead, phenomena are theoretically translated into constructs consistent with psychological models of the mind, in line with constructionist assumptions that no object is self-evident but becomes experienceable through semiotic processes.

In practical terms, this means that social and political phenomena cannot be addressed as fixed entities but as symbolic constructions shaped by emotions and relational dynamics. Similar to how physics or mathematics create theoretical languages to define their objects of study, psychology needs to develop its own disciplinary language rather than simply adopting ordinary categories such as "adaptation," "resilience," or "self-esteem" as given. Without such translation, psychological interventions risk being limited to descriptive or corrective ("orthopedic") approaches, mirroring medical logic rather than advancing explanatory and transformative insights.

By focusing on how emotions shape our experience of reality and influence behaviors and decisions, semiotic psychology offers a framework for addressing pressing social challenges such as political polarization, populism [19,52,53], declining trust in public institutions [54], economic inequality [55], and climate crises [56]. It promotes collaboration with field disciplines and professionals to co-construct interventions sensitive to the psychosocial dynamics underlying these complex issues.

This perspective resonates with policy science approaches that move beyond rationalist "one-size-fits-all" solutions toward post-rationalist frameworks of polycentric governance and communicative action [57,58]. Policy implementation depends not only on formal agreements but also on the implicit conventions and symbolic meanings shared at the local level. From a semiotic psychological standpoint, policies cannot be treated as objectively given realities: their meaning and impact depend on situated psychosocial dynamics.

Consequently, similar policy instruments—such as deliberative forums, participatory budgeting, or transparency initiatives—can produce radically different outcomes depending on context [59,60]. For instance, participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (1989) increased investments in underserved areas, enhanced citizen trust, and reduced clientelism [61]. By contrast, its adoption in Chicago (2012) was characterized by low participation, domination by organized interest groups, and limited effects on equity and trust [62]. These differences highlight the importance of integrating semiotic psychological insights into policy design and evaluation to account for context-specific symbolic processes and emotional dynamics.

5. A Psychological Contribution to the Challenge of Governing Complexity

The evidence discussed thus far suggests that interventions aimed at fostering social change often fail to align initial premises, intended goals, and actual outcomes. Even interventions grounded in coherent, rational, and evidence-based assumptions frequently produce unexpected or ineffective results [63]. A paradigmatic example is the transition from government to governance, which emerged to overcome the limitations of bureaucratic, centralized models by promoting flexible, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches suited to complex environments [64,65]. Deliberative, negotiated, and communicative decision-making models were introduced as more effective alternatives for managing such complexity [66,67]. However, despite these innovations, persistent challenges remain [68–72]. Social complexity continues to resist linear, rationalist forms of control, causing public interventions aimed at citizen participation, social capital enhancement, or transparency promotion to fall short of intended behavioral changes or compliance [73,74]. Such failures underscore the limitations of assuming straightforward cause–effect relations in complex social systems.

From a psychological perspective, these limitations highlight the need to understand how individuals and groups symbolically construct their experience of reality. Semiotic psychology posits that reality has no intrinsic meaning but is experienced through emotional symbolizations that guide both individual and collective behavior [74]. Semiotic processes operate on two intertwined levels: a rational–declarative level and an emotional–unconscious level [45]. The latter imbues external reality with affective significance, shaping adaptive responses to environmental changes. When contexts shift, symbolic frameworks that once maintained equilibrium may collapse, leading to crises—moments when existing semiotic systems no longer resonate with new conditions [75].

For interventions to be effective—whether aimed at fostering social capital, increasing participation, or improving transparency—they must engage with how initiatives are symbolically and emotionally represented within local contexts. Semiotic psychology offers conceptual and methodological tools to support this task, promoting context-sensitive approaches to social and political change. Unlike technical disciplines focused on predetermined structural outcomes, semiotic psychology explores how shared meanings influence the perception, experience, and enactment of change within social systems. Because semiotic dynamics are historically constructed and continuously evolving, they cannot be predicted a priori but must be investigated in situ to inform policy objectives and strategies.

A key implication is that policy goals such as "increase citizen participation" or "encourage energy-saving behavior" should not be treated as straightforward targets. Instead, psychological interventions should foster reflective emotional thinking about the affective tensions underlying representations and behaviors. Change, from this perspective, involves transforming the emotional frameworks through which reality is experienced and enacted.

Reflecting this growing focus on symbolic processes, several psychological approaches have emerged to explore semiotic dynamics' impact on collective and political change [40,76–80]. Political and societal phenomena are thus understood as semiotic responses to uncertainty, crisis, and global transformations—such as economic crises, pandemics, and migration—that disrupt individuals' and communities' meaning frameworks. To restore predictability, collectives generate affect-laden shared narratives that simplify complexity and orient social behavior [79]. For example, contemporary political rhetorics often employ identity boundaries (e.g., "real people" vs. "corrupt elites") as semiotic simplifications that reduce complex issues into emotionally resonant dichotomies [77]. Politics is thereby a primary domain for meaning reconstruction, offering narratives, identities, and

symbolic resources that rapidly reduce uncertainty, making policy-making a sensitive field for semiotic theory and action research.

