

Chapter 5

Developmental Psychology in Latin America



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Abstract Human development is an area with numerous research studies and fields of application. This chapter presents a perceptive overview of the subject in Latin America. It centers on recent advances with special emphasis on the last 30 years. The review of the field is organized in three sections. The first contains a brief update on the recent history of developmental psychology in Latin American countries. The second describes the main areas of research in some nations (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Finally, the last section focuses on developmental psychology in Brazil, presents authors' country of origin, and includes a discussion of the main research groups affiliated with the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Psychology. Future directions in research and practice are suggested at the end of the chapter.

Introduction

In recent years, Latin American countries have made great advances in increasing their representation in science. Psychology has always been a very fertile and active area of research, but recent years have seen the rise of developmental psychology, specifically, as a one of the most productive and active fields of research and intervention in the continent.

In 2006, the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI)-indexed journals in psychology and psychiatry papers were accounted for 50% of the total scientific production in countries like Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Colombia, showing a significant increase from previous estimates of only 10% (Zorzetto, Razzouk, Dubugras, Gerolin, & Mari, 2006). The political and economic repercussions of this trend included an increase in the number of mental health policies and improvements in national mental health programs in some Latin American

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countries (Alarcón & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2000; Razzouk, Zorzetto, Dubugras, Gerolin, & Mari, 2007). These changes, in turn, had an impact on research support, increasing the number of grants and funding initiatives in the last decade. The number of articles published by Latin American authors increased by 880% from 2001 to 2013, shifting from regional journal articles to more visible international publications (VandenBos & Winkler, 2015). Databases and online libraries—including www.scielo.org, www.bvs-psi.org.br, and www.redalyc.org—played a crucial role in increasing the visibility of Latin American science. The creation of these databases allowed for the sharing of information produced in Latin American countries, providing an efficient alternative for the organization and dissemination of psychological knowledge (Sampaio, 2009). Unfortunately, this scenario is likely to change in the upcoming years due to the financial and social crisis, which is currently ravaging education, science, and health services in Latin American countries.

Nevertheless, individual well-being continues to be the basis for global health and economic development, and psychology must consider ways to improve it and study its impact on social programs and indicators (Scorza et al., 2013). Latin America and the Caribbean account for 8.63% of the total world population with 643,601,971 inhabitants and a mean age of 29.6 years (<http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>). However, this figure is expected to increase in the upcoming years due to population aging in Latin American countries (LAC). Developmental psychology should be aware of these changes and the consequent need of new translational studies to improve quality of life.

This chapter presents a review of recent advances in developmental psychology in Latin America, with a special emphasis on the last 30 years. The literature on developmental psychology has been recently reviewed in Argentina (Saforcada, 2008), Brazil (Biaggio & Monteiro, 1998; da Mota, 2005), Colombia (Carrillo, Ripoll-Núñez, & Ruiz, 2008), Paraguay (García, 2006), and other Latin American countries. In this chapter, our review of the field will be organized in three sections. The first contains a brief update on the recent history of developmental psychology in Latin American countries. The second describes the main areas of research in developmental psychology in some Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay, Venezuela). Lastly, the third section focuses on developmental psychology in Brazil, the present authors' country of origin, and includes a discussion of the main research groups affiliated with the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Psychology. Future directions in research and practice will be suggested at the end of the chapter. The research cited in this chapter provides an illustration of scientific contributions to the field but is not an exhaustive representation of the entire body of work in this fruitful area of research. Nevertheless, it corresponds to a sizeable proportion of the research in developmental psychology in this part of the Southern Hemisphere.

Brief Update on the Recent History of Developmental Psychology in Latin American Countries

Developmental psychology is the study of human behavior, emotions, and psychological features including affective, cognitive, social, and biological changes throughout the life cycle. The area shares a common interface with areas of knowledge such as the social sciences, education, biology, medicine, genetics, and neuroscience (Palacios, Marchesi, & Coll, 2009; Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg, 2010) but is unique in its focus on change and stability over the course of development.

