Mapping the social representations of Psychology: a study in a Portuguese context

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Abstract

Objective
The present study aimed to analyse the social representations of Psychology in a sample of Portuguese respondents, thus contributing to a better understanding of the social meaning of this scientific area.

Method
A free association task was performed by a sample of 205 Portuguese individuals who were given the word "Psychology" as a stimulus. Data were analysed using content analysis, supported by the Max-Qda software.

Results
The main results show a greater diversity of representations compared to previous studies. However, the dominant representation in terms of intervention is still the curative clinic and the medical paradigm.

Conclusion
This research made it possible to highlight the need for Psychology professionals, and the entities that represent them, to reinforce the visibility and awareness of the community in general, of the application areas both in the scientific and professional context.

Keywords: Portugal; Psychology; Social representation.

In a brief approach to the history of Psychology, we are faced with a science that, despite being recent, its beginnings date back to the 5th century BC with the philosophers of Ancient Greece, having as reference Plato (428-348 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). It was not until the 16th century that the term "Psychology" appeared, used in a theological context (by Melanchthon). The concept of Psychology in a sense closer to the one currently used, as an area interested in the study of the inner workings of the mind, due to its dimensions and manifestations, appears only in the 18th century with the German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754). The creation

(in 1879, by Wundt) of the first laboratory of Experimental Psychology, at the University of Leipzig, was established as a milestone for the recognition of its status as a science (Airenti, 2019).

Although Psychology is a very young science, with about 140 years old, if we look at its growth and expansion, we can see how much it has revealed itself as an incredibly attractive professional area, despite the threat of the saturated job market.

In this regard, Jesuíno (2002) presents us with some remarkably interesting data, of which we highlight the trend verified from 1950 onwards towards a greater development of applied areas, such as the psychology of organizations, compared to the development of traditional areas of clinical research and investigation. In addition, there is a trend towards the feminization of the profession, whether in the practical component, in the areas of research or teaching.

> Finally, psychology will tend to become more popular, as happened with psychoanalysis, to become a social representation, and in this respect to constitute an important element in the social construction of reality. If the 20th century was the century of psychology, the 21st century will perhaps be even more so (Jesuíno, 2002, p. 223).

The history of Psychology in Portugal followed very closely the abovementioned evolution, having been strongly influenced by the French tradition of physician-philosophers. The first Portuguese Psychology Laboratory was created in 1912, at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Coimbra (Jesuíno, 2002). In 1930, the teaching of Psychology began in Portuguese Universities, in this case with only two curricular units: General Psychology and Experimental Psychology, or General Psychology and School Psychology and Mental Measures (also taught at the Faculty of Arts, in the Licentiate in Philosophy).

From the 1920s to the 1950s, there were several activities related to Psychology conducted in Portugal and whose characteristics followed very closely the predominant models at the time: the experimental and, consequently, the psychometric model, the pedagogical activities of genetic feature, and the phenomenological and psychoanalytic models.

In 1962 the Institute of Psychopedagogical Sciences was created and, shortly thereafter, in 1964, the Higher Institute of Applied Psychology begins what is considered the first training of psychologists in Portugal. It was a Bachelor's degree, with a common curriculum in the first two years, followed by three specialization options in the junior (3rd) year (Pedagogical Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Industrial Psychology).

The first Licentiate in Psychology in Portugal was opened in 1976 at the Universities of Lisbon, Porto, and Coimbra. It was this course, called the Higher Psychology Course of the Faculty of Letters, which formed the basis of the Faculties of Psychology and Educational Sciences, officially recognized in 1980 in the Universities above. Despite this late start, the training offer in question grew so fast that, in 1995, there were 10 Licentiates in Psychology, between public and private institutions, reaching its peak in 2007 with a total of 37 courses.

It should be observed that current higher education courses in Psychology follow the model resulting from the Bologna Declaration (1999), joint statement by the European Ministers of Education meeting in Bologna on 19 June 1999, whose implementation process was completed in 2010. Thus, three cycles of study have been established to which it corresponds: the 1st cycle refers to the licentiate degree, the 2nd cycle to the master's degree, and 3rd cycle to the PhD.

