

Making the boundary: neurology, psychiatry, and legal medicine in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1881-1912

Construindo a fronteira: neurologia, psiquiatria e medicina legal no Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 1881-1912

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ABSTRACT

Background: The early institutional histories of neurology and psychiatry in Rio de Janeiro developed in overlapping academic, editorial, and professional settings, making present-day disciplinary boundaries an unreliable guide to that period.

Objective: To examine how teaching structures, scientific publishing, professional societies, and psychiatric classification contributed to disciplinary boundary-making in Rio de Janeiro between 1881 and 1912.

Methods: Critical historical synthesis of the published historiography and of the primary sources cited here, centered on the reorganization of 1881-1883, the journal founded in 1905, the society founded in 1907, and the separate Neurology chair of 1912.

Results: Historical accounts describe a first Chair in Clinical Psychiatry in Brazil in 1881; the imperial budget law of 30 October 1882 (Law No. 3,141) created new chairs in the medical faculties, to be filled by public competition, and the historiography links this reorganization to teaching on mental diseases. João Carlos Teixeira Brandão took the corresponding chair after the 1883 competition, a chair joining Clinical Psychiatry and Diseases of the Nervous System. In 1905, Juliano Moreira and Júlio Afrânio Peixoto founded a journal joining psychiatry, neurology, and related sciences; a society adding legal medicine followed in 1907, and the journal took the same three-part name in 1908. The separate Neurology chair of 1912 marked institutional differentiation rather than abrupt intellectual rupture.

Conclusion: Neurological autonomy emerged through gradual, asynchronous changes in teaching, publication, and professional organization. Legal medicine formed a third institutional axis, complicating any simple binary account of a division between brain and mind.

Keywords: History of Medicine; Neurology; Psychiatry; Forensic Medicine; History, 19th Century; Brazil.

RESUMO

Fundamento: As histórias institucionais iniciais da neurologia e da psiquiatria no Rio de Janeiro desenvolveram-se em ambientes acadêmicos, editoriais e profissionais sobrepostos, tornando as fronteiras disciplinares atuais um guia inadequado para aquele período.

Objetivo: Examinar como estruturas de ensino, publicação científica, sociedades profissionais e classificação psiquiátrica contribuíram para a construção de fronteiras disciplinares no Rio de Janeiro entre 1881 e 1912.

Métodos: Síntese histórica crítica da historiografia publicada e das fontes primárias aqui citadas, centrada na reorganização de 1881-1883, no periódico de 1905, na sociedade de 1907 e na cátedra separada de Neurologia de 1912.

Resultados: Relatos históricos descrevem uma primeira cátedra de Clínica Psiquiátrica no Brasil em 1881; a lei orçamentária de 30 de outubro de 1882 (Lei nº 3.141) criou novas cátedras nas faculdades de medicina, providas por concurso, e a historiografia a associa ao ensino das moléstias mentais. Teixeira Brandão assumiu a cátedra correspondente após o concurso de 1883, cátedra que reunia Clínica Psiquiátrica e Moléstias do Sistema Nervoso. Em 1905, Juliano Moreira e Júlio Afrânio Peixoto fundaram um periódico que reunia psiquiatria, neurologia e ciências afins; em 1907 surgiu uma sociedade que acrescentava a medicina legal, e em 1908 o periódico adotou o mesmo nome tripartite. A cátedra separada de Neurologia, em 1912, marcou diferenciação institucional, e não ruptura abrupta.

Conclusão: A autonomia neurológica surgiu por mudanças graduais e assíncronas no ensino, na publicação e na organização profissional. A medicina legal constituiu um terceiro eixo, tornando inadequada uma narrativa binária da separação entre cérebro e mente.

Palavras-chave: História da Medicina; Neurologia; Psiquiatria; Medicina Legal; História do Século XIX; Brasil.

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Introduction

Neurology and psychiatry are institutionally distinct specialties today. When that distinction is projected backward, however, the separation can appear more natural and inevitable than it was to physicians working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Rio de Janeiro, mental and nervous diseases occupied overlapping academic, clinical, editorial, and professional settings before neurological teaching acquired a separate institutional base in 1912.^{1,2}

The historical problem is therefore not simply to identify the first neurologist or psychiatrist according to present-day criteria. A more precise question is how authority over disorders of mind, brain, nerves, and behavior was progressively redistributed among professional domains. The interval from 1881 to 1912 is especially informative because it includes the reorganization of psychiatric teaching in the early 1880s and ends with the establishment of a separate chair of Neurology in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁻³

This Historical Note uses boundary-making as a present-day analytical expression rather than a term attributed to the historical actors. It describes an institutional process and does not imply that a single homogeneous discipline called neuropsychiatry existed and later split in a single event.

Methods: sources and historiographical approach

This article is a critical historical synthesis rather than an exhaustive archival study. It draws on the published historiography and on the primary sources listed in the references, including studies that analyze legislation, institutional records, scientific periodicals, and professional debates.¹⁻⁹ The analysis is organized around a small number of verifiable milestones: the academic reorganization of 1881-1883, the creation and renaming of a specialized journal between 1905 and 1908, the foundation of the scientific society in 1907, and the establishment of a separate Neurology chair in 1912.

