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Argentina and the Malvinas Crisis

Antonio E. Puente

In his classic article "The Snark Was a Boojum" (1950), Frank Beach warned that the overwhelming interest shown by psychologists for white rats as a subject of psychological experimentation was seriously restricting the development of a truly representative psychology. After reviewing major psychological journals, Professional Beach discovered that psychologists had used white rats in over 70 percent of their studies and that most of these studies were related to conditioning and learning. By 1950, psychology was quickly becoming the study of the acquisition of behavior in one species of animal.

Perusal of today's major psychological journals suggests that psychologists have heeded Professor Beach's warning but only in a restricted sense. Species other than the white rats (including the "introduction to psychology college student") are currently being used in research. However, most of the species used tend to inhabit the temperate zones of the Northern Hemisphere. The overuse of specific species, for convenience or familiarity's sake, will eventually result in a continued restriction of psychological knowledge. In contrast, more latitude has been shown the topics of study. The problem is that it is rare for researchers from countries outside of North America and Europe to contribute (i.e., publish) to psychological knowledge. While one expects that American and European scientists are unbiased in their research efforts, one wonders whether such inbreeding may result in a limited view of the world (e.g., as in the interpretation of "unbiased" data).

The limited perspective of psychological reality may be playing an important role in what Epstein (1980) calls a crisis in psychology—a crisis due to the "extremely inefficient procedures for establishing replicable generalizations." The importance of replicating findings stems from the need to account and reliably predict overtly appearing, random fluctuations in behavior. According to Epstein, the most common technique for solving

the problem of replication is to "exert careful controls in the laboratory." If enough variables are adequately controlled, the scientist can gauge reliably how one variable affects another. However, there are serious limitations to this methodological approach. If controlling the species used as subjects results in using species only from northern climates, one has probably increased the reliability of the findings. Nevertheless, the generalizability (or ability to extend these findings to, say, Southern Hemispheric species) is quite another story. If the origin of scientists conducting experiments and the locale of experimentation is additionally controlled, reliability should be increased but potential problems of generalizability arise. Psychology has mounted an effort to become a "true (i.e., replicable) science" at the expense of becoming a valid one. To increase the reliability of knowledge, we have inadvertently controlled the validity of our understanding of behavior.

The current exclusionary trend in modern psychology has been difficult for me to accept, especially since I emigrated from Cuba twenty-five years ago, and being excluded from activities was simply part of my life during my early years in the United States. During the process of acculturation, I became interested in trying to conceptualize psychological issues from a bicultural perspective, American and Cuban. Eventually, this interest was to be extended to the commonality of behavior across all cultures. The important questions in my life revolved around examining what behaviors (especially those which are disordered, as found in brain-damaged individuals) were culturally sensitive and alinguistic in origin. Nevertheless, formal education in the United States went far in squelching these questions. Indeed, my graduate training in psychology was a labor in adaptation to dogmatic, methodological empiricism. With hopes of relighting my interest in the questions of non-culturally biased psychological issues, I was delighted at the invitation to join the faculty at St. George's University Medical School in Grenada, West Indies. After a year of battling the elements, voodoo, and political unrest, the desire had been rekindled. However, it was not for several years and until my necessary return to the United States that I was able adequately to translate these questions into research paradigms. Unfortunately, by then I found myself surrounded once more by the limitations of North American psychology.

The opportunity finally arose in 1981 to initiate a research program which could begin to answer what, if anything, was common to individuals across cultures. As part of the American Psychological Association's Visiting Psychologist Program, several studies comparing patterns of conceptualization in Puerto Rican and American schizophrenics were initiated. It was not enough—geographically and culturally Puerto Rico was still too similar to the United States. In 1980 a Fulbright application to

Uruguay was rejected but hopes of visiting the Southern Hemisphere were not. Another attempt was initiated the following year, this time to Argentina. The effort resulted in a firm commitment to visit Bahía Blanca, Argentina, in May of 1982.

As I sat in my warm room at the Hotel Italia in Bahía Blanca (on the Southern coast of Argentina) on a windy, cold, and cloudy late August afternoon several days after my arrival, I could not help but wonder about people, people of all cultures. I had finally achieved the opportunity to ask the "right" questions. After twelve months of planning and a previous rejection (to Uruguay), both commissions had finally agreed to support a series of seminars and to initiate a research program on brain functioning at the Instituto Superior "Juan XXIII." The first of the seminars was scheduled for May 1982—about the time that the Argentine military launched an assault on the Malvinas, as the Argentines call the Falkland Islands. From the Fulbright Commission in Buenos Aires, I had received the most cordial of invitations and the greatest of assurances for my personal safety as a U.S. citizen (especially a Latin). In contrast to this friendly reception and encouragement, the U.S. Information Agency initially suggested not to proceed with my plans to visit Argentina during the Malvinas crisis. Considering such events as the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, their concern was not without merit. Soon the concern evolved to more of an edict. Their point was clear, the U.S. Embassy had been evacuated except for a skeleton crew and visiting scholars would only complicate matters. It was not until I called the embassy that a marine corps sergeant on sentry duty made it clear to me that unless I was willing to carry a gun, I had no business going to Argentina. Thus the war (and the Exocet missiles) came and went without me, of course. Distraught and disgruntled, I settled back to academic routine.

