

MICHAŁ HARCIAREK

University of Gdańsk

Institute of Psychology

POLISH PSYCHOLOGISTS ARE NOT GEESE AND HAVE A TONGUE OF THEIR OWN

Jerzy Brzeziński's article "On What Is Important When We Think of Psychology in Poland," opening this issue of *Annals of Psychology*, has served as background for the discussion on the potential idiosyncrasy of research conducted by psychologists in Poland as well as on the issue of publishing their scientific works in Polish. I agree with the Author that psychological research, in contrast to psychological practice, has a global character. Thus, speaking about any Polish specificity in this regard seems meaningless, especially when it comes to broadly considered neuroscience. I also agree with the opinion expressed by Jerzy Brzeziński that, in addition to publishing our research results in English, we should additionally write books and scientific articles in Polish. Nonetheless, I believe such works should rather have the status of academic textbooks or review articles, predominantly written by experienced researchers, not by graduate or Ph.D. students.

Keywords: psychology in Poland, publishing in Polish, neuroscience.

In his article "On What Is Important When We Think of Psychology in Poland" Professor Jerzy Brzeziński asks four questions that other Polish psychologists involved in scientific research certainly ask themselves as well. These questions are as follows: (1) *Does it make sense to speak of any specificity of research carried out by psychologists in Poland?* (2) *Should psychologists publish (also) in their native language and should they publish their work also in Poland?* (3) *What indices are used (or should be used) to determine a psychologist's position in world science?* and (4) *What conclusions should we draw from the scientific pathologies that have come to light and what should our reaction to those pathologies be?* The Author also gives answers to each of these questions, and it is difficult to disagree or even argue with his answers. As a result, writing a commentary on the text published in the current issue of *Annals of Psychology*

resembles seeking a gap where the hedge is whole – although, as the saying has it, “Where there are two Poles there are three opinions” – even in the case of not very controversial matters.

I shall nevertheless try to address the issues discussed by Professor Jerzy Brzeziński from the perspective of broadly understood neuroscience, mainly clinical neuropsychology, which has been my field of research for over ten years now. Due to the limitations of space and to the fact that my opinions concerning the indices that should be used for assessing a psychologist’s position in the world of science as well as my opinions concerning scientific pathologies do not differ from the Author’s views, I will focus on the first two questions only.

Does it, then, make sense to speak of the specificity of scientific research conducted by psychologists in Poland? I fully agree with Jerzy Brzeziński’s opinion that speaking of this kind of specificity does not make much sense, unless the researcher deals with analyzing culturally determined phenomena or with linguistic issues. Relating this question directly to neurosciences, one can hardly expect that the brains of Poles differ in structure or function in any particular way from the brains of, say, Americans or Koreans. Of course it can be assumed that some brain structures differ in size between the citizens of Poland and, for example, those of Papua New Guinea (see Beck & Gajdusek, 1966). Any possible differences in this respect seem not to be significant enough to suggest any kind of national specificity in the development and functioning of the nervous system, though (cf. Koch, Schuz, & Kariks, 1985). If differences do occur, they mainly result from the diet followed by people in a given part of the world, from their alcohol consumption frequency, or from an occupation particularly common in a given country or region and involving specific cognitive skills (see e.g., Maguire et al., 2000). When conducting research or neuropsychological assessment (e.g., assessment for dementia), one must definitely bear those sociocultural factors in mind, particularly at the individual plane. It may happen that, even though an individual from a different country has obtained results that fall within the normal range, this effect is due to so-called cognitive reserve or brain reserve (Stern, 2009), determined (to some degree at least) by culture, for example by the high quality of education and the style of life in a given country. The opposite situation may also sometimes be encountered (in which a disorder is diagnosed when in fact the patient is healthy but fails to perform certain tasks correctly for linguistic and cultural reasons). However, in the context of the question posed by Professor Jerzy Brzeziński, these are problems of a slightly different kind, showing, first of all, the general principle of brain plasticity and the significance of environmental factors in brain development (rather than, e.g., cross-national

quantitative differences in the structure of the brain or the principles of its functioning). In other words, the theories of the functioning of the nervous system as well as the assessment criteria for each neurological or mental disease developed on the basis of research conducted in Poland should apply in equal measure to American society and Americans should have no problems with replicating the results obtained in Poland. The above directly and obviously implies the necessity of disseminating the results of one's own research not only in the local community but also on the international arena. Also from the viewpoint of the ethical principles of the profession of psychologist, disseminating research results in other countries may be regarded as our duty, especially if these results concern the (in)effectiveness of a particular form of psychological assistance.