Artificial intelligence-assisted technology (OpenAI ChatGPT) was used during editorial revision to assist restructuring, language refinement, and adaptation to the journal format. It was not used as a source of historical evidence. The author verified every factual statement against the cited sources and is responsible for the final content.

1881-1883: an academic jurisdiction that still joined mind and nerves

The chronology of psychiatric and neurological teaching in Rio de Janeiro cannot be reduced to a single founding date. A historical review describes the first Chair in

Clinical Psychiatry in Brazil as created in 1881.¹ The imperial budget law of 30 October 1882 (Law No. 3,141) created new chairs and laboratories in the medical faculties of the Empire and determined that the new chairs be filled by public competition.⁴ The historiography reads this reorganization as the legal basis for academic teaching on mental diseases, although the same act is cited elsewhere as a decree rather than a law, a discrepancy that has not been resolved in the secondary literature.² In 1883, João Carlos Teixeira Brandão (Figure 1) won the public competition and was sworn in as the first Brazilian professor of Clinical Psychiatry; the chair he occupied joined Clinical Psychiatry and Diseases of the Nervous System.^{1,3}

Brandão's importance is not that he represented an undifferentiated precursor of two modern specialties. Mathias and Nardi emphasize his role in the professionalization of psychiatry and in defining the jurisdiction of the alienist as a specialist qualified to diagnose mental illness and delimit sanity and madness by scientific criteria.³ The institutional arrangement is nevertheless equally revealing: nervous and mental diseases remained connected within the same teaching environment.

This coexistence shows why specialization should not be equated with immediate organizational separation. A psychiatric professional identity could become more specific while nervous diseases still occupied the same teaching jurisdiction. Conversely, the presence of nervous disease within that arrangement should not be read as proof that modern neurology already existed there in fully formed institutional terms.

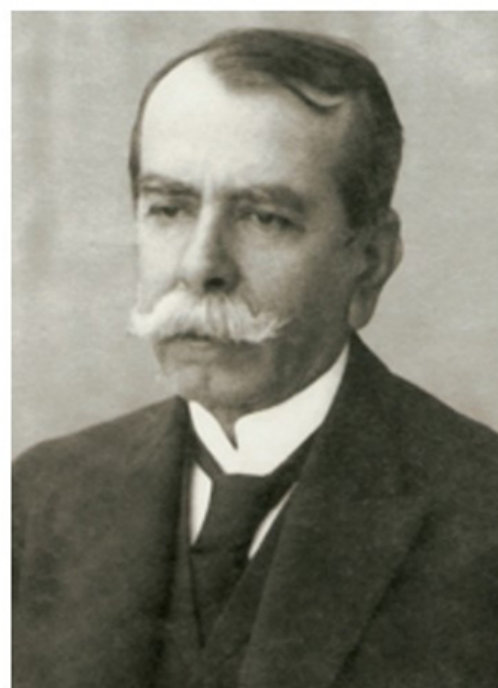


Figure 1. João Carlos Teixeira Brandão (1854-1921), who assumed the teaching position associated with Clinical Psychiatry after the 1883 public competition in Rio de Janeiro. Source and credit: Collection of the Academia Nacional de Medicina.

1905-1908: journals and societies as a shared scientific territory

Scientific publishing provides particularly clear evidence of continued proximity. In 1905, Juliano Moreira and Júlio Afrânio Peixoto (Figures 2 and 3) created the *Arquivos Brasileiros de Psiquiatria, Neurologia e Ciências Afins*. Facchinetti, Cupello, and Evangelista identify it as the first Brazilian periodical specialized in this combined field.⁵ Its title should not be overinterpreted as proof of a single discipline; it does, however, document an editorial project in which psychiatry, neurology, and related sciences shared a scientific venue.

The institutional constellation became more explicit in 1907, when the *Sociedade Brasileira de Neurologia, Psiquiatria e Medicina Legal* was founded in Rio de Janeiro.⁶ In 1908, the journal was renamed *Arquivos Brasileiros de Psiquiatria, Neurologia e Medicina Legal* and became the society's publication vehicle.^{5,6}

The inclusion of legal medicine is essential to the interpretation. The historical boundary under construction was not merely a line between mind and brain: medico-legal expertise, professional authority, and the social consequences of defining mental abnormality also connected psychiatric practice to legal medicine.⁶ The society therefore provides evidence of a three-way professional landscape in which specialization could proceed through coalitions as well as separations.



Figure 2. Juliano Moreira (1872-1933; some sources give 1873 as the year of birth), co-founder, with Júlio Afrânio Peixoto, of the *Arquivos Brasileiros de Psiquiatria, Neurologia e Ciências Afins* in 1905. Source and credit: Arquivo Nacional, BR_RJANRIO_PH_0_FOT_35126_004; public domain.

