

Psychological Science Around the World: Latin America

March 14, 2012



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Latin American psychological science is a growing field with a promising future despite its young professional and scientific history. Here I will share some of that history and discuss some of the areas in which I believe Latin American psychological science must keep evolving to make our science more global and to encourage research in the public interest.

The Roots of Latin American Psychological Science

The circumstances that gave rise to psychological thinking in Latin America can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century, a period when most nations in Latin America were declaring their independence and institutional secularization began to take root. In this context, different forms of eclecticism appeared in the public discourse of philosophers and teachers, especially in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela (Klappenbach & Pavesi, 1994). With the advance of this process and the shift toward positivism that occurred near the end of that century, young nations embraced new scientific theories as a means for development. One of the interests they shared was to “improve man,” and Social Darwinism therefore offered a framework for supporting immigration and education-innovation processes. This context allowed the first Laboratory of Experimental Psychology to be established in 1891 in Argentina by Mercante, followed by Piñero’s laboratory, also in Argentina, and de Madeiros’ laboratory in Brazil, both of which were founded in 1899. These laboratories produced a regional point of view about educational relevance, and psychological thinking was considered to be central to the development of Latin America. After the First World War concluded, a backlash against positivism took place in some countries, leading to a decrease in the impulse of experimental psychology. Also,

important advances in psychoanalytic theory occurred during that time, especially in the southern regions of Latin America, and particularly in Argentina. These developments are the reason that the first Latin American countries to establish a degree in psychology (Colombia, 1947; Chile, 1948; Cuba, 1950; Brazil, 1953; Argentina, 1954) had training programs that involved a combination of experimental traditions and a strong clinical orientation associated with psychoanalysis.

Contemporary Trends

Despite the wide impact psychoanalysis has had in Latin American psychological training for the last 30 years, it has since been superseded by cognitive and behavioral theories, along with neuroscience. This trend is especially prominent in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, and, to some extent, Peru and Chile. Southern countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, still have a more psychoanalytic orientation.

Teaching Psychological Science in Latin America

In almost all Latin American countries, a university degree in psychology takes four to six years to complete, and the coursework includes general psychology as well as some specific training in applied areas. Individuals who earn this degree are usually allowed to practice psychological therapy upon completion, so it is equivalent to a master's degree rather than a bachelor's degree.

The most influential event for psychology education in the region was the Latin American Conference on Training in Psychology that took place in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1974 under the direction of Rubén Ardila. At the conference, a Latin American Model for Professional Training was proposed that was based on the Boulder Model for scientist-practitioner training, which had been established some years earlier. Most important recommendations issued by this conference included the acknowledgment of psychology as both science and profession, the need to develop common training programs, the requirements for a thesis, and supervised professional training as a condition to receive a psychology degree (Ardila, 1978).

Years later, some agreements were made in 1997 and 1998 in the Mercosur (Common Southern Market, an alliance of Latin American countries to promote free trade) to begin the standardization of training programs in the member countries and to fund free transit for research and teaching. Some of these recommendations were considered recently in the context of degree accreditation in many countries (especially, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru). This process acknowledges the relevance of the Bologna Declaration to scientific and professional training, but its definitive instrumentation is more complex because of the different socio-institutional and historical aspects of the region.

The psychology books used in Latin America include *Psychology in the Americas* [*Psicología en las Américas*], edited in 1999 by Alonso and Eagly, *Psychology in the Southern Cone* [*La psicología en el cono sur*], published by Vilanova and Di Doménico in 1999, and the three volumes of *Central Issues for Psychologists' Academic Instruction and Professional Training in the Americas* [*Problemas centrales para la formación académica y el entrenamiento profesional del psicólogo en las Américas*], which were edited in 2001 by Toro, Villegas, and Marassi.

Organized Psychological Science

The first regional psychology organization, the Interamerican Society of Psychology [Sociedad Interamericana de Psicología (SIP)], was founded in 1951 in Mexico City. This organization is currently the biggest and most important psychology organization in Latin America, and it brings together individual psychologists who share common scientific and professional interests. The SIP organizes the Interamerican Congress of Psychology every two years, and it also publishes a scientific journal. Over the past few years, it has also started organizing a Regional Congress that takes place in between the Interamerican meetings. The next meeting will be held in June 2012 in Bolivia.

In 2002, the Union of Latin American Psychological Organizations [Unión Latinoamericana de Entidades de Psicología (ULAPSI)] was founded in Mexico with the aim of uniting psychological institutions in the goal of promoting more direct action toward the resolution of regional social needs. The ULAPSI holds the Latin American Congress of Psychology every two years, and it also has a scientific journal. The next ULAPSO congress will be in Uruguay in April 2012.

The third major organization in the region is the Iberoamerican Federation of Psychology Associations [Federación Iberoamericana de Asociaciones de Psicología (FIAP)], which was founded in 2002 in Colombia. The FIAP, similar to the ULAPSI, doesn't bring together individuals, but it focuses on connections at the organizational level by forming connections between journal editors, university deans, and research groups. The FIAP organizes the Iberoamerican Congress of Psychology every two years, and the next one will be held in Brazil in October 2012.

There are important endeavors in organized psychology in Latin America, and the success of these organizations will likely depend on how well they can cooperate with each other and form complementary goals to help Latin American psychological science develop.

Psychology Journals

There are many important general psychology journals in the Latin American region. The first journal, the *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, has been published since 1967 by the SIP. The *Latin American Journal of Psychology* was created next, and has been edited by Konrad Lorenz University since 1969. Rosario University started publishing *Advances in Latin American Psychology* in 1982. The fourth journal that was introduced was *Universitas Psychologica*. As for more recent publications, the *Panamerican Journal of Psychology* has been published since 2001 by the Pontifical Xavierian University [Pontificia Universidad Javeriana]; *Psychology for Latin America* has been edited by the ULAPSI since 2004; and finally, the most recent publication is *PSIENCIA. Latin American Journal of Psychological Science*, which has been edited since 2009 by the Association for the Advancement of Psychological Science.

