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Psychological science in Argentina: current state & future directions

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Abstract

Psychology was internationally developed as a scientific discipline. However, there continues to be a bias towards the publication of research with Western English-speaking samples. In consequence, it is important to understand what challenges non-English speaking countries are facing in their ability to contribute their research. Considering this, the goal of this article is to present an overview of the factors that may affect the development of scientific psychology in Argentina, including the professional practice of psychology, the teaching of psychology in higher education, and obstacles faced by graduate students who pursue research careers. Reviewing these topics will allow us to present the current state of psychological science in Argentina, and to propose future directions for scientific development.

Keywords Psychology in Argentina · Higher education · Research careers

Psychological science has been proposed to be a growing scientific discipline. However, it has also been highlighted that there tends to be a bias in top journals towards publishing research from Western countries [25, 30, 39], which mainly includes participants from English-speaking college students (96% of participants in studies published in the top six psychology journals were from western countries, [4, 17, 37]). This may represent a problem for the reliability and generalizability of psychological research [37, 38]. Accordingly, it is important to promote the publication of research that involves diverse samples, and to understand what challenges non English speaking countries are facing in their ability to contribute their research. Considering this, the goal of this article is to present the current state of psychological science in Argentina. With this aim, we will present an overview of the factors that may affect the local development of scientific psychology, including the history of Psychology in Argentina, the professional practice of Psychology, teaching psychology in higher education, and obstacles faced by graduate students who pursue research careers. Then, we will present conclusions and propose future directions.

1 History of development of psychology in Argentina

Argentina is one of the countries with the highest rate of psychologists in the world. In 2015, there were 193,99 psychologists per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Finland and Norway with 56,96 and 54,98 psychologists per 100,000 inhabitants [1, 12]. Even though psychologists in Argentina are licensed to work on fields such as clinical, educational, and forensic psychology, they tend to work on clinical psychology [13, 22]. This can be related to the history of Psychology in Argentina.

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Psychology in Argentina flourished in early years (1895–1916) as Experimental Psychology [22, 32]. Yet, it was highly influenced by the clinical bias of French psychology [21]. After these early years, between 1916 and 1941, psychology became almost a philosophical anthropology, which still had a clinical orientation [35].

Between 1941 and 1962, psychologists focused on psychotechnics, through the study of aptitudes, and the development of personality inventories. This was related to an industrialization process in Argentina, which required the study of workers' aptitudes in order to promote their productivity [21].

Since the military coup in 1955, psychology and academia underwent deep changes. Among them, democracy was heavily restricted and several universities were intervened by the government. All tenure positions were removed, affecting the careers of several professors with international prestige. In relation to this, higher education and the research agenda in Argentina turned towards "*economic modernization*". Such economic transformations led to a deindustrialization, and a decrease in psychologists' interest in psychotechnics. In turn, the new culture of modernity facilitated the irruption of psychodynamic approaches, which emphasized individual clinical practice [22].

The following military coups continued affecting the development of psychological science. Even though in 1958 the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) was created, the funding of basic and applied research was biased towards biomedical sciences [18]. In consequence, there was limited availability of funds for psychological science.

In turn, the military coup of 1976 established a liberal economic model, which accentuated the dependent and peripheral role of Argentinian science. This was accompanied by a renewed attack and underfunding of public universities, which resulted in the censorship, political persecution, torture, kidnapping and disappearance of psychologists [18, 22].

With the return of democracy in 1983, higher education began a normalization process, which led to an increase in student enrollment. In the 90's, a new economic model emerged, based on a market economy. In this context, most universities still have a strong focus on clinical psychology and psychodynamic approaches, even though new approaches such as CBT are gaining interest among the public and clinical psychologists, especially in private institutions and professional associations [22, 24].

To sum up, historically the economic and political situation in Argentina has not promoted the development of psychological science, and has contributed to psychologists choosing other career paths that focus on clinical practice.

1.1 Factors affecting the development of professional practice of psychology in Argentina

As was mentioned, Argentinian psychologists tend to work on clinical psychology. A low number of them work on educational psychology, industrial–organizational, and forensic psychology [2, 22]. This is reflected in the topics of publications authored by Argentinian psychologists, which have tended to focus on Clinical Psychology and Psychoanalysis, followed by Educational Psychology, and to a lesser extent on Social Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Industrial Psychology and Experimental Psychology. More recent publications have started to focus on topics such as Behavioral Sciences, History of Psychology, and Cognitive-Behavioral Approaches to therapy [22, 33]. In turn, in other Latin-American countries (such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Cuba, Perú, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela), publications by psychologists have tended to focus on Psychoanalysis, Psychometrics, Cultural Psychology, Social Psychology, Cognitive Psychology, Developmental and Behavioral Psychology [15], Gutiérrez & Landeira-Fernández, 2021).

