

## Editorial

# Prospects of Research in South America: The Case of Colombia

Lilian Patricia Rodríguez-Burgos\*<sup>a</sup>

[a] Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de la Sabana, Chía, Colombia.

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\*Corresponding author at: Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de la Sabana, Campus Universitario del Puente del Común, Km 7, Autopista norte de Bogotá, Chía, Cundinamarca, Colombia. E-mail: [lilian.rodriguez@unisabana.edu.co](mailto:lilian.rodriguez@unisabana.edu.co)



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“So it is” sighed the colonel. “Life is the best thing that has ever been invented.”  
(Gabriel García Márquez, 1961, p. 46)

South America is a mine of opportunities for research in different fields. Its social, political, educational and economic situation and constant transformation offer a privileged stage for reflection and for the development of proposals to understand the complexity of phenomena that are transforming this part of the world. This calls for permanent contributions from all disciplines, psychology included, to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities.

In this context, the efforts of some governments and academic communities to strengthen funding for research, training researchers and increasing international networks have advanced research considerably. There are countless studies that have been conducted by researchers in South America. In mentioning only a few below I am taking the risk of not including them all, so my focus will be primarily on the area of humanities and social sciences in Brazil, Chile, Argentina and, of course, Colombia, mainly in relation to socio-cultural and developmental research.

Brazil has a very sound system of research. This is reflected, for example, in recognized works by Branco (2007, 2012), Oliveira and Branco (2010) related to social development and culture, Guimarães' (2010, 2011) research on Cultural Transmission Processes within an Amerindian context, as well as Lyra's (2010, 2011) studies of communication processes and change in infants. In Chile we find notable works by Cornejo (2007, 2011) on cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics and theoretical psychology. In Argentina, Mario Carretero conducts extensive research on education, learning and identity formation (Carretero & Borrelli, 2008; Carretero & Castorina, 2010; Carretero & González, 2008; González & Carretero, 2013).

With respect to Colombia, it is important to mention that a lot of research has revolved around the social situation found here. Colombia is a country of wealth but also of contrasts. For over half a century it has suffered from an

armed conflict that has had a large psychosocial impact. Among the causes of this situation we find poverty, inequality and unemployment. What created the rise of groups functioning outside the law (guerrillas and para-military) was initially the ideal of defending the population, but then these groups lost their vision by accepting money for kidnapping and drug trafficking to finance their activities. Both groups have committed massacres and human rights have been violated. This was coupled with the lack of leadership of rulers, many of whom were irresponsible, corrupt, or with little commitment to social problems (Guzmán, Borda, & Umaña, 1962; Ospina, 1997, 2013).

Consequently, much of the research tries to respond to problems caused by the conflict. We can therefore identify a few trends in Colombian research.

One is represented by a growing body of research focused on understanding the phenomenon of war in cases such as the ones involving children, young people and their participation in the armed conflict (Calle, 2011; Montoya, 2008; Moreno, Carmona, & Tobón, 2010; Torrado & Vargas, 2009), the phenomenon of peasants' displacement in the cities (Ibáñez as cited in Leal & Herreño, 2011; Ochoa & Orjuela, 2013), and reconstruction of memory and identity setting (Molina, 2010; Patiño & Patiño, 2012).

A second trend is represented by the work of researchers who focus on children, their teachers and families from rural, urban and indigenous communities in order to understand their emotional, cognitive and social processes so as to recover many of their practices and traditions. An example of this is the research by Amar and collaborators (Amar, 2000; Holgado et al., 2014) related to child development in conditions of poverty. Otálora (2010) explores the everyday practices of teachers in rural and urban areas. Puche (2009) works on the cognitive development in children. Sierra (2011) and Sierra & Gerald (2013) study issues of sustainability in the context of indigenous cultures. Córdoba (Córdoba, Verdugo, & Gómez, 2006; Lumani & Córdoba, 2014) focuses on issues of social inclusion and quality of life for children with disabilities and their families while Rodríguez (Rodríguez, 2011a, 2011b; Rodríguez et al., 2014; Rodríguez, Díaz, Rodríguez, Izquierdo, & Nassar, in press) explores everyday activities of children living in rural and indigenous communities.

In what follows I will describe briefly some of the research related to development, family and culture conducted in Colombia by the research group I coordinate at the Universidad de la Sabana. Broadly speaking, our work is based on two premises: first, the need to contribute to understanding our social problems and, second, to elaborate a new approach to the study of human development. With regards to the latter, we conceptualize development as a complex process, dynamic in nature, whose main characteristic is the emergence of novelty; this then becomes also our main analytical focus (see also Lewis, 2000; Molenaar & Valsiner, 2005; Rodríguez, 2011a; Thelen & Smith, 1998; Sato & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2006; van Dijk & van Geert, 2007).

