

Chapter 1

Panorama of Psychology in Latin America



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Abstract This introductory chapter presents a panoramic vision of psychology in Latin America. It includes historical and conceptual aspects of the training at the undergraduate and graduate level. It affirms that psychology in Latin America has been previously characterized by scientific orientation, dependency, lack of sufficient originality, a conflict between social relevance and political activism, emphasis on applied issues, and emphasis on work with human beings. Latin-American psychology as a science and as a profession has been isolated from international developments during the larger part of its history. Psychology in Latin America is a discipline with many active research centers, university training programs at the undergraduate and graduate level, journals, practical applications, professional developments, social impact, and original work carried out in many of the countries of the region. The first psychology training programs in Latin America began in 1946 (Chile) and in 1947 (Colombia) and a few year latter in other countries. However, Latin-American psychology has been isolated, with scarce participation in International Congresses of Psychology (IUPsyS), International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP), APA conventions, etc. Few international psychological events have been held in the region. Reasons will be presented to explain that isolation and possible solutions will be suggested.

Latin America

Psychology in Latin America has a long history, beginning with the ideas that the native inhabitants had about what we consider today psychological topics, such as the way of knowing the world, education of children, family relationships, sexuality, human development, aging, wisdom, what is considered normal and abnormal, the meaning of life, and similar topics. The study of indigenous psychologies is a relevant research field in psychology in Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Peru.

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With the arrival of the Europeans beginning in 1492, the philosophical ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas became central. At the universities of the New World, the “psychology of the faculties” (derived from St. Thomas’ philosophy) predominated. This colonial period lasted until the second decade of the nineteenth century.

Psychological work carried out by physicians, philosophers, and educators during the nineteenth and the twentieth century was the foundations of psychology as a discipline. The professionalization of psychology began in 1946 with the first psychology training programs (Chile, 1946, Colombia, 1947; Brazil, 1953; Argentina, 1955; Mexico, 1958).

At the present time, psychology is a well-established discipline at the university level. It is taught in practically all Latin-American countries. Undergraduate programs exist in the great majority of the nations and also master and doctoral programs in many of the Latin-American countries (see Ardila, 1986).

Let’s make clear that in strictus sense, there is no such a thing as “Latin-American psychology.” There is psychology *in* Latin America, meaning research and application of psychological principles in a particular context, in this case the Latin-American subcontinent. On the other hand, the geographical area known as “Latin America” or “Latin America and the Caribbean” is varied and heterogeneous, with more than 35 nations and more than 600 million inhabitants. Countries are in different stages of sociocultural development. People speak Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, and other languages including native languages, and they belong to different ethnic groups—Caucasian, Native American, African American, Chinese, and many combinations of the above ethnic groups. This heterogeneous assembly of nations shares some traditions and has some common features that facilitate their identification.

From its origins in philosophy, education, and medicine, psychology in Latin America has evolved into a science and a profession that follows international standards and is contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in the region. The development of psychology in Latin America is varied and heterogeneous, as it is the region. In countries with a strong philosophical tradition such as Mexico, Peru, and Argentina, psychology began as a part of philosophy taught at the universities of the colonial period based on ideas of Aristotle and St. Thomas. In countries with less philosophical tradition, psychology was at the beginning a discipline that helped medicine and education in the handling of behavioral problems.

From the scientific perspective, it is important to indicate that the earliest experimental psychology laboratory in Latin America was founded in 1898 at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires by Horacio Piñero. Wundt has established the first psychological laboratory only 19 years earlier, and Stanley Hall had started the first laboratory on the American continent (at the Johns Hopkins University, in the USA), only 15 years before the Latin-American laboratory.

Today there are approximately 300.000 professional psychologists in Latin America. They work in all the areas of psychology as a science and as a profession. The leading countries are Brazil and Mexico, but important developments are also

carried out in other nations (Peru, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, Cuba, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, and others). Doctoral training programs have been established in several Latin-American countries, mainly in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina but also in other nations.

The current trends of psychology in Latin America can be said to be the following ones (see also Alarcón, 2002):

1. *Scientific orientation.* There is a great interest among psychologists in the scientific approach. The pioneers of psychology in Latin America founded laboratories, did experimental research, and tried to organize psychology following the standards of natural sciences. Today psychology in Latin America is predominately empirical, objective, and quantitative.
2. *Dependency.* The use of “imported” models has characterized psychology, especially in the early stages. Rationalism (Descartes), empiricism (Locke), and vitalism (Bergson) were doctrines imported by Latin-American psychologists.
3. *Lack of originality.* During the formative period, a number of imported ideas, instrument, and tests were at the core of Latin-American psychology. Only in the last 30 or 40 years, original work has been produced by Latin-American psychologists (see, for instance, Díaz-Guerrero, 1972).
4. *Between social relevance and political activism.* Psychologists were very aware of social issues, worked in relevant social topics, and in some cases proposed politically oriented alternatives (see Aron, Corne, & Martín-Baró, 1994 on Martín-Baró’s liberation psychology).
5. *Emphasis on applied psychology.* Latin-American psychology gives special importance to practical work, usefulness, and short-term applications.
6. *Human beings at the center.* Psychologists in Latin America work more with human participants than with nonhuman animals. They are interested in describing human behavior, understanding it, and explaining it. Although there is important research work in comparative psychology and psychobiology, the emphasis is on work with human participants.

