

8-1-2017

Psychology's Contributions to Extension: State of the Art and Calls to Action

Fernando Landini

/University of La Cuenca del Plata/University of Morón Posadas, Misiones, Argentina

Alejandra Olivera Méndez

San Luis Potosí Campus Postgraduate College Salinas, San Luis Potosí, Mexico

Pedro De Hegedüs

University of La República Montevideo, Montevideo, Uruguay

Recommended Citation

Landini, F., Méndez, A. O., & De Hegedüs, P. (2017). Psychology's Contributions to Extension: State of the Art and Calls to Action. *Journal of Extension*, 55(4), Article 23. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol55/iss4/23>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Commentaries conform to [JOE submission standards](#) and provide an opportunity for Extension professionals to exchange perspectives and ideas.

Psychology's Contributions to Extension: State of the Art and Calls to Action

Abstract

Several psychosocial processes are embedded in the practice of extension. However, there is no *Journal of Extension* article that systematically addresses how psychology can contribute to the field. Research conducted recently in Latin America addresses this issue and is applicable to those working in U.S. Cooperative Extension. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of possible contributions psychology can make to U.S. Cooperative Extension. These contributions are presented in the context of seven aspects of extension practice that have strong psychological components. Calls to action are presented as well. Essentially, extension organizations need to acknowledge the potentiality of psychology and invite psychologists to be part of their programs and research.

Fernando Landini
Senior Researcher
National Council of
Scientific and
Technological
Research/University of
La Cuenca del
Plata/University of
Morón
Posadas, Misiones,
Argentina
landini_fer@hotmail.com

Alejandra Olivera Méndez
Associate Professor
San Luis Potosí
Campus
Postgraduate College
Salinas, San Luis
Potosí, Mexico
aleolivera@colpos.mx

Pedro De Hegedüs
Professor
School of Agriculture
University of La
República
Montevideo,
Montevideo, Uruguay
phegedus@adinet.com.uy

Introduction

Extension, as understood within the U.S. Cooperative Extension System, is a complex and diverse practice whose practitioners, through different programs and actions, aim to improve the quality of people's lives using evidence-based science (Atilles & Eubanks, 2014; Wang, 2014). Extension practice is not about knowledge and technologies per se but is instead about generating changes at individual, group, and community levels that improve people's lives and generate development.

Even when extension's direct objectives may be strongly linked to technologies (e.g., changes in agricultural practices and technology adoption), these objectives are always mediated by human agency (Landini, Long, Leeuwis, & Murtagh, 2014). Therefore, having an understanding of social sciences is necessary for all extension practitioners, given that the purpose of extension programming is to modify human behavior

(Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014).

In this context, the fact that psychology has delivered only scarce solid and critical contributions to the field of extension is surprising (Murtagh & Landini, 2011), as is the limited amount of attention paid by extension personnel to this science. From the technology transfer perspective, Rogers (1983) pointed out that "to argue that economic factors are the sole predictors of rate of adoption is ridiculous" (p. 215). Nevertheless, it seems that psychologists have not offered solid and systematic contributions to the field of extension, nor have extension workers consistently turned to psychology for answers to their practical problems. This is evident in the lack of *Journal of Extension* articles that systematically address the contributions made by psychology to U.S. Cooperative Extension.

Recently, psychologists in Latin America have made an interesting attempt at sparking the debate on potential contributions from psychology to extension practice (Landini, 2015; Landini, Leeuwis, Long, & Murtagh, 2014). In research conducted in 12 Latin American countries, 90.6% of the extension practitioners surveyed argued that psychology could make real contributions to their practice, particularly in areas such as group management, cooperative behaviors, participatory processes, motivation, and gender issues, among others (Landini, 2015). Nonetheless, it was found that only in Uruguay do psychologists have a clear presence as extension practitioners supporting the strengthening of rural community organizations (Landini & Riet, 2015). In this article, we will reference some of these contributions and present some calls to action that would improve extension practice by means of contributions from the field of psychology.