Editors' networks exist at a regional level, such as the Iberoamerican Psychology Journals' Editors Network [Red de Editores de Revistas de Psicología de Iberoamérica] organized by the FIAP, and at a national level, such as the Colombian Association of Psychology Faculties [Asociación Colombiana de Facultades de Psicología (ASCOFAPSI)], the Brazilian Association of Scientific Editors in Psychology [Associação Brasileira de Editores Científicos em Psicologia (ABECiP)], the Scientific Psychology Journals Editors' Network [Red de Editores de Revistas Científicas en Psicología] in Argentina, and the Chilean Association of Scientific Psychology Journals [Asociación Chilena de Revistas Científicas de Psicología].

Latin American psychological scientists also maintain regional journal databases, including the Latin America, Caribbean, Spain and Portugal Scientific Journals Network [Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal (Redalyc)] and the Virtual Library of Health [Biblioteca Virtual en Salud (BVS-ULAPSI)].

Forthcoming Challenges

We've seen incredible growth in Latin American psychological science in the twentieth century, and even though the field briefly strayed away from scientific principles, it's now increasingly defining itself as a scientific discipline and an evidence-based profession. Yet challenges remain and we believe there are two main elements in the field that are causing tension: the internationalization of science and its national relevance.

International Integration

With the internationalization of psychological science, it has become increasingly important to conduct research on common topics and to use standard methods. Latin American researchers have been working toward this goal for several years with some success, but there is still much to do. For instance, if we analyze citation reports for Scopus (1996-2010), the first 10 countries account for 88% of the citations (3,770,720), whereas Latin America accounts for only 0.9% (around 31,000 citations). We think it's critical for regional psychological science researchers to be able to have their work cited in international journals, not only as a means to have better individual qualifications but to have the chance to discuss their work within a bigger audience. Also, international integration would lead to a better citation index within the Latin American region, something that has not yet been fully achieved. Finally, we believe integration can be better achieved in the context of an open-access publication policy, which would allow for wider availability of content, especially for peripheral countries. We believe all this can be achieved with a more systematic fostering of scientific competence at different levels, but especially in training programs, and through organized professional societies.

Local Articulation

The question that arises after defining a strong scientific program for psychology is how to make that knowledge useful to both psychological science professionals and the general public. This is probably one of the most pressing intellectual problems of the age. Science has proved that it can systematically help mankind to live longer, but it has yet to show how our societies can live better. Increasing the social relevance of psychological research can be attempted in several ways. One approach is to include more effective training about social context and the role of science in society, an approach called "social responsibility training" (Altman, 1996). Also, we can help researchers better understand how their research topics might be integrated within clinical practice (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008) or public policies (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2010). The key point here is to broaden our understanding of science and to rethink the gap between its truthfulness and usefulness (Drenth, 2008), with a more definitive impulse on translational (Tashiro, & Mortensen, 2006) and strategic research that complements current academic research (Benito, 2011). Also, popularizing (psychological) science is something that psychologists should do more often because it's an essential part of how the public becomes interested in psychological research.

A Word on Argentinean Psychological Science

Psychological science in Argentina has a promising future too. But there still are significant shortcomings in several important areas, and even though changes will certainly occur over time, it may be necessary to ensure the advancement process. The main limitations now include aging training programs with a widespread emphasis on psychoanalytical theories rather than evidence-based models, a small scientific editorial community, a massive cultural extension of psychoanalysis, and the lack of a strong national psychological science association.

The actual official form of organization for psychologists in Argentina is the Federation of Psychologists of the Republic of Argentina [Federación de Psicólogos de la República Argentina (FePRA)], which consists of professional colleges from each province. The organization has a professional scope, dictates a code of ethics, determines official specialties, and organizes a congress every two years. Nevertheless, there is a lack of a definitive scientific orientation and a limited extent to which research is considered a foundation for psychological practice.

In Argentina, there is also the Argentinean Association for Behavioral Sciences [Asociación Argentina de Ciencias del Comportamiento (AACC)], which brings together researchers from various fields, including psychological science. The AACC has an extremely important function, is well recognized, and has IUPsyS national representation. Yet AACC primarily has a primarily academic and scientific focus, with little participation in professional or public-interest matters.

As a result, a whole range of topics for the development of a scientifically grounded psychology were not being fully addressed, or were being addressed with an undefined scientific view.

In this context, the Association for the Advancement of Psychological Science [Asociación para el Avance de la Ciencia Psicológica (AACP)] was founded in 2005 to bring together psychologists at a national level and revive Argentinean psychology by combining strong scientific development with a definitive articulation of research through professional practice and generating public interest. This goal is being pursued through a series of institutional programs that fosters scientific publications, offer complementary training in scientific methods and models, provide scholarships to assist psychological science conferences, facilitate access to scientific databases, promote membership other national and international psychological science organizations, and disseminate psychological science to public. Also, this year, with a grant from the Association for Psychological Science, the AACP has started to develop a reference portal for teaching scientific psychology in the region.

A Final Comment

As I have shown in this article, Latin American psychology has a complex past, but it has proven it has the potential to overcome problems and to continue in the path of science. I believe this can be achieved by including regional work in a global context, as well as by advancing toward widespread consideration of psychological knowledge as part of nations' assets. Achieving success in this two –let us insist, not exclusive– tasks will make a definitive difference and help to consolidate psychological science in the region.

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