Before I address the second question posed by Professor Jerzy Brzeziński, let me make one more remark. It is true that, despite the international character of psychology, the titles of some periodicals point to what can be called "localness" – for instance *British Journal of...* or *American Journal of...* However, this does not mean that the papers published in those journals are submitted exclusively by "local" representatives of the scientific world. Quite the contrary: those journals (most of which are on the JCR list) accept articles submitted from all over the world. In this sense, their "localness" is meant to emphasize the place where a given journal was established, not to the kind of content presented therein. By the way, personally, I have always wondered whether it makes sense to engage in efforts of this kind, resembling the "Teraz Polska" ("Time for Poland") promotional contests. Would it not be better simply to focus on conducting scientific research reliably and maintaining high standards rather than on highlighting the magnitude and uniqueness of our Nation? Naturally, everyone feels proud to see our team winning a gold medal in one sports discipline or another and to hear the Polish national anthem, "Dąbrowski's Mazurka," played at the stadium afterwards. Still, unlike in sports competitions, in the case of (neuro)science we are all trying, regardless of nationality, to answer the same questions, which is possible only through mutual and international cooperation, not through a bragging match about the national contribution to knowledge on brain-behavior relations.

Answering the second question posed in his article, concerning the publication of scientific works also in the native language, Professor Jerzy Brzeziński expresses the view that it is important to publish both in Polish and in English. One can hardly disagree with this statement, though what kind of works should be published in Polish and who should publish them is a matter open to discussion. I also agree that one of the main reasons that makes it necessary to publish

works also in Polish is the concern for our language, including the language of psychology. I am strongly opposed to borrowing numerous scientific (and other) terms from the English language when these terms have their equivalents in Polish. Examples include *fokusowanie uwagi* (attention focusing) or *metoda matchingu* (matching method), the latter already mentioned by Jerzy Brzeziński. Another problem (not only in the case of neurosciences, I believe) is the lack of uniform Polish terminology (translations), which frequently results in mistakes, such as *przedni zakręt obręczy* used instead of *przednia część zakrętu obręczy* to mean “anterior cingulate cortex.” I believe that publishing good works also in the Polish language will contribute to reducing linguistic errors and awkwardnesses of this kind (I am an optimist but I would not go so far as to assume that they can be eliminated altogether); after all, as poet Mikołaj Rej wrote, “Poles are not geese and have a tongue of their own.”

Still, I disagree with the suggestion that practicing psychologists (a vast majority of psychology graduates) cannot be expected to have a command of English comparable to that which researchers have. I believe that the vast number of English-language academic papers presenting the latest discoveries in a given field as well as the more and more frequent migrations of people who might need a psychologist’s help make it increasingly indispensable (also for psychology students and practicing psychologists) to be fluent in reading and performing assessment examinations in English. In my opinion, apart from excellent textbooks prepared in their mother tongue, psychology students in Poland should be able to use and learn from works published in English in a comfortable way.

The fact that we all should (or even have to) publish the results of our research in English is fairly obvious. To some extent, we are forced to do so by the Act of March 14, 2003, on Academic Degrees and Title, together with the Order of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of September 1, 2011, on the criteria for assessing the achievements of applicants for a doctoral or postdoctoral (habilitated doctor) degree. What is the most important, however, is that publishing works in international circulation allows to familiarize a wider audience with the results of one’s research, which often provides inspiration for other researchers and constitutes a contribution to an interesting and important scientific debate. Contrary to what some of us may think, psychologists from other countries are genuinely interested in the results of our research. Not trying to disseminate your scientific output in the international community is a little like writing for your own pleasure and arguing with yourself. History abounds in cases of great thinkers whose monographs written in their mother tongue or in another non-English language did not receive international acclaim until many years later

