



Psychology in Mexico: Background and Current Status

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The initial establishment of psychology in Mexico, as defined by formally listed university courses and scholars using the title of the discipline dates from 1896. As a distinct profession psychology became well-established in the

1950s. Mexican psychology originated in its flagship university, National University of Mexico which was originally founded in September 1551 and the first disciplines being taught included architecture, law, medicine, engineering and theology (Sanchez Sosa, 2004).

Almost one hundred years of relative political and administrative instability followed the end of the war of independence. By the second half of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th, several disciplines developed at an increased pace, in both academia and organizations, including psychology. For instance, the first Latin American psychological association was founded by professors Ezequiel Chavez and Enrique Aragon, of the University of Mexico in 1907 followed shortly (1908) by the foundation of the second, in Argentina (Ribeiz, 2002).

The accomplishment of early applications of psychological expertise and the country's need for professionally trained psychologists led, as in other countries, to the foundation of university-level programs in psychology. Germinal courses in the late 1900's evolved into fully developed university curricula. In 1937, Ezequiel Chavez, an influential scholar who later became president of the university, formally proposed the establishment of master's and doctoral degree programs in psychology as a specialty of philosophy, despite a relatively strong experimental component. In time, these degrees evolved into the professional degree program that leads to the licensing degree presently called *licenciatura* (Sanchez-Sosa, 2002).

Contemporary Mexican psychology was influenced, since the 1960's, by the rapid expansion of experimentation, psychological testing, and statistical methods. The ferment started at the College of Psychology of the School of Philosophy and Letters of UNAM. The College was finally transformed into a full fledged Faculty in 1973. This meant increased autonomy to appoint and hire professors, lab technicians, administrative personnel etc., and to modify curricular structures and confer a doctorate degree in its own right (Alvarez & Trevino, 1979). This was, perhaps, the first such school in America to award a post-professional training doctoral degree, exclusively in psychology. Doctorates are considered strictly research degrees and cannot be obtained before a five-year-long professional licensing degree which provides entry level for independent practice.

For decades since the beginning of the twentieth century, the structure of the Mexican educational system, which was adopted by the Mexican government during the last

decade of the 19th century, resembled that of France. After one or two years of pre-elementary education, ending by age six, children go to elementary school for six years, followed by three years of high school and three years for a bachelor's degree (Sanchez-Sosa & Valderrama-Iturbe, 2001). This twelve-year pre-university cycle does not give any specific practice-oriented education, but is expected to be a "well rounded" one. Thus the terms "undergraduate" and "graduate," as used, for example in the U.S.A. have no meaning in Mexico since it is only after the bachelors degree, awarded by age 18, that students enter universities and study for about five years exclusively in one profession or career, to pursue general professional degrees (medicine, engineering, architecture, psychology, law, etc.).

Thus, once they complete their B.A., students who want to become psychologists apply for admission to a public or private university to study exclusively psychology. All programs, public or private, file their admissions criteria with the Vice-Ministry for Higher Education and many schools or departments require applicants to pass an entrance examination. Thus students enter the university for professional training at around 18 or 19 years of age. Professional, licensing-oriented programs provide five to six years of courses, laboratory classes and practica exclusively in psychology.

By the end of this cycle students must complete a thesis or a supervised practicum at an external training site (some programs entail both conditions). At least part of the practicum, referred to as social service, is mandatory for all university trained professions and usually entails 500 to 1000 hours of supervised professional practice. The thesis is publicly defended before a committee of three faculty members (Sanchez-Sosa, 2007). Most programs that train professional psychologists are housed in either a school of psychology or a department of psychology, which is part of a larger school. Schools of psychology are normally headed by a dean, and may have various departments that represent distinct specialties in psychology. Departments, however, are not empowered to autonomously issue professional titles. Some schools have replaced the thesis requirement with a multiple-choice examination. Currently most programs offer both options leading to a professional title (diploma).

