

Integrating Cultural Patterns in International Extension Efforts

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Abstract

This paper advances a strategy to enable Extension systems to effectively address changes in the cultural profile of its current and/or potential Extension audiences. The components of the proposed strategy are pertinent to Extension efforts in both, the rapidly increasing multicultural U.S. society and in an international context. First, Extension needs to acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific demographic characteristics of their clientele. These characteristics which include age, race, ethnic background, gender, religion, and family structure, among others, need to be considered from a cultural or ethnic group-specific perspective. Another component of the proposed strategy is that Extension must acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific patterns that constitute the personal and social realities of target audiences. This strategy considers a more anthropological evaluation of the audience including its cultural identity, time orientation, perceptions of self and community, communication patterns, learning styles, thinking patterns, cosmology, and problem-solving approaches for example. Finally, for Extension systems to be effective in the new millennium, they should determine and consider the target audience's degree of acculturation and assimilation in the mainstream society. Considerations in the acculturation assessment include the information on the length of time the target audience has resided in the host country; how often and with whom does the target clientele socialize outside the community; and what percentages of the target population are traditional, marginal, bicultural, and fully acculturated and assimilated into the mainstream culture. It is recommended that this Extension strategy be carefully considered by Extension leaders domestically and internationally.

Keywords: Audience assessment, culture, culturally diverse audiences, cultural tailoring, extension

Introduction

Domestic as well as international Extensionists embark on the challenging task of providing effective agricultural technology delivery to communities which may uphold a perception or view of the world somewhat or significantly dissimilar to theirs. People in all cultures face similar human problems involving issues such as our basic human identities, our relationships with others, and our orientations to the physical and spiritual world. On an individual as well as a collectivistic level, people provide answers to such issues to have a coherent and consistent interpretation of the world and thus developing their own reality.

Although within a given culture there are preferred solutions or answer to human problems, some people from a cultural community develop distinct responses to these universal human problems. However, the common preferences, which are selected unconsciously, define implicitly the shared meanings of the cultural community. Understanding the rationalization for such identities, relationships, orientations, and explanations is perhaps the most ominous and exigent but critical part of the role of an Extensionist.

The premise of this paper is that Extension administrators, Extension leaders and scholars, and Extensionists need to consider the implications of culture and cultural orientations on audiences, programs, services, and service providers. Therefore, given the dramatic changes on not only the role of Extension systems, but also the profile of Extension clientele, if Extension systems are going to survive in a relevant, sound and effective manner, they must integrate and reflect the realities, cultural orientations, and practices of current and potential clientele.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to advance a strategy to enable Extension systems to effectively address changes in the cultural composition of its current and/or potential Extension clientele. The paper demonstrates the importance, necessity and benefits of integrating cultural patterns and orientations in all Extension efforts. The components of the proposed strategy are pertinent to Extension efforts in the rapidly increasing multicultural U.S. society or in an international context.

Theoretical/Philosophical Themes

In *Whose reality counts?* Robert Chambers (1997) refers to personal reality as an individual person's perception and interpretation of the physical and social realities outside her or himself; and includes personal constructs, perceptions and values. According to Harrison and Huntington (2000), individuals, institutions, organizations and other entities engaged in international Extension work most often than not ignore cultural values and attitudes and their role as obstacles to or facilitators of economic development.

There are several examples of frameworks that assist in the process of understanding and incorporating the realities and cultural composition of communities or population groups targeted for service delivery. For example, the *Self-Evaluation for Effective Decision-making* (SEED) and the *System for Communities to Adapt Learning and Expand* (SCALE) includes cultural factors in its community assessments. The community's historical self-perception; expectation for the future; views of equity, justice, and gender roles, among other cultural perspectives are some of the key indicators used in such assessments. (Taylor-Ide & Taylor, 2002).

In discussing the interactions among culture, health behavior, and health promotion Pasick, D'Onofrio, and Otero-Sabogal (1996) distinguish between the *targeting* and the *cultural tailoring* efforts of a practitioner. The *targeting* of interventions for specific culturally diverse groups ensures exposure of the target group to the intervention or services provided. *Cultural tailoring*, on the other hand, is the development of interventions, strategies, messages, and materials that reflect specific cultural characteristics of the audience or community targeted for intervention or service delivery.

