

Rural Psychology: Literature review, reasons for its need, and challenges

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Abstract

Psychology has traditionally neglected the specific needs of rural communities. This paper reviews the situation of psychology in rural areas and discusses the need for a rural psychology. An open internet review using Google search engine and 'rural psychology' as key word was conducted, as well as an academic literature review. Results show that psychology tends to be framed in urban terms and that rural communities have particularities that call for a contextualized approach and not a mere reproduction of urban practices. In order for rural psychology to become a relevant area of debate, it has to demonstrate real and practical usefulness, put into question assumptions that implicitly frame mainstream psychology in urban terms, and generate training programs for psychologists.

Keywords: Rural psychology; Rural populations, Underserved communities; Isolation; Complexity.

Introduction

During 2018, approximately 3,413 million people lived in rural areas, representing 44.7% of the world's total population (United Nations, 2018). In 2011 the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) pointed out that extreme poverty was 27% higher in rural areas when compared to urban ones (IFAD, 2011), which implied that more than half of the poorest people in the world lived in rural areas. In this line, Anríquez and Stloukal (2008) also argued some years ago that, “rural communities in developing countries are home to some of the most disadvantaged and marginalized people in today's world: the landless; the chronically poor; women who are heads of households; people affected by chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis or malaria; disadvantaged youth; the elderly; persons with disabilities” (p. 3).

Moreover, different authors have argued that rural people face multiple, specific disadvantages. In the area of health care, for example, it has been pointed out that rurals have a higher risk of having mental health problems in general (Bradley et al., 2012; Costa et al., 2014; Simpson et al., 2014) and depression in particular (Brossart et al., 2013); as well as limited access to quality health services (Jameson & Blank, 2007; Rainer, 2010; Tarlow et al., 2014), which leads to a worse prognosis. Additionally, rural youth seems to have more problematic alcohol consumption than their urban counterparts (Salazar et al., 2011). With regards to education, universities and other higher education institutions, these tend to be located in urban areas (Pillay & Thwala, 2012), which makes studying more difficult for those living outside of big cities. In this vein, lower academic performance has been found in rural youth (Lillo et al., 2014) as well as lower literacy rates (Singh, 2002). Additionally, different studies have shown more gender inequities and violence against women (physical, sexual and psychological) in rural settings (Vasquez, 2009). Thus, it becomes apparent that rural communities are particularly vulnerable (Jameson & Blank, 2007) and are generally underserved by welfare public policies (Silva & Silva, 2013; Riding-Malon & Werth, 2014; Tarlow et al., 2014).

In this context, one would expect a clear and ample commitment of psychology and of psychologists to rural communities. However, the situation is quite the opposite. Firstly, the proportion of psychologists living and working in rural and remote areas is clearly lower than that of those living in urban ones, in countries as varied as Australia (Bhar et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 2014), Brazil (Vasquez, 2009), the United States (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Duncan et al., 2014), India (Singh, 2002) and South Africa (Pillay & Thwala, 2012).

Secondly, psychologists receive scarce or even no education or training to work in rural areas, that is, to face their specificities (Martins, 2010; Vasquez, 2009). In general, there is almost no academic literature on the specificities of rural professional practice (Malone, 2011). Likewise, psychologists tend to be trained according to urban models of psychological intervention (Helbok, 2003). Thus, as Heyman and VandenBos (1989) warned three decades ago, most training programs for psychologists seem to be geared implicitly or explicitly toward urban contexts.

Thirdly, there is a solid agreement that psychology and psychological research both focus on urban problems and neglect rural specificities (Landini et al., 2010; Pizzinato et al., 2015; Rojo et al., 2010). Thus, the lack of research in certain specific topics such as rural mental health (Costa et al., 2014; Jameson & Blank, 2007; Kumar et al., 2016), gender (Maciazeki-Gomes et al., 2016), child education (Lima & Silva, 2015), rural development (Albuquerque & Pimentel, 2004; Roberti & Mussi, 2014) and social norms (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016), among others, has been highlighted.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that psychology, as a scientific discipline and as a practice, has neglected rural people (Bonomo et al., 2011; Leite et al., 2013), has a tendency to see reality through an urban lens (Landini, 2015a) and is framed in urban terms (Malone, 2011; Reis & Cabreira, 2013; Sánchez Quintanar, 2009). As Migliaro (2015) puts it, psychology is an urban-centered scientific discipline. As a result, the need for seriously reflecting on the specificities and problems of rural populations from a psychological perspective is an urgent one (Landini, 2015b).

