

AMERICAS NEWS

Its GDP Is Depressed, but Argentina Leads World in Shrinks Per Capita

Media Psychologist Gabriel Rolón Spreads Empathy Around This Anxious Nation

By MATT MOFFETT

Updated Oct. 19, 2009 12:01 a.m. ET

BUENOS AIRES -- When celebrity psychoanalyst Gabriel Rolón picked up the phone, the man on the line said he was holding a loaded gun and was ready to blow his brains out.



Gabriel Rolón

Mr. Rolón was recently recounting the incident, which took place several years ago, to a rapt audience of his fans here in Argentina, the nation with more psychologists per capita than any other. Mr. Rolón said he told the caller to come right by his office -- but added, "Please don't bring the revolver." When the caller laughed, Mr. Rolón says, he thought the man might be treatable. A few years later, Mr. Rolón says he looked on proudly as his once-suicidal patient received a professional degree. Mr. Rolón's audience roared approval.

Here in Freud-obsessed Argentina, the 47-year-old Mr. Rolón is the shrink hundreds of thousands of people count on to feel their pain -- even if many of his peers are less appreciative.

Mr. Rolón is a fixture on radio and once hosted a TV show, "*Terapia (Única Sesión)*," in which he conducted playful analytical sessions with celebrities reclining on his divan. His face, whiskered and bespectacled, stares down from billboards touting his speaking tours and best-selling books. About 30 people a day contact his Web site asking about a session. He refers most of them to other therapists, or to a psychiatrist, who can prescribe drugs. Sometimes, when he's

finished taping his radio program in the late evening or early morning, people are waiting for him at the studio door.

"It could be a patient who needs help," says the psychologist. "Or it could simply be [somebody] having a crazy morning."

Celebrity psychoanalyst Gabriel Rolón analyzes actress/model Luli Salazar on his Argentine reality show, "*Terapia, Unica Sesión*."

Mr. Rolón's rock-star status reflects Argentina's fascination with psychoanalysis. Argentina had 145 psychologists per 100,000 residents in a 2008 study by researchers Modesto Alonso and Paula Gago. That's far more than second-place Denmark, with 85, or ninth-place U.S. with 31, in a 2005 study by the World Health Organization.

Psychoanalysis is embedded in the geography of Buenos Aires, where many analysts are clustered in a neighborhood popularly known as Villa Freud.

Freudian thought colors political reporting. The newsweekly Noticias recently turned to a panel of 10 psychoanalysts to explain the behavior of ex-president Néstor Kirchner, who has been stealing the policymaking spotlight from his wife, Cristina, the current president.

One magazine query: What to make of Mrs. Kirchner's statement that her husband sleeps in the fetal position?

Meanwhile, on TV, a drama series called "*Tratame Bien*," ("Treat Me Well"), focuses on the travails of José and Sofia, a husband and wife, each of whom has an analyst. Facing midlife crises, the two make a momentous decision: retaining a third analyst they can see together for couples' therapy.

Mariano Ben Plotkin, author of "Freud in the Pampas: The Emergence and Development of a Psychoanalytic Culture in Argentina," knows his subject firsthand. Back in the 1960s, his parents sent him to an analyst four times a week when he was only 6 years old.

Per Capita

Argentina topped a world ranking of psychologists per capita compiled by the *World Health Organization* in 2005:

Psychologists per 100,000 inhabitants

Argentina: **121.2**
Denmark: **85**
Finland: **79**
Switzerland: **76**
Norway: **68**
Germany: **51.5**
Canada: **35**
Brazil: **31.8**
USA: **31.1**
Ecuador: **29.1**

Also:

In 2008, Argentina had **145** psychologists per 100,000 inhabitants; the capital, Buenos Aires, **789**, according to a report by *Modesto Alonso and Paula Gago*.

A 2009 national survey conducted by TNS Argentina found that **32% of respondents had at some time made a psychological consultation**. That was an increase from 2006, when 26% said they had.

Mr. Plotkin suggests one reason that psychoanalysis began flourishing here in the 1950s and 1960s was Argentines' longing for a private haven away from an increasingly conflict-ridden political sphere. Even battle-hardened soldiers in Argentina sometimes sound like grief counselors. Mr. Plotkin recalls that in 1995, when the head of the army apologized for the military's responsibility for countless murders and rights abuses in prior decades, he spoke of "working through" the mourning process and coping with "unconscious traumas."

The percentage of Argentines who say they have visited a therapist at some time in their lives increased to 32% this year, from 26% in 2006, according to the Buenos Aires market research firm TNS, which took a survey in March, amid the global financial crisis.

"Analysis is one of the last things Argentines will ever give up," said Malele Penchansky, author of a

book about hysteria, who has been seeing the same analyst, on and off, for close to 40 years.

Mr. Rolón has attained the highest public profile of any Argentine psychoanalyst -- while also drawing lots of criticism from his psychoanalytic peers, such as Mirta González, who lambasted him in a professional publication as a lightweight master of the "media couch."

Mr. Rolón makes no apologies for his commercial success. He says he's carrying the Freudian flame that was lit by the immigrants who settled here in the last century to escape Europe's famines, wars and pogroms. "How were they not going to embrace a theory about how to live with loss and pain?" Mr. Rolón asked a reverent bookstore audience. "Though many say we're sad, I think we're profound." To close the talk, Mr. Rolón played piano on a couple of somber tango tunes, "Suffering Taught Me" and "Oblivion."

Audience members often ask Mr. Rolón about their relationships with the people who matter most to them -- their analysts, for instance. One young woman said she had been in therapy for four years and now felt great, except for one thing: Her analyst wouldn't let her quit. "How do you know when to stop this?" she asked. Mr. Rolón told her taking a break mightn't be such a bad idea.

Since 2007, Mr. Rolón has added author to his résumé, publishing two best-selling books of case studies.



A poster promoting one of Gabriel Rolón's "Divan Chat" speaking engagements, top left, was seen next to ads for music concerts in Buenos Aires in August.
Matt Moffett/The Wall Street Journal

One chapter deals with a patient he called Mariano, who is torn between his wife and his mistress. One day he forgot his cellphone on his bed and his wife read a text message from the other woman. In Mr. Rolón's interpretation, Mariano forgot the phone because he subconsciously wanted to be found out. The story ends with the married couple working toward reconciliation.

One of the richest nations in the world a century ago, Argentina now has a credit rating on a par with Bolivia's. Drug use is spiraling up, street crime

is rampant and the leadership class often seems to abide by a union boss's famous maxim that in Argentina, "nobody makes money by working."

In Mr. Rolón's diagnosis, Argentina suffers symptoms of bipolar disorder, evidenced in the gap between rich and poor. He also says the country has endured an abusive relationship with the U.S., which he says rigs the global economy in its own favor. Being No.1 in psychoanalysis, Mr. Rolón says, is "one of the few senses in which Argentina is privileged."

Write to Matt Moffett at matthew.moffett@wsj.com

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com