This perspective entails a shift from data-driven, phenomenologically focused psychology toward a theory-driven science centered on sense-making [40]. Salvatore's Semio-Dynamic Model of Sense Making (SDMS) conceptualizes human experience as generated through dynamic sign transitions within cultural and affective fields, emphasizing structural and symbolic dimensions of mind beyond surface behaviors or subjective reports. This framework integrates cultural psychology, psychodynamic theory, and semiotic approaches, positing affect, identity, and cognition as inseparable in meaning construction. From a methodological standpoint, abductive reasoning, field-sensitive modeling, and pluralistic empirical approaches are crucial to capturing the underlying semiotic structures of human experience rather than merely describing phenomena.

Similarly, Magioglou [81] advocates for a psychological approach transcending individual-level models of political behavior by conceptualizing political psychology as a societal sense-making process wherein citizens and institutions co-construct symbolic worlds that influence political attitudes, trust, participation, and legitimacy. She emphasizes how cultural narratives and historical trajectories shape collective perceptions of authority, democracy, and social change, bridging micro-level psychological processes and macro-level cultural dynamics.

Methodologically, these approaches converge on analyzing semiotic dynamics through collective discourses. Discourse is viewed not merely as language use but as a semiotic practice through which cultural values, power relations, and identities are enacted and transformed. Analyses focus on how narratives, metaphors, and positioning strategies in conversations, interviews, media texts, and public debates reflect and reshape broader symbolic universes, linking micro-level interactions with macro-level cultural and political structures. By coding discursive repertoires, tracing dialogical voices, and situating them within historical and institutional contexts, these approaches illustrate how discourse actively participates in recursive meaning-making processes, enabling a nuanced understanding of the mutual constitution of psychological and cultural phenomena [81–84].

Within this framework, the Italian psychosociological tradition has developed two primary action–research methodologies [85]. Emotional Textual Analysis (ETA) [86–90] analyzes texts and discourses by identifying "dense words"—emotionally loaded terms that retain potent affective significance even outside their original discourse context (e.g., trust, freedom). ETA reveals local meaning configurations through clustering dense words and projecting clusters onto factorial spaces. Meanwhile, the Indicators of Organizational Development (IOD) methodology [48,91] uses ad hoc questionnaires grounded in interpretive models of shared semiotic dynamics rather than explicit semantic content. IOD explores complex psychosocial dimensions shaping group representations and behaviors, with ETA often informing its design.

Both ETA and IOD build on an integration of qualitative and quantitative data to analyze affective symbolizations. Although both use discourses produced by individuals, they focus on their shared symbolic components, enabling the emergence of different modes of affective symbolization that constitute the way reality is collectively made salient.

This feature fosters a potential methodological pluralism, combining semiotic tools with reflexive approaches to enhance the capacity of psychological and social sciences in general to support governance processes' capability to grasp the symbolic dynamics underpinning collective life.

6. Conclusions

This paper addressed two interconnected challenges: the limitations of policy-making approaches grounded in rational–technical models and the marginalization of psychology in addressing systemic social transformations, both of which are shaped by the broader dynamics of globalization and neoliberalism. In both domains, a common epistemological limitation was identified: the tendency to overlook the symbolic, affective, and context-dependent nature of human behavior.

First, public interventions designed to foster social change often fail to achieve their intended outcomes, even when based on coherent, rational, and evidence-based assumptions. This failure stems from the intrinsic complexity of social systems, where behaviors and representations are shaped by situated symbolic and emotional dynamics rather than linear cause–effect relationships. Second, psychology, when modeled predominantly on a medical paradigm, has tended to focus on individual normalization to predefined standards, neglecting the relational and symbolic processes that structure human experience and collective behavior.

Semiotic psychology offers an alternative framework to overcome these limitations. By shifting the focus from individual pathology to the symbolic construction of reality, it emphasizes how emotions and meanings mediate the relationships between individuals and their social contexts, as well as the way public decisions are framed and acted upon. This perspective provides conceptual and methodological resources to support policy design and implementation, particularly in contexts characterized by conflict, unpredictability, and rapid transformation.

By employing action–research methodologies such as Emotional Textual Analysis (ETA) and Indicators of Organizational Development (IOD), semiotic psychology enables the exploration of context-specific symbolic configurations and affective tensions. These insights can inform the development of policies and interventions that are better aligned with local meaning systems, thereby enhancing their legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Integrating semiotic psychology with policy-making processes can thus produce two significant outcomes: policy-making that accounts for how structural transformations are symbolically framed by local actors, thereby improving its efficacy, and a renewed disciplinary identity for psychology, capable of intervening beyond the individual and contributing to the resolution of broader social problems. Rather than attempting to control complexity, this approach engages with it, recognizing that social change requires transforming the emotional and symbolic frames that structure collective life, rather than merely enforcing behavioral compliance.

In conclusion, positioning psychology as a strategic partner in governance processes can advance more inclusive, adaptive, and context-sensitive public policies. By bridging the gap between intended objectives and real-world outcomes, semiotic psychology offers a path toward interventions that not only respond to contemporary societal challenges but also contribute to reshaping the symbolic and affective foundations of collective existence.

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Notes

[1] Building on Freud's foundation, the author offers an interpretation of the unconscious as structured around the principles of generalization and symmetry. It thus constitutes a mode of being of the mind that transcends Aristotelian logic—characteristic of rational and divisive thought—grounded on different operative rules.

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