

# Chapter 11

## Current Trends and Perspectives



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**Abstract** This closing chapter points out the trends and perspectives of psychology in Latin America, referring to its main work fields in the near future, its challenges, and its projections within the overall context of psychology as a science and as a profession. The author analyzes this dual scientific and applied nature of psychology, indicates that original theories and research are being proposed, points out the different methodologies in process, and touches on other related topics. No doubt psychology in this part of the world is more focused on human beings than on other species and places more emphasis on applications than in basic research. It seeks to be a recognized profession and be valued in the twenty-first-century society.

### Psychology Features in Latin America

In previous publications (Alarcón, 2008, 2011), the most significant characteristics present in psychology in Latin America toward the end of the twentieth century were identified, in an attempt to determine what they have in common, beyond the differences that may exist among the countries of the region. The current aim is to reflect upon those features and others subsequently noticed. Here they are.

#### *The Scientific Viewpoint*

The dominant interest of European pioneers of psychology who migrated to South America was to make psychology an empirical science, freed of philosophy, in spite of the fact that most of them have a philosophical training. This interest is observed in Waclaw Radecki, Walter Blumenfeld, Emilio Mira y Lopez, Mercedes Rodrigo, and Helena Antipoff. This concern is also present in the Argentinean pioneers Horacio Piñero, Victor Mercante, José Ingenieros, Enrique Mouchet, and Alfredo

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Calcagno, as well as in the Brazilians Lourenco Filho and Noemy da Silveira, among others, plus the Mexicans Ezequiel Chávez, Jesús Pacheco, and Rafael Serrano. The European forerunners settled in South America founded experimental psychology laboratories, reported the scientific methods they used in their research, worked with psychological tests, made use of statistical methods in the treatment of the data obtained, and introduced and promoted psychometrics.

The influence of the pioneers, through their publications or from the university psychology lectures, was decisive, but not easy, to establish an objective, empirical, experimental, and quantitative psychology separated from philosophy in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, this was a time where there was a strong predominance of intuitionism, phenomenology, and other expressions of German idealism. The professors of the liberal arts departments, in which experimental psychology courses were offered, acted as resistance forces. In some countries, such as Perú, opposition to the introduction of experimental psychology was very strong; in university philosophical circles, there was some fear that positivism would return, a philosophical approach that had been rejected a decade before. Scientific psychology only became accepted in the mid-1950s, when the psychology profession was established. Today, no one disputes the scientific nature of psychology; rather it is wondered what kind of science it is. Is it a natural science or is it a social science? The truth is that psychology is a science that studies human behavior, in two dimensions, as internal processes (psyche, mind) and as an external manifestation of these processes expressed in terms of behavior or conduct. Both are the topics of psychology. It is science because of the scientific method that is used to obtain knowledge. The breadth of application areas of psychology has often generated labels such as social psychology, clinical psychology, community psychology, sports psychology, educational psychology, organizational psychology, and many other branches of applied psychology. These branches of applied psychology and related research areas will probably continue to expand. New subareas will be created by the intersection between psychology and biology, pharmacology, physiology, genetics, and microbiology, which will probably opt for a more scientific orientation. In the case of social psychology, for the complexity of its problems, it will require multiple methodologies, which can range from content analysis to experimentation (Triandis in Ardila, 2002).

Latin American psychological research has adopted the scientific method; it is predominantly empirical, objective, and quantitative and makes use of objective instruments to collect data, with a clear predominance of tests, scales, inventories, and questionnaires, and it is correlational with an *ex post facto* character. The processing of data collected by statistical tests will become increasingly sophisticated to achieve greater accuracy. The experimental method and the use of laboratory instruments will be used increasingly more by psychology in relation to biological, physical, or other variables. Computers and the Internet will become increasingly important in psychological research.

In the groundbreaking days, behavioral research preceded practical applications. However, upon being established as a university degree program, psychology has developed more as a profession than as a science. Currently, its application areas are vast and diverse, marching to the beat of the complexity of society and its problems,

to the point that social demand often exceeds the professional training psychologists have received. This has led, on some occasions, to address the new problems with outdated intervention techniques, pointing out the urgency that the training curricula be reviewed regularly at the graduate psychology levels.

