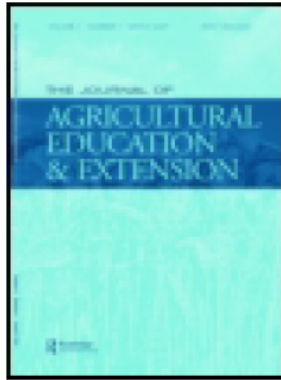


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The importance of the advisor's relational and professional competence and formal power in meetings with farmers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of the paper is to explore how advisors' relational and professional competence influences inter-subjectivity and farmers' perceptions of farm visits in a setting where advisors have formal power.

Methodology: Advisors from the dairy company Tine, which is owned by farmers in collaboration, visit farmers at least once a year. The aim of the visit is to assist farmers in managing the farm and to control the production conditions in the cowshed. In a case study, we attended 10 such mandatory advisor visits and interviewed both farmers and advisors.

Findings: Together with advisor style, our findings show that the power relation leaves room for advisors to define their roles widely, ranging from inspector to coach. Advisors have different perceptions of what their jobs are and when they have done a good job. These differences determine the degree of inter-subjectivity and how satisfied farmers are with visits. Furthermore, advisors' relational and professional competencies are crucial for achieving high inter-subjectivity and satisfied farmers.

Theoretical implications: This paper contributes to the theory by identifying factors that influence farmers' perceptions of advisor visits, as well as by showing the importance of the advisor's relational and professional competence in a setting where they have formal power.

Practical implications: Partly as an outcome of this study, Tine has started a process to separate the control function from farm visits. Tine has also decided to let farmers choose advisors themselves.

Originality/value: The power relation in our study differs from most consultant–client interactions in the literature.

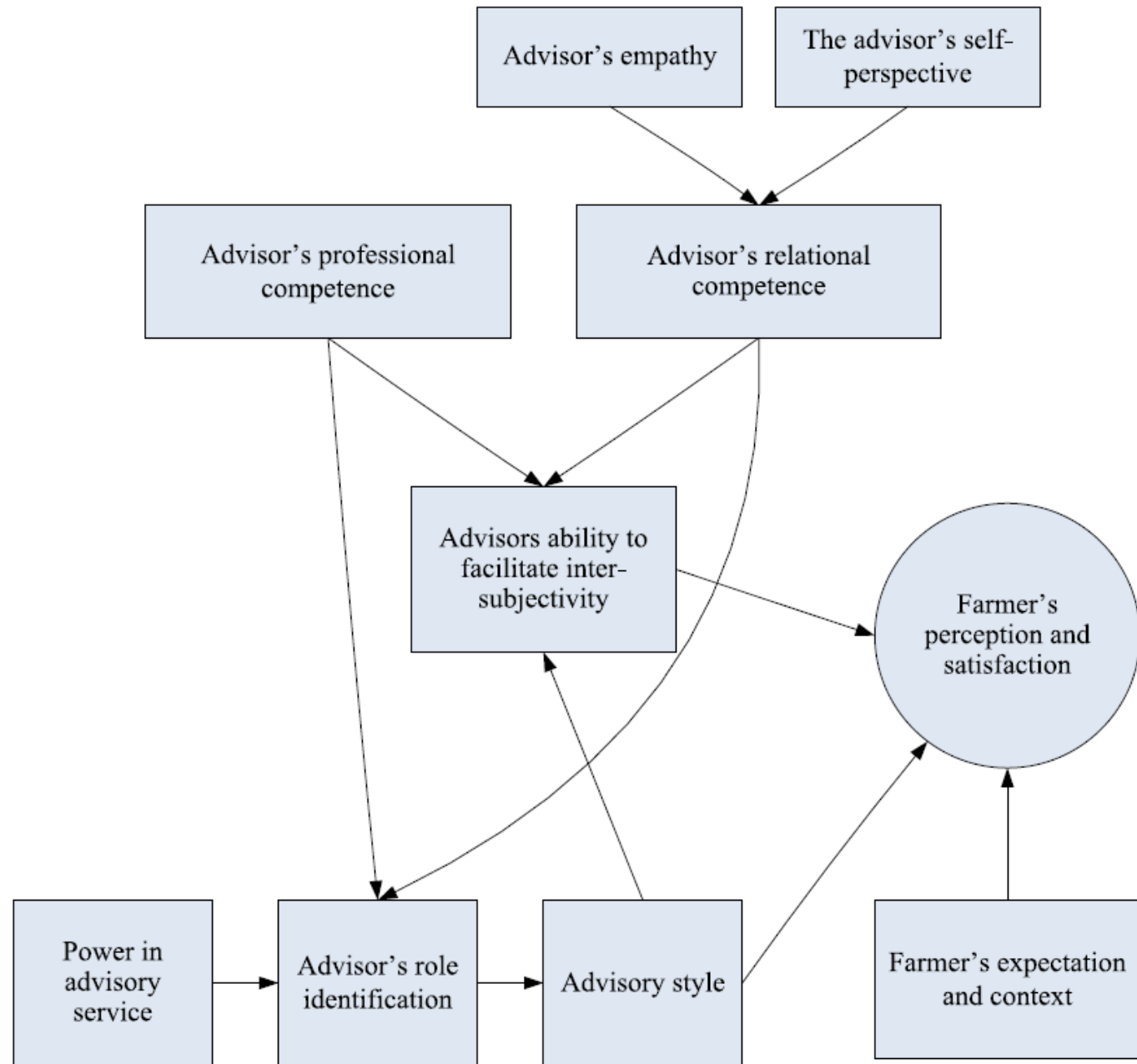


Figure 1. Factors influencing how farmers perceive the advisor visit.

