

Training in psychology and gender violence: opportunities and misunderstandings

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ABSTRACT

Gender violence is a social problem of priority solution for the Cuban government. Being the psychologist a key actor to face it, his training must respond to such intention. The objective of this article is to analyze the relationship that the development of the conceptions on gender violence has had on the training in Psychology in Cuba. The problem is approached through theoretical and empirical methods which show as main results the limitations and successes between social demands and scientific production around gender violence and psychology training in Cuba.

Keywords: Gender violence; Training; Psychology; Gender; Cuba

Introduction

The subordination of the feminine and the violence against women that it fosters is a sociocultural phenomenon whose visibility, recognition and understanding have varied depending on the historical contexts in which it occurs. It has been so naturalized throughout history that, despite the formal and legal recognition of the equality of men and women, sexism and androcentrism continue to prevail in human institutions and practices, from which the sciences and education are not exempt.

In tune with the international policies declared in the 2030 Agenda, in the Cuban context an unprecedented moment is being experienced related to the government's intention to work for the elimination of gender violence. This term used to be found only in academia to the detriment of official and normative documents; however, the recently approved Constitution of 2019 visualizes this concept and positions itself against it (National Assembly of People's Power, 2019).

Such positioning legitimizes the need to provide a solution to this problem as a governmental priority and in coherence with this, the “National Program for the Advancement of Women” is elaborated, approved as a presidential decree in March 2021 and later in December of the same year by agreement of the Council of Ministers the “Comprehensive strategy for prevention and attention to gender violence and in the family scenario” (Council of Ministers Agreement 9231, 2021) comes to light. These documents recognize gender violence as a complex social problem requiring a systemic and multidisciplinary approach.

In order to respond to this social and governmental demand, it is necessary to have professionals trained in coherence with this need; therefore, it is important that their training responds to this intention. The area of psychology is especially sensitive because the psychologist is expected to have expertise in the management and understanding of this problem, however, psychology is an androcentric science that, if not approached from a gender perspective, continues to reproduce the conditions that favor the disadvantages of the feminine and, therefore, the conditions that favor the manifestations of gender violence.

That is why it is still a pending task to achieve, within Psychology as a science, an ethical reflection on issues related to issues such as gender violence in all its spheres and manifestations, as they are still invisible in most contemporary theories (Reyes *et al.*, 2017).

Psychology has traditionally been a science where its most recognized schools do not usually look differentiatedly at men and women, putting the analysis of its “subject” in a generic or neutral man, when that referent is actually male. The only theory that takes into account the difference is to see in the woman someone emasculated and with penis envy.

Reflexivity, or the capacity to question the manner and contexts in which this knowledge was generated and perpetuated, has little space for dialogue in psychology, which contributes to making its androcentrism and other values that sustain it invisible. These theories emerged in times and contexts in which, although women had access to training in psychology in universities, they were denied access to academia, which is where the “scientific” is legitimized and theoretical production is generated (García, 2003).

From the educational teaching process in the training of psychologists, it becomes important to reflect on psychology itself as a science and its professional projection in order to identify whether it constitutes an agent that collaborates in the prevention and solution of situations of gender violence or is one of those that legitimize it. The understanding and tolerance towards violent and discriminatory acts against women has been evolving in recent decades both internationally and nationally, however, not always the social and human sciences are adjusted and updated with these contributions and continue to perpetuate positions that are contradictory to this intention.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how in the history of Cuban psychologist training, the conceptions and norms that, from academic and legal institutions, in Cuba and the world, have marked the treatment of women, gender or gender violence, have been taken into account or ignored. For this reason, we analyze the events that can be considered milestones in the history of psychology training in the country and their relationship with the historical context and the social movements, organizations and legal and academic institutions that are in favor of the defense of women's rights and their protection in the face of gender violence.

The information obtained from empirical methods such as documentary analysis, observation and interview was processed by means of theoretical methods like historical-logical, synthetical-analytical and inductive-deductive. Of special value were the different versions of the psychology curriculum, Cuban governmental documents and those of international organizations that deal with the violence treatment, and interviews with events protagonists identified as milestones in relation to the problem addressed.

Development

Bearing in mind that the training of Cuban psychologists has been marked from the beginning by the need to respond to the demands generated by the social justice project conceived since the triumph of the Revolution, it is important to analyze how much gender justice has or has not contributed to this attempt. The psychologist often becomes a professional of reference when these issues are addressed, so it is important to gain clarity on how much his training contributes to contribute in this regard.