Two months later I received an early morning phone call at my home in North Carolina; the travel ban had been lifted and all appropriate parties encouraged the resumption of normal relations between the two countries. While I was not ready to carry a gun in May, I was eager to carry knowledge, questions, and enthusiasm as a means to repair relations. At worst it was a challenge; at best, it would not only allow me to ask important questions but it would stimulate the resumption of cultural and academic exchange between these two long-standing friends. Although I was not sure what to expect, it seemed best at the time not to consider the possibilities after such a disappointing end to my original plans.

What I did encounter was a paradox and no clear answers to any of my questions. A demoralized, almost ravaged country existing simultaneously with a mature, sophisticated culture and people. The loss of the Malvinas did not seem as important to the Argentine people as other factors, es-

pecially since Argentina had not occupied the islands for numerous years. What was disconcerting was the morale, the censorship, the uncertain future of the country and its citizens. One morning the Argentines had risen to the news that their armed forces had successfully landed on the Malvinas; next, they were dealing stunning blows to the proud and sterling British forces; and, then, just as quickly as it all had started, it was over. The island was briefly occupied, but the country had lost the Malvinas, the war, and the future.

How did it occur? I was fortunate to have met one of General Menéndez's (a ranking official who directed the war and is currently facing court-martial) chief aids who informed me that the media had reported an extremely censored version of the true account. Now that the war is history, the Argentines know how many of their young were killed, they know that the *Queen Elizabeth* had never been hit, and they know that the United States had become Britain's chief ally during the crisis. I found myself trying to convince them to put their emotions and the past aside in favor of cultural and intellectual exchange. Who knows, maybe carrying the gun may have been easier.

Life went on, we all knew it, and it was best for all concerned if the past and the emotions could be squelched in favor of a more acceptable common goal. How strange and unexpected an experience it was when this goal was embraced. For example, a Sunday drive proved beyond all doubt that the Argentines were striving for more. Unexpectedly, the father of one of the part-time faculty members at the institute's psychology department turned down a long, winding road only to be met by numerous armed naval personnel at a gate. After providing appropriate identification, we were off to Puerto Belgrano, where the Argentine Navy had launched its attack on the Malvinas. Not only was I surprised to see the battleships which just a few weeks previously I had seen on the nightly news, but I was surprised when I was told that I was the first U.S. citizen to visit the naval base since the beginning of the war in May. To commemorate the visit, I was presented with a beautiful plaque. It was time to activate my mind, since it was clear that answers to my questions were being provided.

It was unbelievable. The annual inflation rate after the war was over 200 percent officially and over 1,000 percent on the black market. Oddly, the devaluation of the Argentine peso was not a result of the war. It had existed prior to the war and may have been the actual stimulus for the conflict. But the important point was how could these people live under the circumstances? Research faculty earned an equivalent of less than U.S. \$10 per month, or enough to buy a paperback published in the United States. Tenured faculty could earn up to \$50 per month while the rector, or president, of the institute made approximately \$75 per month. As an academic,

I had simply guessed that my university colleagues were being grossly underpaid, but I was surprised to find that all professionals earned salaries in the range between U.S. \$10 and \$150 per month.

During those few months after the war, it was a never-ending battle of rumors, speculations, and uphill battles. People were wondering about their jobs, their professions, and their country. Above it all, people were still moving forward with visions of new horizons. The hope of a democratic government, of political and personal choice, of academic freedom, was thick in the air. The assurance that Argentina would eventually regain world recognition and confidence was discussed by the population. During strolls in their many parks or during their late-night conversations at the cafés, Argentines questioned themselves and the future of U.S.-Argentine relations. What can you say to a people whom your country has fought against (at least on paper)? In spite of conditions and in spite of the lack of easy responses, their zest for living and questioning managed to linger on. While we in the United States strove for technological sophistication and consumer comfort, basic human needs were at stake during those few months after the war. My colleagues in psychology at the institute were not concerned with doing publishable research, they were worried about existence and basic human needs. Nevertheless, they were eager to embrace a questionable future with an enthusiasm I was not used to, with a concern for those issues which are truly common to people of all cultures (regardless of political affiliation).

As I prepared for another of my many afternoon siestas in Argentina—between morning and evening seminars—I hoped to find answers in one of my dreams. While I now do not recall what I dreamed during those siestas, I still hope that regardless of what one does, the answers will always be there simply for the asking. All we have to do is allow ourselves to become unbiased, to experience, and to search for the core of human behavior. Luckily for me, answers to my questions came as a function of a Fulbright award.

In retrospect, it appears to be such a shame that I ever questioned the importance of the concerns that I had formulated early in my life. The right questions are not going to be answered by North American and European psychologists testing white rats and college students. If the questioning of psychological phenomena and human existence is truly important, we owe to ourselves, to our discipline, and to society to expand our horizons and our minds.

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