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## French Ideas in the beginnings of Psychology in Argentina

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### Ideias francesas nos primórdios da Psicologia na Argentina

**Hugo Klappenbach\***

Universidad Nacional de San Luis – UNSL, San Luis, Argentina

#### **ABSTRACT**

First, the paper analyzes the intellectual conditions that made possible the emergence of psychological studies in Argentina around 1900 and the Argentine's reception of French thought. It will be point out that although laboratories of Experimental Psychology were established in the country since 1899, such laboratories were quite different to laboratories in Germany. First, because laboratories were mainly used for educational purposes, not to produce new psychological knowledge. Second, because in Argentina the term "Experimental Psychology" was related with the concept of "Experimental Medicine" introduced by Claude Bernard in France. In such context, *Experimental Psychology* in Argentina meant *Clinical Psychology* oriented by the perspective of French psychopathology, especially by the works of Ribot, Grasset and Charcot.

**Keywords:** Psychology, History, Argentina, France.

#### **RESUMO**

Primeiro, este trabalho analisa as condições intelectuais que fizeram possível o surgimento de estudos psicológicos na Argentina em 1900, e da recepção do pensamento francês no país. Segundo, discute que, embora os laboratórios de Psicologia Experimental fossem estabelecidos no país desde 1899, esses laboratórios eram muito diferentes dos laboratórios na Alemanha. Primeiro, porque os laboratórios foram utilizados principalmente com fins educativos, não com o objetivo de produzir um novo conhecimento psicológico. Segundo, porque na Argentina a "Psicologia Experimental" foi relacionada com o conceito de "Medicina Experimental" introduzida por Claude Bernard, na França. Nesse contexto, a Psicologia Experimental na Argentina significou Psicologia Clínica orientada pela perspectiva da psicopatologia francesa, especialmente pelas obras de Ribot, Grasset e Charcot.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicologia, História, Argentina, França.

## 1 Introduction

Roger Smith suggested that "the history of psychology should be abandoned" (Smith, 1988. p. 162). While the fundamental of Smith's statement is that there is not any unitary subject for such a history, Kurt Danziger pointed out other impossibility for *the* history of

psychology. From his perspective, "different versions of modern psychology appeared at more or less the same time in a number of countries" (Danziger, p. 210). In such a way, it is necessary a *polycentric* understanding of the history of psychology.

What this paper intends is to contribute to a *polycentric history of psychology*. To this end, analyzes the remarkable impact of French thought on Argentine Psychology at the beginning of Twentieth Century. Impact that has deserved the name of *cultural imperialism* (Brock, 2006).

The broad political, cultural, philosophical and scientific program inspired in positivist's ideas paved the way for the beginning of a scientific Psychology in Argentina. The positivist conception not only supported the development of experimental sciences but it also went beyond the scientific and philosophical field in order to become a real cultural and political movement. As Comte stated:

"les besoins essentiels de l'école positive concourent directement avec les devoirs naturels des gouvernements"  
(Comte, 1844, p. 96).

In such a way, positivism became the cultural background of politics in several Latin American countries, including Argentina. One of the most important philosophers in Argentina, Alejandro Korn, explained what he named *positivism in action* (*positivismo en acción*), with reference to "the economic development of the country, the prevalence of material interests, dissemination of public instruction, incorporating heterogeneous crowds, affirming individualistic freedom" (Korn, 1936/1983p. 206).

It is not easy to briefly describe the development of *new psychology* at the end of the last century. Whig historiography had placed the birth of scientific psychology with the organization of the First Laboratory of Experimental Psychology in Leipzig, founded by Wundt. According to this interpretation, psychology reached a scientific state when it incorporated the *experimental method* (Boring, 1950; Roback, 1961).

