
Can Psychology Contribute to Rural Extension?

[Short Research Note]

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Abstract: *Although the field of psychology has the potential to be a contributor to rural extension work, it has done so on rare occasions. Thus, this work's objective is to show not only that the majority of extensionists consider that psychology could contribute to their labor, but also to present areas for potential contributions.*

Key words: Farmers; Rural extension; Psychology of rural development; Latin America

1 Introduction

Rural extension, considered one of the most important strategies towards boosting processes of rural development within the context of agricultural economies, has been defined in various manners (Leeuwis, 2004) and these definitions have generated a wealth of controversies (e.g. Freire, 1973; Landini, Murtagh & Lacanna, 2009; Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011; Machado, Hadedüs & Silveira, 2006). In an effort to build a working description of the term, we consider rural extension to be the relationship established between agents of rural development (generally, agricultural engineers and other professional technicians) and farmers, a relationship which's end is to improve, change or reorganize the productive and commercial practices of these producers by means of various actions, including providing training, credits or subsidies and generally working in conjunction with said producers on joint initiatives.

Nevertheless, despite the strong psychosocial content of much of the processes carried out by rural extensionists, the

field of psychology has generated strikingly few contributions dedicated to strengthening these processes (Landini, Benítez & Murtagh, 2010; Murtagh & Landini, 2011). In fact, within the area of rural extension work and development, psychologists have tended to study the individual psychological variables related to the adoption of certain technologies as well as to certain populations of farmers being more "developed" than others. However, psychologists have produced few works dedicated to generating initiatives geared towards overcoming the problems that rural extensionists face, as would a psychology with a more community or applied social orientation (Montero, 2004; Sánchez Vidal, 1991).

For some time now, our team has been working towards filling these gaps within this area of study. In this sense, we have discussed psychology's potential for contributing to the field of rural extension (Barilari, Landini, Logiovine & Rotman, 2011; Landini, Leeuwis, Long & Murtagh, 2012) and we have extensively studied rural extension practices as well as the dynamics of how specific populations appropriate technologies (Landini 2010; Landini & Murtagh, 2011), the psychosocial impacts of political clientelism and its relationship with developmental processes (Landini, in press a, in press b), peasant identity (Landini, in press c) and the use of money within peasant economies (Landini, 2011a, 2011b), amongst other areas of study. Nonetheless, these contributions have not allowed us to confirm whether or not rural extensionists are in fact interested in psychology's potential contributions nor what expectations they might have of this field. Thus, in order to answer these questions, this work presents the preliminary results of an investigation that is currently being carried out in many Latin American countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

2. Methodology

This is a quali-quantitative, descriptive investigation of a cross-sectional nature, based on a survey administered to

rural extensionists proceeding from various Latin American countries. The survey is composed of: a group of closed questions that includes inquiries regarding country, gender, age, extent of experience in rural extension, educational background, institution where they work and whether or not they believe that psychology can contribute to the resolution of problems common to the rural extensionists' work; and four open questions which inquire about: (1) problems that affect the development of small producers, (2) problems faced by rural extensionists and (3) possible contributions that psychology could make towards resolving some of them, and in the case that the answer to question (3) is negative, (4) why. Our objective is to administer at least 200 surveys in Argentina and 30 in the rest of the aforementioned countries, a task that is currently in process. Telephone and e-mail contact has been made with rural extension institutions in order to obtain (via email) said surveys and these have been returned fully completed.

Next, we will analyze the percentage as well as the profile of extensionists who considered that psychologists could contribute to rural extension work, studying the relationships between this variable and others, using as a base population extensionists from countries that to this date have provided at least 20 completed surveys. To this end, we used the functions provided by SPSS 17.0. Then, in order to clarify expectations that Latin American rural extensionists might have of psychologists, the results of the open questions regarding potential contributions from psychology to rural extension are presented, but only in regards to the Argentine sample.

3. Results and Discussion

In what follows, result tables are presented as well as their respective analyses.