Upon completion of academic training, entering the labor market also depends on completing a one-year professional internship, which is monitored by the *Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses* (OPP, Portuguese Psychologists' Association). Registration in the OPP to do the professional internship depends on obtaining a master's degree, in the 2nd cycles of Psychology that are accredited by the A3ES (Portuguese Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation Agency) and that meet the requirements for professional training. It should be noted that the OPP, the regulatory body for the professional activity of psychologists, was created by Law nº 57/2008 of September 4th, which approved its Statutes and started operating on April 12th 2010, with around 18,000 registered psychologists.

Committed to ensuring the best professional response from psychologists, while also safeguarding their legitimate interests, the Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses (OPP, 2016) decided to create the General Regulation of Professional Specialties of the OPP (Regulation n.º 107-A/2016). This regulation defines a set of principles concerning the training and professional development of psychologists, assuming that specialties should promote the quality of professional practice. The title of specialist psychologist is a certification of specific competence in the respective area of specialty, thus working as a recognition of qualification.

With this regulation, three general specialties were defined: Clinical and Health Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Work, Social, and Organizational Psychology. In addition to these, there are 12 more advanced specialties, which can be assigned to specialist psychologists, regardless of their recognized area of expertise. There are currently more than 20,000 Portuguese psychologists registered in the OPP. It is important to systematize that, in Portugal, there are two opposing standpoints on Psychology today: one extolling it as an expanding area in terms of training offer and the other focusing on a currently saturated professional (and also educational) market.

Having made this very brief historical framework of Psychology, also in the Portuguese context, we end with the well-known statement by Ebbinghaus (1908, p. 3) that "[...] psychology has a long past, but a short history". In Portugal, it is a recent scientific and professional area, experiencing daily discourses of preconceived ideas resulting from an apparent lack of knowledge or beliefs. It was in this context that the need to conduct the present study emerged with the aim of analyzing the social representations of Psychology in a sample of Portuguese respondents.

Social representations

The concept of social representation was proposed by Moscovici in the 1960s, referring to a set of concepts, propositions and explanations created in everyday life in the course of inter-individual communication. Detaching himself from the behaviorist paradigm, Moscovici proposes that we go beyond models that consider representations as simple mediating variables between stimulus and response to start considering them as independent variables that will be at the origin not only of behavioral responses but also of the way in which stimuli are perceived (Moscovici, 1984). Representation is thus understood as the construction of an object and the expression of a subject (Vala, 1993), having a strong social component since it is a form of socially elaborated and shared knowledge, with a practical objective, contributing to the construction from a common reality to a social group (Jodelet, 1984). All social representation is shared by a set of individuals and is collectively produced.

Social representations translate common sense thinking, as they describe the transformations that different social groups make of the dominant philosophical and scientific theories in contemporary societies. Representations are social because: they emerge in a real social

context; they are elaborated from frameworks of apprehension that provide the values, ideologies and systems of social categorization shared by different social groups; they are constituted and circulated through social communication; and they reflect social relationships while contributing to their production (Moscovici, 1984).

There are two essential processes responsible for the elaboration of social representations: objectification and anchoring. The crystallization of a representation takes us to the process of objectification that "[...] is essentially an image-forming operation, the process through which abstract notions are transformed into something concrete, almost tangible" (Spink, 1993, p. 306). Anchoring refers to "[...] the organic insertion of what is strange in the already constituted thought, that is, we anchor the unknown in already existing representations" (Spink, 1993, p. 306). Anchoring can precede or follow the objectification process, and in the first case it can be useful to integrate new information into categories that the subject already has as a result of previous experiences, or, in the second case, to attribute meaning to events, behaviors, people, groups, or social facts in order to express and constitute social relations.

Finally, it is important to mention the multifunctionality of social representations. In fact, these present significant organization functions of the real, explaining it as a function of communication, behaviors, and social differentiation phenomena. Social representations make it possible to significantly organize the real, influence communication processes, predispose to action, and assume a relevant role in social differentiation phenomena, namely in the role of identity protection, which refers to the dynamics of social interaction, specifically in the elaboration of collective or individual strategies for the maintenance of identities (Spink, 1993).