Argentinian clinical psychologists tend to adopt a psychodynamic perspective [12, 13, 29]. In 2012, Muller & Palavezzatti [27] stated that 52,9% of the psychologists in Buenos Aires reported adopting this perspective in their clinical practice. In 2018, Alonso and colleagues stated that 44,1% of the clinical professionals in Argentina adopted it. The Cognitive-Behavioral approach to therapy has increased in popularity in the last decade, but mostly in private settings [22]. This focus on Psychoanalysis has also been observed for other Latin American countries (e.g., Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay), where it plays a bigger role than CBT approaches [14].

Even though psychologists in Argentina tend to practice clinical psychology, it has also been proposed that they tend to have scarce knowledge about the theoretical foundations of their approach to therapy [26], and to not base their practice on prior research [28]. Also, they do not tend to be trained in the use of international diagnostic manuals, the writing of assessment reports or the design of psychological tests [6, 12, 13].

Another factor that has been proposed to affect the development of Professional practice of Psychology in Argentina is that psychologists do not tend to pursue postgraduate education [11, 20]. In fact, 50% of them only held a Bachelors' degree in 2019 [3]. Considering this, it has been suggested that it would be useful that there was a continuing education requirement for psychologists to renew their license [20].

This focus of Argentinian psychologists on Clinical Psychology can be related to their undergraduate education, which tends to promote students' interest in pursuing a career in Clinical Psychology, over other fields such as Experimental Psychology or Community Psychology [8].

Next, we will present an overview of factors affecting Psychology and higher education in Argentina.

2 Factors affecting the Teaching of Psychology and Higher Education in Argentina

Undergraduate psychology degree programs in Public or Private Argentinian Universities last 6 years. After completing these years of training, psychology graduates are able to obtain a license to practice Clinical Psychology [22]. Courses tend to focus on different psychology fields, such as general psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, forensic psychology, and psychological assessment [10, 12, 13]. Yet, most of them have a clinical focus, present a psychodynamic perspective [9, 22], and do not include bibliography by non-Argentinian Latin American authors [12, 13]. Accordingly, they do not tend to promote scientific pluralism (that is, they do not promote that students learn from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, Fierro & Klappenbach, [22] or students' interest or involvement in diverse psychological fields other than clinical psychology [10, 12, 13, 23]. Another factor that does not promote that students focus on different psychological fields or research is that there is a low number of elective courses that they can take as part of the requirements for their degree, which would provide them an opportunity to focus on different topics [11].

Obstacles to the teaching of Psychology as a scientific discipline in Argentina include infrastructure constraints, such as large student bodies (student–teacher ratio: 122 for the University of Buenos Aires, where the percentage of enrollment of students in relation to the total enrollment at Public Universities is 19.2), teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to online libraries and journals [13]. In turn, professors tend to work as clinical psychologists, and do not be involved in research activities [11]. These constraints promote that they adopt lecture-based teaching, and do not use instructional strategies that promote students' involvement in research activities, such as asking them to read and critically review papers, or draft research proposals [1, 12]. This strong emphasis on clinical psychology over other psychological fields, and of teaching over research activities has also been observed for other Latin-American countries (such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, and Venezuela), in addition to a lack of interdisciplinary approaches to higher ed and curriculum updating [16, 40]

Next, we will present some of the obstacles faced by psychologists who decide to pursue research career paths in Argentina.

2.1 Obstacles faced by graduate students who pursue research careers

Even though Argentinian higher education does not tend to promote students' involvement in research careers, some graduate students pursue them.

Some of the obstacles that these students face include scarce funding availability, funding cuts due to political and economic crises (which make the application process for obtaining grants and research positions extremely competitive), and delays in the access to funds [12, 13]. Similar difficulties have been reported for other Latin-American countries (such as Brazil, Mexico and Chile, [19]), where research is mainly sponsored by governmental agencies, and national investment in research is usually under 1% of their gross domestic product [16].