Initially, most studies in the area focused on children and adolescents. Developmental stages and processes, with a special emphasis on age-related skills and abilities, were described in a series of manuals and benchmarks. The concepts of developmental continuity and discontinuity were explored by several theorists (e.g., Bruner, Kohlberg, Piaget, Skinner). However, researchers soon realized that development does not end in adolescence, and continues throughout the life cycle (da Mota, 2005). This gave rise to several new studies in developmental psychology, especially in the context of cognition, language, social development, and socialization. The openness to cross-cultural studies in this area of research paved the way for important contributions and discussions regarding topics such as universality and diversity, which often highlighted the role of context and nature as vectors of development. Developmental studies of adulthood, middle, and old age were also included in the field once researchers realized that development only ends with death. The dominant chronological conception of development, defined by chronological age and the passage of time, was abandoned for a view of development as the result of the interaction between contextual and internal factors (nature versus nurture) over the lifespan (da Mota, 2005).

More recently, development has also been defined as a process of reciprocal interaction between the person, their internal processes, and the environment over time and a function of the forces emanating from multiple contexts and their relationship to individual life histories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As such, development can be said to occur through the reciprocal, progressively complex interactions between an active, biopsychological, and socially evolving human being and the people, objects, and symbols around him. This process includes periods of both stability (constancy) and change in biopsychosocial characteristics within a single lifetime and across generations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These ideas form the basis of a perspective known as the bioecological approach to human development, introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the late 1970s. The bioecological theory was built around central aspects in human development, including the analysis of personal characteristics, psychological processes, context, and life history (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory has given birth to a framework that was well received by many developmental researchers in Latin America and inspired many research groups and investigations around the world.

Latin American researchers have also been influenced by many other developmental theories created in the Northern Hemisphere, such as cognitivism, behaviorism, and sociocognitivism (Escobar Melo, 2003; Puche Navarro, 2009). However, the contextual aspects of these theories had to be adapted in order to make sense of the idiosyncrasies of Latin American populations (Río & Álvarez, 2002). Latin American researchers have not proposed any new theories, but have invested heavily in the adaptation of existing models to the contextual features of Latin American countries. The understanding of local contexts, and the personal and cultural characteristics of the local population, often instigates the development of new theories and methodologies as researchers strive to explain their new findings based on what they have learned from firsthand experience in Latin American contexts. The relevance and legitimacy of scientific findings are undoubtedly greater in investigations led by local researchers. Contextual knowledge can reveal the sociopolitical and cultural implications of existing findings and ensure a culturally sensitive adaptation to policy and practice (Blicharska et al., 2017). These concepts will become especially evident as greater dialogue is encouraged between the contextual aspects and main assumptions of developmental psychology. This will contribute to the enhancement of health promotion and the effective implementation of social policies.

Developmental psychologists must pose a series of questions prior to using theories from Northern countries in their Latin American practice. First of all, how do foreign theories apply to Latin American people? Second of all, do Latin Americans share the same developmental trajectory as individuals in the Northern Hemisphere, including the stages and tasks described by existing theories and methodologies? The work of these researchers must therefore include a greater familiarization with these individuals and the means to improve their quality of life.

There is currently a growing body of research into cognitive, social, and personality development, especially in scientific databases from Latin America. However, some of the existing information may be misleading, such as that produced by foreign researchers who write about Latin Americans without being part of their cultural context. Unless the researcher can speak Spanish or Portuguese, for instance, they would be unable to interview any participants. In the case of articles published by a single author from a foreign institution, this raises the question of who analyzed the data and perhaps gave up their work and its authorship to make the publication possible.

The few studies conducted with Latin American populations are mostly descriptive and fraught with methodological problems. One may, at this point, wonder whether Latin Americans can be evaluated like other developing populations around the world. The answer is simple: they probably can. They are, after all, persons in development. However, the same measures of variables such as depression, school achievement, attention, and moral and social judgment should not be administered in other cultural backgrounds without the adequate contextualization and semantic adaptation.

