

Psychology in Spain

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Although the roots of scientific Psychology in Spain are as old as in other European countries, its modern establishment as a profession and the creation of the studies in the majority of Spanish universities is quite recent. The first Faculty of Psychology was created only in 1978 in Madrid. Today, and according to recent surveys (data from Santolaya, Berdullas, & Fernandez, 2001), the average Psychology professional works preferably in clinical settings (68%), in the private sector (73%) and with a cognitive-behavioural orientation (49%). This professional is 36 year old, woman (73%) and belonging to a community (certified by the professional association) composed of around 30000 members. Some of these numbers look remarkable, although they are overshadowed by a very high unemployment rate (50% of the certified professionals under 30) that were much higher if we were to take into account the amount of people obtaining the degree. Psychology as a subject matter is a very popular choice among students accessing the university, and the proof is that there are about 40000 people enrolled in the university system, pursuing the degree that could provide them with the possibility of working as “psychologists”. The popularity of the studies of Psychology is due to a combination of factors that would deserve an empirical study not made yet. As an speculation, we can advance that Psychology has enjoyed a good image particularly among the woman population because of its social applications; until recently the studies did not have restriction of access, and they were considered as studies of medium difficulty.

Early development

The origins of Spanish scientific Psychology can be traced back to the latter part of XIX century (Prieto, Fernandez-Ballesteros & Carpintero, 1994). In 1902, Luis Simarro (1851-1921) was appointed to the then recently created chair of experimental psychology within the Faculty of Sciences of university of Madrid, where he also founded the first experimental laboratory. In Barcelona, Ramon Turró (1854-1926) founded a psychophysiological laboratory in 1906 and the second Spanish laboratory of experimental psychology in 1922. At the time, life sciences were dominated by Santiago Ramon y Cajal (1852-1934), undoubtedly the most important figure in Spanish science. Ramon y Cajal established a very influential school of anatomists and students of the central nervous system. As such, he may be considered as one of the fathers of some of the current branches of psychobiology. On the applied side, Emilio Mira (1896-1964) began to use extensively psychometrics for vocational guidance and personnel selection on behalf of the Municipal government of the city of Barcelona, where he worked. Mira and also Lafora (1886-1971) played also an essential role in applying psychology to the improvement of efficiency in the industry and rehabilitation programs for disabled employees. All these promising developments vanished with the civil war (1936-39) and were replaced by a scholastic psychology, which put psychology more as a philosophical discipline than as a empirically based enterprise. A select group of people (among them, J. Germain, M. Yela, J. L. Pinillos) were in part responsible for bringing back Psychology to the realm of empirical sciences during the fifties and sixties, in a period in which the country was isolated from the rest of the world.

Present day Psychology

Modern Psychology was shaped in the 70's by the exponential growth of the student population. During this decade and in the 80's, successive new syllabus, faculties, and

departments were created to respond to this social, and the corresponding teaching demands. This trend has now levelled off and things have settled down considerably. Psychology is still one of the most popular career choices in our country, but the mismatch between the number of professionals, students and the possibilities of the work market is a fact that may help to put the profession and the academic activities (teaching and research) in a more realistic perspective.

Studying Psychology

The higher education system in Spain has suffered many reforms in the last 20 to 30 years. The degree in Psychology, which is required to practice the profession is obtained after following a number of courses taken normally in a five year period. The number of credits needed to get the degree varies among the different universities, between a minimum of 300 and a maximum of 390. The access to these studies is carried out on a competitive basis that takes into account the average grades from previous studies, and the pass level sets by faculties and schools within the university. Those pursuing research can achieve the PhD degree after defending a research project, and following a number of additional courses with a more or less similar profile as in the rest of European or American universities.

Academic organization

The Spanish university system is organised in faculties (Mathematics, Education, Psychology, etc.) and departments. Usually a faculty is in charge of delivering one or more academic degree and has partially as one of its main goals to establish the teaching path towards the degree. Professors in a faculty are associated to one in a usually multi-departmental faculty. These departments are mainly in charge of organising teaching of specific subject matters. Over imposed in this structure is the adscription of professors to a number of “subject areas” (areas de conocimiento), of which there are 6 in Psychology: Methodology in the Behavioural Sciences, Psychobiology, Psychology of Basic Processes, Developmental-Educational Psychology, Social Psychology, and Personality and Psychological Assessment and Treatment. The organization into subject areas has a big impact on academic promotion. This promotion (professor and full professor) takes place as a result of an evaluation given by five colleagues from the own subject area, chosen from all universities at a national level. This is not the place to go into the specific of the system, that presently is being reformed again and which generally is considered unsatisfactory. However, the way in which the different members of the subject areas assess the research and teaching requirements to get promotion varies widely and it is the source of problematic decisions not always positive for the advancement of our discipline. These knowledge areas usually organize also their own meetings, mailing lists, and activities to promote the advancement of their disciplines.