Studies on social representations of Psychology and the psychologist

A search was conducted in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) databases regarding the social representation of Psychology and psychologists, in which fourteen studies carried out until 2019 were identified. All studies identified were conducted in Brazil, except for one (Aisenson et al., 2005) – conducted in Buenos Aires. Of the fourteen studies analyzed, two were prior to 2000 (Leme et al., 1989; Souza & Trindade, 2012), four focused on the second decade of our century, and the rest on the first decade.

The studies focus on different populations, although there is a predominance of studies (8) involving students (Aisenson et al., 2005; Bertollo-Nardi et al., 2014; Figuerêdo & Cruz, 2017; Iop et al., 2013; Leme et al., 1989; Praça & Novaes, 2004; Rittner, 2008; Souza Filho et al., 2006). Most of these studies focus on students, referring to higher education and Psychology students, although two of them (Praça & Novaes, 2004; Souza Filho et al., 2006) include, along with Psychology students, students of other courses in the area of Health. In these cases, there is an attempt to compare the representations of Psychology students with those from other areas, with a third group involved referring to the general population being registered in one of the cases. The studies also vary considerably in terms of the progress of the course(s), as it includes freshman and senior students. Regarding the general population, that is, the population that was not studied in contexts that involved explicit contact with psychologists, for example people approached on the street, there are five studies (Cenci, 2006; Lahm & Boeckel, 2008; Souza Filho et al., 2006; Souza & Trindade, 2012; Weber et al., 2005) and one of them (Souza Filho et al., 2006) also includes, in a comparative perspective, two other groups of students (Psychology and Nursing). In one of the studies (Hedler et al., 2018), the psychologists were subject to the study of their own representations about the profession. The authors interviewed nine female management psychologists who act

as coordinators of multidisciplinary teams in the field of health care, social care, and social legal assistance. In these cases, whenever the issue of socioeconomic level is focused, studies show the absence of representation of Psychology and/or its professionals in a significant percentage. Studies suggest that this lack of knowledge results from the limited access that populations, in general, have to the services of psychologists, who are mostly self-employed professionals, particularly those in the clinical area, thus making access to them difficult and expensive. Of the two studies carried out in institutional contexts, one (More et al., 2001) reports that 80% of individuals who sought Psychology services did not do so on their own initiative and were unaware of the role of this professional; in the study by Lahm and Boeckel (2008), since more than half of the individuals who sought services had already had previous contact with psychologists, there was no longer a lack of representation of psychologists and their work.

Regarding the methodological options, the studies basically present three: interviews, questionnaires (which include open and closed questions or just open questions) and free association. It is also verified, in some cases, that the studies presented are part of broader studies, and the published article focuses specifically on this topic. There are also situations in which the published article, despite being based on a questionnaire, only analyzes one of the questions of the instrument used (Leme et al., 1989). There is also a study that uses focus groups (Bertollo-Nardi et al., 2014) and another using a technique called "conversation circle" (Figuerêdo & Cruz, 2017). This last study also presents the use of drawing as a way of analyzing the participants' representations.

Except for one study, whose data collection takes place between 1976 and 1984 (Leme et al., 1989), assessments regarding Psychology and psychologists are generally positive. Probably the study by Leme et al. (1989), due to the fact that it was carried out about three to four decades ago, a period in which the lack of knowledge regarding the profession would be much higher and the recognition of the contribution of this profession to the well-being of people would fall far short of expectations, suffering from this negative view.

Most studies refer that the social representation of Psychology and the psychologist are linked to the clinical area. One of the studies (Weber et al., 2005), which compares data from 1990 and 2002, refers to greater knowledge on the part of the general population regarding the profile and nature of the profession. Even for Psychology students, the areas of Social Psychology, Educational Psychology, or others, seem to be peripheral, with the clinical area occupying an evident centrality and that the authors of one of the studies (Aisenson et al., 2005) consider that it is also shaped in the course syllabus itself.

The functions of helping, listening, guiding, and supporting problem solving appear recurrently in the studies, as well as an individual view of psychologists, probably adjusted to the idea of Clinical Psychology. It is also worth mentioning the case of two studies, which found that the representation of psychologists is of professionals who seek adaptation and integration of subjects and not social transformation (Praça & Novaes, 2004).