Since 1980 began a lot of criticism to such historical perspective (Ash, 1983; Blumenthal, 1975, 1980; Danziger, 1979, 1990; Furumoto, 1989; Harris, 2009; Kelly, 1981; O'Donnell, 1979; Tortosa, Calatayud, & Pérez-Carrido, 1992). First, because the experimental psychology that characterized the German academic thought in the last quarter of 19th Century greatly differed from the experimental psychology carried out in other countries, like United States of America or France during the same period. Second, because experiments of reaction time or the threshold of sensitivity, were prototypes of the German experimental Psychology. More over, experimental subjects in German Laboratories were at the same time

researchers, considering they needed and adequate training to discriminate sensations (Danziger, 1990). Such experiments revealed its relationship between the problems of scientific psychological observation and the philosophical problem of obtaining knowledge.

This seemed to be a core problem in the context of *research university*, which characterized German universities since the times of the organization of Berlin University (Dobson & Bruse, 1972; Humboldt, 1809/1970; Perkin, 2007). In Germany, laboratories of Experimental Psychology were established with the aim of *produce new knowledge*. As McKean Cattell stated: "University laboratories have the same ends as the University itself, the education of students and *the advancement of knowledge*" (Cattell, 1888, p. 37; italics are mine).

On the contrary, experiments related animal learning process, e.g. those carried out by Thorndike in the United States, involved animals in captivity unable to reasoning and without freedom. The *statistical technology* and the *animalization of human behaviour*, to call it somehow, was close to the economic and social interests that looked for a discipline capable of the administration and control of the population of individuals, mobs and crowds (Danzinger, 1985; Harris, 2009; Herman, 1995). As it was established:

"If the subject is an individual consciousness, we get a very different kind of psychology than if the subject is a population of organisms." (Danziger, 1990, p. 88).

## 2 The origins of new psychology in Argentina

In any case, whereas whighist American History of Psychology found the origin of experimental psychology in the preestige of Wundt and Experimental Psychology, what is possible to name as a French History of Psychology proposed a wider view of the events. In 1894, Binet also considered Wundt's work as important for the beginnings of *new psychology* but he also considered both Charcot and Ribot as other fundamental authors of *new psychology*:

"Depuis une quinzaine d'années la psychologie est entré dans une ère nouvelle. Cette ère date approximativement de 1878, époque doublement importante pour la psychologie, puisque c'est elle où, en Allemagne, M. Wundt a ouvert le premier laboratoire de psychologie expérimentale, celle aussi où en France M. Charcot a inauguré ses recherches sur l'hypnotisme chez les hystériques. A peu près à la même époque, M. Ribot fondait la *Revue Philosophique*, et donnait une vive impulsion aux études de la psychologie expérimentale en France." (Binet, 1894, p. 1).

Turn in Argentina, the beginnings of psychology have been characterized as *Experimental Psychology*, considering that the *institution of Laboratory of Experimental Psychology* appeared relatively early in the country (Cortada, 1978; Foradori, 1935, Papini, 1976). In 1899, Horacio Piñero (1869-1919), Professor of the course of Psychology, founded a Laboratory of Experimental Psychology at the National High School of Buenos Aires (*Colegio Nacional*). In 1901-1902 he also founded a Laboratory of Experimental Psychology in the Department of Philosophy and Humanities (*Facultad de Filosofía y Letras*) at the University of Buenos Aires.

Nevertheless, critical historiography since the 1990's found that such *Experimental Psychology* was quite different both from German Experimental Psychology and from American Experimental Psychology.

First, it must be consider the *objectives* of those Laboratories of Experimental Psychology in Argentina. The objective of such Laboratories was not to *produce* new psychological knowledge, but to *reproduce* experiments with an educational function. Horacio Piñero stated that his Laboratories and the experimental method were intended only to information and education, in order to "*complement the teaching of the course*" (Piñero 1902b, p. 318; translation is mine). In one of the publications of his course, he completely transcribed the Prologue of *School Psychological Experiences* (*Psychologische Schulversuche*) by professors Alois Höfler, from Vienna and Stephan Witasek from Graz:

"Nowadays, it is generally accepted that where it is at all possible to treat a science in experimental terms, it should be done in research as well as in teaching for the science to develop (...). The teaching of psychology whatever its application, either in schools or gymnasiums or universities, can make use of experimentation which will prove to be essential in the course of time" (Höfler & Witasek, 1900 cited by Piñero, 1902b, p.319; translation is mine).