Table 1: *Can psychology contribute to the work of rural extensionists?*

	Argentina	Brazil	Ecuador	El Salvador	Mexico	Paraguay	Peru	Total
n Valid	218	40	75	34	25	30	24	446

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Lost	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
SÍ	194 (88,99%)	35 (87,5%)	72 (96%)	31 (91,18%)	20 (80%)	26 (86,67%)	24 (100%)	402 (90,13%)
NO	24 (11,01%)	5 (12,5%)	3 (4%)	3 (8,82%)	5 (20%)	4 (13,33%)	0 (0%)	44 (9,87%)

In many of the countries studied, we observe that a large majority of extensionists consider that psychology could contribute to the work of rural extensionists, an interesting fact considering that the sample population surveyed contains no psychologists. This leads to the conclusion that a remarkably high percentage of extensionists are open to receiving contributions from the field of psychology, a phenomenon that can be explained by making reference to the existence of multiple, practical difficulties faced by rural extensionists (Uzeda Vásquez, 2005), difficulties that cannot be resolved by means of a purely techno-productive approach (Landini, Murtagh & Lacanna, 2009).

Table 2. *Statistical associations between variables studied*

Variables	Country	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Experience in extension work (years)
Can psychology contribute to the work of rural extensionists?	$\chi^2=10,01$	$\chi^2=1,14$	$r=-,004$	$r=.11^*$	$r=.002$

Note: χ^2 =Chi-square, r =Spearman correlation, * $p < .05$

Table 2 shows that there is no significant, statistical association between the expectations that psychology can contribute to the field of rural extension and the country of residence, gender, age or work experience in rural extension. The only significant, positive association observed is between said variable and educational background. This means, the higher the educational background achieved, the more probable that the subject considers psychology to be a possible contributor to rural extension work, an association possibly due to the subjects' having greater knowledge of psychology's potential or to their being aware that the nature of rural extension work is multi-dimensional.

In what follows, Table 3 outlines the areas that Argentina rural extensionists consider could benefit from the work of psychologists, areas that emerged from the categorization of responses to open question number 3 (only those areas spontaneously mentioned by more than 15% of those surveyed are presented). The Argentine sample is composed of 220 answers.

Table 3: *Possible areas of contribution by psychologists to rural extension work (Argentina)*

Areas of contribution	n	Percentage
1. To manage or coordinate groups of farmers and participatory processes and provide support to the association of farmers	123	55,91%
2. To take part in interdisciplinary teams of rural extensionists	84	38,18%
3. To train or advise rural extensionists	59	26,82%
4. To help extensionists to understand farmers	54	24,55%
5. To provide tools or methodologies to improve rural extension	47	21,36%
6. To provide support in the area of pedagogy and communication	38	17,27%
7. To participate in the design and evaluation of extension projects	35	15,91%

Table 3 shows that extensionists consider the area of managing and coordinating groups of farmers and participatory processes as one that is particularly prone to possible contributions from the field of psychology, being that it was spontaneously mentioned as such by more than 50% of the sample surveyed. This is clearly related to the amount of problems they experience in this area (Landini, 2007). Additionally, the table shows extensionists' expectation that psychologists become members of rural extension teams as well as participate in the design of projects, providing training or advice in an array of different areas in order to better understand the farmers and improve the impact of rural extensionists' interventions. In conclusion, from extensionists' point of view, psychologists could and should become a permanent part of rural extension work due to the existence of various areas to which they could contribute in a range of different ways.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper demonstrated that most Latin American rural extensionists consider that psychologists could contribute to rural extension work by becoming a part of extension working teams in a number of ways. However, this work also highlights the fact that psychologists do not tend to work on these types of initiatives nor does there exist, within the field of psychology, an area dedicated to developing concrete contributions to rural extension work. Consequently, it becomes necessary to execute two tasks. The first is to develop this area, thus generating interesting contributions to extension practices by first studying practitioners' problems and then developing proposals geared towards tackling them. The second is for psychologists to undergo training and dare to take part in this type of work.

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