Typical professional licensing degrees require course and laboratory work in basic psychological processes, research methodology, statistics, testing, and theories and systems. The last two years involve courses on assessment and intervention. The thematic areas covered usually include clinical and health problems, counseling, school performance, job performance, interpersonal relations, community psychology, and ethics. In Mexico the basic structure of many professional programs resemble those called "combined" or "integrated" in the U.S. (see Beutler & Fisher, 1994).

In addition to UNAM, the oldest, best established, and

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more significant professional training public psychology programs include those in the state universities of Baja California, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Puebla, Sonora, Veracruz, and Yucatan. Private universities with recognized professional programs in psychology include Anahuac, De las Americas, Iberoamericana, Intercontinental, Latino Americana, and Del Valle de Mexico.

Once psychologists receive a professional diploma they register in a state or federal registry office for the regulation of professions. This process leads to a national license, which can be revoked by either the Ministry of Education or a judge in case of improper or illegal professional conduct. Thus, "*licenciatura*" is the name of the academic diploma and "*cedula*" is the actual government-registered license. Masters programs tend to provide specialization or teaching proficiency, whereas doctoral programs are research degrees. Doctoral degrees usually require about nine years of academic preparation including the *licenciatura*.

Professional degree programs are accredited by a relatively new set of boards named Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education. Although funded by the Ministry of Education, this council autonomously establishes specific committees for each profession. These committees are generally composed of seven to nine well known scholars who review each program proposal and issue a recommendation. In the case of programs by private universities, before accreditation is granted, the program is expected to have an "Official recognition of studies validity certificate" given by a joint health-education committee, state or federally established. If the program meets the standards for curriculum, equipment, facilities, and faculty, the committee makes a formal recommendation to the Ministry of Education to issue the corresponding certificate. If a private university has not received such a certificate, its graduates cannot obtain the professional license, or *cedula*, necessary to practice.

Postgraduate research education gets *de facto* accredited by the National Council for Science and Technology in the sense that programs are evaluated and listed in a national register. Very stringent new standards place (post licensure) doctoral programs in one of three quality levels: a) newly founded, b) consolidated and c) of international quality. This designation is normally tied to the likelihood of additional funding by the Council. Currently only two doctoral programs belong in the higher levels of this roster: The doctoral program in neuroscience of the University of Guadalajara, designated as consolidated, and UNAM's doctoral program in psychology, designated as of international quality.

Demographics of Psychologists

Between 1945 and 2003 approximately 64,000 licenses for psychologists had been issued by Mexico's Ministry of Education (Dirección General de Profesiones, 2003). Recent estimates from the Mexican Psychological Society suggest that approximately half of all practicing psychologists are in the clinical or health area. The next largest application area is organizational-industrial psychology followed by school psychology and, last,

academicians and researchers in universities and other higher education institutions. Very few psychologists practice in emerging areas such as forensic psychology. Over 90% of psychologists in Mexico practice in urban areas.

Psychology Organizations

There are generally two types of psychological organizations: societies and colleges (*colegios*). Societies are usually scientific or disciplinary in nature whereas *colegios* tend to function more as professional guilds. The Mexican Psychological Society holds an annual convention and publishes the *Mexican Journal of Psychology*. The National College of Psychologists holds a bi-annual convention and publishes its proceedings as books (Sanchez-Sosa, 2004).

Other important organizations in psychology include psychology associations of university psychology program directors. Probably the most visible in Mexico is the National Council for Research and Education in Psychology (CNEIP). It is amalgamated by some 90 department chairpersons and deans of schools of psychology. About half of CNEIP members represent public universities, and the other half private. With over 500 currently active university programs training professional psychologists in Mexico, this Council includes about 25% of all departments or schools of psychology. It is the largest association of its kind and it encompasses the most significant professional training programs in psychology in Mexico. The Council supports the publication of a journal, *Teaching and Research in Psychology (Enseñanza e Investigación en Psicología)*. Other psychological organizations are specialized. Two of the most significant include the Mexican Society of Behavior Analysis (SMAC), and the Mexican Association of Social Psychology AMEPSO; they both organize yearly conventions and publish their corresponding journals.