### *The Dependent Character Has Been Overcome*

In one of our studies (Alarcón, 1997), it is shown that Latin America had been a very receptive and wonderful host of imported doctrines, acting as a subsidiary of European thinking and afterward of Anglo-American thought. This situation was not recent. Our colonial universities imparted philosophical knowledge from a scholastic approach, an orientation that dominated for nearly three centuries. When the winds of intellectual renewal blew, Cartesian rationalism, Locke empiricism, and Condillac sensualism spread. In the early years of the Republic, Cousin's eclecticism, Destutt de Tracy's ideology, Thomas Reid's common sense philosophy, and Krause's idealism stood out. In the mid-nineteenth century, Comte's positivism managed to capture the most lucid minds of our countries, who embraced it as a creed, to the point that it guided the political destiny of some Latin American countries. When positivism is questioned and rejected very vehemently for its anti-metaphysical view, Bergson and his vitalism are hailed as the savior of authentic philosophical thinking. Nowhere in the world was Bergson welcomed with more devotion and enthusiasm as in Latin America. The scientific dogmatism of positivism was replaced by Bergson's spiritualistic dogmatism. After the Second World War, the European philosophical doctrines from whose parameters psychology was taught gave way, and it was the turn of the United States to exert its influence, in proposing other approaches to psychological topics, among them Skinner's radical behaviorism. This scientific orientation movement was well received, and its theories, principles, and technology were used. What had happened in colonial and early Republic times once again took hold in Latin America: to embrace a new psychological movement alien to our environment. This condition was denounced by Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero (1971) in his presidential address at the 11th Inter-American Congress of Psychology held in Montevideo, Uruguay. He thoughtfully and vibrantly proposed that in order to forsake this dependency there needs to be rational questioning of the hypotheses and foreign theoretical constructs, and there must be scientific testing and the development of distinct psychological ideas that correspond to the idiosyncrasies of the people of our land. His attitude, eminently scientific, was free of the chauvinist symptoms in vogue during the years when he made his proposal. Some psychologists (Marín, 1980) have suggested that psychosocial research in Latin America up to the late 1960s simply imitated the classic topics of international psychology, expressing in it a clearly dependent standpoint, a replication of the themes in vogue in the United States and Europe. During the 1970s this situation was questioned, and there was a debate on the social significance of the findings, suggesting the formation of a socially relevant discipline, one which

sought to carry out research on the problems immersed in the reality of our countries and whose discoveries could be used in favor of disadvantaged Latin American groups.

Latin American psychology will end its cultural dependency once it becomes an active generator of theoretical and technological knowledge, and this can be achieved through scientific research, and certainly it is headed in that direction.

### *The Search for Originality*

Associated with the dependent character or as a consequence of it is the meager originality that Latin American psychology has shown since its beginning. This was witnessed when the psychometric movement in our countries took place, a trend whose work was orientated more toward the adaptation of foreign tests and much less to the production of original tests (Alarcón, 1997). This fact is attributed to the absence of original theories on the measurable behavior areas developed in Latin America. As is known, tests are based on theoretical formulations grounded on basic research. The original tests produced in the region in the first period are the Mira y Lopez Myokinetic Test, the Lourenco Filho ABC Test, the Barranquilla Rapid Survey Intelligence Test developed by Francisco del Olmo, the Vocational Interest Inventory of Arrigo Angelini, and the A-51 Test constructed by Walter Blumenfeld.

Currently, psychometric measurement has made substantial progress in several Latin American countries. The idea of a revision of the theoretical constructs of foreign tests was well received, particularly in México, and in recent decades a persistent interest has been observed about submitting foreign tests to rigorous statistical verifications of validity and reliability. This has led to reject more than one theoretical construct and replace them with new formulations in accordance with the characteristics of the individuals of the adopted culture of the tests, as well as giving rise to the construction of original tests.

An indication of the originality of Latin American psychology is the formulation of the historic-bio-psycho-socio-cultural theory of human behavior of Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero (1972a, 1972b) and his ethnopsychology, which seeks to develop indigenous psychologies based on the dominant features of the individuals of a socioculture (Díaz-Guerrero & Pacheco, 1994).

Additionally, the work of Rubén Ardila in several publications is notable including the book *Experimental Synthesis of Behavior (Síntesis Experimental del Comportamiento)*, Ardila, 1993), in which he proposes a unifying psychology paradigm (see Ardila, 2006; 2010). Beyond the agreement or disagreement with the proposal, the Ardila paradigm starts from very well-developed premises and offers a definite and solid framework.