Although Psychology is a relatively recent training and professional area in Portugal, it nevertheless presents a strong expansion in terms of training offer that is reflected in the number of professionals in the "field", a factor for which the carrying out of this study was considered relevant. In this sense, the main objective of this research is to analyze the social representations of Psychology in a sample of Portuguese respondents.

Method

Participants

The study consisted of 205 participants, 67.8% (n = 139) women, with a mean age of 37 years (SD = 11.21) and 48.8% (n = 100) with higher education. It should be noted that 60.0% (n = 123) of respondents had already had professional contact with psychologists.

Instrument

A self-completion questionnaire was used. This included socio-demographic questions, which allow the description of the sample, and a free word association task. In this way, the participants were invited to write what came to their mind when thinking about "Psychology." No other stimulus or information was given to capture the most salient and significant ideas associated with Psychology.

Data Analysis

Data collection took place through "snowball" sampling, among the general population, with a questionnaire in paper format. These data were subjected to content analysis (Bardin, 1977). A system of categories for coding data was developed based on a bottom-up technique (i.e., emergent coding), having the theme as the unit of analysis. Sections of participants' responses that referred to the same topic were grouped together (it could be a word or a whole sentence, depending on the case). From this process, the categories were identified which, in a second phase, were grouped into broad categories, which were constituted according to the contents of the categories included in them.

Content analysis was performed using the Max-Qda software. To ensure the quality of the category system, two independent investigators coded 10% of the collected questionnaires (randomly selected). The interjudge agreement results indicated a very adequate level of reliability of the category system (Cohen's k for interjudge agreement: 0.92%).

The study followed the ethical principles, in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists (1st Revision published in the Portuguese Official Gazette, 2nd Series nº 246/2, of December 26, 2016) about studies conducted with the participation of human beings (information on the objective, risks and benefits of the study, protection of personal data and guarantees of confidentiality, free of charge, and possibility of quitting the study at any of its stages).

Results

From the data analysis process, a total of 390 categorizations were identified, 23 categories whose designation reflects the content of the themes. In a second phase, these categories were grouped into 9 broad categories, constituted according to the contents of the categories included in them (Table 1).

When we analyze the results based on the 9 main categories (Table 2), we see that the representations are centered on tools of psychology, which is the category most mentioned by the respondents, followed by the focus on the scientific domain of Psychology. The professional also emerges in representations.

Table 1

Category system for coding

Category	Definition	Examples
Scientific domain of Psychology		
Object of study of Psychology	Explicit references to the various objects of study in Psychology	"science, study of the mind" (Q7) "Study of behavior" (Q4) "Trying to realize" (Q21) "science that studies ideas, feelings" (Q67) "science that studies the psychic" (Q72)
Interventional domain of Psychology		
Personal intervention domain	References to Psychology as a means of personal intervention	"helps in understanding our problems" (Q6) "personal development" (Q12)
Social intervention domain	References to Psychology as a means of social intervention	"noticing the behavior of others" (Q21) "behavior and relationship between people" (Q59) "Psychology is increasingly important in the relationship between people" (Q1) "Development of social skills" (Q12)
Organizational Intervention Domain	References to Psychology as a means of organizational and professional intervention.	"professional guidance" (Q5)
Educational Intervention Domain	References to Psychology as a means of intervention in education and vocational guidance	"school guidance" (Q7)
Other intervention domains	References to Psychology as a means of intervention in domains other than the four mentioned above	"Developmental Psychology, Criminal Psychology, Child Psychology; Educational Psychology, Clinical Psychology" (Q3)
Tools of Psychology		
Methods and techniques used in Psychology	Reference to methods and techniques used in Psychology	"tests" (Q6) "therapy" (Q7) "drawings, games" (Q45)
Physical space	Reference to the surrounding physical space involved in the practice of Psychology	"Sofa, chair" (Q44)
Subjects related to Psychology	References to other disciplines	"Psychiatry, Neuropsychology, Psychoanalysis" (Q77) "Philosophy" (Q4)
Authors	References to reference authors linked to Psychology	"Pavlov, Piaget, Bruner" (Q3) "Freud" (Q2)
Concepts associated with the Human Being	References to terms, expressions and concepts associated with Psychology	"psyche, soul, mind, behavior" (Q42) "personal, intimate, thought" (Q2) "fears, phobias" (Q6)
Paradigm		
Traditional and medical paradigm	References to pathological aspects	"depression, psychological problems" (Q9) "psychosis" (Q84)
Positive Psychology paradigm	References to the positive aspects that can be focused by Psychology	"Well-being, self-esteem" (Q40)
Criticisms of Psychology		
Derogatory view of Psychology	Reference to a derogatory view of Psychology	"disorder in its application and in the scientific domains" (Q8) "easy way to make money" (Q2)
Positive view of Psychology	Reference to positive aspects related to Psychology and its benefits	"helps people to overcome, fears, obstacles in life" (Q4) "It promotes self-knowledge, allows us to improve and empower ourselves with inner tools, it is a way of perfecting and improving our "I" (Q6) "Personal development" (Q12) "It helps to overcome depression, helps to raise self-esteem" (Q2) "Help to overcome emotional problems" (Q2) "Helps in self-development" (Q2)
The client		
Profile of the client	References to the profile of the person who uses the psychologist	"Crazy" (Q36) "Crazy" (Q37) "Sick" (Q10)