In this paper, the following strategies are proposed for consideration in developing an Extension system that culturally tailors its efforts to responds effectively to the needs and priorities of audiences and communities in the new millennium. This Extension system is one able to:

- Acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific demographic characteristics of their clientele.
- Acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific patterns of communication, problem-solving and conflict-management approaches, learning styles, thinking patterns, among other factors that constitute the personal and social realities of the target audience or community.
- Determine and consider the target audience's degree of acculturation and assimilation in the mainstream society.
- The strategies advanced in this paper follow.

Acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific demographic characteristics of their clientele

The most basic assessment need in most planning Extension programs is to determine as accurately as possible the demographic characteristics of the intended target clientele. In their discussion of factors that may impact program planning, Seevers, et al (1997) identify "age, race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, disabilities, gender, religion, military experience, family structure, rural/urban setting, etc." (p. 96) as components of the social factors that impact program planning. The assumption here is that the more we know about these factors, the better we will be at targeting programs that consider these characteristics and issues in the program planning, design, implementation, and evaluation processes. These same issues from a cultural or ethnic group-specific perspective also must be included.

For example, age and gender factors need to be considered where there are cultural rules governing issues such as making decisions for the family regarding child rearing and food preparation practices. A young, white American Extensionist might have to interact with an elder or the most educated family member to do effective outreaching in a particular cultural community. Thus, beyond the usual reasons for looking at age in a demographic profile, it is important to understand that decision making based on deference to elders may play a major role in how families perceive and determine Extension services such as those pertaining to food and nutrition.

Like age, gender rules within a cultural or ethnic group also need to be assessed. Many cultures have very specific rules and traditional roles prescribed for men and women. For example, in some cultural communities, such as the African, men are the decision makers and income-generating while women are expected to be responsible for food preparation, safety, and security as well as child-rearing and household chores.

In learning on the educational level of a target or potential community, an Extensionist would benefit from knowing the general attitudes toward formal education, how does the cultural group learn best, and what dialect differences exist within the group. Literacy also is important because many Extension programs rely on written educational materials and advertising to reinforce concepts and skills they teach and to reach the target audiences with their program promotion messages. Western concepts and examples included within these materials might be completely foreign or counter to the target group's worldview and understanding of leadership, food preparation, or horticultural principles and practices.

Acknowledge, adapt to, and integrate the culture-specific patterns of communication, problem-solving and conflict-management approaches, learning styles, thinking patterns, and personal and social realities, among others, that characterize diverse communities

This strategy is concerned with a more anthropological evaluation of a culturally diverse community or audience. Included here are culture-specific characteristics of the target audience; i.e., cultural identity, time orientation, perceptions of self and community, communication patterns, preferred learning styles, thinking patterns, and cosmology, for example.

With respect to cultural identity, an Extensionist need to know for example how the target audience identify itself with respect to culture or ethnic derivation; what subgroups, if any, exist within the broader cultural community; and how does the potential audience perceive and relate to the mainstream culture in which it is located.

Research suggest (Jandt 2007, Neuliep 2006, Hall 2005, Samovar & Porter 2001), and personal and others' experiences reinforce it, the most challenging cultural characteristic that Extensionists need to consider is the time orientation of a culturally diverse audience. Is the past, present, or future the orientation of the clientele? How does the community perceive and use time on a daily basis? Is the community *polychronic* oriented where time is viewed in a circular manner and it allows for multiple things to be done at once? or is the community *monochronic* oriented where time is viewed linear, schedules and promptness are emphasized, and doing one thing at a time is the norm? Responses to these questions provide a reference point from which to begin outreaching and service delivery to a particular audience or community.

