Psychological Science Takes Off In Brazil

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According to dictionaries, optimism is a willingness to face things on their bright side. Even more, it is a tendency to expect a favorable ending, even in clearly unfavorable situations. Some friends say I’m optimistic. Those that are not so friendly call me naïve. Of course, I prefer to agree with those who call me optimistic! When I accepted the invitation to write this piece for the Observer, I saw the task as an opportunity to present my view about Brazil and, especially, Brazilian psychology. Thus, facing the question “How is psychology in Brazil going?” my answer is short and simple: “Fine, thank you!” In order to keep myself optimistic and reduce the risk of falling in the trap of naiveté, I present some data to sustain these statements.

The scientific production in Brazil has grown extraordinarily in the last two decades. According to the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), in the beginning of the 1980s the publications of Brazilian scientific works made up 0.3 percent of the world’s scientific literature. In the end of the 1990s, this production increased to 1 percent and, in 2008, it increased to 2.6 percent of the total. Thus, in 2009, Brazil was 13th in the ranking of countries that produce science, and it is estimated that by 2020 it will be among the top 10.

The increase in the Brazilian scientific production is, without a doubt, the result of several factors. Among them is the fact that Brazil is one of the four components of the BRIC countries, along with Russia, India and China. According to economists, the four BRIC countries, jointly, represent currently more than a quarter of the land area of the planet and more than 40 percent of the world’s population. Analysts evaluate that economic growth is strongly tied to the social, cultural, and educational development, and, thus, to scientific production. Thus, considering the good performance of the Brazilian economy at the moment, one can also see why there is also a good scientific performance by the country.

The reader must be wondering what this whole discussion about economic growth and scientific publications has to do with psychology. The answer is simple: psychology is one of the fields that has contributed the most to the Brazilian visibility in the worldwide scientific statistics. Like all the sciences, a significant part of the increase in psychology research publications in Brazil is due to the economic
development. However, psychology would not be able to contribute so much in the current situation if it was not a mature field when the economic development began. I believe a careful analysis of the good performance of the Brazilian psychological production should reveal other important aspects, in particular the contribution of the long history of psychology in Brazil to its current development and maturity.

To make an appropriation of the eminent German experimentalist Hermann Ebbinghaus, it is possible to state that Brazilian psychology has a long past and a short history. A law regulating the formation and practice of the psychology in Brazil was passed in 1962. However, the past of psychology in Brazil is quite older. Historians of Brazilian psychology have identified the origins of psychological ideas in writings from the 17th and 18th centuries. For instance, in the Sermons of Priest Antônio Vieira (1608-1697), references can be found to the genesis of the individual and of social human behavior. In the work *Reflection on the Pride of Men* (1752), Brazilian Matias da Silva Eça points out behavioral elements of human pride from biblical excerpts taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

There are several indications of strength of psychological thought in Brazil throughout the entire 19th century. Brazil’s 1822 declaration of independence from Portugal established a fertile field for the cultural, scientific and, especially, educational development of the country. Several higher education institutions were created, such as law schools, mine-engineering faculties, and medical schools. The analysis of the first dissertations of the medical schools shows an intimate relationship between medicine and psychology. Cases in point are some dissertations defended in the Medical School of Rio de Janeiro: one by Manuel de Figueiredo, defended in 1836, with the title *Passions and Affects of the Soul* and one by José Augusto de Menezes, defended in 1843, with the title *Propositions Regarding Intelligence*. In the Medical School of Bahia, in the Brazilian northeast, Francisco da Cunha defended a dissertation titled *Psychophysiology About Man* in 1851 and, in 1864, Ernesto Carneiro Ribeiro defended the dissertation *Relation of Medicine with Philosophical Sciences: Legitimacy of Psychology*. The titles of these dissertations — and of so many others defended in the Brazilian medical schools in the 19th century — show that work in psychology was directly involved in the development of several fields of medicine.

As in other countries, psychology also had a great deal of importance in the development of the field of education in Brazil. Several documents show a close link between psychology and education at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century in Brazil. One of the marks of this relationship between the two fields is the reform in the Brazilian educational system made by the Brazilian statesman Benjamin Constant in 1890. One of the goals of the reform was to replace the literary dominance in education with a scientific one. The scientific spirit of the Benjamin Constant Reform introduced psychology into the teacher education curriculum in Normal Schools all over Brazil. The scientific ideals of the Benjamin Constant reform also led to the formation of several psychology labs. By the beginning of the 20th century, experimental psychology labs began being established, especially in Normal Schools. In 1906, Medeiros e Albuquerque founded a lab in Rio de Janeiro. In 1914, a lab was installed in São Paulo by Ugo Pizzoli, and in 1929 a lab was installed by Helena Antipoff in the state of Minas Gerais. The installation of labs in Normal Schools for teacher education is a clear indication of the importance of psychology for the foundation of scientific pedagogic practices.

The laboratory practices had different functions. On one hand, they granted the new psychological discipline the status of science. On the other hand, they allowed the training of professionals for the
application of psychological principles such as attention, memory, and intelligence to several spheres of the society. Beyond the relationships emphasized between psychology and education and medicine in the last two centuries, several relationships with other fields also developed. For instance, in law, psychology was important in developing theses about delinquency and criminality. In the field of management, psychology contributed for the development of the organization of workspaces, training, and personnel selection. As such, the regulation of psychology as a profession in Brazil in 1962 was clearly the crowning of a long period of psychology developing relationships with several fields of knowledge.

The intention of this brief historical account about psychology in Brazil was to show that the current state of Brazilian psychology is very well founded. Thus, should Brazil continue its economic ascension in the next years, it is likely that its participation in general scientific terms will also grow. And, if this does happen, the historical signals are that psychology will have much to contribute. As an eternal optimist, I believe that Brazil will shortly have more presence in the international psychological landscape.