

Psychology and Psychopharmacology

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When Dr. Lemos asked me to collect relevant articles to compile a monographic issue for *Papeles del Psicólogo* on the movement to attain prescription authority for psychologists, my first reaction was to question how I might communicate to colleagues outside of the United States the complexities of a movement which started decades ago and has not only evolved during that period, but continues to grow and to metamorphose as I write these very lines. What is certain is that the social forces that propagate this movement are multidimensional and at times adversarial, and for every catalyst that propels the proposal forward there is a counteraction that attempts to buffer it. Nonetheless, the movement towards extending prescription privileges to psychologists has grown to such proportions that it is beginning to extend beyond the confines of America and is causing echoes within other communities.

Psychiatry has been unable to respond to the growing demand for psychoactive drugs, and the list of patients waiting to see a psychiatrist grows longer every year, resulting in the necessity to refer the majority of psychiatric cases requiring medication management to general practitioners. In the best of cases these patients are seen by a physician who attempts to diagnose and treat psychiatric conditions without specialty training in such illnesses; in the worst of cases, those patients who live in rural areas for example, there is no physician at all to attend to their mental/emotional symptoms. In contrast, there are large numbers of psychologists, in urban and rural areas, who are trained and available to treat patients who suffer from the entire range of psychiatric conditions. A growing number of these psychologists have “recycled” to be able to prescribe psychoactive medications, completing several years of postgraduate training in psychopharmacology that is equal to, and in many cases is more stringent than, that required of psychiatrists. The lack of psychiatrists, especially child psychiatrists, is not a phenomenon restricted to the United States, but is observed worldwide. In France, for example, 80% of all psychoactive medication is prescribed by general practitioners (*Le Monde*, June 29th, 2006)¹. The imperative that the psychology profession should come forward and shoulder the needs of millions of patients who would otherwise receive inadequate care requires a concerted effort to support psychologists who are qualified to be deployed as fully qualified clinical psychopharmacologists.

The present movement in the United States began in 1984 when Senator Daniel Inouye, from Hawaii, challenged psychologists to prepare themselves to respond to the growing demand for psychoactive drugs. The American Psychological Association (APA) responded in kind in 1989, adopting the official position that psychologists are particularly prepared to diagnose and treat mental illness and, with proper additional training, are competent to prescribe medications relevant to the treatment of mental/emotional syndromes. The APA defined the postdoctoral curriculum necessary for preparing psychologists to become specialized in psychopharmacology, and several university psychology departments, in collaboration with faculties of pharmacy, developed postgraduate studies that conformed to APA criteria. At the same time, the United States Department of Defense (DOD) initiated a program that trained uniform psychologists to prescribe within the military. After the success of the DOD program was demonstrated through years of psychologist prescribing, the States of New Mexico and Louisiana, as well as the Territory of Guam, approved legislation that authorized psychologists with postgraduate training in psychopharmacology to prescribe psychoactive medication. At the present, ten other states have legislation pending that would allow psychologists within their respective jurisdictions to prescribe medication. Currently, there are over fifty prescribing psychologists in the United States who have written thousands of prescriptions without incident. There are hundreds of psychologists who are currently attending university programs to graduate with the postdoctoral diploma “Master in Clinical Psychopharmacology”, eventually to become licensed within their respective states as “Medical Psychologists”, a new specialty within the profession of psychology.

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¹ See also: *American Journal of Psychiatry* (Volume 163, #7, 2006). “Changing Profiles of Service Sectors Used for Mental Health Care in the United States”, in which it is documented that the majority of Americans receive their mental health care from their primary care physician.