Areas of Contribution

Often, psychology is known solely as being a clinical practice within the context of mental health. Nonetheless, psychology is an ample science that encompasses multiple subdisciplines, some of which address subjects relevant to the practice of extension. Such subdisciplines include clinical, community, educational, environmental, organizational, and social psychology, among others.

It is clear that the field of psychology involves both knowledge and capabilities that could be useful for extension practice. However, in general terms, psychology does not include extension as a subdiscipline or specific area of interest, research, or intervention. Moreover, psychological knowledge must be adapted to meet the needs of extension personnel for it to be relevant to their practice. Herein, we propose seven aspects of extension that have strong psychological components.

1. Interpersonal relationships and cultural competence. Interpersonal trust and credibility are invaluable assets when working with people, communities, and various partners within the field of extension (Landini, 2016). Additionally, U.S. Cooperative Extension workers have to build cultural competences (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003) so as to better serve the increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse U.S. population (Atilas & Eubanks, 2014; Henning, Buchholz, Steele, & Ramaswamy, 2014). Thus, there is no doubt that social and community psychology can make important contributions related to the study and understanding of interpersonal attitudes, social interaction, and interpersonal communication (Franzoi, 2007).

2. Group processes and cooperative behaviors. An important part of extension practice takes place in the context of group or collective settings (Sligo & Massey, 2007). Such settings include 4-H youth development groups (Borden, Perkins, & Hawkey, 2014), interinstitutional partnerships, extension councils, and farmers' training groups, among others. Moreover, when extension professionals are involved in programs aimed at community and economic development, the construction of social capital and the encouragement of

cooperative attitudes are of utmost importance. In these contexts, group leadership, cooperative behaviors, conflict management, and mediation play important roles. Psychological knowledge is relevant for dealing with these issues.

3. Learning processes and human resource development. Extension practice is essentially a process of nonformal education (Torock, 2009). Depending on the context, education and learning in extension involve a wide array of strategies, from the transfer of knowledge to the development of life skills, and from experiential to virtual learning. Psychology has great potential as a contributor to such learning processes, particularly with regard to adult education. Additionally, organizational psychology is significantly linked to on-the-job training, and community psychology to social learning, with both subdisciplines aimed at developing practical capacities for dealing with changing and complex environments (Guillén, 2009). Thus, psychology seems relevant to understanding and facilitating these different learning processes (Massey, Morriss, Alpass, & Flett, 2004) for both beneficiaries and extension personnel.

4. Participation, engagement, and ownership. Development processes and extension programs need the participation and engagement of all stakeholders to be sustainable (Prokopy et al., 2012). Without stakeholder participation and involvement, extension simply is not possible. Bennett (1975) recognized this importance and included participation as a key step in his renowned model of evaluation (hierarchy of evidence for program evaluation). Thus, it is fundamental that extension proposals respond to clients' and communities' needs and that recipients participate throughout the process (Borden et al., 2014). Community psychology has a long-standing tradition in the study of people's participation, engagement, motivation, and ownership (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), which could be very useful for extension practice.

5. Technology adoption, behavioral change, and innovation processes. Most of the contributions psychology has made to the field of extension have been in the realm of technology adoption (Straub, 2009). Along this line, psychology has much to contribute to the study and understanding of processes of behavioral change (Pratt & Bowman, 2008) in different areas, such as classical technology adoption and incorporation of proenvironmental practices (Holahan, 2011) and healthful habits. In addition, it can contribute to understanding and fostering of more complex processes, such as non-predefined technological or organizational innovations, through interaction, reflection on practice, and social learning (Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011).

6. Evaluation and accountability. Accountability to clients regarding the use of public funds is an important concern within U.S. Cooperative Extension and elsewhere (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014; Borden et al., 2014; Christoplos, Sandison, & Chipeta, 2012). Scholars and practitioners in the United States have tended to focus on either subjective measures (e.g., satisfaction with the service) or hard data (e.g., technology adoption). In this context, psychology could help generate new indicators as well as provide new strategies for measuring nontraditional results and impacts, such as improvements in quality of life, self-esteem, and community trust and networks.