This view has three particular implications: first, development is a process that takes place at different intervals of time (minutes, seconds, years). Therefore, to capture its non-stationary nature micro-longitudinal studies are highly relevant. Second, given that development is a process, we must ask what are the moments, actors, scenarios and paths that people construct during the emergence of new skills. Third, but not least, we believe that the study of development must surpass the aspect of chronological stages and stop questioning what the subject 'does' to move up to another stage. The goal of development researchers should be to identify the cognitive, emotional and cultural wealth of people, how they become manifest in everyday life and how people develop in spite of difficult life circumstances.

One line of investigation we developed asks the question of how infants use everyday objects and how they solve problems from the very early stages of their development. In this sense, we conducted a micro-longitudinal monitoring of young children for six months with observations every 10 days. The participants in this study were a group of 9-month old infants living in an urban area of Cali, a city in Valle del Cauca near Bogota. The results were analyzed qualitatively and we aimed to determine the paths an infant builds in a given time in his or her interaction with objects. These paths helped us build three main profiles characterized by the infant's own dynamic moments of conquest, transition, regression and stability, which show the variety and cognitive wealth infants have at their disposal as well as argue for the nonlinear nature of their development (Rodríguez, 2011b). We have also identified the objects used by children in their play. Since it is difficult for children in conditions of poverty to have Barbie dolls or other similar toys, they used available objects creatively. A lid of a pot, for instance, became a tambourine to keep up with the rhythm of a song.

In a second line of investigation we examined the daily life activities that contribute to the development of the cognitive ability for planning. We worked with 5-year old pre-school children and their parents. The results allowed us to identify their everyday activities and discover that Colombian children have very active and participatory roles within their homes. The social and economic conditions of our country require children to help with housework or help their parents with their jobs. For example, we found children who help their parents sell roses at traffic lights or sell shoes in a store. Other children do activities at home, which include looking after their siblings, running errands, washing dishes and cooking. But beyond analyzing how children work, we have also examined their ability to plan and solve problems. Our results show how daily interactions between children and their families contribute to the cognitive, social and emotional development of children (Rodríguez et al., 2014).

Finally, in a third investigation we worked with the indigenous women from Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, who belong to the Arhuaco tribe. We analyzed the history, process, meaning and significance of their daily activity of bag (*mochila*) knitting. This is an exclusive activity of women, which they have inherited from their ancestors. It is a responsibility that has several particular implications: it is a way to perpetuate their cultural identity as older women teach 4-year old girls to weave and, while teaching them, also transmit the origins, myths, legends and traditions of their culture as well as their love and respect for nature. It was very interesting to find out that creating the *mochila* is not merely an integration of wool, colors and figures related to the elements of heaven, earth or aspects related to gender in order to produce a creative and beautiful bag. This activity goes beyond these associations and, while creating this object, stories and meaningful symbols are exchanged. Our study also allowed us to learn how some women perceive this activity of weaving. For some the activity has lost its meaning. It has become a way to survive economically. For other women, this activity is linked to tradition and is part of "being a woman" in charge of preserving local culture (Rodríguez et al., in press).

In the end, I will conclude this brief editorial with a few proposing possible directions for future research in the Colombian context. During this period, all the key players of the prolonged conflict in the country (government, guerrillas) have been meeting in Cuba in an attempt to sign a peace treaty. In this post-conflict context, new projects can be envisioned, for example "Children and young people after the war, historical memory, forgiveness, reparation and reconciliation". At the same time, we must also continue working on the issues of everyday life that involve the recovery of cultural practices, development issues, family, inclusion, creativity, work and cultural identity, which will continue to be high up on research agenda. For just as Gabriel García Márquez, the late Nobel Prize winner in literature, quoted by Berrutti (2008), once said:

“We have to cast a bottle of sidereal shipwrecks into the oceans of time so the universe may know about us what the cockroaches that will outsurvive us cannot tell: that here existed a world where suffering and injustice had prevailed, but in it we got to know love and we were able to imagine happiness” (p. 1).

Colombia is a country that combines magic and reality, we are not doomed to live a hundred years of solitude, we want to rediscover our wealth and understand our problems; this requires an interdisciplinary and multicultural approach. European and other international colleagues are invited to walk with us on this path through the magical land of yellow butterflies.

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## Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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## About the Author

**Lilian Patricia Rodriguez-Burgos.** Has a PhD in psychology from the Center for Psychological Research, Cognition and Culture at Univalle University (Cali, Colombia). Her research focuses mainly on cognitive child development, education and cultural practices. In this last field she has collaborative work in progress with York University (Canada). She is also a recurrent visiting scholar of Clark University (USA). Currently, she is professor of psychology at the department of psychology Universidad de la Sabana (Chia, Colombia).