Table 1
Category system for coding

Category	Definition	Examples
The professional		
Psychologist's competences	References to the skills and characteristics associated with the psychologist	"Listening and Interpreting" (Q2) "Patience" (Q43) "Good person" (Q22)
Functions	References to the psychologist's functions	"Help from a health technician in explaining our self" (Q11) "Follow-up" (Q1) "Listening and interpreting attitudes, helps to overcome emotional problems, Helps in self-development" (Q2) "Psychological assessment" (Q038)
Negative View of Psychologists	Reference to a negative view of psychologists	"Psychologists help solve other people's problems but cannot solve their own problems" (Q3)
Positive view of Psychologists	Reference to a positive view of psychologists	"good person, helps others" (Q22)
Economic aspects		
Economic concerns associated with treatment	References to economic difficulties in accessing psychological counseling	"very little recognized science by the health system, expensive treatment" (Q5) "too expensive" (Q4)
Economic concerns associated with the professional	References to economic difficulties in the professional opportunities that the course provides	"unemployment" (Q6)
Other aspects		
Relationship with institutions	Reference to interactions between Psychology and other entities.	"Science very little recognized by the health system" (Q5) "No support from the State or insurance companies in terms of costs" (Q6)

Note: Q: Questionnaire identification.

Table 2 shows the synthesis resulting from the content analysis. It can be seen that the tools of psychology are the most referenced by respondents, namely the sub-categories of "concepts" and "methods and techniques". In the intervening domain, the focus is on the intra-personal level, associated with clinical intervention.

An analysis of the social representations by gender, qualifications and previous contact with a psychologist, reveals that the physical space is mentioned mainly by men. Individuals with 10 to 12 years of schooling tend to present a more positive view of Psychology, while individuals with lower educational levels showed more appreciation for the professional.

An analysis of the social representations by gender, qualifications, and previous contact with a psychologist, reveals that the physical space is mentioned mostly by men, individuals with less than higher education tending to present a more positive view of Psychology, while with lower qualifications give more appreciation of the professional. The respondents without previous contact with psychologists emphasize the paradigms, namely the professional.

Table 2
Frequency of categories and subcategories

Category and Subcategory	Frequency
Scientific domain of Psychology (*n* = 89)	
Object of study of Psychology	89
Interventional domain of Psychology (*n* = 42)	
Intra-personal intervention domain	25
Social intervention domain	8