7. Reflection on practice and continuous innovation. Reflection is a key component of both experiential learning (Torock, 2009) and innovation processes. The recent celebration of the 100th anniversary of U.S. Cooperative Extension indicates that the organization has had to constantly adapt to changes in the environment and to innovate in order to survive and remain relevant. Studies in organizational psychology and related scientific disciplines have shown how organizational learning and innovations occur and how they can be fostered (Fitzpatrick, 2006; Kim, MacDonald, & Andersen, 2013). Consequently, psychology could help U.S. Cooperative

Extension workers and institutions remain vigilant and reflect on their practice so as to facilitate individual learning and institutional innovation, or as Beaulieu and Cordes (2014) put it, to "help Extension re-imagine itself" ("Important Challenges and Opportunities Ahead," subheading 6).

Reflections and Calls to Action

Several aspects of extension practice have strong psychosocial components. However, psychologists rarely have addressed extension and extension workers rarely have looked to psychology to make contributions to their work. Overall, this situation has led us to reflect on the potential of infusing extension with psychology and to formulate associated calls to action.

Firstly, extension workers and extension institutions have to acknowledge the importance that psychosocial knowledge has for extension practice, relative to both technology transfer and human resource development perspectives. Without this recognition, it will be impossible to benefit from this knowledge.

Secondly, an open and permanent dialogue between extension workers and psychologists is needed. Nowadays, most extension personnel do not have a clear picture of how psychologists can contribute to their work, and most psychologists are unfamiliar with extension settings and practices and thus cannot provide sound and contextualized contributions to this area.

Thirdly, institutions associated with extension, such as those in the U.S. land-grant university system, should find ways to encourage psychologists to train and work as extension practitioners. This practical experience will let extensionists see how psychology can contribute to their practice in real settings and will allow psychologists to understand the applicability of their knowledge to extension practices.

Finally, researchers and extension practitioners should invite and encourage psychologists to conduct research related to extension practice. In this way, psychologists will be able to provide extensionists with evidence-based knowledge specifically developed for extension settings and for addressing extension staff needs.

The objective seems to be clear: to improve extension through the support of psychology. However, the path is uncertain, and the results will depend on practitioners' and extension authorities' initiatives and commitment. We encourage those working in extension in the United States and elsewhere to carefully analyze how psychology could contribute to their practice and, more importantly, to invite psychologists to partake in it. Successfully achieving extension goals will definitely make doing so worth the effort.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the University of La Cuenca del Plata (Argentina) and the Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica (National Agency of Scientific and Technological Research) of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Productive Innovation of Argentina under Grant PICT-2011-0192.

References

- Atiles, J., & Eubanks, G. (2014). Family & consumer sciences and Cooperative Extension in a diverse world. *Journal of Extension*, 53(3), Article 3COM1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2014june/comm1.php>
- Beaulieu, L., & Cordes, S. (2014). Extension community development: Building strong, vibrant communities. *Journal of Extension*, 52(5), Article 5COM1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2014october/comm1.php>

Bennett, C. (1975). Up the hierarchy. *Journal of Extension*, 13(2). Available at:

<http://www.joe.org/joe/1975march/1975-2-a1.pdf>

Betancourt, J., Green, A., Carrillo, J., & Ananeh-Firempong, O. (2003). Defining cultural competence: A practical framework for addressing racial/ethnic disparities in health and health care. *Public Health Reports*, 118(4), 293–302.

Borden, L., Perkins, D., & Hawkey, K. (2014). 4-H youth development: The past, the present, and the future. *Journal of Extension*, 52(4), Article 4COM1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2014august/comm1.php>

Christoplos, I., Sandison, P., & Chipeta, S. (2012). *Guide to evaluating rural extension*. Lindau, Switzerland: Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services.