The income of psychologists in governmental institutions tends to be lower than those of some other professionals. In public healthcare institutions for instance, a psychologist makes about 25% less than a physician and about 10% less than a registered nurse. In these settings a psychologist's salary is about that of a social worker.

On the other hand, psychologists have been edging their way toward comparable recognition with psychiatrists, aided in part by the fact that evidence-based psychological treatments for emotional problems have evolved more quickly than those of traditional clinical psychiatry, notwithstanding the introduction of new medications. There have not been initiatives to promote prescription privileges for psychologists in Mexico, and it will probably remain so for years to come. On the other hand, if the number and type of articles published are an indicator, research is an area where psychologists have had at least as much success as psychiatrists. The number of research articles jointly published by psychologists and psychiatrists is on the rise, and this provides evidence of improving professional relationships (Sanchez-Sosa, 2004).

Current Trends

Until the mid 1960's, both academicians and practitioners in Mexico identified primarily with a psychodynamic approach as the dominant conceptual

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and methodological perspective. Over the ensuing years, the dominance of this model has slowly decreased. At UNAM for instance, the 1970's saw a boost of experimental psychology all the way from animal research to novel applications of psychological testing and statistical tools. Applications are gradually shifting toward evidence-based interventions closer to the cognitive-behavioral approach. Mexican industrial-organizational psychologists seem to be less influenced by psychological research and frequently adopt concepts common in business schools and communities.

Mexican psychology still reflects the long-term outcomes of its fragmented and often contentious early development. Both new and old theoretical and methodological affiliations evolved and gathered advocates who associated in insular groups characterized sometimes more by ideology or theoretical proposals than research. Although this trend has dwindled in the last decade, subtle expressions of this approach can still be found.

The status of Mexican psychologists in relation to other disciplines has evolved noticeably in the last decade. In the health area, for instance, although physicians maintain a predominant status, better defined professional roles for psychologists have slowly begun to lessen this disparity. In the past it was unusual to find psychologists in hospitals caring for patients. Today an increasing number of psychologists in hospitals help treat patients with chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, cancer, etc.) alongside physicians and nurses, and newer roles are gradually becoming commonplace. Psychologists' interventions aim predominantly at promoting therapeutic adherence, coping with side effects of invasive treatments, managing chronic pain, increasing quality of life and improving patient-caregiver interaction.

By the same token, in contrast with earlier roles in psychiatric hospitals such as doing little more than psychological testing, contemporary professional roles of psychologists have gradually expanded to include such professional responsibilities as psychotherapy. Recent history suggests that part of this effect lies in a growing stature and prestige of psychologists in mental health institutions such as the Mexican Institute of Psychiatry.

Mexican school psychologists still provide mainly assessment services and occasionally treat children or adolescents with learning difficulties. Consolidation in this area has been slower and comparatively weak. Professional goals such as improving teacher quality, improving curricula or advancing study and test-taking skills are still infrequent. On the other hand, many industrial-organizational psychologists in Mexico remain working in the traditional areas of personnel selection and job training (Sanchez-Sosa & Hernandez-Guzman, 1996). Currently, perhaps due in part to this slower development of research-based interventions in these specialties, educational psychologists normally compete with educators for positions in schools, and industrial-organizational psychologists contend with business administrators for positions in industry.

Regarding ethical guidelines most Mexican psychologists refer to the *Ethical Code of the Psychologist (Codigo Etico*

del Psicologo) authored by the Mexican Psychological Society (2007). The guidelines were developed through successive revisions beginning in the early 1980's. Recent revisions are based on surveys on ethical dilemmas encountered by Mexican psychologists. A good portion of the conceptual work underlying recent versions of the guidelines stemmed from collaboration with the Canadian Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology (Hernandez-Guzman & Ritchie, 2001). Other ethical concepts and organizational experiences streamed from the annual meetings of the Forum of Professional Psychology of North America. The Forum is currently amalgamated within the Council for Credentialing Organizations of Professional Psychology (CCOPP). Beginning in 1994, the goal of these meetings was to promote mutual knowledge of systems for education, training, licensing, ethics and professional regulations in Mexico, Canada, and the U.S.A.