The use of assessment instruments whose manuals were edited in the Northern Hemisphere, based on cultural standards that may not apply to the local culture, has

also been questioned. Researchers in developmental psychology must learn firsthand about Latin American contexts and how to adjust to their particularities. Researchers who live in these countries must also attempt to make sense of their work for the social community, finding effective ways to disseminate their findings, obtain feedback, and learn how best to adjust to social demands. If no procedures are in place to facilitate this process, it will not be possible to endow scientific research with social relevance and validation. This must be regarded as a major issue for Latin American researchers in developmental psychology.

Developmental psychology is a major curricular area in several universities across Latin America. The importance of comprehending abnormal and psychopathological characteristics to the understanding of human beings is a matter of consensus in psychology. As such, developmental psychology studies changes that are closer to normative parameters, but also those that are further from the norm. Many professionals in different areas have benefited from the theoretical and methodological advances in psychology and other professions. Latin American researchers have published a large number of books and chapters on the topic of developmental psychology to be used in universities and also in professional practice.

In recent years, the field of developmental psychology has also seen the creation of many important and representative scientific institutions, such as the Latin American Network of Developmental Psychology—ALAPSIDE (<http://redalapside.iip.ucr.ac.cr/>), founded in July 2013. The ALAPSIDE emerged as an academic nonprofit entity, aimed at promoting the scientific, academic, and professional quality of research, intervention, and teaching and the dissemination of developmental psychology in Latin America. Through this institution, psychologists, professors, researchers, and practitioners from the nine member countries can support and contribute to the scientific, professional, ethical, and social development of psychology as a whole. The Brazilian Association of Developmental Psychology is a national nonprofit entity that organizes biannual events and promotes the exchange of information on research and issues of common interest to contribute to the ongoing advancement of the area. It also promotes exchanges between government and nongovernment agencies and institutions, as well as national and international scientific associations. Lastly, it encourages academic production through partnerships with scientific journals, with specialized sections for technical and scientific publications on the topic of human development.

Developmental Psychologists and their Areas of Research Emphasis on Latin America

The growth of developmental science over the past 30 years, as evidenced by quantitative and qualitative improvements in research, statistical sophistication, and increasing conceptual concerns, with an emphasis on ecological validity, is a matter of consensus in the literature (Dessen & Costa Junior, 2006). However, despite

these advances, efforts toward the internationalization of the knowledge produced in Latin America are still incipient, and most of the quality research performed in these countries receives little attention elsewhere. Even on an internal level, there has been little dissemination of scientific research in the nonspecialist community (Lo Bianco, Almeida, Koller, & Paiva, 2010). Studies of human development should be much more widely circulated for their potential applicability to educational, institutional, and social settings, as well as intervention and prevention strategies in healthcare, public policy, and overall improvements in quality of life.

The Latin American contributions to developmental psychology are unique in their descriptions of an interaction between psychological functioning, contextualization, and development. Research should involve a series of progressive integrations, beginning with conceptual formulations based on available empirical findings, which are reviewed and successively revised in the interest of ecological validity. In its approach to cognition, emotion, motivation, personality, psychopathology, and social behavior, developmental psychology should emphasize individuals and their contexts, engaging researchers in cultural and transcultural issues and proposing investigations in different cultures, subcultures, and systems. Some strengths of developmental research, which should henceforth receive much more attention, include (1) attention to the sociocultural context, especially across different cultures and subcultures, including features such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; (2) sensitivity to diversity and the plurality of development in different cultures and historical periods; (3) the articulation between several levels of analysis, both in theory and research; (4) the importance of naturalistic observation, with its ecological validity, in establishing the value of everyday learning through face-to-face interactions in proximal processes to the process of development; and (5) the integration of political aspects and applications to social policy and interventions into the research process (Narvaz & Koller, 2004).