Another sign of the originality of Latin American psychology is the recent development of original psychological tests constructed in our milieu for the investigation of various positive psychology topics. Thus, the translation problems are overcome

by seeking terminology equivalence among different languages. However, international recognition of psychological tests developed in Latin America is pending. This should be a goal to achieve.

### ***The Human Being as the Central Problem***

One key aspect observed in Latin American psychology is having the human being as the central topic of its research. Unlike US psychology, where nonhuman species are frequently used and findings are extrapolated to explain areas of human behavior, as what happened, for example, with behaviorism in the area of learning, Latin American psychologists carried out a great deal of their work with people. Placing the human being at the center of interest coincides with humanistic psychology, which does the same and insists that human beings should be part of the research on humans (Quitmann, 1989). However, in humanistic psychology, the scientific method does not have the same relevance as it has in the objective psychologies; the method is subject to the criterion of human experience, and “in order to study experience and human work, a phenomenological approach is preferred because of the important role of self-consciousness as a specific human trait” (Auer, 1997, p. 5).

Latin American psychology is interested in humankind, in describing, understanding, and explaining it. But beyond that, it is concerned with getting to know the people in these lands. Examples of this interest are the books of Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero (1972a, 1972b) on the psychology of the Mexican individual and Rubén Ardila (1986b) about the Colombian one. This motivation led Díaz-Guerrero to create a line of research called ethnopsychology, which seeks to develop home-grown psychologies, as was noted above.

### ***Between Social Relevance and Political Permeability***

Latin American psychologists have shown to be very sensitive to the strenuous problems of their communities, where research and psychological intervention can contribute to the problems being understood and being solved. The issue was put to debate at the 11th Interamerican Congress of Psychology, which met in Mexico in 1967 and which was entitled *The Contribution of the Psychological and Behavioral Sciences to the Social and Economic Development of Peoples*. The aim was to connect psychological inquiry with the problems of developing societies or, to put it another way, to guide psychological research toward problems related to social development. The emphasis was to investigate problems and then use the findings that could be helpful for the country's development, to understand the behavior of individuals living in deprived environments and promote psychological research relevant for development and welfare. This interest was motivated by the presence of health problems, malnutrition, illiteracy, political violence, terrorism, child labor,

crime, drug addiction, political frustration, and other problems that plague our countries.

These problems, certainly lacerating, were the subject of a great deal of research conducted by psychologists who worked with samples of children, adolescents, adults, men, and women living in marginal areas of the cities and in extreme poverty. Under the name of *Psychology, Poverty and Underdevelopment* (*Psicología, Pobreza y Subdesarrollo*), the results of the research on the subject were published (Alarcón, 1986). Previously it was stated that social psychologists proposed making psychology an entirely relevant science and then that the psychologist should make a political commitment to combat the existing social structure, described as unjust and oppressive. Proposing the expertise of psychology for the service of political liberation and social change was encouraged, seeking to make psychology a politically engaged science. Strictly speaking, the political option of a psychologist, like of any citizen, is a personal decision. To politicize a psychological movement is an unnecessary risk for psychology and science.

### ***Main Areas of Research***

An appropriate way to observe the trends that Latin American psychology research has followed over time is to analyze the frequency of research topics presented by Latin American authors at the Interamerican Congresses of Psychology (see Natalicio et al., 1969). This bibliometric procedure has been successfully used by some authors. Ardila (1986a, 1986b) found that in the congresses held in Miami Beach (1964), Lima (1966), and Sao Paulo (1973), clinical psychology ranked first, with the highest number of presentations, although it suffered a considerable reduction in the Bogotá Congress (1974), occupying the fifth place, with only 10% percent of presentations. Another area that has always attracted the attention of Latin American psychologists is social psychology, which received the largest number of papers (25%) in the Bogotá Congress. Ordoñez (1995) examined the scientific programs of the SIP Congresses and articles published in the *Interamerican Journal of Psychology* (*Revista Interamericana de Psicología*) from 1983 to 1993 and found that both in the Interamerican Congresses of Psychology (SIP Congresses) and in the *Journal*, the applied areas with the highest proportion of works were clinical psychology, social psychology, and educational psychology. Meza (1997) analyzed 566 articles published in the *Interamerican Journal of Psychology* (*Revista Interamericana de Psicología*) from 1969 to 1993; he found that the areas with the highest percentages were clinical psychology (11.8%), social psychology (11.7%), and general psychology (10.6%). In the SIP Congress held in Santiago de Chile (1993), the largest percentage of papers was on health psychology (13.9%), followed by educational psychology (12.4%), then social psychology (11.1%), and, finally, clinical psychology and psychotherapy (10.8%). The differences between the percentages are very narrow; in total these percentages account for 48% of all presentations. The other half corresponds to 16 other specialties. At the San Juan

