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# PSYCHOLOGY IN BELGIUM

*M. Richelle*

Laboratory of Experimental Psychology, University of Liège, B-4000 Liège, Belgium

*P. Janssen*

Center for School Psychology, Catholic University of Leuven, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

*S. Brédart*

Laboratory of Social Psychology, University of Liège, B-4000 Liège, Belgium

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A BRIEF RETROSPECT<sup>1</sup>*Historico-Geographical Keys to Belgian Psychology*

The geographical distribution of universities, and of their faculties of psychology, is, in part, linked to the present political configuration of the country. Belgium is a recent entity in European history, emerging from a short local revolution against the Dutch rulers in 1830, after 15 years of a rather artificial state created by the Congress of Vienna. The country has evolved, in the last decades, into a quasi-federal system, whose organization aims to solve complex linguistic issues. Belgium has three official languages: French, Flemish (similar to Dutch), and German. To oversimplify, French is spoken in the southern half of the country, Flemish in the northern part, and German in a small territory in the East. The large Brussels area is bilingual.

Seven universities have faculties of psychology and education (under various labels) offering a full range of subject areas in psychology. Four of them are French-speaking (Brussels, Liège, Louvain-la-Neuve, and Mons); three are Flemish (Brussels, Ghent and Leuven).<sup>2</sup> The two universities in Brussels were born from a single institution, formerly teaching in both languages. This has been the case also for the universities of Leuven/Louvain, but the French-speaking university moved from the city of Leuven to a new site in the southern part of the country, called Louvain-la-Neuve (New Leuven).<sup>3</sup> As these changes do not go back more than 25 years or so, in the cases of both the Brussels and Leuven/Louvain universities, the now separate institutions, including their psychology faculties, share the same history.

Three periods can be distinguished in the historical development of scientific psychology in Belgium: the 19th century only highlights a few forerunners and pioneers; in the first half of the 20th century, psychology entered the academic institutions with the creation of laboratories and the development of curricula, usually with an emphasis on applied fields; from the 1950s on, full and diversified curricula were created, distinct faculties were eventually established, and research expanded.

<sup>1</sup>For more historical information, see Nuttin (1961), Montpellier (1971), and Bertelson (1984).

<sup>2</sup>The complete names labeling of these institutions are as follow: Université Libre de Bruxelles, Université de Liège, Université de Mons, Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Rijk Universiteit Gent, Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven. Liège, Mons, and Ghent depend on public administration, now at the level of linguistically defined communities. The universities of Leuven/Louvain and of Brussels are private institutions, the first two, as the name indicates, depending on the Catholic religious authorities, the other two originally on nonreligious groups. For most practical purposes, all are now financially supported by public sources, and they share equal access to research funding.

<sup>3</sup>With the exception of the Medical School, which moved to the Brussels area.

### *Some Pioneers*

Psychology textbooks mention the names of a few Belgian scientists who contributed directly or indirectly to the progress of psychological science in the 19th century. The names of Quételet (1796–1874), Plateau (1801–1883) and Delboeuf (1831–1896) are especially salient.

An astronomer and mathematician in Brussels, Quételet made important contributions to statistical methods and to the theory of normal distribution; he had the idea of putting them to work in measuring mental faculties in humans, opening the way to the quantified approach to interindividual differences that Galton was to develop later in the century (Quételet 1869, 1870).

Plateau, a physicist who taught at the university of Ghent, was an expert in vision, especially in color vision, a field he went on studying after he became blind in his forties. He published an essay on a general theory of vision, and his experimental contributions include empirical data on color mixing and studies of stroboscopic movement (Plateau 1834).

Delboeuf's name is best known now in relation with the visual illusion named after him. He was affiliated with the department of philosophy at the University of Liège, where he taught logic as well as psychology. His contributions to both fields have been highly praised. He performed experiments of his own in sensation and perception, and wrote extensively in the field of psychophysics, discussing the conflicting theories of his day (Delboeuf 1883a,b). Freud came across his work and occasionally discussed his views. William James visited him when traveling in Belgium and reported in a letter to his brother Henry how much the man and his scientific achievements impressed him.<sup>4</sup> Delboeuf had been an active participant in the first two Congresses of Psychology, in Paris (1889) and London (1892). Although he had been involved in the preparation of the 1896 Munich meeting, he could not attend for health reasons, and he died shortly after it took place. His work in Liège was discontinued, presumably because he had not established a group of followers, and for reasons of local institutional policy.

