

## PROFESSIONAL PROBLEMS OF PSYCHOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

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This paper attempts to study the current shortcomings of professional psychology in Latin America, here defined as all the American continent with the exception of the United States and Canada. Psychology is a growing science and profession in Latin America. In the last ten years in particular new departments of psychology have been created, new journals have begun to be published, and research is now in progress in many areas of pure and applied psychology. However, there are a few important steps that have to be taken before psychology becomes a science and a profession in the same sense that it now exists in the most developed countries, especially in the United States, England, Japan, and the Scandinavian countries.

Latin America at this moment is undergoing rapid social change. New institutions are created every year in each country, but no one can be sure whether they are going to last. A number of journals existed for five or more years and then disappeared. Psychological laboratories have been opened and closed. The social frame of reference has to be taken into account in order to understand the current status of psychology in Latin America, its shortcomings, and how they can be overcome (Hereford, 1966).

The present paper has two parts: an enumeration of problems, studying each one in detail, and an enumeration of solutions for them.

### PROBLEMS

*Lack of legal recognition of profesisonal psychology.* Only three countries, Brazil, Chile (Bravo-Valdivieso, 1969), and Cuba have any form of legal recognition of the profession of psychology. In the other countries psychologists work as professionals in clinical, academic, industrial, and other settings without having any legal support. The importance of this point cannot be exaggerated; it is the greatest shortcoming which has to be overcome before psychology can be a profession in a real sense. On the other hand, this legal recognition will help in many problems with other professionals, especially with physicians who are opposed to the practice of clinical psy-

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<sup>1</sup>This article was prepared for the XIX International Congress of Psychology.

chology by people without a medical degree. However, before attaining legal recognition the professional role of the psychologist has to be drawn very carefully.

*The public image of professional psychology.* Because psychology is not legally recognized as an independent profession and because its functions are rather vague and obscure, the public image of psychology in Latin America has suffered. The profession has to attract better qualified young people who will place psychology in the proper setting in modern society. Psychologists have to show to other professionals, and to the general public, that they have important services to offer. The image of psychology as a science, in the strictest sense, and as a profession comparable to any other profession has to be attained very soon in order to keep from lagging behind current developments in the discipline.

*Inadequate scientific and professional preparation for certain roles.* In order to become a psychotherapist, for example, it is necessary to go through a long process of training, supervision, and internship. Professionals without that preparation can hardly compete with psychiatrists in demonstrating the usefulness and importance of clinical psychology. Similar reasoning can be applied to other specialties, such as experimental, industrial, and school psychology. The student is very disappointed when he sees that his teachers miss classes and do not help him with guidance and orientation concerning the professional role of psychologist.

*Incomplete libraries.* Inadequate library facilities contribute to inadequate scientific preparation of psychologists in Latin America. In many college libraries there are relatively old books, very few psychological journals, and even fewer films for teaching psychology. In addition important books of contemporary psychology have not yet been translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Neither are there translations of the main theoreticians of learning, personality, social, or industrial psychology. Only about 10% of the basic books that a psychology student has to read in order to understand the current state of his discipline are available in Spanish and Portuguese. It is unrealistic to ask a young Latin American, just beginning to study psychology, to read Skinner in English, Fraisse in French, or Luria in Russian.

*Lack of adequate psychological laboratories.* Maintaining a colony of monkeys or apes is expensive, and not all universities are willing to do it. Laboratories of animal psychology are scarce in Latin America, and their being so rare has had a negative influence on the training of students in experimental psychology. Used mostly for

teaching purposes, the majority of laboratories have old-fashioned equipment, constructed in Europe a number of years ago. Original experimental research requires expensive equipment that only a few laboratories of psychology in Latin America can afford.

*Lack of funds for research.* For many specialties it is difficult to find an institution or foundation willing to sponsor research in psychology. There are some associations for the advancement of science which do a good job in this respect. The universities also pay for research having certain specifications. Industries are interested in studies related to practical applications of psychology, but funds are still quite small in relation to needs.

*Inadequate communication of Latin American psychology with the "external world."* The ignorance of psychologists in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world concerning psychology in Latin America is surprising. They simply do not know anything about it. They are amazed to learn that there are several thousands of psychologists, working in 16 countries, doing research in many areas of pure and applied psychology, such as operant conditioning, achievement motivation, and cross-cultural studies. Latin American psychologists can hardly be up to date on all the new findings. Linguistic barriers are probably the most difficult to surmount. In any case Latin American psychologists know much more about North American and European psychology than North American and European psychologists know about them.

*Inadequate communication within Latin America.* Although they might be well informed about "foreign" psychology, the majority of Latin American psychologists do not know what it going on in Latin American countries other than their own. They neither read the journals published in other Latin American countries nor meet professionals from those countries. This fact may be surprising and best explained by considering the geographical obstacles and the relative isolation of each country.

#### SOLUTIONS

The above problems are intrinsically related to the social situation of developing countries. On the other hand, emphasized in the present paper are the shortcomings, not the achievements of Latin American psychology. In any case research is a very expensive endeavor, and countries with serious economic problems cannot afford it. Economically disadvantaged countries still have to feed their people and teach their citizens to read and write before they can spend money to study food preferences in rats or the learning processes of squirrel monkeys.

The situation of Latin American psychology will improve as the whole of Latin American society improves. There is reason for optimism about both aspects (considering the rich natural and human resources of Latin America). The following practical suggestions are an expression of such optimism.

*To increase the exchange of psychologists with different Latin American countries and with the rest of the world.* Increasing the number of visiting professors from foreign countries will help. Psychologists from the United States, because of its proximity and its state of psychological sophistication, would be particularly desirable.

*To multiply the number of psychological congresses and symposia to be held in Latin America.* Probably the Interamerican Congresses of Psychology, sponsored by the Interamerican Society of Psychology, are the most important experiences for many Latin American psychologists. It would be good to plan to have an *International Congress of Psychology* in Latin America very soon.

*To attain legal recognition of professional psychology.* Legal recognition can be accomplished with relative ease through the national associations of psychologists which exist in a majority of Latin American countries. Yet it has not been seriously attempted.

*To improve the public image of psychology.* Better training and better professional practice is the job of the individual psychologist working within the frame of reference of each country. A better public image of psychology as a science and as a profession will attract more able people into the field and effect a positive influence on psychology as a whole.

*To multiply the occupational opportunities.* There are only a few psychological clinics. Many more are needed. Industrial firms usually know the importance of psychology for their business, but they do not know how to recruit psychologists. Many schools need psychologists, many universities need professors of psychology, and the demand is growing. However, due to deficient organization the placement of new professionals is sometimes complicated.

All the above solutions to the current problems of Latin American psychology are related to each other and to the economic setting. Many things can be done, individually and through associations, to improve Latin American psychology. Foreign psychologists who would like to work in Latin America will find a stimulating environment, and the experience will be rewarding. But the main load of the progress, the main responsibility, is that of Latin America. Latin American psychologists have to be aware of the state of their discipline, have to have a group consciousness, and have to be willing

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to work for psychology as a science and as a profession in order to keep abreast of the rapid development of this discipline in the world.

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