The opening of the psychology career at the proposal of Ché Guevara in 1961 and 1962 was part of the strategy of the new government in 1959 to contribute to the proposed change. This change, having social justice as its compass, kept as a priority to improve the situation of oppressed sectors where women also received important guarantees. The benefits and protections given to women at this time generated advantages and disadvantages with respect to their peers in the world. In this sense, it will be analyzed how this condition influenced the way in which the psychologist was trained in Cuban universities.

For the presentation of the information, it will be organized taking as a reference the way in which psychology training was conceived and the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which they were developed. Around events that can be considered milestones, it will be taken into account how policies on women, gender or violence prevention influenced such training.

Opening of the psychology program in 1961 and 1962 in Las Villas and Havana.:

The beginnings of the career were characterized by the emergence of providing solutions to social problems for which no answers could be found in theories. According to De la Torre (2017), the theoretical orientation of the research and practices was “heterodox and eclectic” and responded to the training of the professors who taught it, who in turn came from different areas and training.

At this time the second wave of feminism was gaining strength in the world and women in other latitudes were fighting for rights that in Cuba were granted to women as part of the political agenda of the revolutionary government. The right to abortion in safe conditions, equal pay, the creation of children's circles, access to family planning and free reproductive health care, and the encouragement of women to study or work as salaried employees were conditions that radically changed the possibilities for women in this new stage. Although the academy in this period accompanied these processes, it did so without

previous references because they were taking place in completely unprecedented contexts, which marked the emergent and experimental nature of training at this stage.

Unified curricula were introduced in 1976: As a result of the program for the improvement of higher education and the creation of the Ministry of Higher Education, unified curricula were created for both schools of psychology. This Plan A was characterized by the training of professionals in clinical, educational, labor and social specializations. By this time the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana becomes the governing center of the teaching of this science in Cuba (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017) favoring the concentration of powers and privileges in this institution.

This period coincides with the search for the establishment of a theoretical foundation to guide practice. Relations with the former socialist camp favored the adoption of the theories of Marxist Psychology, which constituted the main reference for Cuban psychology. However, Soviet psychology was characterized by a significant imbalance between academic development and professional performance, demanding the exercise of creativity in the Cuban psychologist to respond to the needs of practice in which clinical and health psychologists were notorious (De la Torre, 2017).

Also in the 1970s, feminist psychotherapy was consolidated in the United States and Europe, exercised mainly by academic activists who incorporated this approach to their professional practices. This therapeutic modality has much in common with sociocultural theories as it makes reflect on the ways in which social reality shapes, constrains and limits life choices in relation to gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, among others (Enns, 2002). Although this therapy explicitly states among its postulates the commitment to social justice and the need for social change along with personal change (which are in line with the principles that have guided the Cuban social project), its treatment and approach has been completely ignored in Cuban classrooms.

Transit to Plan B: As of 1981, a new curriculum is established that responds to the formation of a professional with a broad profile and not by specialties (MES, 2017). This occurred at a time of socioeconomic flourishing in the country that positively impacted the development of psychology as a science and profession. The aforementioned allowed the consolidation of achievements that were seen brewing since previous decades to give rise to an increase in categories and scientific production within the faculty of the career.

At this time, many professors of the Faculty of Psychology in Havana pursued their doctoral studies in countries of the socialist camp; however, the same opportunities did not exist for the faculty of Las Villas, which concentrated academic power in the capital. As a result of the scientific production of the new doctors, theoretical elaborations are produced in important strands of psychological thought that overcome the uncritical adoption of the Marxist model of understanding to give way to more integrative visions of human subjectivity from its historical-cultural determinants (De la Torre, 2017).

In this decade, as a result of the theoretical production, debates and practices generated by feminist thought mainly from the United States and Europe, a diverse and multidisciplinary theoretical body was formed, which materialized in Gender Theory. These studies flourished in those academic contexts with a strong activism of intellectual women. Two factors influenced Cuba to remain outside these studies. Firstly, in the former socialist camp, the main theoretical reference on the island, these debates were not abundant and secondly, the formal equality and rights achieved by women generated the illusion of the existence of real equality of opportunities and the absence of gender violence.