In Argentina, psychologists tend to apply for research positions (for Phd students, postdocs or permanent research fellows) at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council- CONICET [31]. When they apply, they are assessed by the "Psychology and Educational Sciences committee" (which also assesses and selects applicants who hold a degree in Education). CONICET yearly informs the number of new researchers and fellows hired by the institution, and their educational background. In relation to this, Fig. 1A presents the raw number of new fellows and researchers selected by the Psychology and Education committee between 2011 and 2020, and Fig. 1B presents the proportion of candidates selected by this committee in relation to other committees. These Figures illustrate some of the effects of the described obstacles for researchers in Latin-America. As can be observed, the number of new fellows selected by this committee decreased since 2016. This can be related to an economic and scientific crisis that took place in Argentina during those years, which was marked by funding cuts for new research job positions, grants and salaries [7, 34]. In addition, the proportion of new psychology fellows and researchers decreased in relation to researchers and fellows from other areas. This

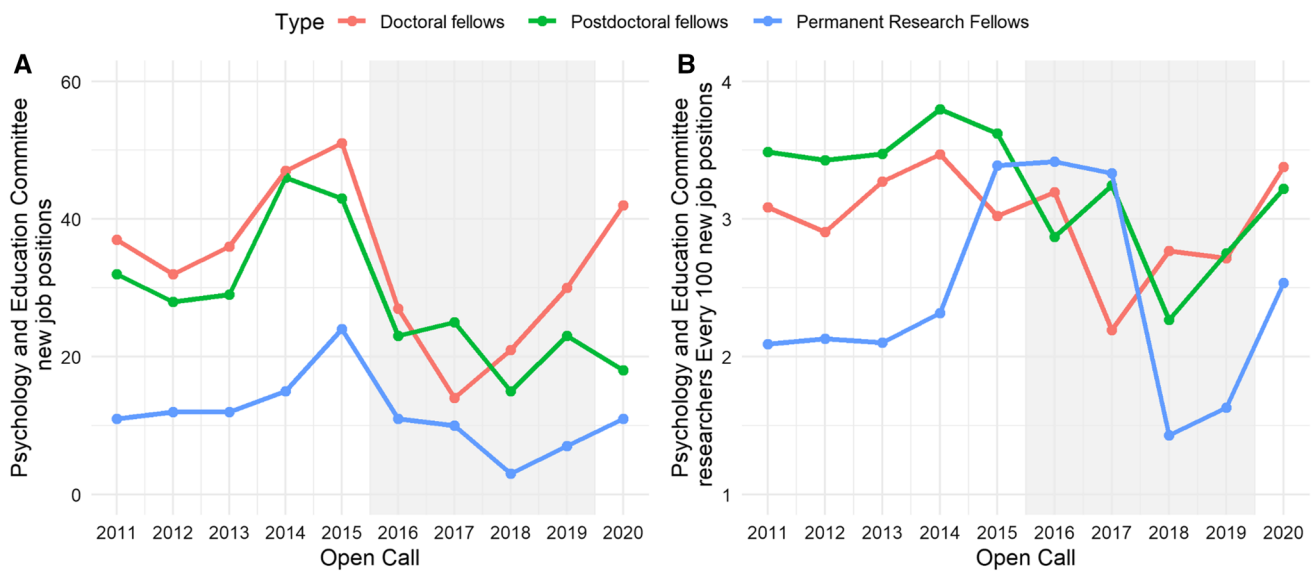


Fig. 1 New Job Positions allocated by the Psychology and Educational Sciences Committee between 2011 and 2020. Grey Area represents a New Government Administration

suggests that the funding cuts may have had a higher impact on Psychology than other areas, and raises key questions for analyzing the obstacles that psychological research faces in Argentina: Are Argentinian government agencies less interested in promoting research in Psychology and Education than in other areas? Do social representations of Psychology as a clinical discipline contribute to this?

In relation to these unequal funding cuts, recent studies have analyzed the challenges faced by human and social sciences since 2016 in Argentina. This period was characterized by political, media and academic discourses that downplayed the importance of these sciences, in relation to other fields such as software, biotechnology or nanotechnology [5]. In consequence, social and human sciences were assessed based on criteria coming from the so-called “hard sciences”, and with business or market perspectives, not necessarily suitable for them [36]. This delegitimization of the social sciences could be associated with the funding cuts experienced in the field of psychology and other social and human sciences.

These funding cuts have also been proposed to have had a negative effect on Psychology graduate students’ motivation for pursuing research careers [7, 34]. In relation to this, Fig. 2A exhibits the raw number of applications submitted to the Psychology and Educational Sciences committee between 2011 and 2020, and the total number of new job positions. As can be observed, in relation to the described scientific crisis in Argentina, the number of applications decreased since 2016.

Considering the obstacles that Argentinian psychologists who wish to pursue research careers face, it would be important that government agencies develop a clear agenda for promoting research in psychological science. All data presented in this section is available at: <https://fedegiovannetti.github.io/ks7conicet/>.

