



# Psychology in Chile

**C**HILE is a sparsely populated country in South America, at the 'end of the world'. Despite having an area of around three times the UK, its population is only just over 15 million. It is probably best known for the political turmoil of the early 1970s, so, many people outside Chile cannot imagine it as the very Europeanised country that it really is. Chile has one of the most stable economies in Latin America, based upon free trade and relying heavily on exports.

The fourth presidential period since the return of democracy began in December 2005, with the election of Michelle Bachelet as the first female president in the history of the country. Many Chileans would assess their culture as quite traditional, and it might be that this change reflects other areas of society which have been less listened to.

## **The roots of psychology**

The descendants of European immigrants form a significant portion of Chile's population. The country was a Spanish colony from the early 16th century and has been independent since 1810. Probably because of the early influence of France and England during the 19th and early 20th centuries, most Chileans tend to regard everything that is European (and nowadays, North American) as the gold standards for achievement and behaviour.

The same is true for psychology, where the influence of the occidental world has clearly marked its development. There is not much indigenous psychology; universities tend to focus their teaching on theories developed abroad, and a main characteristic of Chilean psychology is its

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emphasis on the professional applications of these theories to the Chilean situation (though this is starting to change).

Psychology in Chile can be traced back to 1885, when the government hired two German educational psychologists, Wilhelm Mann and Heinrich Schneider. Disciples of Wundt, their interests lay in experimental psychology and psychometrics. Later on, in 1908, Wilhelm Mann opened the first experimental psychology laboratory in the country, similar to the one that Wundt had founded in Leipzig. In this sense, Chilean psychology shares its roots with psychology in other countries, such as the UK and Spain.

Until the late 1940s the main influences continued to be in educational psychology, with its base in educational departments at established universities. Contributions from psychoanalysis, the first psychoanalysts (Ignacio Matte Blanco and Arturo Prat) coming through medical schools.

Psychology started to be taught as an independent discipline in 1946 in the Universidad de Chile, and in 1957 in Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. The first Psychology Institute specialised in experimental and differential psychology, and the application of psychology to development, education, work and mental hygiene. Child development and educational psychology were especially strong, as publications lodged in the Psychology Institute Archives demonstrate.

During the 1960s psychology became

an established discipline. It was already taught in two universities, there was a recognised Psychological Association, and research was buoyant. It is recorded that in 1970, the Universidad de Chile had 160 academic staff, a number that has not been exceeded since. Also, the influx of American psychology and behavioural theory provided new areas of interest for psychologists, moving away from the traditional European models.

## **Political unrest**

The military coup in 1973 changed all that. Many social scientists at the time had been involved in politics and the military government took measures to control what was perceived as a threat. Some academics had to leave the country – the number of academics in Universidad de Chile was reduced from 160 to 40 – and many remained exiled for almost 20 years.

Power and funds were taken back from universities by the government and no support was given to research for a long time. Police controlled university campuses. Being part of the social sciences could be especially dangerous. This was not helped by rumours that the chairman of one of the psychology schools was closely associated with torture, and was using psychological techniques to obtain information from prisoners. The effects of the coup were immediate, and until the 1990s there was very little research in psychology (although teaching and lecturing continued).

### Current trends: Practice

Since the early 1990s the situation for psychology has once again improved. Teaching and student numbers have increased explosively. There were only 86 psychology students in Chile in 1980, by 2000 the number had risen to 3593. Psychology as a profession has a good public standing.

It is estimated that from all psychology graduates, more than half work as clinical psychologists (privately or for the national health system), around a third as occupational psychologists and around one in 10 as educational psychologists (a trend similar to that reported by Algaravel and Luciano in their April 2003 article on Psychology in Spain). The interest in health psychology is growing and there are developments in political psychology.

Undergraduates receive basic training in various theoretical traditions, including behaviourism, cognitive psychology, and psychodynamic theory, among others. In practice, there is a strong preference for the use of integrative methods in psychotherapy, with elements of systemic thinking. Nevertheless, the historical influence of psychodynamic theories on clinical practice is still present.

Occupational psychology has seen substantial growth over recent decades. Chilean companies are generally aware of the need to employ psychologists in selection and training. Increasingly the role of psychologists has been more strategic in areas such as organisational development. There are some renowned psychologists in the field, who have established their practice through consultancy work. It is also interesting that many recently graduated clinical psychologists retrain as occupational psychologists due to their perception of market requirements.

Educational psychologists mainly focus on the development and assessment of teaching methods, increasingly in relation to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the education system, and also in what is known as school psychology (i.e. providing guidance and support for students). This is the area in which most research is published, reflecting both the fact that many practitioners are linked to academia, and the predominance of this field in Chilean research generally.

More recent developments relate to health psychology, community psychology and political psychology, though hindered by the fact that very little training is

provided in these areas. However, postgraduate courses in health psychology have been established and relations in this area with the national government are strong.

Political psychology has benefited from the return to democracy and a governmental programme developed to provide support to victims of human rights violations. Although this ought to be an area of general interest, in reality it is the domain of particular specialists.