Some of the major areas of research in Latin American countries are shown in Table 5.1. Brazilian research is not shown in the table, as it will be more thoroughly discussed in the third section of this chapter. However, it is important to note that, over the past 12 years, Brazilian authors were responsible for the sixth largest number of studies in psychosocial and personality development in the PsycINFO database regional journals with impact factors (VandenBos & Winkler, 2015), which speaks to their role as leading publishers of scientific research in Latin America.

As can be seen in Table 5.1, the greatest emphasis in developmental psychology research appears to be on cognitive development (e.g., reading, writing, learning), followed by social vulnerability, as represented by violence (physical and sexual), maltreatment, homelessness, and institutionalization. The major focus appears to be on childhood development, with fewer investigations into other stages of the life cycle (adolescence, youth, and aging). Nevertheless, themes such as family, emerging adulthood, aging, and civic development are also present in several countries. As such, despite the focus on more traditional themes in developmental research (i.e., childhood and cognitive development), Latin American researchers also appear to focus on human rights violations against children and adolescents as a result of common problematic issues in these countries.

Table 5.1 Research topics in developmental psychology across Latin American countries

Country	Research areas
Argentina	Aging; child development; cognitive development; emerging adulthood; Neuropsychology; social development
Chile	Civic development and education; family and community development; learning and development; individual, family, and community processes; teaching and learning processes; youth civic development
Colombia	Attachment, early childhood education and development; cognitive development; family and attachment; learning and cognitive development; social development, learning, family and adolescence; acquisition and mastery of reading/writing skills
Paraguay	Sexuality in adolescence; child development from birth to 18 months; maltreatment; physical and sexual violence; children's rights and institutionalization; street children; youth, education, employment, health, legislation, citizenship and culture, violence; violence-related issues in work, education, and politics
Peru	Attachment; school achievement, social development
Uruguay	Education and development in early childhood; social development
Venezuela	Family and cultural issues

Developmental Psychology in Brazil

Developmental psychology has become a consolidated field of research in Brazil, with a “significant presence” in Brazilian psychology (Seidl de Moura & Moncorvo, 2006, p. 115). However, its history is relatively recent as compared to more traditional areas of research (e.g., personality psychology), since its inception is tied to the implementation of graduate programs in developmental psychology in the 1980s and 1990s (Souza, Gauer, & Hutz, 2004).

This movement runs counter to the hegemonic trend in developmental psychology, which focuses on Anglo-Saxon authors and studies. It represents an effort to strengthen non-hegemonic (e.g., Latin American, Asian, and African) research, whose results are attuned to contextual characteristics and social demands and relevant from a social and scientific perspective (Dessen & Costa Junior, 2006; Seidl de Moura & Moncorvo, 2006).

The importance of developmental psychology on a national level is illustrated by three main sources of evidence. The first consists of the list of work groups in the National Association of Graduate and Postgraduate Research (Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação em Psicologia; ANPEPP). Data published after the 10th ANPEPP National Symposium in 2004 showed that the issues discussed by 16 (40%) of the 41 work groups were directly related to human development. These included evolutionary and cultural factors, a sociocultural perspective of development and education, human development in situations of risk and personal, parents-baby-child interaction, games and their relevance to psychology and education, psychology of mathematical education, and psychology and morality (Seidl de Moura & Moncorvo, 2006). In 2006, sociocognitive and language development, and psychoanalysis, childhood and education were added to this list.

Another important indicator of the advancement of developmental psychology in Brazil is the percentage of researchers with productivity grants from the National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico; CNPq) who conduct their research in this area of study. The most commonly cited area of research among the 250 researchers with productivity grants in psychology in the years of 2009–2011 was developmental psychology, followed by social psychology. Developmental and social psychology accounted for 79 and 74 citations, respectively, in the list of 690 areas mentioned by researchers (Weber et al., 2015). Developmental psychology has also received a significant share of funding from research support agencies (Carvalho-Barreto, Soares, & Barbato, 2014). The third source of evidence for the growth of this area of research is the creation of the Brazilian Society for Developmental Psychology (Sociedade Brasileira de Psicologia do Desenvolvimento; SBPD), whose biannual events have seen growing attendance, submissions, and international interest since its foundation in 1998. Recently, the SBPD joined forces with the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (ISSBD) to promote events across the country, with conferences, symposia, and workshops delivered by national and international speakers.

