

## THE IMAGE OF PSYCHOLOGY AS A HEALTH PROFESSION AMONG STUDENTS OF PSYCHOLOGY

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The aim of this work is to explore the opinion of Psychology students about Psychology as a health profession. In a study based on a descriptive survey, the Opinion Questionnaire on Psychology as a Health Profession was applied to a sample of 1571 fourth- and fifth-year Psychology undergraduates from 14 Spanish universities. The results show that Psychology students consider Psychology to be a health profession. They perceive a high affinity between medical disciplines and psychological disciplines, which is not restricted to Clinical Psychology. This supports the contention that other psychological disciplines, and not just Clinical Psychology, should be considered as belonging to the health field. The implications for the social perception of the psychologist as a health professional are discussed.

Con el objetivo de conocer la opinión de los estudiantes de Psicología acerca del carácter sanitario de la misma, se realiza un estudio de poblaciones mediante encuestas en una amplia muestra de estudiantes de segundo ciclo de Psicología ( $N = 1.571$ ) de 14 facultades españolas de Psicología. Se aplica el Cuestionario de Opinión sobre la Psicología como Profesión Sanitaria, COPPS. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes sitúan claramente la Psicología dentro del ámbito sanitario. Otros datos de interés muestran que los estudiantes perciben una alta afinidad entre disciplinas médicas y disciplinas psicológicas, afinidad que no se limita a la Psicología Clínica, lo que respalda la propuesta de que otras disciplinas psicológicas además de la Psicología Clínica deberían ser consideradas sanitarias. Se discuten las implicaciones de estos datos en la percepción social del psicólogo como profesional sanitario.

The image of a discipline held by its students is of crucial importance to its development, since they represent the continuation of professional exercise in all its various fields. In Spain today, a total of 31 universities (29 attended and 2 providing distance learning) offer courses in Psychology, followed by some 60,000 students (Hernández Gordillo, 2003). The recent passing of the Ley de Ordenación de las Profesiones Sanitarias (LOPS; Law for the Organization of the Health Professions) means that the possibilities for new graduates to become health professionals will be scarce, and their career options severely reduced, as recognized by students themselves (Consejo General de Colegios Oficiales de Psicólogos, 2005b). Therefore, and especially in view of their awareness of the situation, Psychology students have been and continue to be one of the most active groups opposing this Law (see Consejo General de Colegios Oficiales de Psychologists, 2005a). Given the important role of this sector in the future development of Psychology in Spain, it is essential to assess in a systematic way their opinions and perceptions in relation to

Psychology as a health discipline and profession, as has been done with professional psychologists, university teachers and the general population.

Psychology students' image and perception of diverse aspects of the discipline have been the object of study in several countries, including: Argentina (Erausquin, Btesh, Lerman, Basualdo & Bollasina, 2002; Sans de Uhlandt, Rovella & Barbenza, 1997), Brazil (Morales, Abramson, Nain, Aleixo & Bartoszeck, 2005; Noronha, Baldo, Barbin & Freitas, 2003), the United States (Bram, 1997; Janda, England, Lovejoy & Drury, 1998; Oliver, Bernstein, Anderson, Blashfield & Roberts, 2004; Turner & Quinn, 1999), Arab countries (Yousef, 1992) and Turkey (Eker, 1985). In general, these studies show that students change their perceptions of Psychology as their degree course progresses (Erausquin et al., 2002; Noronha et al., 2003), that the majority consider it as within the field of science (Morales et al., 2005) and report an interest in behaviour modification (Yousef, 1992), and that in many cases Psychology is identified with Clinical Psychology (Janda et al., 1998; Sans de Uhlandt et al., 1997).

This type of study is not new to the Spanish context: the early 1990s saw some research on the image of Psychology with samples of students of the discipline. Among these studies was that of Sierra and Freixa (1993), using

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a sample of 224 students at different stages of degree and PhD courses, which showed how their image of Psychology evolved in a positive way as their studies progressed, or that of Sierra, Pal-Hegedüs, Alvarez-Castro and Freixa i Baqué (1995), who compared the image held by Spanish students with that of students from Costa Rica. The authors concluded that despite a high degree of similarity between the two groups (such as the predilection for Clinical Psychology compared to other specializations), the influence of Psychoanalysis was much greater among the Costa Ricans. Another study carried out with Psychology students in the 1990s – notable, above all, for its large sample size – is that of Buela-Casal, Alvarez-Castro and Sierra (1993). These researchers applied a survey to 765 final-year undergraduates at 15 Spanish universities, finding a marked preference for Clinical Psychology versus other disciplines, such as Social Psychology or Developmental Psychology; they also found that, although the majority orientation was behavioural, there are students who identify with Psychoanalysis, depending on the university at which they study. This association between Psychology and the behavioural model among Psychology students also emerges in the study by Sierra, Alvarez-Castro and Buela-Casal (1994), who conclude that final-year students do not perceive Psychoanalysis as a part of scientific Psychology, or that of Alvarez-Castro, Buela-Casal and Sierra (1994), which clearly reveals the identification of Spanish Psychology students with the behavioural model.