Plan C was conceived at the beginning of the 1990s: As a result of the growing development of the scientific level of the faculty, the experience of the professors, as well as the social demand generated by the profession, the study plan was restructured, which was characterized by its updating, the structuring of the contents by disciplines and the inclusion of pre-professional practice as an integrating discipline (MES, 2017). This transit coincides with the most critical part of the economic crisis of the "special period", so it occurred at the same time as abrupt social changes and the emergence of unprecedented socio-psychological phenomena in the country and therefore without theoretical or methodological references for its approach.

In the midst of the economic and social crisis, the Women's Chair was founded in September 1991 within the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana, which, although it brought together professionals from different areas, its coordinating team and four of its ten founding members were psychologists (Acosta and Gonzalez, 2012). Despite the involvement of women psychologists in this group and their becoming referents in women's studies and the first to approach gender studies in Cuba, their work concentrated mainly on research on women's issues having relatively little impact on the

initial training of professionals. This late entry into gender studies has also been characterized by the fact that it has not been widely disseminated and has remained concentrated in small academic groups in some universities and cooperation agencies.

Also in 1991, starting with this Plan C, it opened the career at the Universidad de Oriente in Santiago de Cuba, with which the training of professionals in the three main regions of the country was achieved. Although in its constitution it counted on the tutelage and collaboration of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana, the most prestigious and experienced professionals of the region joined its staff, which gave it its own peculiarities. Its emergence in a period in which Cuban psychology had lost its main scientific referent in the socialist field, made it become a space open to the new with a more eclectic and diverse influence.

The municipalization program begins in the 2001-2002 academic year: This program arose with the objective of providing a response to the educational needs and continuity of university studies for young graduates of the programs emerging from the Revolution. This fact was a significant event in the history of this career that was always characterized by the rigor and selectivity of its graduates, which generated an elitism of the student body that is lost with this new modality of study to promote greater popular accessibility. This project gave back to many young mothers the possibility of returning to or entering university. It used the plan C modified for the conditions of the semi-presence.

Despite the irregularities and dissatisfactions that existed with its implementation, it had the achievement of democratizing the access to this science to students who could use it not only for the performance of the practice as psychologists, but also from the exercise of related professions for which psychology became a complement. Since 2005, several universities of Medical Sciences in the country have also opened psychology programs, which, although the graduate was focused on working only in the clinical area, still used the C curriculum. Training in this context had few graduates.

It should be noted that part of the resources allocated to this social project was the printing of basic textbooks, which made it possible to update the course bibliography. In this bibliography, for the first time, a topic of violence against women is presented in one of the books on Social Psychology. Although this book does not make a deep analysis of the causes and conditions of this phenomenon, it is a first approach to the study of the subject. Contrasting with this achievement, one of the new books published at this stage, Clinical

Case Studies showed an inadequate handling of a situation of sexual violence in whose analysis the limitations in the understanding of the phenomenon and the presence of myths about violence were evident.

During these years, the Master's Degree in Gender Studies was opened in 2004, an interdisciplinary space coordinated by the Women's Chair of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana. This space for post-graduate training was an important seed to form a group of psychology professors (and other professions) from all over the country with a new look at these phenomena. After four editions, this master's program, sustained more by the activism of its faculty than by institutional interest, did not open any more calls for applications.

Plan D is created in 2009: Based on the experiences and lessons learned from the previous plan and the practice of blended learning, a new plan was conceived that involved the reduction of teaching hours and was distinguished by the establishment of interdisciplinary relationships, which led to a greater integration of the academic, work and research components. Another significant modification is the introduction of optional subjects, among which it is suggested in the methodological indications of the study plan, one of Gender and Psychology (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). This proposal was only positioned initially in the Santiago de Cuba career where there was a group of women professors trained in gender and then at the University of Havana.

At the University of Oriente, this topic had a greater impact on the training of psychologists, as it led to the creation of student scientific groups that transversalized the topic in their research and gave rise to several diploma papers with this approach. Although these groups were dissolved, their legacy continues to this day. It can be said that they still teach the optional subject of Gender and Psychology and that the Discipline of Social Psychology transversalizes gender in all its subjects. (I. Alea¹ personal communication March 14, 2022)

It should be noted that in 1997 Cuba approved the National Action Plan for Follow-up to the Beijing Conference, the main objective of which was to promote conditions of equality between men and women. This was the result of agreements with international

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organizations to which Cuba reported every five years on the progress achieved in this area. In this document, the Ministry of Higher Education is declared responsible for continuing to improve study plans and programs, textbooks and teaching materials in order to create greater awareness of gender equality. It also indicated the need to develop training programs in gender studies and the introduction of this perspective in their research. This intention was achieved very timidly in Cuban universities, including the Psychology career, and in some cases it was not achieved at all.