The volume of scientific literature in developmental psychology also increased progressively in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Souza et al., 2004), with distinct characteristics in every decade. In the 1980s, the literature was characterized by the following: (1) a variety of research themes, due to difficulties in delimiting the field of developmental psychology, (2) an emphasis on childhood as opposed to older age groups, (3) observational studies involving psychometric instruments and simple (descriptive) statistical methods, and (4) a predominance of cognitive theories and a decrease in the use of behavioral approaches (Souza et al., 2004).

In the 1990s, although studies continued to focus on children and adolescents, two additional characteristics were identified: (1) a resurgence of interest in topics which had not been studied since the late twentieth century, such as emotional development (mother-father-child attachment and the biological and genetic basis of development), and (2) new directions in research and intervention, which underscored the relevance of culture and social issues such as homelessness among children (Biaggio & Monteiro, 1998).

Important remarks on the scientific literature in the 1990s were also made in a review by Souza et al. (2004). The authors selected 20 articles published between 1991 and 2000 in two important national journals—*Psicologia Reflexão e Crítica* and *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*. The first two articles in each issue which focused on behavioral, motor, perceptual, cognitive, linguistic, and social changes between the prenatal period and death were selected for the review, which produced the following findings: (1) nearly all research was conducted in public institutions, which are home to most graduate programs in the country; (2) few interinstitutional partnerships were identified, and the majority of existing partnerships were local; (3) significant regional imbalance was observed, as the majority of first authors were affiliated with institutions in São Paulo (followed by Porto Alegre and Recife); (4) most studies were empirical and involved quantitative/statistical analysis; and, lastly, (5) an increase in references to

Table 5.2 ANPEPP work group topics associated with developmental psychology (1994–2014)

Topics
Social contexts of development: evolutionary and cultural features
Child and development contexts
Parent-infant/child interaction
Research in pediatric psychology
Development in situations of personal and social risk
Development and education from a historical-cultural/sociocultural perspective
Games, learning, and health
Family development
Sociocognitive and language development
Family, development, and health promotion
Developmental processes in individuals with disabilities
Human learning
Child and adolescent assessment
Youth, resilience, and vulnerability
Psychological and neuropsychological assessment of children and adolescents
Psychoanalysis, childhood, and education
Developmental and training narratives
Development, health, and education
Social, moral, and ethical development
Children and social interaction
Subjectivity and contexts of development
Moral development and educational outcomes
Written language: acquisition and development
Psychosociological perspectives of sociocultural development

foreign authors and recent publications, with a preference for articles over chapters and books. However, the 2000s saw the rise of a new trend in scientific research, characterized by the following: a biopsychosocial perspective on development, the active role of the subject, a better appreciation of context, a better appreciation of interactions and the construction of meaning, and greater attention to the interaction between affect, cognition, biology, and culture (Seidl de Moura & Moncorvo, 2006).

Analysis of ANPEPP Work Groups

The themes discussed by the ANPEPP work groups conducted every 2 years between 1994 and 2014 are presented in Table 5.2. The most constant work groups in successive editions of the ANPEPP were “Social contexts of development: evolutionary and cultural features,” “Moral development,” and “Parent-infant/child interaction,” followed by “Games, learning, and health” and “Sociocognitive and language development,” and “Family, development, and health” follow.