More recently, García, Pérez, Gutiérrez, Gómez and Bohórquez (2004) assessed Psychology's image in students of the discipline and of other subjects. Among the conclusions drawn in relation to the Psychology students was that they did not have a systematic and congruent picture of the discipline. However, perhaps the most interesting findings concerned the sample of students on other degree courses: the majority considered Psychology to be an applied human science, but were unclear or in disagreement about its object of study, which they perceived to be closely related to those of Psychiatry and Education; moreover, they did not consider Psychology as particularly "scientific", they situated its work context in the field of Education (especially those with little knowledge about Psychology) and mental health, and identified it with Psychoanalysis – Freud and "The interpretation of dreams" being the author and work most frequently referred to. Finally, it is relevant to men-

tion the confusion in the responses given by those doing the Education degree course, who could not agree on whether psychologists worked in primary education.

Other studies carried out in Spain with samples of Psychology students have focused on more specific aspects of the psychology profession. For example, Navarro, Maldonado, Pedraza and Cava (2001) report that students of Psychology consider research with animals as highly important for the progress of science. In their analysis of Psychology students' views on the ethics of some psychotherapeutic practices, Del Río, Borda and Torres (2003) found that the vast majority of the sample had adequate ethical knowledge; however, given that their participants had doubts over the ethics of nearly 25% of the behaviours assessed, the authors suggest the inclusion of courses on professional ethics in the curricula of Psychology degrees (Borda, Del Río, Pérez San Gregorio & Martín, 2002).

Bearing in mind these precedents, the aim of the present study is to throw some light on Spanish Psychology students' image and perception of Psychology as a health discipline, with a view to finding out where they stand with regard to the LOPS Law.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample was made up of 1571 fourth- and fifth-year Psychology students from 14 public Spanish universities. Of these, 1191 were women (75.9%) and 380 were men (24.1%). Age range was 18 to 40 years, mean age was 22.65 and standard deviation was 2.31.

### Instruments

- Opinion Questionnaire on Psychology as a Health Profession (*Cuestionario de Opinión sobre la Psicología como Profesión Sanitaria, COPPS*). This opinion questionnaire was originally designed by the authors of the present study for assessing the image of Psychology as a health profession and the estimated degree of affinity between disciplines of Psychology and Medicine in university teachers of Medicine and Psychology. Some changes were made to the sections on sociodemographic data, as it was necessary to delete the questions on teaching status, field of knowledge and whether the respondent was a teacher, professional psychologist or research assistant; likewise, we included a question on whether the respondent was in the fourth or fifth year of the de-



gree course. The questionnaire was made up of two subscales, the first of which included 15 items referring to matters of the proximity between Medicine and Psychology and the role of the latter as a health profession. This subscale offers three response options (yes, no, don't know), drawn up so that the higher the score, the more favourable the opinion about Psychology as a health profession. The second subscale, composed of 14 items, was designed to rate the degree of affinity between pairs of medical and psychological specializations. Response format is a scale with five alternatives, and the higher the score, the greater the perceived affinity. As regards the internal consistency of the instrument, the analyses carried out with the sample of Psychology students gave  $\alpha$  values of 0.65 for the first subscale and 0.91 for the second subscale.

Factor analysis carried out on the questionnaire gave a three-factor structure for the first subscale, the first factor including the items with content related to Psychology in general, the second the items related to Clinical Psychology, and the third the items with health content. In the case of the second subscale there emerged a single factor in which all the items saturated. These results demonstrate a satisfactory factor structure in line with the assessment objectives for which the scales were created (Bretón-López et al., 2005).

#### Design

This is a study of populations by means of questionnaires according to the classification proposed by Montero and León (2005). In writing the article we have followed, as closely as possible, the norms drawn up by Ramos-Álvarez and Catena (2004).