Horacio Piñero also pointed out the importance of experimentation in psychology education in his most important keynote at the Institut Général Psychologique in Paris in February 1903. There, he stated that real research would be possible when the public was prepared for it:

"The teaching of experimental psychology in secondary schools is elementary and it only offers students general notions of the nervous system and the sense organs as an anatomic and physiological base of natural science. *But only scientific notions proved by experimentation* teach student the discipline and the determinism of the phenomena, notion that should be studied more deeply in higher education" (Piñero 1903, p. 411; the italics are in the original;

translation is mine).

Second, for understanding the characteristics of experimental psychology in Argentina, it is necessary to examine not also the educational objectives of laboratories, but also the *contents and problems* of that Argentine experimental psychology. When Horacio Piñero explained the origin of the *new psychology*, he used almost verbatim the concepts of Binet that we transcribed above, that will be later almost exactly reproduced by José Ingenieros (1919a):

“Two important events around 1878 established new paths for Psychology: Charcot and his studies about hysteria and hypnotism, and Wundt founding in Leipzig the first Laboratory on Experimental Psychology. If we add to these events, that around the same date, Ribot founded the *Revue Philosophique*, we can state that from these three facts emerge the clinical observation, the experimental research and the scientific divulgation” (Piñero, 1902a, p. 117; translation is mine).

And later on, he stated the little importance given to Wundt in that trilogy:

“The theory of Wundt, founder of experimental psychology in Leipzig, has also influenced our studies. But it has not been so deeply felt as in North America, where fifty laboratories still follow his theory. In my opinion they make too much use of psychometrics and that is only a short chapter of psychology” (Piñero, 1903, p. 407; translation is mine).

Summarizing, in that *trilogy* (Charcot, Wundt and Ribot), as it was called by Piñero, only Charcot and Ribot, and broadly the psychology originated in France, influenced the early “experimental” psychology in Argentina.

Nevertheless, it must be considered that Horacio Piñero recognized Ribot’s influence related to *scientific divulgation*, not to experimentation in psychology. What would must not be surprised. Current French historiography research showed both that the *Revue Philosophique* “may be considered one of the major archival achievements to have graced French philosophy” (Nicolas & Murray, 1999, p. 286) and that although Ribot promoted the use of experimental methods in psychology, he never took part in any psychological experiment (Guillin, 2004; Nicolas & Charvillat, 2001; Nicolas & Murray, 2000). More over, it has been pointed out that in France the term “*experimentalisme*” first appear in the 1870 edition of the Larousse dictionary, not to describe the active perform of experiments but with the meaning of “a scientific system founded on *l’experience*” (Carroy & Plas, 1996, p. 75). That is, experimental

psychology was simply, scientific psychology, conception also rooted in Argentina (Talak, 2000).

In any case, many factors could explain such state of affairs in Argentine at the beginning of 20th Century. In Argentina, universities had not a large tradition in research. So, Experimental Psychology in Argentina didn't mean what it meant in Germany. As it was pointed out, the well known Wundt's disciple, Felix Krueger was Professor in Argentina during 1907. Following Wundt's ideas, Krueger showed the limitations of experimental method in Psychology and introduced in Argentina the *Völkerpsychologie* (Klappenbach, 1994). Unfortunately, Krueger's teachings clashed with the local environment and letters from Krueger to Wundt "discloses his frustration with the prevalent discourse in psychology in Argentina" (Taiana, 2005, p. 385). As in García-Marquez *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Krueger remained in Argentina only one year and he was quickly dismissed.

On the other hand, the French influence was based too on deep cultural reasons. Romantic thinkers, along the 19th Century, especially Juan Bautista Alberdi, sought intellectual inspiration in France (Korn, 1936/1983).

Historians of ideas in Argentina analyzed such devotion to France and the value among artists, writers, intellectuals, scientists and even politicians of the "consecratory trip to Paris" (Jitrik, 1970, 1982; Viñas, 1964).