someone finally decided to cite them or have them translated. An example (perhaps a little disputable given the geopolitical situation in Europe at the time) may be the writings of eminent Polish philosopher and psychologist Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the Lvov-Warsaw School, which were noticed and won recognition in various parts of the world only thanks to his disciples and followers (see Lapointe, Woleński, Marion, & Miśkiewicz, 2009). Another example, this time from the field of neuroscience, may be the reports on so-called primary progressive aphasia, a disorder caused by a relatively slow neurodegeneration process affecting the region of Sylvian fissure in the left hemisphere of the brain. This disorder was first described (in German) towards the end of the 19th century, by Arnold Pick (1892). Similar descriptions of cases were published at the beginning of the 20th century (also in German) and then, in Japanese, in the first half of the 1940s (see Harciarek & Kertesz, 2009). Unfortunately, it was not until the early 1980s that, following Marcel Mesulam's English-language publication (Mesulam, 1982), the problem of primary progressive aphasia attracted the attention of the international scientific community. Perhaps our work aimed at designing a therapy supporting the functioning of people with this and other disorders would be in a much more advanced stage if pioneering reports of this kind were first published in English?

But who should publish works in Polish and what kind of works should they be? I might be in a minority on this issue, but I believe that works in Polish should be written primarily by scientists with well-established professional achievements (first of all by people with the title of professor), not by graduate or doctoral students. Moreover, these publications should have the status of academic textbooks or review articles, not necessarily strictly research-based studies. This, in my opinion, would contribute to popularizing good Polish research among psychology students and promote concern for the Polish language, including the language of psychology. At the same time, such practice would reduce the number of very mediocre and weak books and articles (so-called degree theses or "bookbinder's syntheses," discussed in Jerzy Brzeziński's article), which would not stand a chance of appearing in a renowned JCR-listed journal. Additionally, graduate and doctoral students (as well as, probably, researchers working to obtain postdoctoral degrees or to be granted the title of professor) would prepare their research from the very beginning with a view to publication in international journals, where the peer review system is usually very well organized.

Summing up, I do not think that in the case of research on brain-behavior relations we can speak of any kind of specificity of neuropsychology in Poland.

This is not meant to question the essence of sociocultural factors that may affect performance in some tasks; nor is this meant to question the whole infrastructure and financing of science (Poland is still far behind countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States in this respect). I also agree with the opinion expressed in Jerzy Brzeziński's article that, apart from publishing in English, Polish psychologists should also write papers and books in their native language, both for educational purposes and out of concern for language correctness. However, I believe that Polish-language publications should rather have the status of academic textbooks or review articles. Moreover, they should be prepared by psychologists with extensive scientific achievements, not by graduate or doctoral students; my recommendation for the latter two groups is that they submit the processed results of their research to journals of international renown and circulation – also for formal reasons connected with the rules of career advancement.

REFERENCES

- Beck, E., & Gajdusek, D. C. (1966). Variable size of the septal nuclei in man. *Nature*, *210*, 1338-1340.
- Harciarek, M., & Kertesz, A. (2011). Primary progressive aphasia and their contribution to the contemporary knowledge about the brain-language relationship. *Neuropsychology Review*, *21*, 271-287.
- Koch, F., Schuz, A., & Kariks J. (1985). Comparison of the septal areas in New Guinean and European brains. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, *67*, 259-267.
- Lapointe, S., Woleński, J., Marion M., & Miśkiewicz, W. (Eds.) (2009). The golden age of Polish philosophy: Kazimierz Twardowski's philosophical legacy. New York: Springer.
- Maguire, E. A., Gadian, D. G., Johnsrude, I. S., Good, C. D., Ashburner, J., Frackowiak, R. S., & Frith, C. D. (2000). Navigation-related structural change in the hippocampi of taxi drivers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, *97*, 4398-4403.
- Mesulam, M. M. (1982). Slowly progressive aphasia without generalized dementia. *Annals of Neurology*, *11*, 592-598.
- Pick, A. (1892). Über die Beziehung der senilen Hirnatrophie zur Aphasie. *Pragischer Medizinischer Wochenschrift*, *17*, 165-167.
- Stern, Y. (2009). Cognitive reserve. *Neuropsychologia*, *47*, 2015-2028.