Discussion and conclusion

This study differs from most consultant-client studies in that the consultants have significantly more power over their clients than what is common. The important aspect of this power difference is that it gives the advisors a relatively large amount of room to define their own advisory role and style. There seems to be interplay between how this power manifests itself in the relation and the advisors' competence. If advisors lack relevant professional or relational competence, they tend to emphasize the control part. The farmer then easily ends up as a passive consumer, as suggested by Alvesson et al. (2009).

Clearer expectations and orders from the farmer may contribute to sharpening both the consultant and the farmer, and thus their effort to make the service useful. However, the two female advisors in the study particularly demonstrate that it is possible to combine high formal power with a coaching advisory style. Thus, the advisor's role identification, relational competence, and professional competence determine the degree of inter-subjectivity and the farmers' satisfaction with the visit. Our findings support the view that 'understanding and sharing another person's lifeworld is not so much about learning a method – ultimately, it is about how we relate to other humans' (Höckert and Ljung 2013, 306).

An interesting finding is that farmers and advisors sometimes have quite different opinions about the outcome of the visit. Farmers may evaluate the visit based on their professional usefulness, while advisors may evaluate it based on how they perceive their own role and tasks. Thus, conclusions can be quite different. Furthermore, the same advisor can obtain different feedback from different farmers – for example, due to different expectations or farming contexts. If the advisor uses the same approach regardless of the farmers' expectations and the farming context, some farmers end up dissatisfied. Our findings clearly show the importance of adapting to each farmer and the specific context, in line with Rogers (1969) and Proctor et al. (2012).

The farmers expect to be challenged. Another important finding is that challenging the farmers helps to keep the conversation on track. However, to challenge farmers, the advisors need high relational competence, as emphasized by Røkenes and Hanssen (2015) and

Sewell et al. (2014). Furthermore, to succeed in challenging farmers, the advisor must have updated professional knowledge to contribute, in line with the findings of De Rosa, Bartoli, and La Rocca (2014).

Our proposed model appears as a useful tool to study the interaction between farmers and advisors, as well as the farmers' perception of the visit in situations where the advisor has formal power. Our findings are in accordance with Faure, Desjeux, and Gasselin (2012) in that improving advisors' capacity for reflection on their own professional activities is an important way to shape advisory services that are better adapted to farmers' actual situations. The results show that the unique context of each farmer requires replacing predefined agendas and answers with a context-dependent support process with aims to develop specific solutions. The notion of the joint construction of advice from both farmers and advisors leads to a revision of the advisor–farmer relationship through participatory learning methods, where both the advisor and farmers participate in the definition of the problem faced by the farmers and the construction of solutions to address the problem (Röling and de Jong 1998; Cerf and Hemidy 1999; Ingram 2008).

Our findings are in line with the findings of Andersen (2004) in that the style or profile of the advisor strongly influences the outcome of the interaction. Like Andersen (ibid.), we find examples ranging an advisor who delivers his advice somewhat regardless of the farmers' expectations and farming context, to an advisor who listens to and interacts with the farmer to construct tailored advice. Similarly, the high diversity between advisors reported here support the findings of Ingram (2008). While some generate interactions characterized by an imbalance of power and the divergence of professional knowledge, others provide a platform for the facilitation of farmers' learning in their problem-solving practices. Finally, our findings are in line with McLeod (2013) and Kvalsund (2015) in that the advisor's ability to enter the relation with clients in a good, confidence-building, and efficient way determines the degree of inter-subjectivity.

A suggestion for further research is to refine and explore our model both qualitatively and quantitatively. Future studies could also explore whether female and male styles of advising differ and how this affects the feedback from farmers in more detail. This study shows how the power of advisors may influence the outcome of the advisory service. Advising farmers is strongly related to empowerment. Empowerment enables people to make their decisions autonomously and have control over economic resources themselves (Dzecoa, Amilaia, and Cristóvão 2010; Meemken and Qaim 2018). In the case of advisory services, it means helping farmers acquire resources to master what they were not capable of before the visit.

In conclusion, the power relation leaves room for advisors to hold different perceptions of when they have done a good job. These perceptions influence the degree of inter-subjectivity, how satisfied farmers are, and how power manifests in the relation. Farmers' expectations and farming context can explain why different farmers evaluate the same advisor differently. The advisor's relational and professional competence is crucial to achieving high inter-subjectivity and satisfied farmers.

Practical implications

A strategy to empower farmers is needed. Partly as an outcome of this study, Tine's advisory service has taken steps towards separating the control function from the farm visit in the future to obtain a clear distinction between advisory and control tasks. Furthermore, Tine has decided to let farmers choose advisors themselves, which will allow farmers to access advisors who meet their specific needs. From a power perspective, paid advisory services contribute to empowering the farmer because the farmer can choose not to ask for them.