Psychology Departments

It is not easy to list Spanish departments of Psychology according to specialities or lines of research because most of them have active research groups in a variety of research fields. By size, the University Complutense of Madrid is the biggest in the country (<http://www.ucm.es/info/Psi/>), but also Barcelona (<http://www.ub.es/psicolog/facultatcat.htm>), Valencia (<http://centros.uv.es/web/centros/psicologia/>), and the Spanish Open University

(Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia, <http://www.uned.es/psicologia/>) have very big Psychology departments. All of them have very active research groups in a number of research fields in all Psychology specialities. Smaller in size are the University of Granada (<http://www.ugr.es/~psicolo/index.html>) and the University of Almeria with very fine departments of Experimental Psychology, as well as La Laguna in the Canary Islands (<http://www.ull.es/inforgeneral/facultadescentros/facultadcentros/psicologia.htm#psi>), and Salamanca (<http://www.usal.es/webusal/>), The Autonomous University of Madrid (<http://www.uam.es/centros/psicologia/paginas/>) and Barcelona (<http://seneca.uab.es/psicologia>)

Research

In the research arena, the changes occurred in the Spanish psychology in the last 20 years are huge and very positive. When Spain was a closed country by political reasons, research production was most of the time not connected to international standards and insignificant both in terms of quality and quantity. However, with the advent of democracy, things changed radically. Not a minor force in this change was the establishment of research groups by students formed in American universities by the Fulbright program and who came back and promoted research standards long time operative in international research. Scientific research follows a strong trend towards internationalisation (García-Pérez, 2001; Igoa, 2001; Sanz, 2001; Sánchez-Miguel and García-Sánchez, 2001; Blanco and De la Corte, 2001; Herreros and Muñoz, 2001). This is a very positive and important step forward, although not uniform in all research sub areas previously enumerated. Whereas in psychobiology, research is mainly published in English in international journals (about 75% of the publications made), the percentage goes down to a 14% in Educational and Developmental Psychology. The rest of the areas may publish 20% of the production through these international channels. Although this is very significant if we consider the starting point, it is also pointing out to discrepant criteria within the different fields that should be unified in the near future. Why this difference between Psychobiology and the rest of the areas? Probably because of the way in which the psychobiologist applies criteria for promotion. They require to publish research in international journals, and this is a very important drive for all the members.

By areas, there is a very significant trend towards applied research and applications of theoretical knowledge. This trend is particularly strong in social Psychology with significant research in Work, Organizational and social Psychology of Health, and in the area of Personality and psychological assessment and treatment, working mainly on personality, adult psychopathology assessment and treatment. But it is also obvious in the area of Psychology of Basic Processes, where there is a sizeable number of research publications coming from fields traditionally not considered as such, like Sport, Traffic or Health Psychology. Historical research is also a major field in Basic Psychology, but it is particularly important from the international point of view, to mention the research carried out on attention and psycholinguistic where Spain has a very significant number of researchers who regularly publish in the major international journals. There are also a sizeable amount of work on psychometric and statistical methods (Methodology in the behavioural sciences), and Cognitive and linguistic development, cognition and instruction and difficulties in development and learning (Developmental and educational Psychology). The overall view of these trends is very positive with research in psychobiology clearly ahead of the rest in quality, but with the increasing trend

towards publishing in international journals and promoting collaborative research in international teams. This is a trend particularly emphasized in recent years that will show up in future impact studies. It remains as a challenge the acceptance of the reforms needed to be implemented to promote this trend evenly among the different subject areas and establish quality and excellence as the criterion for future academic reforms. Research journals publishing in Spain, predominantly in English, can be consulted at <http://www.uv.es/psicologica> (Psicologica) and <http://www.ucm.es/info/Psi/docs/journal> (Spanish Journal of Psychology)

3.3.-Professional Associations

Currently there is a major Professional Association of Spanish Psychologists (Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos, COP, <http://www.cop.es>) and several others, more specific and more scientifically and academically oriented. The “Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos” promotes and defends professional interests, particularly when registered psychologist provide services under a contract of employment. The Colegio also regularly sponsors National conferences, Seminars, and Conventions focusing on theoretical and practical issues and questions of professional interest. In its web page, there are links to several publications that they sponsor. Among the scientifically oriented societies, we would like to mention the “Sociedad Española de Psicología Experimental” (SEPEX, Spanish Society of Experimental Psychology, <http://www.sepex.net>), the “Asociación Española de Psicología Clínica y Psicopatología” (AEPCP, Spanish Association of Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology, <http://www.uv.es/AEPCP>), and the “Asociación Española de Metodología de las Ciencias del Comportamiento (AEMCCO, Spanish Society of Methodology of the Behavioural Sciences, <http://www.aemcco.org>)

Challenges for the future

We hope that these few lines had given a feel about the current state of scientific research and the profession of Psychology in Spain. The advances made in a very few number of years have been very significant. Psychology is one of the most popular studies in university, and the advancement in quality in research is also remarkable. What significant goals could we set for the future given our present situation?. Some of them are the followings. First of all, I think that the very high unemployment rate is indicating that the population of professionals (and of course students) and the work market are not equilibrated. One challenge is to work out in both sides of the equation to improve the current situation. Secondly, now that the student population is not expected to grow, there is a need to improve teaching conditions and curricula. The many changes happening in a few years in curricula and studies indicate that previous solutions were not completely satisfactory. Thirdly, research standards need to be raised across the different research areas as a way to continue improving the trend already initiated towards international collaboration and publication.

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