#### Procedure

First of all we made telephone contact with the students' representatives, student's associations, students' delegations or students' vice-deans at 19 of the 21 Psychology faculties in Spain to explain the objectives of the study and request their collaboration. The Psychology faculties of the UNED (distance learning) and the University of Huelva were discarded, due to the difficulties involved in contacting UNED students and the fact that the faculty in Huelva was only just starting up. A total of 17 faculties committed themselves to participating in the study, and each was sent a quantity of questionnaires, accompanied by stamped addressed envelopes, proportional to the

number of students registered for the fourth- and fifth-year degree courses. The questionnaires were given out during lectures, and the study objectives were explained to the students. A requirement for those wishing to participate was that they had passed all the courses in "phase one" (years 1 to 3) of the degree and were registered for "phase two", since, in the Spanish system, it is possible for students to be enrolled in phase two courses before having successfully completed phase one. Once the questionnaires had been sent to the faculties by regular mail, those responsible for applying the questionnaire were contacted once more and asked to confirm receipt of the questionnaires by e-mail. In those cases in which no confirmatory e-mail was received, the corresponding persons were telephoned again. Two weeks after confirmation of receipt of the materials, they were called once more to request information on the application of the questionnaires. Two months passed between the initial contact with the faculties and receipt of the completed questionnaires (April 2005 to June 2005). We eventually obtained data from 14 of the 17 faculties who had in principle agreed to participate.

#### RESULTS

Analysis of the data on students' opinions about Psychology as a health discipline and profession was made using version 12.0 of the "Statistical Package for Social Sciences" (SPSS 12.0) program.

Given the objectives of the research, we first of all analyzed the percentage of favourable and unfavourable responses about Psychology as a health discipline. In accordance with the design of the questionnaire as described in the Method section, a positive response (YES) indicated a favourable position as regards Psychology as a health profession, while a "NO" indicated an unfavourable position. Table 1 shows the percentages for the two types of response to the first part of the questionnaire. As it can be seen, in the majority of items there is a clear tendency to place Psychology within the health professions. Only for the cases of question 2 ("Psychology and Medicine are sciences that belong to the same field of knowledge"), question 4 ("Any type of psychologist is qualified to diagnose mental problems") and question 10 ("The work of the psychiatrist and the psychologist is very similar") are lower percentages found, with questions 4 and 10 yielding higher percentages of unfavourable responses.

The results referring to the opinion of Psychology stu-



dents about the affinity between medical and psychological disciplines appear in Figure 1, which presents the mean scores for the questions making up the second subscale of the questionnaire. As it can be seen, scores are clearly favourable to the affinity between disciplines.

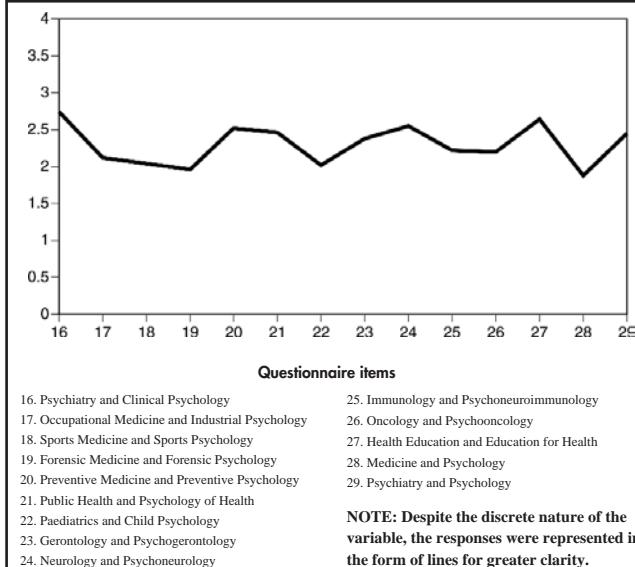
We also considered it of interest to compare the results of the two subscales, that is, the responses on Psychology as a health discipline and those referring to the affinity between disciplines. As Table 1 shows, for the first subscale there emerges a pattern of responses generally favourable towards Psychology as a health discipline. Nevertheless, for certain questions (2, 4 and 10) the scores are less favourable. As for the affinity between medical and psychological disciplines, as Figure 1 shows, in the majority of cases the students tend to consider it as high. Thus, as regards the basic concept in question – the degree to which Psychology is a health discipline –, the results of this comparison would suggest that the favourable position reflected through perceived affinity between disciplines is clearer when the issues are considered by means of the content of the first subscale.