### *The Growth of Academic Psychology*

Scientific psychology found its place, with a better prospect of lasting, with the foundation of the Laboratory of Experimental Psychology at the University of Louvain in 1892. The laboratory's establishment was due to the initiative of D. Mercier (later a Cardinal of the Roman Church), then the head of a recently created Institute of Philosophy. One of his students, A. Thiéry,

<sup>4</sup>James's letter is dated November 2, 1882. The document is part of the important Delboeuf archives, deposited at the philosophy department of the University of Liège. The information is reproduced by courtesy of F. Duyckaerts, who has been exploring Delboeuf's papers for some years (Duyckaerts 1989a, 1990).

who had studied with Wundt in Leipzig, was appointed as the first director. He had worked on optical illusions. He was succeeded in 1906 by A. Michotte (1881–1965), his student, who also spent some time at Leipzig and later developed close relationships with Külpe in Würzburg. Michotte's contributions to experimental psychology have been many and diverse, but he is best known for his often quoted work on perception of movement and of phenomenal causality (1954). Michotte has played an important role, at the international level, in making Belgian psychology visible. He was President of the International Union of Psychological Science (1957–1960).

The Louvain laboratory was to develop, not only along the lines that Michotte had developed in the field of perception with A. Fauville (1946, 1948) and G. Thinès (1961), but in new areas as well. Fauville is to be credited for making early use of information theory (1963), Thinès initiated a research group in animal behavior (Thinès 1966), while J. Nuttin engaged in personality and motivation research (1953a,b, 1980) and G. de Montpellier developed animal learning studies (1950) before turning to experimental social psychology. Much current research at both Catholic universities has its roots in such developments, which were due to Michotte's impetus.

In other universities psychology did not so quickly achieve its due place; as a rule, applications were emphasized initially. This was the case at the University of Brussels, where psychology was linked with psychopathology—for example in the work of A. Ley (1946, 1948) and R. Nyssen (1946, 1948)—and with child and educational psychology—in the work of O. Decroly; the same assessment applies to the State Universities of Ghent and Liège, where programs of vocational and work psychology were organized.

### *The Postwar Period: Laying the Foundation of the Present*

After the Second World War, the rapid growth of scientific psychology, resulting in the organization of full and varied university curricula, in the creation of laboratories and research groups, and in increased interactions with psychologists outside the country and outside Europe, was essentially the work of dynamic individuals, of high scientific status and committed to the progress of their field as well as to the development of their own academic institutions. The names of these men of transition deserve mention in the present historical survey because the current scene of psychology in Belgium is clearly a consequence of their decisive action, sometimes carried out at the expense of their own careers as scientists.

In Brussels, A. Ombredane (1898–1958), a French psychologist and physician, was in charge of the chair of psychology from 1948 until his untimely death. He promoted research in various directions of basic psychology—laying the foundations for the later development by P. Bertelson of current

experimental cognitive psychology in Brussels—as well as of applied psychology, be it clinical, industrial, or child psychology—work associated with the names of F. Robaye, J. M. Faverge, and P. A. Osterrieth, respectively.

In Ghent, L. Coetsier (1912–1968) and W. De Coster (1920– ), beside developing their own fields of expertise—applied psychology and developmental psychology, respectively—promoted new domains of experimental, theoretical and mathematical psychology.

In Leuven, J. Nuttin (1909–1988), besides being active for many years as an officer and president (1972–1976) of the International Union of Psychological Science, also developed a laboratory with various research orientations in human social and individual psychology—a laboratory that was full-fledged when the two universities separated. A similar role was played in what was to become the University of Louvain-la-Neuve by Montpellier and Thinès.

J. Paulus (1909– ) was a former student of Pierre Janet, and was well known for his synthesis of the various European and American traditions (Paulus 1965). This background was reflected in the impetus he gave, during the 1950s and early 1960s, at the University of Liège, to the development of complementary branches of psychology and closely related fields, ranging from psychoanalysis and psychodynamics, represented by F. Duyckaerts (1954, 1964), to cultural anthropology; from psychophysiology to ethology; and from clinical to experimental psychology—the latter field being developed after 1960 by M. Richelle, who started the first operant conditioning laboratory on the European continent (Richelle 1991a). The study of animal behavior, carried out since then in the psychological laboratory and in the ethology laboratory (the latter at the Science Faculty), reinstated work initiated in the 1920s and 1930s by L. Verlaine (1889–1939) at the zoology department but interrupted for two decades. Verlaine performed a number of insightful and well-designed experiments and produced important writings on animal cognition; among other things, he pioneered in the study of counting capacities in monkeys (Verlaine 1935–1936, 1938).