3 Conclusions & future directions

The goal of this article was to present an overview of the current state of psychological science in Argentina, and to propose future directions.

In order to present the current state of psychological science in Argentina, we presented an overview of the History of Psychology, factors affecting the development of Psychology as a profession, Psychology and higher education, and obstacles that graduate students who pursue research careers face. This overview allows us to suggest that psychologists in Argentina tend to work on Clinical Psychology and to not get involved in research, which can be related to the history of Psychology in Argentina (which has not tended to involve the promotion or funding of psychological research, due to political and economic crises) and the focus of their undergraduate education in this field. They also do not tend to pursue postgraduate education. In addition, infrastructure constraints do not facilitate that Professors use instructional activities that promote students’ interest or involvement in research activities, or promote critical thinking. In relation to obstacles to pursuing research careers in

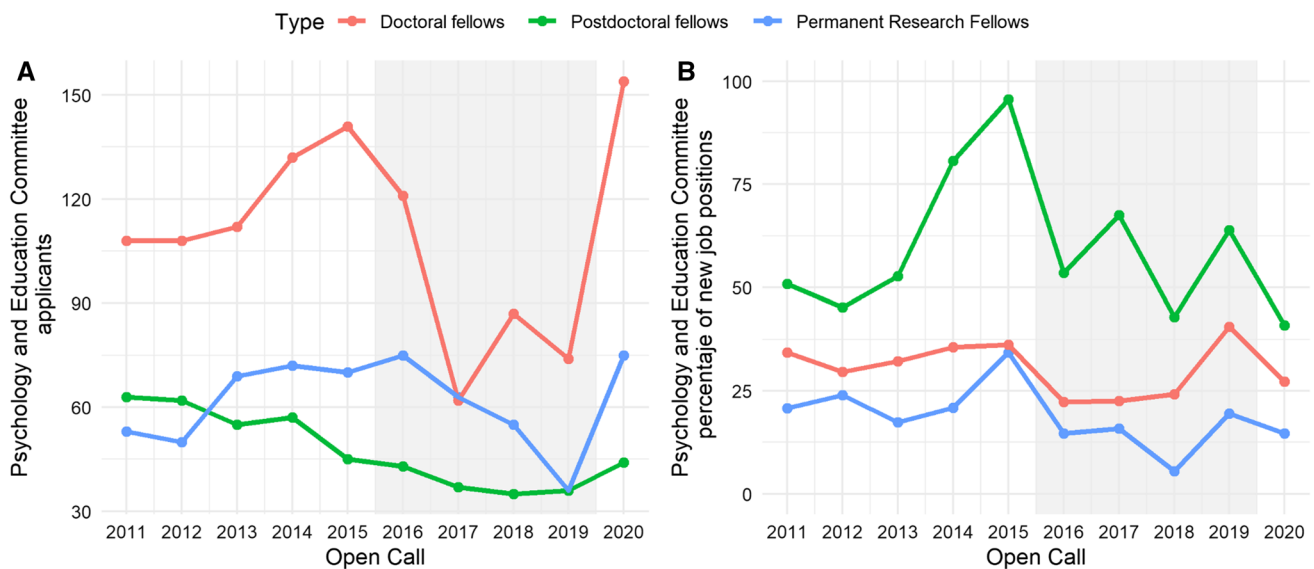


Fig. 2 New Applications and Percentage of Candidates selected by the Psychology and Education Committee 2011–2020. Gray Area represents a New Government Administration

Psychology, funding for Ph.D., postdoc and permanent research positions tends to be scarce and affected by economic and political crises, which tend to result in funding cuts for psychological research over other areas.

Considering these factors that affect Psychology in Argentina, it would be important, as future directions to promote its development, that higher education institutions offered more courses that focused on different psychological fields, such as Educational, Organizational, Experimental or Community Psychology, different approaches to Clinical Psychology. In addition, it would be relevant that students could take more elective courses as part of their programs, and that colleges and Universities promoted public and free postgraduate education. It would also be useful that Professors adopted instructional strategies that encouraged students' critical thinking, and their interest and involvement in research activities, and got involved in research themselves. In relation to scientific careers, it would be crucial that government agencies provided more funding opportunities for psychologists who decide to apply for research positions. This would foster their motivation for pursuing research careers, and developing research that has social impact, and leads to high quality publications.

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Declarations

Competing interests Non-financial interests: 1. Dr. Cevasco is an Associate Editor of Discover Psychology.

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