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MERCEDES RODRIGO (1891 - 1982)¹

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Mercedes Rodrigo Bellido was born in Madrid on May 12, 1891 and died in San Juan, Puerto Rico on September 18, 1982. Her long and fruitful life covers three well-defined periods and takes place in three countries: Spain, Colombia and Puerto Rico). She has been considered as the first Spanish woman who studied psychology, in other words, as the first female Spanish psychologist. .

Spain (1891 - 1939)

Mercedes Rodrigo grew up in an era when there were no professional psychology studies in Spain. She moved to Geneva (Switzerland) to the J.J. Rousseau Institute, where she studied with Claparède and Bouvet, among others. Mercedes was a fellow student of Jean Piaget. The influence of Eduardo Claparède (1873-1940) is especially important in the work of Mercedes Rodrigo. He founded the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP) in 1920, and was one of the leaders at the world level in matters related with the applications of psychology.

Mercedes received her degree (diploma) in Psychology from the University of Geneva in 1923, under the direction of Claparède. Upon her return to Spain, she worked in the National School of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind of Madrid. From 1927 to 1936 she was assistant to the director of the National Institute of Psychotechnics

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of Madrid. From 1931 to 1939 she worked as a psychologist at the Juvenile Court Clinic, and from 1936 to 1937 in the Delinquent's Home of the same city. In 1936 she was appointed director of the National Institute of Psychotechnics, a position she occupied until 1939.

The previous director of the National Institute of Psychotechnics was José Germain (1879-1986) considered as the "father" of Spanish psychology in its modern sense. Mercedes became his closest collaborator. The work that was undertaken in this Institute was basically applied psychology and professional orientation (selection of lathe operators, drivers, etc.). Mercedes participated very actively in the research that was done at the Institute. Because of Germain's great interest in experimental psychology and its applications, he can be considered as one of the first figures in what now is called "applied experimental psychology", which has given rise to "human engineering" or "human factor engineering". Although the work at the Institute was basically psychometric (tests and their evaluation), laboratory apparatus were also used with orientation and selection purposes.

Colombia (1939-1950)

The Spanish Civil War put an end to the development of psychology in Spain. The same happened with the development of many other disciplines. Important scientists left the country and took off to foreign lands looking for better horizons. Among the psychologists that emigrated stands out Emilio Mira y López (1896-1964), who ended his days in Brazil.

Mercedes Rodrigo left for Switzerland with her sister Maria, a distinguished composer and pianist, and with José María García Madrid, one of the main collaborators in the Institute. Mercedes Rodrigo was invited to go to Colombia by Agustín Nieto Caballero (1889-1975), rector of the National University of Colombia

from 1938 to 1941 and founder of the Gimnasio Moderno. The invitation was so that Mercedes Rodrigo could organize the “Sección de Psicotecnia” (psychotechnics services) in order to select the students that were going to enter into the National University. Never before had entrance exams been made in this country, or perhaps in other Latin-American nations.

In August 1939 Mercedes Rodrigo, her sister Maria and José García Madrid arrived in Bogota. The rector Agustín Nieto Caballero was their protector and guide during this period.

At the National University of Colombia, Mercedes came into contact with Alfonso Esguerra Gómez (1897-1967), a physiology professor in the Faculty of Medicine and a fervent admirer of psychology. Mercedes founded the Section of Psychotechnics, whose functions were basically psychological measurement and evaluation. There was an intimate relationship between the Physiology Laboratory and the Psychotechnics Section, both being part of the Faculty of Medicine at the National University of Colombia.

There were many people who collaborated with Mercedes Rodrigo in the founding of the professional career of Psychology in Colombia on the 20th of November, 1947. One of the men most interested in seeing this happen was Luis Lopez de Mesa (1884-1967), who had studied medicine and had specialized in psychiatry at Harvard. In 1920 López de Mesa is credited with the first psychological test elaborated by a Colombian author. He was rector of the National University, Minister of Education, secretary of state, philosopher, sociologist, and a prolific writer. His contribution to the birth of psychology in Colombia is extremely important.

The work carried out by the Psychotechnics Section has been detailed in our book entitled *Psychology in Colombia, Historical Development* (1973) and we refer the interested reader to that publication. The Applied Psychology Institute, planned and organized by Mercedes Rodrigo, where the first psychologists of South America were formed, has many departments: The Child and Adolescent Department, University Department, Research Department, Psycho-medical Department, and the Teaching Department.