In the field of the history of medicine has been analyzed the similarities of the curriculum approved in 1880 at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, mainly performed by Professor Herrera Vegas, who obtained his doctoral degree in Paris, and the curriculum of the School of Medicine in Paris:

"All prominent Argentine physicians, sooner or later, traveled to France for a postgraduate study. Specially, those who were responsible of the medical curriculum at Buenos Aires University studied at the School of Medicine of Paris. Almost all the professors at the School of Medicine at Buenos Aires University at the end of the 19th Century studied at the School of Medicine of Paris" (de Asúa, 1987, p. 97; translation is mine).

Horacio Piñero, himself, addressed within the *Institut Général Psychologique* de la Sorbonne, in Paris, a well-known keynote "*La psychologie expérimentale dans la République Argentine*". Such keynote was immediately published in French in the *Bulletin of the Institut Général Psychologique* and later, again in French within the *Journal of the Physician Society of Buenos Aires* (*Revista de la Sociedad Médica de Buenos Aires*) (Piñero, 1903). Later editions in Argentina, in 1916 and in 1918, were always published in French, not in Spanish and clearly evidence not only the qualifications to read and

write in French by the Argentine elites in those days, but also their enchantment to France and French's culture.

In such address Piñero stated:

“Nous sommes vraiment Français *intellectuellement*, nous vivons auscultant votre progrès, écoutant vos leçons dans toutes les manifestations de *l'intelligence*.... Ce n'est pas tout: nous faisons les études secondaires avec des ouvrages français; nous sommes obligés d'étudier le *français* au Collège National, dans les écoles normales, dans les facultés, à l'Université. Nos médecins (nous sommes 1000 seulement à Buenos Aires), nos ingénieurs, nos avocats, nos docteurs en lettres, *tous* connaissent et traduisent régulièrement votre langue; donc, je peux le dire, nous sommes vos élèves, *nous avons le même esprit*” (Piñero, 1903, p. 404-405).

José Ingenieros (1877-1925), one of the most important scientists and intellectuals in those days, published an article in the prestigious newspaper *La Nación*, precisely titled “French psychologists”. There, he described main characteristics of French psychologists like Binet, Janet, Piéron and Dumas, that Théodule Ribot himself had told him while Ingenieros was correcting proofs in the publisher house Alcan in Paris (Ingenieros, 1906, citado por Dagfal, 2009).

### 3 Clinical and Experimental Psychology in Argentina

In such a context, it is necessary to analyze the source of the prestige of the *experimental method*. On the one hand, it was Théodule Ribot, who emphasised Wundt's experimental psychology in his classical work *The Contemporary German Psychology* (Ribot, 1979). On the other one, the prestige of the experimental method was generated especially by the great impact of the *Introduction a l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* written by Claude Bernard (Bernard, 1865). According to Claude Bernard, experimentation was the end of scientific medicine taking into account that:

“La médecine expérimentale n'exclut pas la médecine clinique d'observation; au contraire, elle ne vient qu'après elle (...) Le laboratoire du médecin physiologiste doit être en rapport avec l'hôpital” (Bernanrd, 1865, p. 257-263)

That thought led to the belief that: “Nous ne saurions trouver, en effet, aucune différence radicale entre la nature des phénomènes physiologiques, pathologiques et thérapeutiques.” (Bernard, 1865, p. 338).

So, *clinical observation was the basis of experimental research*. That explain why, in France, the clinical perspective involves an *experimental* characteristic, which did not solely refer to the laboratory. In his historical analysis of the birth of the clinic, Foucault exposes the classical principle: 'Hospital patients are, for several reasons, the most suitable subjects for an experimental course' (Foucault, 1963/2003, p. 83).