Until the appearance of the 2019 constitution and the governmental programs of 2021, this was the most important legal instrument used by Cuban women to support social transformations for their development. This document was a daring, revolutionary and comprehensive plan to promote equal opportunities between men and women, a phenomenon that constitutes the substratum of violence. However, in the author's opinion, due to the lack of a strategy for its implementation and follow-up, the execution of this plan did not exploit its potential to really result in a proactive plan that would have a deeper impact on higher education, as was one of its objectives.

In 2017, the E Plan is proposed: In response to international trends, the main organizational modifications introduced in this plan are the reduction of one year of studies (regular daytime course to four years and the course by meeting to five) and a competency-based approach to the curriculum. The number of elective subjects is increased and an elective is proposed. Pre-professional practices constitute the integrating discipline (MES, 2017).

This curriculum proposes a content structure by basic disciplines for all higher education centers, and other specific and elective contents. This allows each center to organize, distribute and design its own subjects in function of responding to the demands and potentialities of the territory, decentralizing power over local knowledge. This measure allows each university's degree program to be more similar to its own context.

Among the optional subjects, one is proposed that links Gender and Psychology, although its implementation is left to the discretion of each university's career coordination. This elective is offered at the universities of Havana, Santiago de Cuba and Holguin. At the University of Guantánamo, it is a subject of its own curriculum and at the universities of Camagüey, Santi Spíritus and Santa Clara the subject is not addressed.

The implementation of Plan E occurs in a context where for the first time gender violence is declared as a governmental problem by expressing it as such in the 2019 constitution. The programs that support this intention are the “National Program for the Advancement of Women” and the “Comprehensive strategy for prevention and attention to gender violence and in the family scenario” both of 2021, express among their objectives to use university education as a strategic space to achieve it.

The role of universities to materialize this intention is explicit, for this reason it is stated in the first one “To promote educational, formative actions... that lead to strengthen interpersonal relationships based on equality... through the insertion of gender issues in plans and programs of study of all forms and levels of education” (Presidential Decree 198, 2021, p. 249) and in the second “To include in undergraduate programs ... content systems that make possible the preparation and continuing education of teachers, students, and graduates in the prevention of and attention to gender violence...” (Council of Ministers Agreement 9231, 2021, p. 841). The inclusion of an elective subject that responds to this interest can be considered a sign of a step in this direction; however, the magnitude of what is proposed makes it an insufficient action.

Conclusions

Psychology as a science, from any of its schools, does not usually carry out the necessary analysis to dismantle gender stereotypes and make a social critique of the conditioning factors that lead to inequalities between men and women and the subtle violence that is implicit in them. Phenomena as complex as gender violence, without the explanatory framework provided by gender theory, tend to have incomplete interpretations. For these reasons, in order for the psychology professional to adequately handle this phenomenon, he/she must receive training that manages to transversalize the gender perspective so that the traditional androcentrism is dismantled.

The incorporation of an elective subject on gender in the curricula of the career, is a valuable first approach to achieve this intention. However, this incorporation is insufficient to denaturalize the stereotypes that through gender socialization have been established in the personality of the psychologist in training and to reverse what has been

instituted as the truth about the masculine, the feminine or what is supposedly universal in the sciences. In spite of the existence of national legislations that point out the need to modify study plans so that they respond more coherently to the intention of favoring the understanding and accurate treatment of gender violence, a divorce is perceived between what is expected from what is legislated and what is achieved or modified.

The purpose of preventing and adequately addressing gender violence is an ambitious but fair and necessary task. In key professions such as psychology, this should be an issue to be taken very seriously and with the responsibility demanded by the government's social policies and the sensitivity implied by the issue in question. Current regulations demand concrete actions to achieve this objective, which would imply the training of teachers in gender and violence issues, accompanied by methodological scientific work in the cloisters to be able to accompany these changes. The analysis of the current conditions for the training of psychologists shows that they are still insufficient to respond to this purpose.