Fig. 5.1 Word cloud of themes discussed by ANPEPP work groups (1994–2014)

Most themes are associated with childhood and focus on the interface and applicability of developmental psychology to education. The group names also reflect an attempt to study development in the contexts where it actually occurs (e.g., daycare centers, communities, schools, streets, quilombos, etc.), as well as an association between development and health, in the form of family, play, and education. Development appears to be defined as a process and associated with social interaction. Other stages in the life cycle (adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age) are less well represented in the names of the ANPEPP work groups (Fig. 5.1).

Conclusions

Latin American psychology is simultaneously pluralistic and singular (Sampaio, 2009; Silva, 2013). Most Latin countries have experienced similar processes of colonization, political and historical oppression, inequality, acculturation, and human rights violations. The exploitation and production of wealth resulted in violence, social exclusion, unequal distribution of wealth, illiteracy, loss of cultural identity, delinquency, drug addiction, malnutrition, and the discrimination of social minorities. However, the linguistic and cultural diversity of each of these countries reflects the alterity between them. As such, any analysis (including that of the history of psychology and developmental psychology) should consider the singularity and plurality of the countries, which constitute Latin America.

The solution for the aforementioned social problems includes the implementation of effective programs for literacy, education, and professional development, in addition to increased access to information (Sampaio, 2009). Researchers in the field of developmental psychology play a crucial role in this process through the adaptation of research findings and interventions to existing social demands.

The facilitation of information exchange also requires a joint effort by researchers and public policies on the promotion of research, knowledge production, and

dissemination in Latin American countries. Ultimately, there is a need to “look to other experiences in similar situations to identify the best practices and ‘shortcuts’ which can contribute to problem solving” (Sampaio, 2009, p. 7).

Latin America must become a producer rather than a consumer of knowledge, increasing the visibility of its scientific work, encouraging the citation of local authors, and, most of all, making use of all available information to improve the quality of life of its people (Sampaio, 2009). The organization and dissemination of the knowledge produced in developing countries are a promising pathway to improvements in population quality of life.

Suggestions for future development in this field of study include (Carvalho-Barreto et al., 2014; da Mota, 2005; Seidl de Moura & Moncorvo, 2006):

- Increased collaboration with other areas of knowledge (interdisciplinarity), such as neuroscience, education, biology, sociology, anthropology, and information technology
- The internationalization of knowledge produced in Latin American countries, to increase its visibility and maximize support to local research
- Engagement in more comprehensive discussions of theory and method, with the adoption of an interactionist, systemic and complex view of human development, which acknowledges and values multimethod approaches
- The conduction of studies that are more comprehensive and “representative” of the cultural diversity in each Latin American country
- A greater emphasis on research and interventions in populations exposed to human rights violations (e.g., sexual violence, child labor, LGBT, etc.), with a nonnormative status, or whose development takes place under atypical conditions
- Greater research investment in stages of the life cycle other than childhood and adolescence (e.g., youth, early adulthood, adult life, and old age)
- Greater participation of Latin American researchers in intercultural studies
- Application of research findings to intervention programs aimed at prevention and health promotion, as determined by ethical guidelines that encourage researchers to transform the reality around them
- Securing financial and institutional support for emerging research groups as well as established institutions, encouraging larger, interinstitutional, and international research

Studies and interventions should also move beyond a discussion of vulnerability/impairments/symptoms/risks and look into positive indicators of development (e.g., health, optimism, hope, meaning of life), many of which are often studied in the context of positive psychology and resilience (Morais & Koller, 2011).

An emphasis on the strategies used to overcome adversity and face daily challenges would constitute a new paradigm in the study of human development, allowing for the identification of factors and virtues which contribute to the flourishing of people, communities, and institutions (Paludo & Koller, 2007). This term refers to the achievement of a healthy and positive developmental trajectory from a psychological, biological, and social point of view.

Lastly, in addition to defending a focus on flourishing in developmental psychology, we hope that Latin America continues to experience the growth and flourishing of this area of research. The aim of this chapter was to highlight some of the historical conditions, characters, and processes which constitute this area of knowledge, while identifying conditions through which it may continue to flourish.

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