

Psychology in Spain

ALTHOUGH the roots of scientific psychology in Spain are as old as in other European countries, its modern establishment as a profession and its study in the majority of Spanish universities is quite recent. The first faculty of psychology was created as recently as 1978 in Madrid, against a backdrop of social and political change. The subject has grown rapidly ever since.

In the modern era (see Santolaya *et al.*, 2001) the average professional works in clinical settings (68 per cent), in the private sector (73 per cent) and with a cognitive-behavioural orientation (49 per cent). This professional is 36 years old, female (73 per cent) and belongs to a community (certified by a professional association) of around 30,000 members.

SALVADOR ALGARABEL and JUAN V. LUCIANO with an outline of the state of psychology in their country.

All these figures are overshadowed by a very high unemployment rate – 50 per cent of the certified professionals under 30. This figure would be higher still if we were to take into account the amount of people obtaining the degree. Psychology is a very popular choice among students: there are about 40,000 people enrolled in the university system, pursuing the degree that could provide them with the possibility of working as ‘psychologists’. Psychology has enjoyed a good image, particularly among women, because of its social applications. The popularity of the discipline has perhaps been boosted by the fact that until

recently entry requirements for psychology courses were not very strict, and the social perception was that the courses were of medium difficulty.

Early development

The origins of Spanish scientific psychology can be traced back to the latter part of the 19th century (Prieto *et al.*, 1994). In 1902 Luis Simarro (1851–1921) was appointed to the then recently created chair of experimental psychology within the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Madrid, and 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 one of the fathers of some of the current branches of psychobiology.

On the applied side, Emilio Mira (1896–1964) began to use psychometrics extensively 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 an essential role in applying psychology to the improvement of efficiency in industry and

Psychology remains popular in Spain, despite there being high levels of unemployment among young certified professionals

in rehabilitation programmes 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 an empirically based enterprise. A select group of people (among them José Germain, Mariano Yela and José Luis Pinillos) were in part responsible for bringing psychology back to the realm of empirical sciences during the 1950s and 1960s, in a period in which the country was isolated from the rest of the world because of the Franco dictatorship.

Present-day psychology

Modern psychology was shaped in the 1970s by the exponential growth of the student population. During this decade and in the 1980s successive new syllabuses, faculties and departments were created to respond to this demand. This trend has now levelled off. 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 helps 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 practise the profession, is obtained after following a number of courses taken normally in a five-year period. Those pursuing research can achieve a PhD degree after defending a research project, and following a number of additional courses with a more or less

similar profile to those in universities in the rest of Europe or America.

Academic organisation The Spanish university system is organised in faculties (mathematics, education, psychology, etc.) and departments. Professors are deployed to 'subject areas' (*areas de conocimiento*), of which there are six in psychology: methodology in the behavioural sciences; psychobiology; psychology of basic processes; developmental and educational psychology; social psychology; and personality and psychological assessment and treatment.

The organisation into these subject areas has a big impact on academic promotion (to professor and full professor). Promotion takes place after an evaluation by five colleagues from the candidate's subject area, chosen from all universities at a national level. The way in which the different members of the subject areas assess the research and teaching

DEPARTMENTS

By size, the University Complutense of Madrid is the biggest in the country (www.ucm.es/info/Psi/), but Barcelona (www.ub.es/psicolog/facultatcat.htm), the Spanish Open University (www.uned.es/psicologia/), and Valencia (<http://centros.uv.es/web/centros/psicologia/>) also have very big departments. Smaller in size are the University of Granada (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 (www.ull.es/inforgeneral/facultadescursos/facultadcentros/psicologia.htm#psi), Salamanca (www.usal.es/webusal/) and the Autonomous Universities of Madrid (www.uam.es/centros/psicologia/paginas/) and Barcelona (<http://seneca.uab.es/psicologia>).

requirements to get promotion varies widely and is source of problematic decisions: not always positive for the advancement of our discipline. These knowledge areas usually organise their own meetings, mailing lists, and so on.

Research In the research arena the changes in Spanish psychology in the last 20 years can only be termed as astonishing. When Spain was a closed country for political reasons, most research production was not connected to international standards. However, with the advent of democracy things changed radically. A major force in this change was the establishment of research groups by Spanish students educated in American universities under the Fulbright Program. On their return to Spain these students promoted research standards that had for a long time been operative in international research.

Overall, scientific research follows a strong trend towards internationalisation (see the *Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 2001, volume 4, part 2 for a collection of articles looking at the development of professional psychology from 1989 to 1998 and analysing research in the six subject areas in the same period). This is a very important step forward, but it is not uniform across all research sub-areas. Whereas research in psychobiology is mainly published in English in international journals (about 75 per cent of the published research), the percentage goes down to 14 per cent in educational and developmental psychology. The rest of the areas may publish about 20 per cent of the output of all their members in international journals. Although this is very

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Currently there is a major Professional Association of Spanish Psychologists (Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos: 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. Its webpage has links to several publications that they sponsor.

Among the scientifically oriented societies, we would like to mention the Sociedad Española de Psicología Experimental (Spanish Society of Experimental Psychology: www.sepex.net), the Asociación Española de Psicología Clínica y Psicopatología (Spanish Association of Clinical Psychology and Psychopathology: www.uv.es/AEPCP), and the Asociación Española de Metodología de las Ciencias del Comportamiento (Spanish Society of Methodology of the Behavioural Sciences: www.aemcco.org).

significant if we consider the starting point, it is also pointing to discrepant criteria within the different fields, which we think ought to be unified, though this is unlikely in the near future.

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, organisational and the 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 are numerous 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 psycholinguistics, where Spain has a very significant number of researchers who regularly publish in the major international journals. There is also a sizeable amount of work on psychometric and statistical methods (methodology in the behavioural sciences), cognitive and linguistic development, cognition and instruction and difficulties in development and learning (developmental and educational psychology).

So, overall, there is an increasing trend towards publishing in international journals and promoting collaborative research in international teams. But research in psychobiology is clearly ahead of the rest in quality, and the challenge now is to promote this trend evenly among the different subject areas and establish quality and excellence as the criteria for future academic reforms.

The research publications *Psicologica* and the *Spanish Journal of Psychology* publish predominantly in English. They can be consulted at www.uv.es/psicologica and www.ucm.es/info/Psi/docs/journal.

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What are we trying to do, and how can you help?

The Psychologist would like to feature a different country every few months, but as always we need your help in the form of contributions. Our overseas readers may like to tackle their own country. UK readers might consider their students: at any time, academics host large numbers of postgraduates from a wide catchment, and given their mobility and firsthand experience they might be a valuable source. The article below could be seen as a template, but *The Psychologist* would also welcome any contributions on psychology worldwide that would be of interest to our wide-ranging, non-specialist readership. Enjoy, comment, and write or seek out contributions yourself!

Contact the Associate Editor (International), Professor Nigel Foreman, on n.foreman@mdx.ac.uk.

Challenges for the future

The advances made in a relatively short time have been very significant. But what major goals could we set for the future? First of all, the very high unemployment rate is an indication that the population of professionals (and of course students) and the work market are not in equilibrium. One challenge is to work out 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 towards international collaboration and publication.

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