Concerning the field of mental pathology, in his *Lessons about the illnesses of the nervous system*, Charcot based on Bernard state that "il existe en pathologie tout un domaine qui appartient in propre au médecin, que lui seul peut cultiver et faire fructifier, et qui resterait nécessairement fermé au physiologiste qui, systématiquement confiné dans le laboratoire, dédaignerait les enseignements de la salle de l'hôpital." (Charcot, 1887, p. 9).

Although it has been pointed out that the teaching of Psychology in France was part of Philosophy institutions (Brooks, 1993), since Ribot and especially since Pierre Janet psychology in France became, in essence, *clinical or medical or pathological* psychology:

"La psychologie s'est constituée nouvelle par une réaction contre la conception dominante; et ce qui est né, c'est une *psychologie médicale*" (Toulouse, Vaschide, & Piéron, 1904, p. 7).

More over, at the beginning of 20th Century, well known French psychologists considered that experimental psychology was born from French physicians:

"La psychologie expérimentale, qui est la véritable méthode scientifique de la psychologie, originaire des médecins ou astronomes français peu connus, incapable de se développer en France ...elle émigre en Allemagne" (Toulouse, Vaschide, & Piéron, 1904, p. 12).

In Argentina too, *experimental psychology* is close related to *experimental medicine*, so it was *clinical or medical psychology*. Previous research, pointed out five main reception's ways for new Psychology in Argentina (Klappenbach, 2006a)

1 - Original books and papers from French authors (Grasset, Ribot, Binet, Toulouse, Piéron, Janet).

2 - French journals, particularly the famous *Revue Philosophique* edited by Ribot.

3 - French divulgation's books about psychology around the work, especially the two well-known books by Ribot, *Psychologie anglaise contemporaine* (Ribot, 1870), and *Allemande Psychologie Contemporaine* (Ribot, 1879). Concerning the first one, Rodolfo Rivarola (1857-1942), one of the first professors of Psychology at the

University of Buenos Aires, noted in 1910, in the opening session of the Psychological Sciences' Section of the International Scientific American Congress:

"The most decisive document, might be called, the most famous of this theory [Psychology], it is the admirable and now classical Introduction that Ribot wrote in his *Psychologie anglaise contemporaine*. It is possible to say that this work have influenced by more than thirty-five years and still influences all spirits" (Rivarola, 1911, p 167).

4 - French translations of works from other languages, mainly Germany books. For instance, the famous Wundt's *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, was known in Argentina in the French translation by Élie Rouvier (Wundt, 1886).

5 - Spanish translations from authors from diverse foreign languages, especially those published by Spanish houses publications like Daniel Jorro, La España Moderna, Librería de Fernando Ré, Sempere & Co, among others.

Si, it is clear that French's psychological and psychopathological ideas are at the basis of the new psychology in Argentina. Current French historiography recognized the impact of authors like Ribot, Charcot, Binet, Pieron and Pierre Janet. Besides all of them, Joseph Grasset (1849-1919), from Montpellier School was one of the most well-known French authors in Argentine early-twentieth-century.

The psychoanalytic historiographical tradition emphasized the controversies between Salpêtrière and Nancy in relation to the so called hystero-hypnotic complex. Of course, such controversies placed an outstanding value in the history of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. However, a deeper analysis shows that, in the late nineteenth century, as well as the rivalry schools dominated by Charcot and Bernheim, existed only in Paris, another two prestigious heads of psychiatric institutions, Pallier Dumont in *La Pieté* and Jules Bernard Luys in the hospital of *La Charité* (Micale, 1990). And outside Paris, another renowned private institution was the School of Montpellier, where he excelled Joseph Grasset. He was Professor of Clinical at the University of Montpellier and Member of the National Academy of Medicine of France.

Grasset's scientific recognition in those years should not be misunderstood. There is a fact that allows us to fully observe the enormous prestige achieved by Grasset. In the 1880s, the distinguished Lereboullet Dechambre began to edit his monumental *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Medical Science*. In such multivolume work, the volume 15 of the fourth series was devoted to mental disorders. The long article on *hysteria*, covering more than a hundred

pages was written by Grasset, one of the most authoritative voices of the moment in the whole of France (Grasset, 1889).