In this article we propose to contribute to the construction and shaping of a rural psychology. In this sense, we identify three urgent tasks that constitute the objectives of this article and frame its structure: to review the situation of rural psychology at an international level, to discuss why a rural psychology is needed, and to define and characterize it. Finally, we will also present some final reflections and challenges ahead for rural psychology.

Background analysis and literature review (in English, Spanish and Portuguese)

In order to review the situation of psychology in rural areas, two strategies were employed. Firstly, an open internet review using Google search engine and ‘rural psychology’ as key word (in English, Spanish and Portuguese) was conducted. And secondly, an academic literature review using DOAJ, EBSCOhost, PsycINFO and Scielo databases with the same key word as well as its transformations was implemented. Web pages as well as titles and

abstracts of the articles identified during the search were scanned in order to check for relevance with regards to the topic. Thus, multiple web pages and almost 100 articles were read in full. Additionally, considering that the objective was to conduct a literature review and not a bibliographical research, the authors of this article also included in their analysis several books that directly or indirectly addressed rural psychology.

Based on the results of said procedure, two different topics will be addressed. Firstly, the presence of rural psychology as a division within psychologists' associations or as part of academic journals and, secondly, an overview of the most relevant approaches and areas of interest of rural psychology. Finally, we will also devote a specific heading to describing the differences found between the approaches and topics addressed by rural psychology in the developing and in the developed world, despite the fact that these difference, although not sought out, appeared with prominence.

Importantly, it is worth mentioning again that the internet and literature review were conducted in English, Spanish and Portuguese. Thus, it is possible that contributions that are not in any of these languages have been involuntarily neglected.

Rural psychology in the institutional context

During the internet review, two divisions of rural psychology were found within national psychological associations: the Section of "Rural and Northern Psychology" of the Canadian Psychological Association (2019) and the Interest Group on "Rural and Remote Psychology" of the Australian Psychological Society (2019). Additionally, the American Psychological Association (2019) has a Committee on Rural Health, thus expressing this rural interest in the context of psychology, but limiting the range of its scope to health issues. Interestingly, all the national psychological associations that have rural psychology or rural health divisions are considered developed countries and are among the biggest countries of the world (Canada is the second, the United States the fourth, and Australia the sixth).

With regards to academic journals, there is no current one dedicated specifically to rural psychology. In 1980 the Marshall University (West Virginia, United States) published the first volume of a journal named *The Journal of Rural Community Psychology*, but it was later discontinued and its articles are not currently available in the internet. Likewise, in the year 2000 the *International Journal of Rural Psychology* was created in the context of the Interest Group in Rural and Remote Psychology of the Australian Psychological Society (Harvey, 2000). There is some evidence of its existence on the internet, but it is clear that the journal was discontinued around 2010 and its articles are not currently available online.

Likewise, there are also several, well-established journals in the area of rural health (e.g. Journal of Rural Health, the Australian Journal of Rural Health, and Rural and Remote Health), but only one focused on psychology, the Journal of Rural Mental Health of the APA. Interestingly, in 1986, the American Journal of Community Psychology published a special issue on rural community psychology (Heyman, 1986), and the Journal of Clinical Psychology another one in 2010 which focused on the clinical treatment of rural and isolated patients (Rainer, 2010).

Two reflections emerge from the analysis of the results of this search. Firstly, the institutionalization of rural psychology is clearly stronger in territorially big, developed countries, particularly the United States and Australia, but also Canada. And secondly, the interest for a rural psychology seems to stem from two different sources: on the one hand, clinical practice; and on the other hand, a community psychology perspective, the former being stronger, at least in terms of its degree of institutionalization.

The emergence of the interest in rural psychology

The first book on rural psychology was most probably, “Our rural heritage. The social psychology of rural development” by Williams (1925), published in the United States. Later, Fromm and Maccoby (1970) wrote “Social character in a Mexican village”, which, in its Spanish version, was entitled, “Sociopsicoanálisis del campesino mexicano” [Sociopsicoanalysis of the Mexican peasant], thus demonstrating its rural focus. However, it was not until 1982 that the idea of a rural psychology appeared in a book’s title. During that year, Childs and Melton (1982) edited “Rural psychology”, a book divided into 18 thematic chapters that focused on the reality of rural United States. As mentioned above, during this time period (concretely in 1986), the American Journal of Community Psychology published a specific issue on rural community psychology. Since 2000, the interest in the articulation between psychology and rurality has expanded and become consolidated. Albuquerque (2002) in Brazil, Singh (2002) in India, and Malone (2011) in Canada have published papers discussing rural psychology as a topic. Furthermore, during this time, different edited books come to light: “Psychology in rural environment” (Sánchez Quintanar, 2009, in Spanish); “Psychology in rural contexts” (Leite & Dimenstein, 2013, in Portuguese); “Towards a Latin American rural psychology” (Landini, 2015c, in Spanish); and “In the inner Amazonia: Psychosocial lectures” (Calegare & Higuchi, 2016, in Portuguese). Interestingly, this review shows a recent increase in psychology’s interest in rural issues, as well as a stronger presence of the developing world in this process, particularly Latin America, although this is perhaps

due to the languages used in the literature review.

Areas of interest and topics of debate in rural psychology (in English, Spanish and Portuguese)

Different areas of interest and topics of debate appeared during the literature review. The most mentioned was health and psychotherapy in rural settings. In this line, different authors highlighted the barriers that rurals find when attempting to access health services in general and mental health services in particular (Bhar et al., 2006; Landini et al., 2015; Rainer, 2010), which in broad terms refers to the lack of professionals (Bradley et al., 2012; Duncan et al., 2014; Simpson et al., 2014) and the great distances separating them from such services (Tarlow et al., 2014). In countries with good and stable access to communication technologies (e.g. broadband), particularly Australia, Canada and the United States, the debate over the efficacy of psychotherapy provided by telephone (Aisenberg et al., 2012) and videoconferencing (Duncan et al., 2014; Tarlow et al., 2014) occupies a central place. Additionally, in Australia, the study of psychologists 'flying in-flying out' to provide psychotherapy has generated great interest (Simpson et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2016).

Although in some respects different, but yet related, are the references to the ethical dilemmas faced by psychologists (particularly psychotherapists) when living in small towns or villages. In this line, three mayor issues have been discussed. Firstly, problems maintaining clear professional boundaries (dual relationships) due to being a health practitioner but also a member of a small community (Edwards & Sullivan, 2014; Scopelliti et al., 2004). Secondly, client's confidentiality within a context where everybody knows everybody and knows what they do, which makes it almost impossible for patients to keep the fact that they are receiving psychotherapy private (Rainer, 2010; Riding-Malon & Werth, 2014). Thirdly, the pressure to be generalist psychologists due to there being a lack of professionals, versus competency requirements to address specific disorders (Bradley et al., 2012; Helbok, 2003). Interestingly, the Australian Psychological Society has published specific guidelines for psychologists in such settings (Sutherland & Chur-Hansen, 2014)

Additionally, different authors have addressed the prevalence of certain mental illnesses in rural contexts when compared with urban ones. Two topics that have drawn great attention are depression and suicide (Brossart et al., 2013; Kosaraju et al., 2015; Valdivia et al., 2015), including specific discussions on whether or not they are more common in rural than in urban people, with inconclusive results (Breslau et al., 2014; Jameson & Blank, 2007).

Another topic of interest within rural health is the study of cultural factors and processes that

are related to mental suffering. For instance, Vahia et al. (2013) addressed how Hispanic rurals in USA explained depressive symptoms and Kumar et al. (2016) why rural patients abandon antipsychotic treatment for schizophrenia in India. Interestingly, Shakya (2005) studied the references to 'evil spirits' used by rural locals in Eastern Nepal to explain a hysteria epidemic in a rural school. Additionally, on a wider scope, Edwards (2015) revealed the existence of over one million indigenous, divine or faith healers currently in South Africa; and Soares et al. (2014) studied superstitious beliefs in rural communities that go against the control of high blood pressure.

Rural development processes and interventions also generate a great deal of interest within rural psychology. In a literature research, Landini et al. (2010) found that rural development was the most common topic of psychological papers that addressed farmer populations. More recently, Roberti and Mussi (2014) presented a literature review on the relationship between psychology and rural development, and Landini and colleagues discussed the need and the theoretical guidelines for a psychology of rural development processes and interventions (Landini, Leeuwis et al., 2014; Landini, Long et al., 2014). One of the central topics of debate within this area has been farmers' cooperation and associative processes. In this vein, Huertas-Hernández & Villegas-Urbe (2007) have studied peasants' cooperatives as a commercialization strategy that goes beyond the market logic. Additionally, Landini (2007) addressed the construction of trust and distrust in farmers' cooperatives; Scopinho (2007) conducted research on cooperativism in the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement; and Salvaro et al. (2014) studied women's participation in rural cooperatives.

Another topic of debate within the area of rural development is the understanding of farmers' practices and behaviors. In a recent paper, Landini (2011) described peasants' economic rationale, later expanded on within the study of farmers' moral perceptions of the economy (Landini, 2012a), productive choices (Landini, 2014). Meanwhile, Rocha et al. (2009) addressed intention of credit payment; and Zuchiwschi and Fantini (2015) pro-environmental behaviors.

A third area of interest in rural psychology is rural youth. Within this area, topics are highly diverse. For instance, Nelson & Bui (2010) studied satisfaction with psychotherapy received through videoconferencing; Sung, Puskar, and Sereika (2006) youth's coping strategies; Salazar et al. (2011) alcohol consumption; Ceballos Ospino et al. (2007) sexual behaviors; and Ferreira and Bonfim (2013) emigration. Thus, it is clear that the subject itself is relevant but there are no consolidated topics of debate, at least within the literature review conducted.

Within the area of developmental and educational psychology, three different topics were

identified. Firstly, several articles, mostly from Latin America, studied mothers' breeding practices in rural settings, as well as mother-child relationships (e.g. Jaramillo Pérez & Ruiz, 2013; Kobarg & Vieira, 2008; Vera Noriega & Martínez Ortega, 2006). Additionally, different authors focused on children's cognitive development (Flores-Mendoza & Nascimento, 2007) and the evaluation of rural peoples' intelligence (Lillo et al., 2014). Finally, a last group of papers pays particular attention to schools in rural contexts and villages. However, two different perspectives appeared, one centered on the practice of school psychologists (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Edwards & Sullivan, 2014), and the other on the role of schools in rural communities (Lima & Silva, 2015; Vera-Bachmann & Salvo, 2016). Interestingly, the former approach seems more prominent among American authors, while the latter more so with Latin American ones.

The topic of people and communities' identities in rural contexts, has also attracted scholars' attention. Some authors, in line with social identity theory, have studied the identity of rural communities in comparison with other social groups (Bonomo et al., 2008; Espinosa et al., 2013), particularly rural versus urban identities (Bonomo et al., 2011; Bonomo & Souza, 2013). Likewise, others have addressed the identity of specific communities or social groups in particular contexts. For instance, Landini (2012b) has studied peasant identity in Argentina, Alvaides and Scopinho (2013) landless rural workers' identity in Brazil, and Turra, Garrido, Pérez, Llanquiao, and Merino (2014) Mapuche natives' identities in Chile. In this line, women's identities have also become an area of research, with studies on rural cooperativist women (Salvaro et al., 2014), peasant women (Salvaro et al., 2013), and young rural women (Pizzinato et al., 2015). Interestingly, all of this academic work on rural identities has been produced in Latin America.

Perhaps, the psychological approach to gender issues in rural contexts could be thought of as an independent area of interest. As shown in the previous paragraph, there are different papers that address women's identities in rural settings. Additionally, papers on violence against women (Ferrer Lozano & González Ibarra, 2008) and on rural masculinities (Detoni & Nardi, 2013) can be found. Nonetheless, taking into account the limited development of the topic (Maciazeki-Gomes et al., 2016), as well as its presence in different thematic areas, perhaps it should be considered a transversal topic rather than a specific one.

In the Brazilian context, due to recent changes in public policies that created opportunities for psychologists to work in small and mid-sized towns in the areas of health and quality of life, the role of psychologists within public policies became a dynamic topic of debate. In 2001, Albuquerque called for a greater involvement of psychologists in pro-poor, rural public

policies, while later, other Brazilian authors discussed how to work in different contexts (Reis & Cabreira, 2013), with regards to specific public policies (Rocha et al., 2009) or with particularly vulnerable, rural populations (Fernandes & Munhoz, 2013). Additionally, authors from the USA have also highlighted the importance of psychologists' involvement in public policies, but in this case in health policies (Rainer, 2010; Tarlow et al., 2014), in contrast with the more general interest shown by Brazilian scholars.

Furthermore, in the developing world, mostly in Latin America, other topics have also drawn the attention of scholars. Specifically in Brazil, multiples authors have studied different social organizations and movements, particularly the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST), with regards to different topics. For instance, Silva (2010) and Alvaides and Scopinho (2013) have studied the social memory and group participants' reconstruction of their lived history from a psycho-political point of view. Likewise, other scholars have addressed childhood experiences (Silva & Silva, 2013), cooperative practices (Scopinho, 2007), as well as women's healthcare strategies (Araújo et al., 2013; Costa et al., 2015) in MST's rural settlements.

Amongst other interesting topics, the study of social violence appeared as relevant in different Latin American countries. This includes papers on gender violence against rural women (Ferrer Lozano & González Ibarra, 2008; Vasquez, 2009), on the effect of paramilitary and guerrilla groups in Colombia (Bravo, 2013; Hewitt et al., 2014; Prado, Carpeta & Tapiab, 2015), and on violence against MST members in Brazil (Campos & Sawaia, 2013). Finally, there are also different articles that address interventions conducted from the perspective of community psychology in rural settings.

In summary, it becomes apparent that different areas of interest and topics of debate exist in rural psychology, as well as differences between them in different contexts. In the following subheading, the differences that exist in the study of rural psychology between authors and countries of the developing and the developed world will be addressed.

Rural psychology in the developing and the developed world

Within the previous headings, many differences were found between topics of interest in different countries and regions, yet the differences between developing and developed regions were found to be the most pronounced. Despite the fact there is no universal agreement on how to classify developing and developed countries, for practical reasons we will follow the United Nations' regions classification (2013). Thus, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, Northern America (Canada and USA), and Japan will be considered developed regions, while

Africa, Asia (excluding Japan), Latin America and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) will be defined as developing.

Beyond this classification, it is interesting to notice that most papers cited in this article are from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada and the United States, five of the eight biggest countries in the world. This could be suggesting that remoteness and problems with accessibility (and not rurality itself) are what makes rurality a topic relevant to psychology. Amongst the eight biggest countries, Russia, China and India are mostly absent. In the case of the first two, it could be related to the languages in which the literature review was conducted. Likewise, the presence of Argentina and Brazil could also be because the reviewers used Spanish and Portuguese to conduct their searches. Nonetheless, the review conducted still suggests the possible relationship between the surface area of the countries and the relevance of rural issues in psychology.

With regards to the differences between developing and developed regions, those referring to the topics of interest and the conceptualization and role of ethics in psychology stand out. Focusing on the area of health, it is clear that psychotherapy and how to deliver it in a rural setting is at the nucleus of the interest shown in developed regions. With regards to health issues in general, the study of the prevalence of mental illnesses in rural compared to urban areas seems to be shared among regions. In this line, other areas of interest appeared in both macro-regions, such as rural youth, how to contribute to public policies, and even gender issues. However, with regards to others, important differences appeared.

In the area of cultural factors that influence health, most of the papers found were from developing countries, in this case Brazil, India, Nepal and South Africa, which suggest the greater importance given to the topic in said macro-region. The same phenomenon was found with the study of rural actors' social identity, with all identified papers coming from Latin America. Additionally, with regards to education and school psychology, while American scholars seem to focus on the practice of school psychologists, Latin American ones do so on the role of schools within rural communities.

Generalizing these findings, it could be argued that American, Australian and Canadian authors seemed to focus on psychologists' professional practice (clinical or in schools) and, in contrast, scholars from developing countries on cultural and community issues in connection with rurality. Of course this is not being argued as a general law, but indeed as a tendency. Interestingly, this very difference is also acknowledged when comparing American and Brazilian psychologists' approach to public policies: while the former highlighted psychology's potential for contributing to public health polices, the latter laid the claim for

pro-poor public ones, thus showing a different positioning: Americans as committed professionals, and Brazilians as agents of social change. Interestingly, these conclusions are strengthened when noticing that most psychological academic literature on rural development, social organizations and movements, as well as social violence, are from different Latin American countries and do not have a clear or strong presence in developed regions, showing different areas of interest but also different approaches to practice.

Moreover, these differences found between authors and papers coming from developing and developed regions are also present in how professional ethics are framed. As argued previously, most papers explicitly addressing ethics do it in the context of ethical dilemmas derived from clinical professional practice in small cities. In this vein, the main problems were dual relationships, clients' confidentiality and pressures to provide clinical attention beyond one's own professional competence. Thus, it is clear that these ethical concerns are essential to those scholars who focus on providing psychotherapy services in rural settings, a characteristic area of interest in developed regions. Importantly, authors such as Bradley et al. (2012) (United States) and Malone (2011) (Canada) highlight the need for advocacy for socially appropriate services for underserved rural communities. However, this seems to be the exception and not the rule in the developed world. In contrast, Latin American authors, in line with the guidelines of community psychology (Montero, 2004), tend to address ethics from a different perspective, explicitly committing, as psychologists, to the development of a more just and equal society. In this line, it makes much more sense that psychologists from developing countries (particularly Latin American in this literature review) are generally more interested in rural development, rural social movements and organizations, and social violence.

In brief, psychologists from developed regions seem to have a greater interest in professional (mostly clinical) practice in rural areas, which leads them to focus on ethical dilemmas and their implications for ethic codes. In contrast, Latin American psychologists (and, psychologists from developing regions in general), seem to address mostly social issues from a community psychology perspective, thus focusing on ethics in terms of commitment to social change.

Why do we need a rural psychology?

Despite the fact that there is no final argument that can prove or establish the need for a rural psychology, in this subtitle we will present several strong points on its behalf.

First argument: rural peoples account for almost half of the world's population and are being neglected by psychology. As argued previously, almost half of the world's total population lives in rural areas (United Nations, 2018). Moreover, this percentage tends to increase when focusing on disadvantaged dwellers because, on average, rural populations tend to be more vulnerable than their urban counterparts, particularly in areas such as access to health services, education and gender equity, to name just some. In contrast, there is a clear and solid agreement among experts around the globe that psychology has historically neglected rural populations (e.g. Landini, 2015a; Malone, 2012; Pizzinato et al., 2015).

Second argument: rural communities and populations possess distinctive characteristics and face specific challenges that have to be acknowledged and addressed by psychology and psychologists. These specificities include environmental, institutional, and socio-cultural factors, which result in unique challenges. In terms of environment, authors have highlighted the role played by distances, lack of transportation and geographic isolation in rural communities (Lima & Silva, 2015; Tarlow et al., 2014). Such contexts exacerbate pre-existing problems derived from scarcity or even lack of public services and professionals (Edwards & Sullivan, 2014; Rainer, 2010), including psychologists (Bhar et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 2014), which leads to poor access to appropriate educational and health services (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Jameson & Blank, 2007). Additionally, scholars have also found differences in terms of social or cultural practices when comparing rural and urban areas. For instance, in adolescents' behavior (Ceballos Ospino et al., 2007; Cotter & Smokowski, 2016), parenting practices (Vera Noriega & Martínez Ortega, 2006), and gender violence (Ferrer Lozano & González Ibarra, 2008). These specificities and differences end up generating unique problems, challenges and contexts for research and practice (Harvey, 2000, Riding-Malon & Werth, 2014), which require a specific and contextualized intervention on the part of psychology and psychologists, and not one derived from general principles. As Edwards and Sullivan (2014) put it, "effective professional functioning in rural contexts requires recognition of the subtleties of rural life" (p. 261).

Third argument: Psychology is framed and structured in urban terms. This framing is not circumstantial, but instead is a part of the history and structure of the discipline. As argued previously, several authors point out that psychology is framed in urban terms (Malone, 2011; Migliaro, 2015; Reis & Cabreira, 2013; Sánchez Quintanar, 2009). This includes psychological tests that are implicitly developed and adjusted for urban populations (Vera Noriega, 2002), a factor that is never mentioned when results are generalized (Albuquerque, 2002), public policies and interventions that fail to address the specific problems of rural

communities (Rainer, 2010; Salazar et al., 2011; Tarlow et al., 2014), theories developed in urban contexts with urban people that are used to ‘understand’ both urban and rural dynamics (Rojo et al., 2010), and psychologists trained (only) to work in urban settings (Helbok, 2003). Importantly, this urban framing of psychology does not seem to be circumstantial or peripheral to the nucleus of the discipline but quite structural. Most psychologists live, practice, teach and do research in urban contexts, and mostly in large cities. Thus, it is not surprising that their areas of interest coincide with those of their environment (Landini, 2015a). Additionally, the expansion of psychology in most countries occurred in the context of a social process of modernization, wherein the development of industry, the migration from rural to urban areas, and the growth of big cities was central and lead psychology to address those and related topics (Albuquerque, 2001; Leite et al., 2013). Finally, since its emergence in the 19th century, psychology has mostly followed the guidelines of positivism. This epistemological approach, characterized by prioritizing the generalization of results over the understanding of diversity, also seems to have led to psychology to render rural environments invisible and ignore its diversity because of a tendency to generalize results obtained in urban contexts with urban people. Thus, it seems like the urban framing and focus of psychology is not just a simple descriptive fact, but the result of specific historical and epistemological factors.

Conclusion: we need a rural psychology. In the context of these arguments, it is clear that rural peoples have tended to be neglected by psychology, despite the fact rural settings have distinctive characteristics and face specific challenges that cannot be addressed in urban terms. On the contrary, psychology seems to be urban-centered and tends to invisibilize rurality as a source of diversity, because of multiple reasons, some of which are quite structural. In this context, the need for psychology to have a greater involvement in these issues is indisputable, and the idea of giving the area a name such as rural psychology, in order to visibilize it, seems to be an advisable strategy.

Rural psychology: Meaning and preliminary characteristics

When we talk about rural psychology we do not argue that it should be considered to be a subdiscipline of psychology, because it would imply substantializing its nature and would lead to the problem of how to differentiate it from other psychological subdisciplines. Quite the opposite, when we talk about rural psychology we are referring to a field of problems and to a space of practice wherein rurality and psychology are connected, because both

dimensions have to be taken into account if processes are to be understood accurately and problems to be addressed properly. Thus, the existence of a rural psychology should not be considered as a need derived from the nature of things, but as an attempt to make rurality and rural people visible to psychology and psychologists (Landini, 2015a).

Such a psychology should not be based on the contrast between rural and urban environments (Albuquerque & Pimentel, 2004; Malone, 2011; Pizzinato et al., 2015) because, besides being the result of an unrealistic, stereotyped approach, it would lead to understanding rurality, again, from and in terms of the characteristics and dynamics of urban spaces and not its own. On the contrary, rural psychology has to be based on rurality and rural people before it makes any comparison with urban environments. In this line, rural psychology should also put into question and denaturalize the urban model of psychological practice, as well as the assumptions used by psychology to understand human experience that are based on research conducted only in urban settings or structured in terms of urban experiences.

Additionally, rural psychology should also pay particular attention to the environments (urban, rural and its diversity) wherein specific human dynamics and experiences take place (Sánchez Quintanar, 2009), avoiding unnecessary generalizations. In this sense, it can be argued that rural psychology should greatly value the contextualization of research strategies, theoretical models and psychological practices. Additionally, neither rural nor urban settings can be perceived as homogeneous. Time and time again, scholars argue that rurality is diverse (Bonomo et al., 2011; Curtin & Hargrove, 2010; Edwards & Sullivan, 2014; Rainer, 2010; Silva & Silva, 2013; Tarlow et al., 2014), which implies that it should be understood in its specificities and diversity. Likewise, rural people should be understood in terms of what they have in common with each other as well as their differences (Helbok, 2003).

In order to understand human experiences and dynamics, rural psychologists have to adopt a complex approach that considers how bio-physical, socio-political and economic processes impact human experience in rural settings (Landini, Long et al., 2014). In this sense, it is clear that rural psychology has to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue with social and natural sciences (Landini, 2015b; Zuchiwschi & Fantini, 2015), as well as with rurals' knowledge and wisdom (Migliaro, 2015; Singh, 2002) as a means to properly understand rural experience in its diversity and complexity.

Finally, our characterization of rural psychology has to also take into account that rural communities tend to be underserved, that they are subject to multiple disadvantages and, particularly in developing countries, they are home to multiple oppressed and excluded social groups. Thus, it is also essential that rural psychology, based on the principle of social justice,

engages in advocacy for improved access to public services and growing social equity of disadvantaged rural communities (Bradley et al., 2012; Malone, 2011). Moreover, following the principles of the psychology of liberation (Montero & Sonn, 2009), we also argue that rural psychologists should acknowledge how their practice and approach are (implicitly or explicitly) contributing to reproducing or changing long-term social inequities and injustices of highly marginalized rural communities and make a free, conscious decision regarding which social interests and groups are to be supported.

Challenges and final reflections

In this paper, the current situation of psychology in rural areas was presented and the need for a rural psychology discussed. This article is the result of an internet and literature review in English, Spanish and Portuguese, which speaks of its amplitude but also of its potential shortcomings. For instance, no articles from China and Russia (two of the biggest and most populated countries in the world) were found in the process. Interestingly, important, unexpected differences between developing and developed regions were identified during the analysis, which broaden the results and opened new lines of thought.

In this context, we think that rural psychology, understood as a proposal and an opportunity, faces several key challenges on its way to becoming a relevant area of interest and debate within psychology. Firstly, rural psychologists have to make visible and to put into question the assumptions, traditions and practices that lead them to implicitly use the psychology of urban people as a general pattern or blueprint for psychology. If conducted seriously, such a task will support more firmly the need for a rural psychology, as well as enrich psychology as a whole.

Secondly, rural psychology also has the challenge to show real usefulness, which involves generating contributions to psychology as a science, for the practice of psychologists working in rural settings and to the wellbeing of rurals. Moreover, rural psychology also has to demonstrate that it has the capacity to generate new ideas as well as more egalitarian rural societies. Thirdly, in a context where different scholars argue that psychologists usually have no education or training to work in rural areas, rural psychology has to seriously address the challenge of generating training and education programs for psychologists that are working or may work in rural settings.

Undoubtedly, these challenges are difficult and there is no proof that they will be overcome. However, there is no doubt that, in this process, there is nothing to lose and much to win.

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