Communication patterns of a target audience should be a cultural characteristic of great interest to the Extensionist. As Edward T. Hall (1981) observed, the typical member of the mainstream culture in the United States is very directive and aimed at getting to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible. Taking the time to discover how best to address, teach, and work with different cultural groups can make the difference in how audiences perceive, receive and react to Extension programmatic efforts. Is speaking one's mind the characteristic of an honest person, or is harmony and avoidance of direct confrontations the norm? How are the usual and customary communication patterns and practices within the cultural group; such as verbal and nonverbal forms of greeting, talking, social interchange, idioms and communication with outsiders? How do the traditional forms of communication in the cultural community merge with, parallel, or conflict with those of the mainstream culture? These are questions to be addressed by Extension personnel in outreaching and providing services to a culturally diverse community.

Perception of self and community is the last cultural consideration in Extension programming discussed in this paper. This cultural dimension separates basically those cultural communities who are *individualistic* oriented, such as the mainstream culture in the United States, from those who are *collectivistic* or group-oriented, such as many of the ethnic communities in the United States; i.e., African-Americans, Latinos, Asians. Does the community

stress individual goals, initiatives and achievements; or does it stress allegiance to groups that support and protect the individual in exchange for loyalty? Do personal responsibilities and tasks prevail in the community or is it relationships? These are questions which provide indispensable information in learning about an audience. A community's orientation in this dimension has significant implications in terms of the recent "paradigm shift away from a technology transfer Extension approach to more facilitative and participatory approaches" (Johnson, Creighton, & Norland 2006, p. 34).

Determine and consider the target audience's degree of acculturation and assimilation into the mainstream society

Acculturation is "an interactive process between a culture and groups of people. When individuals or groups of individuals enter a new culture, they are often changed by the culture . . . To the extent that the individual desires contact with the host culture (and the various microcultures) while not necessarily maintaining an identity with his or her native culture, assimilation occurs." (Neuliep 2006). In the process of acculturation, an individual integrates into a new culture while maintaining his or her original cultural identity. In the process of assimilation, an individual discontinues the values, beliefs, and behaviors associated with the native culture; and he or she acquires a new identity indistinguishable from other members of the host or new culture.

Microcultures formed by culturally and ethnically diverse communities or immigration whose values, beliefs, and ways of life differ from those of the dominant or mainstream group are required, to some degree, to take on some of the characteristics of the mainstream culture. The acculturation continuum ranges from those who remain completely traditional in their original cultural identity to those who take on all of the characteristics of the mainstream culture in which they live.

Assessment of this process can help the Extensionist to determine how best to target his or her program or service to accommodate the values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of his/her audiences. For example, in providing Extension services to a target audience that might be primarily composed of first- and second-generation immigrants, the programs and services need to consider the traditional cultural traits that characterize these audiences.

There are several acculturation scales that may be included within needs assessment instruments. The use of acculturation scales represents a relatively new and innovative tool the Extensionist can employ to better understand the culturally diverse communities with which he or she may work. Considerations in the acculturation assessment include the following information:

- The length of time the target audience has resided in the host country
- Whether the community in which the cultural audience resides is an open or is a more insular community
- The percentage of the target community that works outside the community
- How often and with whom does the target clientele socialize outside the interpersonal and physical boundaries of the community
- What percentages of the target population are traditional, marginal, bicultural, and fully acculturated and assimilated into the mainstream culture?

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

In assessing the needs of their current or target audiences, Extensionists normally focus on the most obvious and easily recognizable cultural orientations that characterize these groups, ignoring some less visible but usually more fundamental aspects that constitute and define the reality of the community. Thus, efforts should be made by Extension workers and researchers to raise awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the value and usefulness of understanding and integrating the cultural perceptions and worldview which define local realities, rather than negatively evaluating and disregarding such perceptions and realities.

Parallel to these actions, efforts need to be made to enhance Extensionists' development of competencies and skills to successfully and effectively identify, acknowledge, understand, validate, adapt, and integrate cultural orientations, perceptions and characteristics of target audiences and communities. Such preconditions ensure the effectiveness of the delivery, local capacity-building efforts and ownership of innovations in a manner not merely culturally appropriate but also meaningful in the context of the local reality.

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