The launching of Mexico's National Council for Science and Technology (CoNaCyT) in the early 1970's fostered a quick growth of psychological research. UNAM also created peer review committees to fund research projects. UNAM's three campuses where psychology is taught receive approximately 45% of all research funding targeted for the social sciences. Psychologists also receive research funding from committees in biology and medicine.

In order to promote scientific research, the Mexican government instituted a nationwide merit program for researchers administered through CoNaCyT. Salary supplements range from one half to two times a professor's monthly salary. Young researchers usually enter the system as *candidates* immediately after obtaining their doctorate, and advance through four successive levels. If the quality and quantity of their research publications merit it, scholars get promoted to level I, then to level II and then III. Life-long contributors to research can access the Emeritus level. This incentive system has very effectively promoted research activities.

A few journals in Mexico publish most of the research produced by Mexican psychologists. Among the most influential are the *Mexican Journal of Psychology*, the *Mexican Journal of Behavior Analysis*, the *Psicologia Social & Personalidad* journal and the *CNEIP* journal. Other periodicals feature mainly conference proceedings, but pretend to be peer-reviewed publications (Hernandez-Guzman, Montero, & Carrillo, 2002). Although not exclusively psychological in its focus, other key journal is *Mental Health (Salud Mental)* published by the National Institute of Psychiatry.

Some Mexican journals publish articles in either Spanish or English, but most include articles only in Spanish, and a few in Spanish and other Latin languages (mainly French, Italian, and Portuguese). These language policies constrict a wider dissemination of Mexican psychological research in the predominantly English language mainstream of the scientific world. While publishing in Spanish may be a necessity for authors with only partial command of written English, many Mexican authors view publishing in Spanish as a matter of pride. For many years, Spanish was a widely used scientific

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language, and it has only recently lost ground to the hegemony of English in the scientific and academic world.

Summary

In summary, Psychology in Mexico is well-established as both scientific discipline and profession. The future will very likely involve dealing with a series of challenges, mainly stemming from Mexico's socioeconomic conditions, and from the pressures associated with a trend toward conceiving education, science, technology, and professional services as mere commercial products. Funding for public universities still is in short supply, and positions for psychologists are scarce and often under-funded. There is some underemployment of psychologists, which usually means that they sometimes are hired for jobs that are only partially related to their professional expertise. This situation is worsened by foreign companies that bring their own psychologists to Mexico, often disguised as "consultants."

The education of consumers, politicians, and the media remains an immediate priority. Although most people with at least high school education have a reasonable knowledge of what psychologists do, the discipline still has to deal with some misconceptions of its science and profession and sometimes the media does not help. Also, impostors offering services to "relieve human suffering" sometimes take the place of legitimate psychologists. This occurs because although the title psychology and psychologist are protected by law, terms such as therapy and therapist are not, and clients are frequently misled. Another challenge seems to be a direct outcome of globalization. There are online "universities" and "institutes" of suspicious quality that offer easy diplomas in numerous fields related to psychology.

International professional mobility in Mexico also faces nomenclature challenges. If free trade agreements include the mutual recognition of licenses only on the basis of the mere *names* of diplomas or titles, Mexican psychologists may be automatically excluded and denied professional opportunities. The fact that the entry level for professional practice is granted by a university diploma called Licenciatura (and not a doctorate) is already a nominal handicap. However, Mexican specialized professional master's degrees, as an example, are equivalent to most professional doctorates in Canada and the USA (Sanchez-Sosa, 2002).

Increased information about different systems and an open attitude by regulators of professional practice by psychologists is clearly an important first step toward real internationalization of psychology as both a scientific discipline and as profession.

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