

## IS PSYCHOLOGY A HEALTH PROFESSION?\*

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The question of whether or not Psychology is a health profession has undoubtedly been the most debated and discussed issue over the last two years among psychologists and psychology students in Spain. As is well known, this whole debate began with the publication of the *Ley de Ordenación de las Profesiones Sanitarias (LOPS; Law for the Organization of the Health Professions)*; since then, debate over the matter has become more and more heated. Given the confluence of so many aspects, this is quite possibly the greatest conflict to erupt in the history of Psychology in Spain, a conflict that has left no sector of the discipline indifferent. There are, then, many different groups involved in the debate. On the one hand are Psychology professionals and the representatives of professional associations and scientific societies, whose involvement is reflected in the special issue of the journal *Infocop* entitled *Los psicólogos somos profesionales sanitarios* ("We psychologists are health professionals"), from 2004 (<http://www.cop.es/extrainfocop>). On the other hand are the Psychology students' organizations, which constitute an important and active element in the process of change. On the academic side, the Conference of Psychology has included the issue as a constant item of debate in its latest meetings. But moreover, this matter has come to a head just at the time when the European Union is in the process of creating a European Higher Education Area – which obviously also affects Psychology here in Spain, but in a different way from that of other countries, given the important links between our discipline and Latin-American Psychology (see, for example, the recent issue of the *Revista Mexicana de Psicología* devoted to the assessment and accreditation of the quality of Psychology programmes in Ibero-America: <http://www.psicologia.org.mx>). And as though this were not enough, Spain's Universities Coordinating Council has just officially begun the process for the creation of

the MSc in Psychology, which ties in with the Royal Decree regulating postgraduate studies. Thus, the matter is no longer restricted to the issue of whether or not Psychology is a health profession; rather, the result of the current context of multiple reforms is a wide-ranging discussion, given that the academic and professional conception of Psychology will greatly influence the design of new study courses. Hence, the enormous relevance of the recent special issue of the journal *Análisis y Modificación de Conducta* (Analysis and Modification of Behaviour), on the topic: *¿Qué debe saber un psicólogo y qué debe saber un profesor de Psicología?* ("What should a psychologist know, and what should a Psychology teacher know?"), which makes some extremely important points, and should be "required reading" at least for those charged with the crucial task of designing the curriculum for the Psychology MSc.

The publication of the three special issues mentioned (*Infocop*, *Revista Mexicana de Psicología*, *Análisis y Modificación de Conducta*) is a clear indication of the involvement of Psychology professionals and teachers in Spain in the extensive changes taking place. However, there is obviously an element of the human bias of seeing the problem in terms of the way one is affected by it; thus, while students are especially preoccupied about their career opportunities, professionals are most interested in their status; at the same time, the primary concern of academics is whether their discipline is to be considered within the field of social and forensic sciences or that of experimental and health sciences. Moreover, there is another group, more or less well informed, that is also observing these debates with great interest – indeed, possibly the most important group –, namely the clients of Psychology, who are keen to obtain a clear idea of the kind of service that will be available, and whether or not it will be considered within the ambit of the healthcare professions.

The present special issue emerged as a consequence of the article *La Psicología: ¿una profesión sanitaria con distintas especialidades?* (Psychology: a health profes-

\* The studies corresponding to the first four articles were financed through a research agreement between the Spanish Psychological Association and the University of Granada.

sion with different specialities? (<http://www.cop.es/extrainfocop/12.pdf>), which was debated at a round table organized by the Psychology students' association at the University of Granada, with the participation of Francisco Santolaya, Mariano Vera, Jesús Gil Roales-Nieto and Gualberto Buena-Casal, since one of the clearest conclusions to come out of that session was the need to discover the opinions (on the consideration of Psychology as a health profession) of the different groups involved in a more systematic way. With this aim, the University of Granada and the Spanish Psychological Association signed a research agreement that allowed the financing and implementation of the four opinion polls presented in this issue. The objective of this research, then, is to explore opinions about the image of Psychology as a health discipline and/or profession among all those sectors of the Spanish population implicated or affected in one way or another by whether or not Psychology is considered within the area of health.

Although this study may appear to constitute nothing more than an opinion poll, it does entail some degree of difficulty, not with regard to technical aspects, but in view of its scope – some six thousand opinions of people from four different sectors to be recorded and processed – and an urgency that meant implementing the entire project in record time. In order to maintain 100 percent control over the data, the research team designed a data-collection system which guaranteed that each person could respond only once to the survey, that responses were anonymous, and that respondents were unaware of the identity of the study's authors. Apart from the psychometric guarantees of the instrument analyzed for each one of the samples, as described in the articles, it can also in some way be said to present apparent validity, since the fact that the study has six thousand respondents, the majority with knowledge of the quality of the assessment instruments, is certainly an indicator of this type of validity.

The four studies that make up this study were carried out with nationwide samples, and in the order they appear in this special issue. First of all we applied a survey to a sample of 593 university teachers of Psychology and of Medicine, analyzing whether opinion differed in accordance with field of knowledge or teaching department; the aim of this study was to discover the academic opinion on the issue. Secondly, we carried out a study

with a sample of 1206 professional psychologists from the different regional official Psychology associations in Spain; the purpose of this second project was to record the opinions of those who exercise the profession. The third study consisted in a survey of 1571 final-year undergraduates from fourteen Psychology faculties in Spain, whose purpose was to reveal how future Spanish psychologists view the discipline. Finally, though no less importantly, we needed to know about the image of Psychology in the eyes of those who use it, and to this end we polled the opinion of 1562 people from the different provinces of Spain.

This special issue also includes two articles from the research teams led by Professors Larry Beutler (*University of Stanford*) and Stephen Haynes (*University of Hawaii*), which, though not dealing specifically with the issue in question, are most certainly complementary, since they contribute a view from beyond our frontiers on aspects related to the object of our study.

Like all studies, to a greater or lesser degree, the present one has its limitations, though these are due mainly to the need to accomplish our task in record time and at a juncture in which information on the issue was springing up in abundance from all quarters, and undoubtedly influencing what people thought about it. It would admittedly have been more correct to carry out this study at a time when Spanish Psychology were more settled, rather than when, as now, it were at the centre of fierce academic and professional debate, but the pressing need for such research outweighed these considerations. The articles are written in as descriptive a manner as possible; we have tried to avoid giving our personal opinion on the issue, and therefore, the discussions are basically a synthesized description of the results. The authors' intention is to present the information as neutrally as possible so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

Lastly, I should like to express my thanks to the Spanish Psychological Association and the Vice-Rectorate for Research at the University of Granada for the financial support, infrastructure and staff they have provided for the present work; to the members of my research team, especially the younger ones, who have had to make an additional effort without neglecting their research projects; and of course, to the six thousand questionnaire respondents, without whose collaboration the study would not have been possible.