Fitzpatrick, P. (2006). In it together: Organizational learning through participation in environmental assessment. *Journal of Environmental Assessment Policy and Management*, 8(2), 157–182.

Franzoi, S. L. (2007). *Psicología social*. Mexico City, Mexico: McGraw-Hill.

Guillén, L. (2009). Capacitación transformadora: Plataforma básica para el desarrollo local de comunidades rurales. In C. Sánchez Quintanar (Ed.), *Psicología en ambiente rural* (pp. 45–62). Mexico City, Mexico: Plaza y Valdéz & Colegio de Postgraduados.

Henning, J., Buchholz, D., Steele, D., & Ramaswamy, S. (2014). Milestones and the future for Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 52(6), Article 6COM1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2014december/comm1.php>

Holahan, C. (2011). *Psicología ambiental. Un enfoque general*. Mexico City, Mexico: Limusa.

Kim, H., MacDonald, R., & Andersen, D. (2013). Simulation and managerial decision making: A double-loop learning framework. *Public Administration Review*, 73(2), 291–300.

Landini, F. (2015). *Contributions of community psychology to rural advisory services: An analysis of Latin American rural extensionists' point of view*. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(3), 359–368.

Landini, F. (2016) *How to be a good rural extensionist. Reflections and contributions of Argentine practitioners*. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 43 (1), 193–202.

Landini, F., Leeuwis, C., Long, N., & Murtagh, S. (2014). Towards a psychology of rural development processes and interventions. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 24(6), 534–546.

Landini, F., Long, N., Leeuwis, C., & Murtagh, S. (2014). Theoretical guidelines for a psychology of rural development processes and interventions. *Cuadernos de Desarrollo Rural*, 11(74), 125–147.

Landini, F., & Riet, L. (2015). *Extensión rural en Uruguay: Problemas y enfoques vistos por sus extensionistas*. *Mundo Agrario*, 16 (32). <http://www.mundoagrario.unlp.edu.ar/article/view/MAv16n32a09>

Leeuwis, C., & Aarts, N. (2011). Rethinking communication in innovation processes: Creating space for change in complex systems. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 17(1), 21–36.

Massey, C., Morriss, S., Alpass, F., & Flett, R. (2004). A framework for building technological learning: Evidence from the New Zealand dairy industry. *Journal of Extension*, 42(3), Article 3FEA3. Available at:

<http://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/a3.php>

Murtagh, S., & Landini, F. (2011). Producción científica de la psicología vinculada a pequeños productores agropecuarios con énfasis en el ámbito del desarrollo rural. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 45(2), 293–304.

Nelson, G., & Prilleltensky, I. (2010). *Community psychology. In pursuit of liberation and well-being*. Basingtoke, U.K., and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pratt, C., & Bowman, S. (2008). Principles of effective behavior change: Application to Extension family educational programming. *Journal of Extension*, 46(5), Article 5FEA2. Available at:

<http://www.joe.org/joe/2008october/a2.php>

Prokopy, L., Aldrich, D., Ayres, J., Amberg, S., Molloy, A., Saylor, A., & Thompson, A. (2012). Context matters: The importance of local culture in community participation. *Journal of Extension*, 50(2), Article 2FEA2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2012april/a2.php>

Rogers, E. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.

Sligo, F., & Massey, C. (2007). Risk, trust and knowledge networks in farmers' learning. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 23(2), 170–182.

Straub, E. (2009). Understanding technology adoption: Theory and future directions for informal learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(2), 625–649.

Torock, J. (2009). Experiential learning and Cooperative Extension: Partners in non-formal education for a century and beyond. *Journal of Extension*, 47(6), Article 6TOT2. Available at:

<http://www.joe.org/joe/2009december/tt2.php>

Wang, S. (2014). Cooperative Extension System: Trends and economic impacts on U.S. agriculture. *Choices*, 29(1). Retrieved from http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/171040/2/cmsarticle_355.pdf

The Discussion Forum for this Commentary can be found at:

<https://joe.org/joe/2017august/comm2.php#discussion>

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)