Table 2
Frequency of categories and subcategories

Category and Subcategory	Frequency
Organizational Intervention Domain	3
Educational Intervention Domain	3
Other intervention domains	3
Tools of Psychology (n = 109)	
Methods and techniques used in Psychology	25
Physical space	5
Subjects related to Psychology	7
Authors	13
Concepts associated with the Human Being	59
Paradigm (n = 31)	
Traditional and medical paradigm	22
Positive Psychology Paradigm	9
Criticism to Psychology (n = 42)	
Derogatory View of Psychology	8
Positive View of Psychology	34
The client (n = 9)	
Client's profile	9
The professional (n = 61)	
Psychologist's competences	15
Functions	29
Negative View of Psychologists	6
Positive view of Psychologists	11
Economic aspects (n = 4)	
Economic concerns associated with the treatment	2
Economic concerns associated with the professional	2
Other aspects (n = 3)	
Relationship with institutions	3

Discussion

The scientific and applied area of Psychology, despite its recent history, has a marked proliferation resulting, in large part, from the spread of higher education institutions and, also, from the awareness-raising work conducted by the OPP. However, it is important to map the community's views on Psychology to bring a greater and better understanding of future paths in terms of the positioning of this area, especially because previous studies focused especially on samples of students mostly from Psychology courses (Aisenson et al., 2005; Bertollo-Nardi et al., 2014; Figuerêdo & Cruz, 2017; Iop et al., 2013; Leme et al., 1989; Praça & Novaes, 2004; Souza Filho et al., 2006). In this context, the present study aimed to analyze the social representations of Psychology in a sample of Portuguese respondents.

Considering that qualitative methods provide privileged tools to capture the diversity of perspectives associated with a social object, this study uses a task of free association as it allows respondents to register the ideas that freely arise in their minds regarding a given concept, allowing them to be registered the most significant and salient categories in the definition of the object.

Based on the responses collected, a system of categories was developed, consisting of 9 main categories and 23 subcategories, in a total of 390 categorizations. The results suggest a multidimensional conceptualization of Psychology and reveal a greater diversity of representations compared to previous studies (Praça & Novaes, 2004), which can be explained by the fact that a heterogeneous group of individuals participated in this study, defocusing from the usual samples with students. It is also worth noting the focus on tools of psychology, with particular emphasis on methods and techniques as well as on concepts associated with the human being. The professional, with his or her skills and functions, stands out in the representations of the respondents. The results of the present study allow us to highlight a greater heterogeneity of views that begin to denote changes in the view of psychologists as professionals and of Psychology, and which aims at the adaptation and integration of individuals. These results highlight the emergence of new social representations based on existing representations (Spink, 1993).

Despite this, the study of the mind (scientific domain) predominates, as in previous studies, compared to the interventionist and the dominant representation in terms of intervention continues to be the curative clinic and the medical paradigm (Chmil, et al., 2017), which shows the long path that professionals, higher education institutions, and professional associations still have to go through in order to reach the community with the multiplicity of interventions and contexts of Psychology.

These results may reveal a greater awareness of the work of a psychologist, in line with the assumption that social representations translate the transformations of common sense and emerge in a given real social context, conveyed in different groups through social communication media (Moscovici, 1984).

The results that associate individuals with higher education with a more positive view of Psychology, while individuals with lower qualifications express more opinions about the professional and respondents without previous contact with psychologists focus on the medical paradigm, reinforce the path of sensitization and awareness of the multiplicity of approaches to Psychology among the community in general.

The main limitation of the study is the sample that has characteristics that do not replicate the Portuguese population, for example, in terms of educational level. In addition, we do not control the nature and perceived quality of the relationship with Psychology professionals, a factor that may have influenced the results in some way, so in the future it will be interesting to expand the study as well as focus on specific contexts and branches of psychology. Triangulating data collection and analysis, namely including the analysis of the impression of the last decades, and in-depth interviews with the target population of psychology could enhance a greater contribution of the Theory of Social Representations (Caillaud et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The present study has implications for professional practice, namely in terms of the work of the OPP and of the specialty colleges, as well as all psychologists and universities with degrees in Psychology, in order to continue the work of promoting, raising awareness, and reinforcing the breadth of the role/performance of psychologists in the community in general, which, despite the present study demonstrating a more heterogeneous pattern of representations, it is still far from desirable for some areas of activity.

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Contributors

S.P. GONÇALVES was responsible for the study conception and design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as writing, reviewing, and approving the article. C.C.L. NOGUEIRA, M.V. SILVA, and M. S CARLOTTO participated in writing and reviewing the article.