Congress in Puerto Rico (1995), health psychology stands out (16.9%), followed by educational psychology (9.8%). Lesser percentages are split among developmental psychology, social psychology, teaching of psychology, and professional matters.

In the course of the twenty-first century, research on the history of Latin American psychology has increased with very active working groups having been created in several countries in the region, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Perú, and Chile (Klappenbach & Jacó-Vilela, 2016), and has become professionalized during the first decades of the twenty-first century.

### *Types of Research*

The kinds of research that have been used most frequently in empirical work are the following ones: experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, descriptive, psychometric, and case studies. At the Interamerican Congress of Psychology in Santiago de Chile (1993) and in that of San Juan (1995), *correlational research studies* prevail, with percentages of 39.5% and 37.9%. They are followed by *descriptive studies*, with 28.1% in Santiago and 32.2% in San Juan. The third research prevalence is occupied by *psychometric work*, 16% in Santiago and 18.6% in San Juan. Quite less is the *experimental work*, with just 7% in 1993 and 3.8% in 1995. The data allows us to infer that psychological research in Latin America is predominantly correlational and descriptive *stricto sensu*. Indeed, the instruments for data collection used in the empirical research in Santiago (1993) were tests, inventories and scales (50%), questionnaires (16.9%), and interviews (15.3%), for a total of 82.2%. Then, in San Juan (1995), they were tests, inventories and scales (53.2%), questionnaires (16.7%), and interviews (9.7%), for a total of 79.6%. There are very few studies that have used experimental equipment or devices, projective tests, and/or personal documents.

The majority use of psychometric tests, inventories, scales, and later questionnaires is explained by the dominant correlational and descriptive character of the research presented, which, as is known, makes use of such instruments. Naturally, these instruments apply to human participants, and it can be inferred that in Latin American psychological research, work involving human participants and not sub-human species prevails. However, in the recent years of the twenty-first century, experimental research with nonhuman animals has increased significantly in countries like Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, among others.

At first glance, what catches the eye with the results is the displacement of clinical psychology from the leading positions of preference. Indeed, at the Interamerican Congresses of Psychology in 1964, 1966, and 1973, clinical psychology ranked first. Similarly, Guillén and Ordóñez (1993) found that in the Congresses held between 1983 and 1991, clinical psychology was also ranked first. On the other hand, in the Congresses of 1993 and 1995, that preference corresponds to health psychology, a term broader than clinical. In addition to the explanation given above on this fact, it could be argued that the inclination to work with “patients” has experienced some change in regard to the type of ailment. In the past, they were mental health patients;

now they are physical and holistic health patients. The scenario has changed; before it was the psychiatric hospital or mental health center, and now it is the general hospital. However, it is almost always the hospital, maintaining the clinical vocation.

One of the oldest areas of Latin American research is psychometrics; nonetheless, its contribution in creating original psychological tests has been very limited. It has worked mostly with standardized tests, probably due to the difficulty of constructing original tests. Times have changed, and psychometrics is now flourishing as a technique of constructing original psychological tests, as was stated earlier. It has progressed a lot, revamped with the addition of statistical techniques such as factor analysis, multiple regression analysis, discriminant analysis, canonical correlation, and many other techniques for the handling of the data obtained. Anxious to develop original tests and submit the theoretical constructs underlying the foreign tests to scrutiny, some Latin American psychologists have gotten interested in developing original instruments for research in positive psychology (Alarcón, 2009), which is the latest psychological area of interest.