The most original Grasset's ideas related to hysteria, hypnosis and suggestion began at the 1880s, as it could be observed in the third edition of *Traité pratique des maladies du système nerveux* (Grasset, 1886). Grasset himself acknowledges his debt to Janet even when some of his ideas related different levels of personality have preceded to Janet.

According to the so called *polygonal scheme* by Joseph Grasset, the *disaggregation of the personality* (breakdowns of personality) could be physiologically explained as disturbances among lower psychological centers (auditory, visual, tactile, kinetic, speech and writing center: E,M,K,A,V,T), and the highest psychological center O, which was responsible for the conscious personality, free will and self responsibility. The lower psychological centers are enabled to run automatically, with independence of Center O (Grasset, 1898, 1903, 1906).

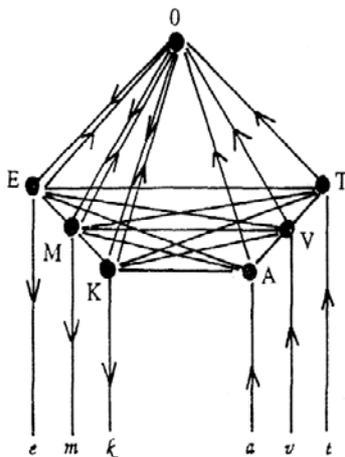


Fig 1: Reproduced from Grasset, J. (1903, p. 8).

In the early Argentine psychological field, Grasset's *polygonal scheme* was exactly reproduced by José Ingenieros (1919b). And also in a paper in the book edited by Horacio Piñero, in fact an article wrote as a part of a student training in the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology at the Department of Philosophy and Humanities (*Facultad de Filosofía y Letras*) at the University of Buenos Aires (Peradotto, 1916). Finally, Horacio Piñero's *evolutionary diagram of psychological phenomena*, which started in the sense receptive organs and finished in the superior consciousness and personality, clearly evoked Grasset's polygonal scheme (Anargyros, 1916).

Also following Grasset's conception, Horacio Piñero established the relation between the cerebral polygonal centres and the actions of the

mind's lower level (Piñero, 1901). Indeed, what Piñero called the psychological concept of the nervous system was the attempt to explain each of the nervous functions in physiological terms. Again, Piñero was following Grasset's ideas.

Therefore, taking into account the impact of the French medical and clinical thought, it is better to describe the beginnings of Psychology in Argentina as a period of *clinical and experimental psychology* (Klappenbach, 2006b).

In such a way, the title of the book edited by Horacio Piñero in 1916 was *Works of Normal and Pathological Psychology* (Piñero 1916). And the well known Jose Ingenieros' book titled *Hysteria and suggestion* was subtitled *Studies of Clinical Psychology*. José Ingenieros himself stated in his book that due to the studies on dissociation of the mind carried out by Janet and Grasset, the concept of superior automatism and mind's lower level "is being incorporated into the *experimental and clinical psychology*" (Ingenieros, 1919b, p. 311; translation and italics are mine).

In conclusion, early psychology in Argentina was dominated by categories that came mostly from French science and culture. In turn, French culture was widespread in the country, especially in the intellectual and political elite. For this reason, the issues of concern to psychology in that context were not the topics discussed during those years either in Germany or in the United States. In that sense, *indigenous psychology* in Argentina emerged from a political and institutional context concerned about the nationalization of immigrants, the simulation of madness and the need for elemental education for the entire population.

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**Endereço para correspondência**

**Hugo Klappenbach**

Avenida Ejercito de los Andes 950, IV Bloque, Oficina 71

D5700HHW San Luis, Argentina

TE: 54 - 266 - 452 0300, Interno 4120

FAX: 54 - 266 - 443 0224

E-mail: hklappen@unsl.edu.ar e hklappen@gmail.com

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\* Professor Titular de História da Psicologia da Universidad Nacional de San Luis (UNSL). Pesquisador Principal do Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET). Presidente Electo de la Sociedad Interamericana de Psicología (2013-2015)