Another very distinguished figure in the first stage of Psychology in Colombia was José María García Madrid, who surely was the person who was the closest to Mercedes all her life, after her sister Maria. He studied medicine at the National University of Colombia, became a psychologist and physician, and collaborated very actively with the Section of Psychotechnics from 1939 and the Applied Psychology Institute from 1948.

Due to the social-political problems of the country, which had their most serious manifestation on the 9th of April, 1948 (the "*Bogotazo*"), violence became widespread, a fact which has been very well-documented by historians, sociologists and "violentologists". Life in Colombia was made very difficult, and at the National University of Colombia these problems were felt with great intensity.

During the 11 years that she spent in Colombia, Mercedes Rodrigo carried out her principal professional and scientific work. She participated actively in international congresses, among them the Latin-American Psychology Congress organized in Montevideo in 1950 by Waclaw Radecki (1887-1953). She was in Paris, Geneva, Washington and Moscow. She made several publications, among them *Introduction to the Study of Psychology* (1949). At a certain moment a "Jesuit" newspaper accused her of being communist for having visited the USSR. It was also added to this that she was a foreigner, having arrived to Colombia fleeing from the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. The republicans were "communists" obviously ... in addition, it was mistakenly affirmed that the tests that

Mercedes Rodrigo and her collaborators applied to the candidate students to enter the National University had many political implications. The selection, the entrance exams, favored "without any doubt" the communist candidates. This was completely false, but this started a campaign in the Colombian newspapers against Spanish immigrants, against the utilization of psychology to select students to enter into the National University of Colombia and against Mercedes Rodrigo.

This matter got serious. Life was made impossible for Mercedes, for García Madrid and for the students of Psychology and Medicine that collaborated with the Institute of Applied Psychology.

Puerto Rico (1950 - 1982)

García Madrid arrived to Puerto Rico and soon organized the way to bring Mercedes Rodrigo and her sister Maria to that country. Mercedes worked first at the University of Puerto Rico as a professor of education, (There was not any psychology training program at that moment.) and as a consulting psychologist. Then she worked at the Veterans Administration. In 1955 she became a clinical psychologist at the Julia Clinic. She retired in 1972.

Her sister Maria Rodrigo had great musical success in Puerto Rico, and carried out important work as a musician. She and Pablo Casals founded the Puerto Rico Conservatory. Maria died in 1967.

In this third stage of her life, Mercedes Rodrigo dedicated herself mainly to clinical psychology. She worked in group and individual therapy. She continued her psychometric research and her work in applied psychology.

After the death of her sister Maria, Mercedes moved to the home of Jose García Madrid (in 1968). She shared it with his wife (Maria Teresa) and their three children in the period from 1968 to 1982. A great part of this time Mercedes spent

as a semi-invalid, looked after with great care by María Teresa de García Madrid, and enjoying the warmth of a home that she had never had. Mercedes Rodrigo never married nor had children. Her life was dedicated to the scientific discipline that she had chosen as her central activity.

In Puerto Rico she received several professional acknowledgements, for example having been elected president of the Psychological Association of Puerto Rico in 1957. Puerto Rico at that time was much different from what it is today. It was without a doubt a country of the third world, much more than Colombia or the other South American nations.

Mercedes died on the 18th of September, 1982. She was buried in the Santa Magdalena of Pazzis Cemetery in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Contribution

Boring stated that historical events which had taken place just a short while ago- less than 25 years- could not be adequately evaluated. If one is too close to the fact at a personal or chronological level, one is not capable of seeing it in either perspective or to placing it into context. According to him, it would be necessary to write history only about those things that are sufficiently far from us as to be able to observe them in perspective. Mercedes Rodrigo arrived to Colombia when she was 49 years old. She was a distinguished professional whose career was associated with the names of Claparède and Germain. She had been a classmate of Jean Piaget. Her work in Spain had received the social recognition that it deserved. The National Institute of Psychotechnics was the center of Spanish psychology at the time, and there Mercedes Rodrigo had accomplished her main scientific and professional work.

The Spanish Civil War was, above all, a conflict of ideologies, and did much to change the psychology of the time. Something similar happened with the Second World War. In September 1936 there was going to take place the XI International Psychology Congress, organized by Emilio Mira, José Germain, Mercedes Rodrigo and the other leaders of the Spanish psychology at that time. It did not come about because of the Civil War, but later the congress was held in Paris.