## CONCLUSIONS

The image of Psychology held by students of the discipline is fundamental for its future development, since it is they who represent the continuation of its professional exercise; consequently, and as referred to in the Introduction, numerous studies have examined students' im-

age and perception of Psychology. Given the situation created by the recent passing of the LOPS Law it is now more important than ever to discover the perception held by students about Psychology as a health discipline. In the present study we carried out a survey designed to reveal this perception with a large sample of Psychology students (1571) from the Psychology faculties of 14

**FIGURE 1**  
**COMPARISON OF MEANS OF RESPONSE FROM PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS ABOUT AFFINITY BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MEDICAL DISCIPLINES**



**TABLE 1**  
**PERCENTAGES\* OF FAVOURABLE AND UNFAVOURABLE RESPONSES FROM PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGY AS A HEALTH PROFESSION**

Items	YES	NO
1. Psychologists can help to prevent health problems	98.9	0.3
2. Psychology and Medicine are sciences that belong to the same field of knowledge	45.3	44.3
3. Clinical Psychology and Medicine are sciences that belong to the same field of knowledge	61.6	30.2
4. Any type of psychologist is qualified to diagnose mental problems	43.2	48.7
5. Clinical psychologists are qualified to diagnose mental problems	93.4	3.2
6. Psychology is closer to Medicine than to other fields of knowledge	54.7	31.8
7. Any type of psychologist is qualified to treat emotional and mental problems that affect health	53.1	41.1
8. Clinical psychologists are qualified to treat emotional and mental problems that affect health	92.7	5.0
9. Psychology can help to improve people's health	97.7	1.5
10. The work of the psychiatrist and the psychologist is very similar	34.0	60.5
11. The work of the psychiatrist and the clinical psychologist is very similar	58.2	36.2
12. Psychologists should form part of professional teams in hospitals	88.5	9.2
13. Clinical psychologists should form part of professional teams in hospitals	98.5	0.7
14. One of the central aspects of Psychology is to promote healthy behaviours	95.0	2.9
15. Psychologists are as qualified as psychiatrists for making expert assessment in the legal context	83.1	5.9

\* The shortfall for 100% corresponds to the option DON'T KNOW.



Spanish universities. The results clearly indicate that students of Psychology situate their discipline within the health field. For example, 98.90% state that psychologists can help prevent health problems, while 95% consider one of the central aspects of Psychology to be the promotion of healthy behaviours. Another relevant finding is that the majority of students perceive Psychology as a health discipline, but independent of more established disciplines, such as Psychiatry, with only 34% considering the work of the psychiatrist and the psychologist to be very similar. This is not the first time research has revealed an identification of Psychology with health, as previous studies found a similar association (Buela-Casal et al., 1993; Janda et al., 1998; Sans de Uhlandt et al., 1997; Sierra et al., 1995). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that although the majority of students consider Psychology to be a health discipline, the majority also believe that not all psychologists are qualified to diagnose and treat emotional or mental problems.

The consideration of Psychology within the health context by students of the discipline can be appreciated with clarity if we consider their perceptions of the affinity between psychological and medical disciplines. Thus, on a scale of 0 (low affinity) to 4 (total affinity), the only pairs with a value under 2 (and even then only slightly) are those of Forensic Medicine-Forensic Psychology and Medicine-Psychology. The highest value for affinity between a medical and a psychological discipline corresponds to the pair Psychiatry-Clinical Psychology, and this is coherent with the recent official recognition of Clinical Psychology as a health discipline; nevertheless, the rest of the affinities perceived by Psychology students between medical and psychological disciplines would support the proposal of Buela-Casal (2004) that other psychological specializations, apart from Clinical Psychology, should be acknowledged as within the health field. This recognition by Psychology students of their discipline as health-related is obviously related to the position of university teachers on the question, as appreciated in the article by Buela-Casal et al. (2005) in this same issue, and indeed, the influence of teachers' opinions and position on those of their students has already been highlighted in other studies of a similar nature (Buela-Casal et al., 1993; Sierra et al., 1995). Even so, it is noteworthy that students' position in relation to Psychology as a health discipline is much more favourable than that of teachers.

Finally, we should mention that despite the sample be-

ing representative of Psychology students in Spain, it was not possible to make comparisons between universities, since the proportion of students from each institution was not representative; nevertheless, the sample size permits us to affirm that, in general, students of Psychology perceive their discipline as falling within the context of health.

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