## **The Future of Psychology in Latin America**

At the end of the twentieth century, Latin American psychology had made significant progress as a science and as a profession. In the pioneer days, behavioral research preceded the practical applications due to the academic nature assumed by our universities. By establishing it as a professional career, it has been developed more as a profession than as a science. Currently, its application areas are diverse and go along with the social and economic development of society and its problems to the point that occupational demand has led the universities that offer a degree in psychology to include new applied psychology specializations. The fact that in Latin America professional work overshadows scientific research in psychology does not mean that the latter has not been developed. The region has a very active scientific community working in various problem areas. Its work reveals a good scientific level that is published in accredited international journals. Chapter 2 of this book on scientific research is an example of this high development in Latin America.

Current Latin American psychology shows a clearly scientific face, and I think this trend will continue progressing. There is evidence that suggests that scientific research will not be based only on the experimental method, which has been privileged many times for its explanatory nature (Alarcón, 1997). Latin American researchers also extensively use field methods and designs: quasi-experimental, correlational, psychometric, descriptive, and exploratory, all framed in the guidelines and requirements of the scientific method. Research in Latin America is predominantly *ex post facto* and quantitative, and it will likely remain being that way. It primarily works with samples from human participants, and it seeks to understand behavior through data obtained in samples of people; it shuns making inferences from observations obtained in nonhuman animals to explain human behavior. Its key interest is to know humankind through doing research on people.



Despite economic constraints, psychology in Latin America has achieved significant development in the leading countries, having garnered valuable achievements in the generation of psychological knowledge. It is fair to say that the Interamerican Society of Psychology (SIP), founded on December 17, 1951, in Mexico City, has contributed very actively to this development of psychology in the region. SIP organizes every 2 years an Interamerican Congress of Psychology, the first of which was held in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) in 1953, attended by 50 participants. The 35th SIP Congress met in Lima from July 12 to 16, 2015. The publication mouthpiece of the Interamerican Society of Psychology is the *Interamerican Journal of Psychology/Revista Interamericana de Psicología*. It has always been affirmed, rightfully so, that science seeks the universality of its findings to establish general laws. However, this principle has been questioned by some when applied to the field of human psychology. The cross-cultural research of the twentieth century set boundaries to exaggerated generalizations of the findings obtained from foreign country participants different from our citizens and contributed to question the ethnocentrism to which we were accustomed. These observations from cross-cultural research were not new. Kurt Koffka (1924) cautioned: "... we should not forget that the subject of a psychological investigation is usually the mature and cultured 'West European...' The world appears otherwise to us than does to a negro in Central Africa. We must not forget then than without comparative psychology, without animal, folk-, and child psychology, the experimental psychology of the human adult is and must remain defective..." (Koffka, 1959, p. 2; original 1924). These reflections opened, many years later, the path that Latin American psychology could follow: to inquire about the problems of its social environment but without neglecting the central matters of the discipline.

The internationalization of knowledge is one of the characteristics of the globalized world of the twenty-first century; it is important because it permits communication with the whole world but without overlooking the psychological and social problems faced by many of our fellow citizens. A problem needing to be solved for the Latin American psychology of the future will be to build an identifiable psychology profile of the people of their countries, because surely we do not know it yet (Zea, 1971, 1986). Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero began this task with his *Psychology of the Mexican (Psicología del Mexicano, 1967)* and concluded with his ethnopsychology. The cross-cultural research of the twentieth century put a limit to the exaggerated generalizations of findings from sociocultural subjects other than the native subjects of the country.

A key feature of the future of psychology in the world is the variety of specialties that will arise because of its connection with related disciplines such as biological sciences, social sciences, and mathematics. In this way, psychology is becoming a very diverse and complex discipline, and the experts in the biological approach will continue making psychology advance as a natural science; some authors mention neuroscience research, genetics, evolution, and development as areas of research. R.K. Silbereisen (in Ardila, 2002, p. 166) conceptualizes that research will be based on the dynamic interplay between biological, psychological, and social factors. M.R. Rosenzweig (in Ardila, 2002, p. 108) argues, "it could be said that one of the

main features of psychology is its diversity, and behavior being so varied, then, the approaches to study it will also be, ranging from laboratory studies to naturalistic environments.” H. C. Triandis (in Ardila, 2002) considers that the central feature of psychology in the near future is going to be much more interdisciplinary and more intercultural; he believes that it will have many more links with biology, with anthropology, and with other neighboring disciplines. Psychology will have problems because of the diversity of specialties, but at the same time, the main issue will be the fundamental topic of maintaining the integrity of psychology as an autonomous discipline. This is how it is expected to be.

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