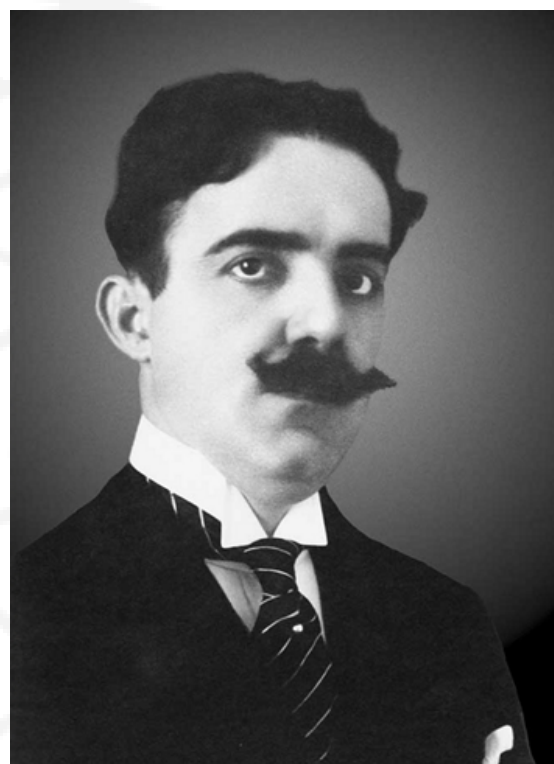


Figure 3. Júlio Afrânio Peixoto (1876-1947), co-founder, with Juliano Moreira, of the *Arquivos Brasileiros de Psiquiatria, Neurologia e Ciências Afins* in 1905. Source and credit: Collection of the Academia Nacional de Medicina.

Conceptual differentiation within shared institutions

Organizational overlap did not prevent psychiatry from developing increasingly specific conceptual commitments. Studies of Juliano Moreira and his circle document the appropriation and debate of Kraepelinian classification in Rio de Janeiro during the early twentieth century.⁷ The two founders' own engagement with that framework can be read directly in the first issue of the 1905 journal, where they discussed paranoia and the paranoid syndromes within Emil Wilhelm Georg Magnus Kraepelin's nosography.^{8,9} This is especially relevant because it shows that a distinct psychiatric classificatory program could sharpen while psychiatry and neurology still shared journals and professional societies.

This asymmetry is historically important. Conceptual differentiation, professional jurisdiction, and administrative separation did not occur at the same speed. A field could acquire a more distinctive diagnostic language before it acquired entirely separate institutions. The sequence examined here therefore resists both a narrative of two specialties that were autonomous from the outset and a narrative of a single unified discipline that fractured suddenly.

1912: neurological autonomy without an abrupt rupture

The formal separation of neurological teaching in Rio de Janeiro is conventionally dated to 1912, when a distinct chair of Neurology was created at the Faculty of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro and Antônio Austregésilo Rodrigues de Lima (Figure 4) became its first professor.^{1,2} This was a major institutional landmark in the history of neurology in Rio de Janeiro and provides a logical endpoint for the period examined here.



Figure 4. Antônio Austregésilo Rodrigues de Lima (1876-1960), photographed in 1926 during a medical congress at La Salpêtrière, Paris. Source and credit: Agence Rol, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie, El-13 (1335), Gallica, btv1b531643896. Public domain.

From the perspective of boundary-making, however, the significance of 1912 lies in the reorganization of academic jurisdiction after decades in which nervous and mental diseases had occupied overlapping structures. The new chair did not erase the journals, societies, professional networks, or conceptual problems that had linked the fields. Nor did it retrospectively transform every earlier physician concerned with nervous disease into a neurologist in the modern institutional sense.

Historical interpretation and conclusion

Three partially asynchronous movements can be distinguished between 1881 and 1912. First, academic structures placed mental and nervous diseases within closely connected teaching arrangements. Second, psychiatry developed stronger professional and nosological specificity while remaining institutionally close to neurology. Third, journals and societies preserved organizational

proximity among psychiatry, neurology, and legal medicine until neurological teaching acquired a separate chair.

This interpretation avoids two symmetrical anachronisms: treating present-day specialties as if their boundaries had always existed, and describing the earlier period as a stable, formally constituted neuropsychiatry. The evidence is better explained by changing professional jurisdictions. Academic chairs defined teaching authority; journals organized communities of publication; societies created networks and membership; classificatory systems defined legitimate objects of diagnosis. These mechanisms could change at different times and in different directions.

The analysis is necessarily limited. It is a selective synthesis of institutional milestones and published historiography, not a complete prosopography, archival reconstruction, or content analysis of all neurological and psychiatric publications of the period. Within those limits, the Rio de Janeiro case indicates that the institutional autonomy of neurological teaching developed gradually rather than arising from a single isolated founding event. The 1912 chair was a major institutional milestone whose historical meaning becomes clearer when placed against the shared academic, editorial, and professional territory that preceded it.

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