Professor Ulfried Geüter (from Berlín) has studied the events that occurred in Europe at this time, and which led important psychologists such as Mercedes Rodrigo, Radecki, Mira y López, Székely and others to emigrate to South America. The psychologists interested in the great theoretical and methodological problems of psychology emigrated to the United States; most of them were Germans (Wertheimer, Köhler, Lewin) and they changed the historical direction of the discipline in that country. Those interested in applied psychology emigrated to Latin America.

Mercedes Rodrigo arrived in Colombia, organized the Section of Psychotechnics (1939) and then the Institute of Applied Psychology (1947). All her energy and knowledge were put to the service of the country. She lived in Colombia from age 49 to age 60. Her most important contribution was to have founded the first psychology training program in South America. The 20th of November has been declared Psychologist's Day in Colombia due to the fact that on this date the program was created (1947), although the first students did not begin classes until the 9th of July, 1948. Before there had been isolated courses, of updating, for other professionals –mainly physicians- but not a structured curriculum or a major in psychology in the formal sense..The University of Chile was also in the process of starting a psychology training program in Santiago at that time.

The first stage of the life of Mercedes Rodrigo -the period in Spain - was of formation, of research and of scientific work. It was centered in psychotechnics, which today we prefer to call applied psychology. The period in Colombia was the continuation of the previous one, but with much more organizational and administrative emphasis. We can assert that Colombian psychology between 1939 and 1950 was mainly Mercedes Rodrigo and her group of collaborators: José García Madrid, Julia Roncancio, Álvaro Villar Gaviria, Hernán Mendoza Hoyos, Cecilia de Brigard, Alfonso Esguerra Gómez, and Alfonso Martínez Rueda.

It is a fact that Mercedes, María and García Madrid never thought of leaving Colombia. Their adopted country was going to be their definitive homeland. But such a violent country, with so many political ups and downs was not easy to understand for foreigners. The Colombia of April 9th, 1948 seemed too similar to the Spain of the Civil War, and therefore was not an adequate site for these Spanish immigrants to stay and live their lives. In addition, the political criticisms against the tests, psychometrics, assessment and personnel selection became too great. The Spanish people in charge of these matters were "republicans and communists" and had to leave Colombia.

In Puerto Rico the situation was different. Mercedes became part of the Universidad -at 60 years old- and was able of initiating a new life. To get settled in a third country -as complex and contradictory as Spain and Colombia had been, - was not easy.

Puerto Rico at that time was not a "Free and Associated State" of the United States, as it was that two years later. Luis Muñoz Marín was at the highest point of his political activity, which was to culminate with the creation of the new status for the island.

Life in Puerto Rico was positive for Mercedes and she worked there between 1950 and 1972. The psychological community recognized her contributions, although we can affirm that the most important work of Mercedes Rodrigo's life was attained in Colombia, not in Puerto Rico or in Spain. This last stage, dedicated to clinical psychology, gave her much personal satisfaction.

The last years, as a semi-invalid, were years of reflection, to take stock of her long life, which included many important events in the history of Spain, in the history of Latin America and in the history of psychology. I met Mercedes Rodrigo in Puerto Rico in 1978, a few years before her death. It was important to have made personal contact with her, with the first person who had worked in professional psychology in my country. Before Mercedes, psychology was a discipline studied almost exclusively by physicians, in doctoral theses, and by the theologians in their philosophical speculations. The educators knew that it was important to use psychological concepts in their work, but they did not pretend to be psychologists. Mercedes insisted that psychology has its own field of work different from the field of medicine, philosophy, and education. It was a science and a profession with its own status and with great potential to improve human beings and their society. This was the science and profession of the future.

In that sense we are able to say that all Colombian psychologists, of yesterday, today and tomorrow, are the spiritual children of Mercedes Rodrigo Bellido.

Additional information about the life and work of Mercedes Rodrigo can be found in:

Herrero, F. (2003). *Mercedes Rodrigo (1891 – 1982): Una pionera de la psicología en España y en Colombia*. Madrid: Universidad Complutense (Doctoral Thesis).

Herrero, F. (2003) Mercedes Rodrigo (1891 – 1982), La primera psicóloga española. *Revista de Psicología General y Aplicada*, 56 (2), 139-148.