These men who shaped contemporary Belgian psychology had in common their strategy of encouraging bright young students to complete their training abroad, a policy that was continued and, of course, largely facilitated by increasing international university exchanges. This has been the source of the diversification in backgrounds that can be noticed among Belgian psychologists of the generations now active.

The 1950s and early 1960s have also been marked by research activities in the field of cross-cultural psychology, carried out in the territory of Zaire, until 1960 a Belgian colony. This research was supported by each of the Belgian universities, and some of the psychologists whose names have been mentioned above have been engaged in it personally at one time or another (Ombredane 1954; Ombredane et al 1957; Richelle 1961, 1966).

mand for such assistants, other schools were founded in Antwerp, Brussels, Kortrijk, and elsewhere. They currently offer a full-time three-year program leading to the certificate of "Assistant in Psychology." Their trainees are highly valued employees in psychological services where most of them work—for instance, in taking care of the administration of standard group and individual tests—under the direct supervision of a university-trained psychologist. After completion of their three-year program, some of these assistants go to a university. They sometimes then have to pass an entrance examination (combining the main parts of the university's first-cycle program in psychology into a special one-year program) before entering the three years of second-cycle training. Thus the two types of training in Belgian higher education must be clearly distinguished. Although understandable in some respects, the claim of these assistants that they should be called psychologists is ill founded.

### *Spheres of Activity*

The employment of university-trained psychologists is sensitive to economic trends. There have been periods in which these licentiates could find a job immediately after graduation. In other times, they have had great difficulty finding employment at their level of competence (Lagrou & De Witte 1990). The present seems relatively favorable. Each period of economic recovery creates new demand for psychologists, directly—for instance, in industrial psychology and related fields—as well as indirectly—e.g. in school and in clinical psychology. A recession almost immediately results in a contraction of the professions in the so-called soft sector because most of them are subsidized by the government. The three domains of applied psychology are described below. Some information about scientific research as a sphere of psychological activity is also provided.

**SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY** School psychology is the oldest and perhaps best known form of the profession in Belgium. Almost everyone under the age of 45 has come in personal contact with it in the one way or another. School psychology gradually developed from vocational guidance, which was introduced immediately after the First World War to help 14-year-old school-leavers find employment and additional training in industry. After the Second World War, as soon as the state of the economy permitted secondary education for every youngster, and after compulsory education was extended, this work increasingly became educational guidance. Around 1960, a new infrastructure was created in which the Psycho-Medical-Social Centers occupy a central position. Here the psychological, medical, and social disciplines work together as a team to provide every child constant guidance from the beginning of preschool kindergarten (at the age of two and a half years old) to

the end of secondary education (officially at 18 years old). Within the discipline of psychology, the original emphasis on guidance has been broadened to all relevant aspects of school psychology: academically trained psychologists and technically trained assistants in psychology work together with nurses, welfare workers, and school doctors. These teams provide for prevention, relief, and first-level therapy of learning difficulties and developmental disorders. Vocational counseling is also given. For many years, the expansion of these centers was frozen for budgetary reasons, but the restrictions on staff recruitment have recently been removed.

**INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY** Around 1800, the first "modern" industrial area on the European continent came into being in the French-speaking part of Belgium, with the exploitation of iron ore and pit coal. The industrialization of Flanders came about much later, which is why industrial psychology started earlier in the Walloon provinces. At present, this psychological activity is equally well developed in both parts of the country, within industry itself as well as in independent centers. The latter take care of recruitment, selection, out-placement, and training and also provide managerial consulting. Recent technological innovations in information processing and automation have created a demand for experts in occupational resettlement and in-service training. Psychologists, more explicitly than in the past, are becoming involved in human resources management, as this, following the Japanese model, has come to the fore as a means of raising the motivation and commitment of workers. The marketing sector is also relatively well established. Many young industrial psychologists start their career in this field.

**CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY** The introduction of clinical psychology within the second cycle of the university programs in about 1965 responded to a real need in Belgian society. Until the beginning of 1982, alumni with a major in clinical psychology could easily find work in therapeutic services all over the country. Under government sponsorship, psychiatric centers, mental health services, rehabilitation centers, family therapy centers and, last but not least, psychiatric wards in general hospitals were established. At present, it is difficult for young clinical psychologists to find employment in this sector: The small number of positions that become vacant are occupied immediately by clinical psychologists who have been holding temporary and part-time jobs or who have specialized in psychotherapy in postgraduate university programs. In the near future, however, new career opportunities will open up because government plans now require clinical psychologists on basic health teams. The ex-psychiatric patient living in small-scale residences must also be served. In hospital wards for physical illnesses, the clinical psychologist can provide counseling during illness, can contribute to the improvement of the

patient's quality of life, and can assist in the treatment of functional complaints. In geriatric and psycho-geriatric hospitals, the clinical psychologist has to perform typical tasks in assessment, counseling, therapy, and management. Collaboration with the family doctor has to be intensified in the care of patients with psychosocial problems and psychophysiological complaints. Clinical and health psychologists have to be involved in specialized rehabilitation centers for sufferers of coronary and vascular diseases and patients in traumatological and orthopedic wards. Both have a role to play in the development of health-promoting campaigns on smoking, alcohol abuse, drugs, eating habits, stress management, etc. The necessary and sufficient condition for promoting these clinical psychological activities in Belgium would imply either the repayment of the costs of the client by the national health insurance system or the subsidizing of such centers by that system. Here again, economic forces are determining the development of the psychological profession.

**RESEARCH** Research is a relatively small sphere of psychological activity and is situated mostly within the universities. Where funding has to be managed by the universities themselves, research opportunities are directly related to enrollment numbers and the student-staff ratio. The latter is small for the human sciences, which include psychology: For every 14 students only one staff member (academic and scientific) is financed. In natural science faculties this ratio is more favorable, and in the faculties of medicine and its associated disciplines (such as physical education), this ratio is much more advantageous. This is why the future PE teacher in this country is better "supported" during his university training than the would-be psychologist. Given that the average member of the academic staff has a high teaching load, research in universities is executed mainly by members of the temporary scientific staff during the preparation of their doctorates under the supervision of a lecturer or professor. Successful completion of the PhD does not automatically imply an appointment in the university, however; gradually more and more doctors in psychology are having to find work outside the universities.

Although placement opportunities for licentiates with a major in scientific research are few, their prospects for finding an appropriate job are not unfavorable. The fact that they are methodologically better trained than their colleagues gives them an advantage when they apply for functions that require such training. Sometimes, too, they can easily find employment in other than specifically psychological areas.

### *Organizations of Psychologists*

Only a few of the many organizations of psychologists in this country are really Belgian both in name and in bilingual functioning. The two most



important "Belgian" associations are the Belgian Psychological Society (Belgische Vereniging voor Psychologie/Société Belge de Psychologie; BVP/SBP) and the Belgian Federation of Psychologists (Fédération Belge des Psychologues/Belgische Federatie van Psychologen; FBP/BFP). Both maintain the usual international relations. Most other organizations are active in only one of the two linguistic communities and almost all of them—including the Belgian Society—are grouped together in the Federation. The latter has taken on the responsibility for the promotion of the interests of all psychologists with respect to the Belgian government.

**BVP/SBP** The Belgian Psychological Society was founded in 1947. Its objectives are threefold: to promote scientific contacts among university-trained psychologists in Belgium, to coordinate their activities, and to promote their professional interests. At present the Society has about 400 members and is a member society of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS). The Belgians Albert Michotte van den Berck and Jozef R. Nuttin served this Union as Presidents; Géry van Ostrive d'Ydewalle is presently the Union's Deputy Secretary-General. The Society, then chaired by Jean Paulus, organized the 15th International Congress of Psychology in 1957 and it is now preparing, also in Brussels, the 25th International Congress for 1992.

In the 1960s, the Society tried, in line with its third objective and in cooperation with associations of psychological practitioners, to define an ethical code of conduct for psychologists and to take measures to obtain the legal status for the psychological profession. It did not succeed. In 1975, the Society concluded that a more appropriate organizational infrastructure had to be composed in collaboration with other Belgian associations of psychologists. Four years later the "Belgian Federation" was founded (see below).