These characteristics of psychology in Latin America are indicative of current trends. *Applied* research, using *quantitative* methods, is more frequent than basic research or that qualitative methodology. *Socially relevant* work is highly valued. Although all areas of psychology are cultivated—from neuropsychology to community psychology and from experimental analysis of behavior to cognitive science—probably clinical work in varied settings is more frequent than other areas.

One of the negative aspects of Latin-American psychology is its isolation, its limited participation in international congresses, the scarcity of publications in English, etc. At the present time, international participation is improving, but there is still a long way to go.

Isolation

Latin-American psychology has not been internationalized enough. It might even be said that it has been kept isolated from the global context. This can be demonstrated by the following facts:

1. Little participation of Latin-American psychologists in international scientific events, including the International Congress of Psychology, the International Congress of Applied Psychology, cross-cultural congresses, and European Congresses of Psychology, among others.
2. The scanty organizing of international congresses in Latin America, the XXIII International Congress of Psychology (Acapulco, Mexico, 1984) being the only one held in a Latin-American country in all its history. No other International Psychology Congress or Applied Psychology Congress has been carried out, despite the great development of Latin-American psychology in the last few decades.
3. The handful of publications by Latin-American authors in the mainstream journals, such as the APA journals, the IUPsyS, the IAAP, or the IACCP. Recently, some Latin-American psychologists have published in journals from Spain available worldwide and in some journals of the United States and other nations.
4. The slight—almost nonexistent—presence of Latin-American psychologists on the editorial committees of the main scientific journals in the world.
5. The small number of exchange programs offered at a formal level between Latin America and the main psychology centers of the world.

All this could be considered as a problem of growth, as a consequence of the relative “youth” of psychology in Latin America. But this is probably not the reason, and the “youth” of psychology in this part of the world is more a myth than a reality. The psychology discipline has existed for many decades in Latin America, longer than in some other cultures or regions of the world, and isolation is a reality; it doesn't depend on maturity or recency of this field of knowledge.

Proposals for Solutions

The advantages of two-way communication (south-north, north-south, and also south-south) are numerous and well-known. Modern science is international, universal, and not restricted to a country, a culture, a linguistic context, or a social system. To find a solution to the isolation of Latin-American psychology in order to include ourselves into the world at large of these first decades of the twenty-first century, we propose the following:

1. To organize exchange programs similar to those that are beginning to be implemented, but broadening their field of action and increasing the number of people that are participating. Create assistantships, research and internship trips,

student and professor exchange programs, and visits to laboratories and practicum centers, among others. These exchanges should be bidirectional, with participants from the great centers of psychology that come to Latin America and Latin-American participants that go to such centers. The relationship should be reciprocal; we have a great deal to learn and also a lot to teach.

2. Creation of research networks which can be established through the use of the Internet and other means of communication, which do not require personal or physical contact. Concerning the present-day issue that exists in psychology between universality and contextualized particularity and between the etic and emic approaches, Latin America is an appropriate continent to put the psychological laws or their cultural determination to the test. With so many cultures and subcultures, so many human groups, and so many social organizations (and what's more, so many animal species and biodiversity for the case of research in comparative psychology), Latin America is a great laboratory for psychology. Are Piaget's stages of development universal? Are Kohlberg's moral stages universal? Do all human beings learn, feel, and love equally? Is the "theory of mind" of chimpanzees and of the monkeys of the Amazon similar?
3. Another important point is to foster the participation of Latin-American psychologists in the major global events of the discipline.
4. Emphasize the learning of English, which has become the language of science, including psychology.
5. Holding large congresses in Latin America is an imminent task, and we hope that it will come true soon.
6. Involve ourselves with the important research and development centers, with psychologists of many countries, and with professionals of other fields and in the most advanced research contexts. Experience has demonstrated that the training of Latin-American psychologists has a well-deserved reputation of high quality and that the doctorates of Brazil, México, Chile, and other nations are more than a match for the countries of the First (developed) World.

Probably Latin-American psychologists will be able to attain that delicate balance between etic and emic and between universal validity and local relevance. This will be a very important end result of current trends.

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