### Current trends: Research

Three peer-reviewed journals of psychology are published in the country (see box). Published research is mainly related to educational psychology. Current research projects in the area look at language acquisition, evaluation of talent, cognitive development through gaming, disability, and teachers' performance assessment, among others. A project with special implications for the country is currently being developed, looking at the assessment and improvement of teaching performance. Results will impact directly on the way in which school children receive education.

Social and community psychologists are also active in research. Their interests lie in the study of stereotypes and discrimination, the prevention of social and domestic violence, and the development of community organisations. Among a small number of Chilean psychologists, there is a new research focus on improving inter-group attitudes towards native ethnic minorities, one project being partly funded by the British Council, and another by the Chilean government, though anthropology and sociology have had relatively more impact than psychology in this research area.

Other research is emerging in the areas of health psychology and psychotherapy. Current projects look, for example, at the facilitation of change through psychotherapy and at users' satisfaction with the public health systems.

### Where is psychology taught?

Before 1981 only the Universidad de Chile ([www.uchile.cl](http://www.uchile.cl)) and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile ([www.uc.cl](http://www.uc.cl)) offered psychology training. Currently, however, there are 42 universities offering undergraduate psychology degrees, of which 40 emerged after 1981, when Chilean law allowed the creation of private educational

bodies. Due to its popularity, students studying psychology in the best recognised institutions come in with exceptionally high scholastic achievements. Training to master's level is provided in 15 universities, and to doctoral level in two of them. Professional postgraduate qualifications are also provided by independent institutes, such as the Chilean Family Therapy Institute ([www.terapiafamiliar.cl](http://www.terapiafamiliar.cl)) and the Chilean Psychoanalytic Association ([www.apch.cl/instituto.html](http://www.apch.cl/instituto.html)).

Regulation of academic practices is a big issue facing Chilean psychology. There is currently no compulsory accreditation of courses and psychology is considered a 'chalk and blackboard' discipline, for which it is perceived as 'easy' to train professionals. Since 1999 an accreditation body was created and criteria was established to evaluate psychology training, but to date only seven of the 42 programmes have been through this process.

Nonetheless, all undergraduate psychology programmes in Chile are designed by law with a minimum of five years' taught content. The first four provide students with a degree roughly equivalent to a bachelor's degree in the UK, and the fifth provides initial professional training. Most universities also require students to work for around a year on an applied research project which is written up as a thesis. The curriculum for psychology teaching in the country is very comprehensive, and in most cases would include introductory modules and applications to clinical, educational and occupational psychology. Some universities also offer a specialised programme in the

## PUBLICATIONS IN CHILE

**Psyke** ([www.puc.cl/psicologia](http://www.puc.cl/psicologia)): a biannual, bilingual (Spanish and English) peer-reviewed journal, published since 1992 by the School of Psychology, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. The journal publishes papers in all areas of psychology in Chile and it welcomes international submissions. It is indexed in PsychINFO and Scielo.

**Revista de Psicología** (<http://rehue.csociales.uchile.cl/psicologia/publicaciones.htm>): a biannual peer-reviewed journal published since 1990 by the Psychology Department, Universidad de Chile. It publishes empirical papers and reviews.

**Revista Terapia Psicológica** [Psychological Therapy Journal]: a magazine of the Chilean Society of Clinical Psychology, published biannually since 1982.

## NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

**Colegio de Psicólogos de Chile** [Chilean Psychologists Association]

([www.colegiopsicologos.cl](http://www.colegiopsicologos.cl)): originally established in 1959, and took its current structure in 1968. It groups psychologists from all areas of practice (classed as clinical, educational or organisational psychologists). Its main contribution is the development of an ethics code and ethics committee which provide guidance on psychological practice in Chile.

**Sociedad Chilena de Psicología Clínica** [Chilean Society of Clinical Psychology]

([www.sociedadchilenadepsicologiaclinica.cl](http://www.sociedadchilenadepsicologiaclinica.cl)): the national body representing clinical psychologists, founded in 1979. They also provide (in partnership with Colegio de Psicólogos de Chile) accreditation for practice.

In recent years, other groups have been developed by groups of specialist practitioners, such as the Chilean Society of Health Psychology and the Chilean Association of Organisational Development.

fifth year of training so that students can choose one of the main areas in psychology for their professional training.

It is expected that in the near future there will be more accreditation, both of courses and individual psychologists, as legislation is soon to enforce this process. A register of accredited clinical psychologists exists, run by the Chilean Society of Clinical Psychology ([www.sociedadchilenadepsicologiaclinica.cl](http://www.sociedadchilenadepsicologiaclinica.cl)). Only members of this register can practice as psychologists in the national health service, but anyone can practice privately.

### Perspectives on the future

The future of psychology in Chile will undoubtedly be dominated by two tendencies: an increase in regulation and accreditation, and the development of applied research.

Chilean law is changing to regulate practices in the health sector and this is likely to affect psychology. Although at the moment these changes will affect only health and clinical psychologists working

in the public sector, the tendency will be to establish similar systems for other areas of practice.

Applied research has centred on areas of educational psychology which can be readily applied to the school setting. With an increasing number of postgraduate students, the same tendency will be seen in occupational, health and clinical psychology. This will hopefully allow psychology in Chile to 'own' theories and practices and do more than translate developments from Europe and America.

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