The Society decided, in line with its first and second objectives, to concentrate on such tasks as the scientific organization of Belgian psychology. It founded discipline-based working groups in the universities and still takes great pains in the publication of its scientific journal *Psychologica Belgica*. Four times a year, a bilingual *Information Bulletin* is issued. In April or May of each year, a one-day workshop is held during which members present and discuss their latest findings (psychology departments act as host in turn).

**FBP/BFP** The "Belgian Federation" was founded in 1979 and coordinates 15 associations of university-trained psychologists in both parts of the country. On the Dutch-speaking side, the three major spheres of psychological activities as described above are represented by as many Flemish organizations: the VOCAP (Vlaamse Vereniging voor Organisatie-, Consumenten- en Arbeidspsychologen) for organizational, consumer, and industrial psychologists, the VVKP (Vlaamse Vereniging voor Klinische Psychologen) for clinical psy-

chologists, and the VWPP (Vlaamse Wetenschappelijke Vereniging voor Psychologen van PMS-Centra) for school psychologists. The French-speaking side has many relatively small associations, most of them for clinical psychologists and each reflecting a specific therapeutic orientation. An association of industrial psychologists is being formed. The Belgian Federation is a member of the European Federation of Professional Psychologists' Associations (EFPPA).

The Belgian Federation has set itself the goal of uniting Belgian licentiates and doctors in psychology in a well-structured professional community. It wishes to promote and (when and where necessary) to defend the professional, socioeconomic, and moral interests of Belgian psychologists, representing them to governmental officials and in the media on the local, European, and world levels. Between its members and colleagues from abroad, the FBP/BFP wants to stimulate a spirit of collegiality, to promote professional contacts and the exchange of information, to develop an adequate ethical code, and to promote the growth and application of psychology as a science.

The Federation's board of directors is composed of representatives of the associations and elected members for each of the four spheres in which psychologists are active. The executive committee, assisted by a permanent secretariat, coordinates the activities. The Federation has four permanent committees and ad hoc task forces. Four times a year, two *Bulletins*—Dutch and French, each having its own editorial board—are published. When information must be given quickly to the members, the Executive Committee uses *News Flashes*. At present, the associations of the Federation have about 1200 members, a relatively small number, considering there are some 5000 "licentiates" active in the profession.

In the past decade, the Federation has devoted considerable effort to achieving its first objective, the legal protection of the title of psychologist in the interest of potential clients—an issue that owes its significance not least to the forthcoming political unification of Europe. One of the major problems to be solved is that of "acquired rights," a central concept in Belgian social law. People who, according to their personal view, have the right to call themselves psychologists—as some educationalists and assistants in psychology do—claim the right to continue to do so, even though they are not psychologists in the way psychologists themselves, being university-trained "licentiates," want to see their own competence defined. Therefore, many compromises have to be worked out in parallel with the preparation of legislation in parliament. As the history of other European countries teaches, the realization of such an initiative can take a decade or more. Other matters have the undivided attention of the Federation, such as the definition of the task of clinical psychologists in dialog with the national Ministry of Public Health

and the work of the industrial psychologist in employment agencies in discussion with the Flemish Ministry of Labor. Such tasks turn out to be extremely difficult as long as the title of psychologist is not adequately protected. Another difficult circumstance is that the Federation is still too small to be able to afford a full-time professional manager to carry out its tasks. It seems to be caught in a vicious circle.

## 1992: THE TURNING POINT?

In 1992, many European countries will commemorate a century of scientific research in psychology. Belgium will do the same. This was one of the arguments used by the Belgian Psychological Society in 1984 when it applied for the honor of organizing the 25th International Congress of Psychology of 1992 in Brussels. Other arguments were based on the scientific and social development of psychology in this country. A better insight into the essence of psychology as a science may stimulate more appropriate funding of psychological faculties within the Belgian university system. For the further development of psychology in Belgium, it is essential that its real psychologists receive the right to exclusive use of their title, which may help them to create the place they deserve in a better-developed national health service.

To the degree that the 25th International Congress of Psychology promotes these domestic objectives, the year 1992 will, indeed, be remembered as a historical turning point in the development of "Psychology in Belgium."

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