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Trust Formation in Agri-Food Institutional Support Networks

Abstract

The important role of institutional support actors in building the networking capacities of rural economic actors and communities has been noted. Over the last two decades, rural and agri-food network models of institutional support have undergone substantive change. Trust is a vital feature of such programmes, however the nature of trust, and how it is manifest, in rural support programmes is underexplored. A longitudinal qualitative methodology is adopted, involving semi-structured interviews and group discussions with artisanal food producers and institutional actors in four cases of business support. Drawing upon cases demonstrating varying levels of trust, the paper examines how trust is formed, and lost, across forms of institutional support programmes and the underlying factors that moderate trust formation. The analysis provides insights into the conflicting narratives around trust formation from advisor-client perspectives. The paper contributes to theory development by offering a conceptualisation of trust building approaches in advisor-client relationships in rural support programmes.

Keywords: rural; trust; agri-food; artisan; knowledge exchange; institutional.

1. Introduction

The important role of institutional or business support actors in building the networking capacities of rural economic actors and communities through legitimacy and established relationships has been noted in the agricultural systems and farming literature (Taylor and Van Grieken, 2015; Knierim et al., 2017). Networks of business support for agriculture and rural affairs have undergone substantive change since the 1990s (Klerkx and Proctor, 2012; Proctor et al., 2012; Sutherland et al., 2013). This has centred around the privatisation of public agricultural research and extension systems, with the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant model of governance (Labarthe and Laurent, 2013; Knierim et al., 2017; Landini et al., 2017; Nettle et al., 2018). In addition, a shift in objectives in agriculture away from production towards sustainable development, where the farmer is expected not only to be a producer but also an environmental manager, has led to a land economy which is more complex and diverse and where farmers have to solve increasingly complex problems (Phillipson et al., 2016). However, it has been shown that rural development initiatives risk being seen as too centralised by those in rural communities (Wellbrock et al., 2013) and that institutions only partially recognise the diversity of needs and competencies of producer actors (Chiffolleau, 2009; Faure et al., 2013; Wellbrock et al., 2013; Bouette and Magee, 2015; Cumming et al., 2015). As such, there have been calls for differentiated support for rural enterprises where needs are not being met by existing programmes at national or regional levels (Smallbone et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2013) and particularly in relation to the need for local and specific support for farm businesses (McElwee, 2010). Moreover, recent studies indicate a degree of competition rather than collaboration and coordination between business support agencies in agricultural systems (Cerf et al., 2017; Faure et al., 2017; Rijswijk and Brazendale, 2017). These developments raise important questions about the nature of trust in rural support networks, and how it is formed and indeed lost in advisor/institution and client interactions. