

Reflections on the 'expert syndrome': a Greek case study on extension education

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Abstract:

The current paper explores the issue of extension education through research carried out in a Greek rural area. The target-group comprises participants in the 'Young Farmers Programme', a programme aiming at supporting new entrants in farming. Young Farmers' (YFs) attitudes towards and relationships with agronomists, with the latter being involved in either training or advice provision, are explored. To refine such an exploration different groups of YFs (those at plain areas vs. those at mountainous ones and thus of the respective production systems) and agronomists (public vs. commercial advisors) are distinguished. The analysis expands on the attitudes of YFs towards scientific and local knowledge as well as on agronomists' practice. Such an analysis allows, in turn, for the illustration and critical discussion of this component of the current AKS in Greece.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world of farmers is changed enormously. Major shifts have taken place: from productivist agriculture under a, more or less, protectionist economic regime to multifunctional agriculture having to operate in liberalized global markets - as well as to deal with a variety of societal requirements regarding product quality, ecological and social sustainability, animal welfare, and food safety. Accordingly, farmers have been encouraged to become more market oriented, to seek new opportunities, and to act in a more strategic manner, i.e. to become entrepreneurs. This, in turn, requires on the part of farmers the development of not only good technical skills but of business skills as well (Kilpatrick, 2000; Matilla et al., 2007) Moreover, given that such a challenge has proven quite difficult for many farmers, developed countries sought to support farmers through the provision of a variety of extension and training services (Phillipson et al., 2004).

The positive relationship between education and training, and farm business outcomes, i.e. productivity, profitability and sustainability is largely confirmed (Kilpatrick, 2000; Kilpatrick and Johns, 2003; Ulimwengu and Badiane, 2010). As Winter (1997) illustrates, knowledge, skills and aptitudes explain the differential production outcomes between business people occupying identical resources (capital, labour and land); the fourth factor of production, knowledge, is thus as important as the commonly held as the key resources deployed in production.

Education and training have been shown to improve farmers' ability to make successful changes to farming practices, including farm-management practices, and assist farmers to become more innovative and flexible (Kilpatrick and Johns, 2003). In the same vein, Kilpatrick and Rosenblatt (1998) argue that education and training improves farmers' willingness and ability to make successful changes to their farm management practices by: making them aware of a greater number of possible new practices; enhancing their ability to select changes

that will be successful; and developing a positive attitude to new practices and increasing confidence to make changes. According to Kilpatrick (2000) research findings show that education and training facilitate successful changes in practice in three broadly defined ways: first, by delivering new knowledge and skills; second, by providing interaction with 'experts'; and third, by providing opportunities for interaction with peers.

At the same time though, sections of farmers are sceptical towards agricultural training services claiming that farmers have always managed without much education, i.e. by developing an 'instinct' through experiential learning (Kilpatrick, 2000). Or, through a sort of informal 'family education' which conveys the knowledge and skills necessary for meeting farmer's requirements along with the farmer's own lifelong 'learning by doing' (Sachs, 1979). Indeed, research has shown that the less-academic sons have traditionally worked on and inherited the farm; therefore, formal courses are viewed as too theoretical for 'practical' farming. In this respect, within this overwhelmingly family business, local knowledge, the willingness to work hard and independence are for them the important characteristics of a farm manager (Kanteres and Koutsouris, 2000; Kilpatrick, 2000).

2. Aim and Methodology

This paper aims at exploring Young Farmers' (YFs) perceptions concerning (and, therefore, practices vis-à-vis) non-formal agricultural education, i.e. various kinds of extension activities and short-term training (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974), and, subsequently, 'expert' knowledge.

Our target-group were participants in the 'Young Farmers Programme', a programme aiming at enhancing the renewal of the farming population through the provision of economic incentives to young (up to 40 years old) people, newentrants into farming, established by the European Union since the early '90s. A requirement of the programme is YFs' training for at least 150 hours within three years after their access into the programme. These short-term training schemes, provided by the Greek Extension Service, are the entry point of this paper.

In this article we focus on the YFs of two municipalities (comprising 12 villages) in Aetoloakarnania Prefecture, Western Greece Region. The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews in the framework of field research (2002-2005) addressing the economic and socio-cultural changes in Aetoloakarnania owing to the 'death' of the, thus far characteristic for the area, traditional tobacco cultivation. The interviews were video-taped and, after each interview, analysed through manually sorting and coding the material (Patton 1980). Furthermore, the fact that one of the researchers was born and raised, and still keeps strong ties with the area has benefitted the analysis in terms of constructing 'the big picture' of people's lives and gaining deeper insights on the topic explored here.

3. Results

'Young Farmers' in the study area comprise 104 men (78.1%) and 29 women (21.8%). The data utilised in this paper were drawn from representative sample of 31 males and 9 females. Their age ranges between 21 and 40 with an average of 30 years old. Two out of three males and one out of three females are single. Their educational status varies: 12 have attended only primary school, another 15 lower secondary (Gymnasium), 12 higher secondary (Lyceum) and one Higher Technological Education; women are better educated. Most of them (58% of the males and 55.6% of females) entered farming through the passing of (part of) the family farm to them. As far as their production orientation is concerned 25 cultivate tobacco (average: 0.8 ha.), 28 olive trees (average: 0.7 ha.) and 18 are animal breeders (average of 57 of sheep and goat heads); 6 keep only livestock (average: 105 heads). A further feature of YFs' life is that all males (single and married) live with their parents in the family home while married women live with their parents in law. Finally, it is worth mentioning that all but three of the interviewed YFs had tried to get a job elsewhere, failed and returned to their villages. Especially as far as males are concerned, it should be stressed that the prevailing succession

system, that is, the expectation that they (sons) will become the owners of the family's property (land, machinery, cash and house), functions as a pull factor for them to stay (or return) in the area (and farming).

3.1 'Obstacles' to training

There is a continuous suspicion that the Extension Service invites 'their own people' to the seminars held in the framework of the 'Young Farmers' programme (clientelism). As YFs comment, some did not receive any official invitation to attend the seminars. According to P28: "Some of us were invited to attend the seminar and the rest were supposed to be invited on a later stage; but I was not invited". This, for P5, extends to the waste of the financial resources devoted to training "They did not invite YFs but others, who were not interested in the subject but in the remuneration provided".

On the other hand, some YFs were invited but did not attend as they claimed that they did not have free time. P3, an animal-breeder, says "I was told to go but I am a shepherd, I have to be all day round with the animals". In a similar fashion P11 states "I couldn't go; how can I cope? I have to graze the animals".

Problems are aggravated by the lack of interest in specialised, scientific knowledge and thus education/training. Local knowledge and experience seem to satisfy everyday needs with additional knowledge not being deemed useful or necessary. Thus, according to P31 "What does training have to offer? [he laughs]. We know. Training about how to milk the sheep, how to feed them ...? I know since I was ten ... I don't believe I need anything more".

Nevertheless, some YFs attended the seminar. But they did not find any interest in the lessons. As P25 claims "They were talking in general, even about the ozone layer! ... they were lecturing about the holm-oak! What can they teach me about it? I know it since I was a child ... The guy had never seen one!" P22 is sharper, stressing that it was a waste of time and energy: "I had to go for a month to the city and attend; then I come back home and there is no further support. Well, it's meaningless".

'Training' is also offered by private companies in the framework of the promotion of new inputs. The detailed knowledge provided and the well organised presentations seem to mobilise quite a few among the YFs. According to P12 who attended a seminar on the improvement of the Virginia tobacco treatments: "I went to seminars [presentations] organised by an agronomist I knew of ... they were quite good. I attended all of them ... They were about tobacco curing. He may have had his self-interest as a private agronomist but he was good at his job". Similar was the interest shown by P13 when a company invited him in a presentation about animal drugs: "I have never been invited by the Extension Service ... When I was invited by the company I rushed".

3.2 Experience vs. 'expert' knowledge

YFs' 'experiences' end up as the real or imaginary alibi put forward to deny either formal education or training in the framework of the 'Young Farmers' programme. Nevertheless, 'experience' is not strictly personal in the sense that it is not 'shielded' from either the knowledge available in the local society or scientific/expert knowledge. Within such complex dynamics 'experts' and the family/local society make up the two basic poles of the locally available 'scientific' and 'experiential' knowledge. Due to the diversification of agriculture in the study-area, and indeed in Greece, such dynamics are outlined separately with respect to mountainous and plain areas.

Mountainous areas. In the mountainous areas the use of inputs (fertilizers and pesticides) as well as the range of production alternatives has always been limited. In these areas, the

primacy of either the agronomist or the father mainly relates to the traditional, sun-cured tobacco cultivation. In the long term, this cultivation has not been subject to any significant changes. Therefore, family experience, transmitted to farmers since their childhood, has always constituted their basic technical knowledge. Agronomists are thus mainly seen as input suppliers, especially in case of phytopathological diseases getting out of hand; but strong trust relationships have not been established between the two parties.

Quite some YFs perceive of the family (or their immediate social environment) as the main and trusted source about tobacco treatments. As P38 argues “whatever I know I learnt from my father; if you work in the fields everyday with your father, one way or another, you learn, it isn't difficult ...”. Sometimes the cautiousness vis-à-vis agronomists is lessened, especially when the change of pesticides is continuous and does not allow one to draw secure conclusions through usage. As P1 argues “I learnt from my parents; we were working side by side for a long time ... [Q: Do you get advice from agronomists?] Well, when things get tough we do not keep to our own line, we don't spray ad hoc; the agronomist provides some suggestion on what is needed ... [Q: Does the agronomist know?] Well, that's his job”. According to P40 “my father used to use other pesticides ten years ago ... now one changes almost every year and then he forgets about them. As the time passes by, I trust the agronomists more; I don't know why, but nowadays pests multiply, you have to spray continuously. Well, I ask the agronomists about it!” Nevertheless, YFs' attitude is still cautious and changing, especially in the case of animal breeders. “Well, I still value some of my parents' knowledge” P38 argues “but I also listen to science, the agronomist, about new drugs and the like. But I still retain some of my parents' knowledge”.

Nevertheless, it seems that, finally, the balance is overthrown in favour of the local society, the basic factor being the alleged lack of experience on the part of agronomists. According to P39 “I trust more local farmers than agronomists. Farmers live with it and face the problems everyday; agronomists do not have practical ways to deal with problems. Farmers have the everyday experience ...”. In parallel, there is always the suspicion that particularly private agronomists are only concerned with their self-interest, i.e. selling the products of the company they represent. In this respect, according to P40 is as follows: “[Q: When the agronomist sells, does he also provide advice to you?] No, nothing of the kind. [Q: Why is that?] Don't know. He may be interested only to sell ... Some of the drugs may cause cancer or damage the environment; I guess he won't tell. Nobody has ever told me anything about it.” In some cases the economic interests of agrochemical companies and agronomists become blatant. For P36 “We do not use many drugs as it rains very often. Nevertheless, agronomists insist that we must apply the drugs; he wants to sell, he argues only about the positive aspects not the negative ones”.

Plain areas. In the plains, the wide range of cultivated plants and the production potential along with the presence of many private agronomists increase YFs' doubts about both parents' and agronomists' knowledge.

In the first place, the infallibility and prediction power of parental knowledge vis-à-vis any other knowledge form is deeply-seated in YFs' consciousness. When talking about his father P12 maintains: [Q: Where did he get this knowledge?] Through experience; if you are involved in agriculture you learn. There are things for which you don't need to go to the University to learn. You learn better in the field”. This image of experiential knowledge which is superior to that of the agronomist is verified by P3: “He knows because he has been farming for ages. Sometimes, my father knows more than the agronomist.” The superiority and validity of father's knowledge is transmitted to their heirs, so that the latter also feel they become 'experts'. “More or less” according to P22 “we are all experts, 'agronomists'. We, the

farmers, know more due to the evolution of the ways we cultivate.” Or as P25 claims: “We have become ‘professors’ about cultivation through years of experience.”

Nevertheless, rural society and agriculture change and, along with them, the significance of knowledge and the role of agronomists also change. As P14 maintains “Tradition was a different path, but now everything has changed; one needs more information; in the old times people didn’t know”. As P8 says: “I have seen errors on both sides: my parents and agronomists. But I believe that agronomists have the fundamental, the real knowledge”. The fact that agronomists have obtained a university degree provides their knowledge with a self-evident validity. According to P32: “I trust the agronomist, he has got a degree ... he knows his subject.”

However, the deep-seated image of the ‘farmer-boss-expert’ seems to ‘hang about’ leading to doubts concerning both parental and agronomic knowledge. As a result, YFs start to experiment. “Look” says P22, a cultivator of traditional tobacco varieties, “in the first place, if I don’t know I will ask the agronomist; he knows, he has studied the subject. But if the advice fails, I may ask another one or I will make my own trials ... I’ll do my experimentation and wait and see.” Such experimentation also implies that some farmers ignore agronomists’ advice. As P4 reveals: “While the agronomist may suggest to apply one bottle I will apply one and a half. Then I feel more secure; and I lower labour demands as I will not have to spray again!”

Overall thus, a deep-seated mistrust for scientific knowledge, its bearers or its traders is detected. The image of the ‘office’, representing authority as well as inexperience, is contrasted to that of the ‘farm’. As P25 says “The company produces a drug, they know about it in theory, they haven’t seen it at work. The real world is us.” In parallel, agronomists, especially public extensionists, are also seen as ‘hiding behind their desks’. “I don’t know why, but nowadays most of the agronomists have never been in the fields to see what happens there. They don’t really know; what they know is through their books; they are hiding, they are afraid, I don’t know what’s going on” says P12. Moreover, private agronomists are considered unreliable as they serve particular economic interests which do not allow them to take into account the specificity of each farmer’s situation or protect farmers from ignorance or exploitation. “I don’t have much faith in agronomists” says P20 “because all they want is to sell; if we applied everything they recommend we would be short of money”.

Nevertheless, the relationships between farmers and agronomists are much more complex. As P34, a big farmer’s narration reveals “... the agronomist is primarily concerned with selling. If I were him, I guess I would do the same. ... As I buy a lot, I have a good relationship with the agronomist, he’s a good guy and he’s open; he is knowledgeable and we discuss. But there is much more involved; he may have in the shop two or three different drugs, but he will try to promote the one from which he makes the most. He will not promote the most effective for the cultivation but the most profitable for him.”

At the same time the majority of the (small-scale) farmers face continuous dilemmas relating to their production needs, social position and family conflicts. “This year I had an argument with my dad. The agronomist made a suggestion” recounts P27 “... My dad objected and I replied that times have changed; he responded that he will do it his way. ... Who should I believe – I am in a dilemma”. Of course, others understand the complexity of the relationships between the bearers of different forms of knowledge. According to P13 “I don’t trust agronomists but I am in a weak position, I am made to believe them since they sell the drugs. Well, I can also listen to my dad ... but he has also got [at some stage] an agronomists’ opinion!”

4. Discussion

Overall non-formal agricultural education in Greece faces serious shortcomings. It is worth mentioning that since the access to the EEC/EU in 1981 the Service got heavily involved in fulfilling the increasing administrative bureaucratic tasks of the State (implementation of the CAP policies and control of subsidies); extensionists were thus gradually transformed into almost typical civil servants working in office. Therefore, extensionists became more than ever severely restricted vis-à-vis the provision of advice to Greek farmers (bureaucratic function; conflict between advisory and inspecting roles); information was provided to those of the farmers who actively sought it albeit in a rather fragmented, inadequate and inefficient manner. The vacuum created was filled by private agronomists either working for private companies or establishing local commercial enterprises promoting, in both cases, all kinds of commercial inputs (Alexopoulos et al., 2009; Koutsouris, 1999; Koutsouris and Papadopoulos, 1998).

In parallel, the Service's educational function has been restricted to short-term training (150-300 hours) in the local Agricultural Training Centres for those who were eligible for participation in the EU modernisation and YFs schemes (R. 797/85/EEC; 2328/91/EC; R. 1257/99/EC). Particularly in the last decade 150-hour training addressing YFs predominates, although short training courses (60 hours) are also provided. Although some of the shortcomings identified in the early steps of such training schemes have been tackled through the years, the overall picture of occupational training in agriculture remains unsatisfactory (Alexopoulos et al., 2009; Charatsari et al., 2011; Rigou and Koutsouris, 2011).

The research reported in this paper shows that clientelism, inappropriate content of training and the lack of interest in specialised, scientific knowledge constitute major facets of the problem 'agricultural training'. On the one hand, in conjunction with the aforementioned research findings, the supply-driven seminars of the Service are found to suffer in terms of the fit between clientele, programme(s) and organisation. Although gaps are almost inevitable (Maxwell, 1987) the situation in Greece is rather critical. In this respect, optimism emerges only from research findings indicating that it is the interaction with trainers, before and after sessions and at breaks, which allows YFs to obtain information on topics of interest and opens windows of opportunity for further contacts and information (Rigou and Koutsouris, 2011). Nevertheless, given the limited provision of training courses in Greece both Alexopoulos et al. (2009) and Charatsari et al. (2011) clearly indicate that there is demand for training, even if this implies fees, provided that the topics taught are of interest to (respond to the needs of) farmers and the duration of courses is rather short.

On the other hand, as shown through our research, most of the YFs' knowledge on farming is based on the transfer of parental knowledge through their active involvement in the everyday work in the fields; the exchange of experiences with their closest social environment follows in importance. Nevertheless, as the circumstances change (new varieties or plants, new pests, increased protection costs, need for updated knowledge to treat new drugs, protection of the environment, etc.) not only the content but the bearers of knowledge change as well. These, along with changes such as the rise of the YFs' educational level, challenge parental knowledge. At the same time though, YFs do not appear convinced for the 'superiority' of the agronomists' knowledge, upon who they rely for inputs and relevant advice.

Suspicion towards, on the one hand, the bureaucratic and clientelistic public extension and, on the other hand, the largely profit-oriented private agronomists, along with allegations that agronomists do not care about what is happening in the fields or are inexperienced exacerbate the situation. Space does not allow for further elaboration on the issue; it will thus suffice to note that both public and private agronomists hold certain positions in the social and technical division of labour, have their own interests, access to local networks, etc., factors which when taken into consideration illuminate agronomists' behaviour. Of course, such

considerations apply to farmers as well (see, for example, Koutsouris and Papadopoulos, 2000; Labarthe and Laurent, 2009). Additionally, the fact that farmers follow recommendations relating to rapidly changing physical products (such as fertilizers and drugs) without understanding results in uncertainty on the part of the farmers (Price, 2001; Wyckhuys and O'Neil, 2007) and further undermines 'expert' knowledge.

Moreover, in terms of explanation, the conflict between parental and expert knowledge and the interplay between 'persuasion' and 'dispute' should not be taken as strictly a matter of farming practices. YFs' claims about the superiority of parental experience should be positioned within the socioeconomic and symbolic family reproduction framework. In other words, it is a matter of whether the father is able to impose (or not) his knowledge as valid, necessary and indispensable. 'Age' or 'experience' alone, i.e. without the aid of power relations (land, infrastructure, capital ownership) which render such characteristics 'legitimate', do not provide an adequate explanation.

Hence, the overall picture one gets about YFs' consideration of both parents and agronomists (and their respective knowledges) is that of an ambiguity and, at the same time, of dependence upon them. According to Carolan (2006: 328) "individuals are often compelled to act 'as if' they trust experts and/or institutions because they feel they have no other choice, keeping any significant doubts to themselves".

Thus the experiments-trials that YFs carry out in their farms can be considered as complex processes concerning knowledge and its validation; experimentation is a way for them to challenge both parental and expert knowledges. An additional factor, not detailed in the present paper, relates to the dominant masculine nature of the world of agriculture (Brandth, 2002; Bye, 2009); in this respect, experiments and the production of new knowledge is an element enhancing male YFs' status among peers in the sense of a 'lay expert' who challenges or defeats those 'experts who learn from books'. On the other hand, female YFs, although more open towards agronomists' knowledge, are affected by their husbands' (or parents') views (who are mainly responsible for tasks such as fertilization and spraying) or tacit social conflicts (their higher educational level is ineffective in professional terms/farming), also conduct their own 'experiments' and have their own objections vis-à-vis the validity of agronomists' knowledge. Nevertheless, such experiments on the part of YFs imply 'learning in context' or the (eclectic) blending of different knowledges fitting particular farming practices (Eshuis and Stuiver, 2005) rather than knowledges' absolute incompatibility. Moreover, experiments take place on the basis of the current expert knowledge and practice.

5. Aftermath

Nowadays, changes pertaining the agricultural knowledge infrastructure, innovation theory and practice as well as the knowledge demand and supply side point to the current worldwide challenging scene for agricultural/rural extension education (Klerkx et al., 2012). Therefore, new concepts/approaches emerge building on networks, as social processes encouraging the sharing of knowledge and notably as preconditions for innovation; moreover, growing attention is given to various types of intermediaries or (process) facilitators (Cristovao et al., 2012).

On the other hand, the Greek situation clearly identifies with extension systems in which agronomists have the role of experts who disseminate technical information to highly dependent upon them farmers (see: Ingram, 2008). The Greek extension system has thus to be transformed. To this end, agronomic education has to change as well (see: Koutsouris and Papadopoulos, 2000). In the first place, courses on Agricultural Extension will have to be widely introduced in university curricula since the lack of such training results in a top-down, expert-led extension (and agricultural knowledge) system. Additionally, in the aggregate, agronomic education has, among others, to abandon mono-disciplinary and reductionist

science in favour of trans-disciplinarity as well as to change from transmissive to transformative learning (Koutsouris, 2009).

Such changes are expected, in turn, to result in the transformation of the present patterns of training which for the time being are not in a position to facilitate widespread change in Greek farming. Transformations might, among others, include, farmers becoming partners in negotiations over the content and style of learning programmes (Kilpatrick and Rosenblatt, 1998); training schemes tailored to issues faced by farmers while also addressing farmers' 'minimum essential learning needs' (Sachs, 1979); seminars delivered in a variety of ways in order to accommodate farmers' diverse learning styles (Knowles, 1990); training programs designed so as to encourage opportunities for interaction and sharing of knowledge and skills (Kilpatrick, 2000); or a turn away from activities delivered as 'training' (seminars) towards 'delivering information' ones which may attract a larger audience and interest (Kilpatrick and Rosenblatt, 1998).

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