

This special issue on Mental Health of the Journal of the School of Medicine, represents a significant contribution to the advance of public mental health research and training in Latin America. The editors (as well as the authors) deserve much credit for having conceived and implemented the joint publication of these papers. In this brief introduction, I draw attention to four ways in which their effort is likely to accelerate progress in this field.

First, this Revista is an important step toward building a regional self-sustaining network for public mental health research in Latin America. Led by Dr. Ruth Fernandez in Cordoba, Argentina, the editors have succeeded in pulling together articles by authors from major urban areas spread across an entire region of Latin America. The authors are located primarily in nine urban areas that cross five countries in Latin America: Argentina (Cordoba and Neuquen); Brazil (Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro); Chile (Iquique, Santiago, and Valparaiso); Colombia (Medellin); and Peru (Lima). By bringing these authors together, the editors are catalyzing the growth of public mental health networks that are led from within Latin America and that cross national boundaries. As they solidify and expand, these networks could include more urban areas, rural areas, other countries in Latin America, Central America, and possibly the English-speaking Caribbean. This kind of effort is not unprecedented for public mental health research in Latin America, but in combination with the other three points discussed below, it is rare, if not unique, in the present time.

Second, and equally important, the ample participation of trainees and early investigators in these papers is catalyzing the formation of nascent networks comprising the next generation of public mental health leaders in the region. By their participation in this and other joint efforts, trainees learn more about what trainees are doing in other countries, and often find ways to meet each other. Imbued with the concept of a regional network, they are already extending their nascent networks well beyond the locales included in these papers. A further advantage of the extensive participation of trainees is that it directly enhances their training, and hence their capacity to be leaders in the future. The authors of the papers cover the full range from world renowned investigators to trainees. Trainees are usually co-authors, but sometimes are lead authors. The experience of writing papers together is one of the best ways to ensure that trainees have meaningful exchange with leaders in the field in the course of their development. It also improves their ability to conceptualize questions important to public mental health, devise study designs to answer such questions, collect and analyze data, make legitimate inferences from results, and/or present a study and its results clearly and succinctly.

Third, the substantive content of the papers both reflects and furthers the progress of public mental health research in the region. For example, some papers discuss topics at the cutting edge of current research in mental health and/or global mental health (e.g. Menezes et al); others discuss promis-

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ing approaches to interventions that are not yet well recognized in Latin American countries and need to gain more attention for their further development (e.g. Schilling et al); others report epidemiologic data that are significant for the allocation of resources and effort (e.g. Restrepo and Montoya); and others are innovative in different ways. Also notable, a common theme in many of the papers is a focus on sociocultural research in the mental health field. This offers a welcome contrast to the diminishing emphasis on such research in many high-income countries. In the United States, for example, the neural circuits underlying mental disorders are being intensively investigated, as (in my view) they should be; but sociocultural research is (in my view) not being given enough attention. Developing countries in Latin America and other regions often follow the patterns of health care and research that have emerged in the United States and other high-income countries, when these practices may not be appropriate for those regions, or even for the high-income countries themselves. The formulation of questions about the relation of sociocultural experiences to mental health has a rich history in Latin America, and there is much prior work to build upon (little known outside Latin America). If these questions remain at the forefront in Latin America, we may find that in 10-20 years, the United States and other high-income countries will have a lot to learn from the advances made in sociocultural research in Latin America.

Fourth, the use of three languages – Spanish, Portuguese, and English -- in this Revista signals the advent of a new era, also evident in a few (but not most) other journals in Latin America. Multilingual journals are important for the communication of findings within Latin America, where two languages are predominant, as well as for communication with the large part of the globe in which English language publications are predominant. It is not easy to publish in three languages; translation adds a significant burden, and is often imperfect when resources are limited. But it is crucial to move in the multilingual direction, in order to build networks that encompass both Brazil and the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and Central America, and to bring to worldwide recognition the scope of work being done there. Ideally, multilingual journals would also facilitate the inclusion of the English-speaking Caribbean countries.

Finally, it should be noted that the development of networks led by regional investigators was encouraged by an innovative program at the National Institute of Mental Health to fund “regional Hubs”. The two Hubs in Latin America facilitated the crossing of national boundaries to produce this important volume. Most of the papers, however, represent work done mainly with local funding, some of it initiated before the Hubs.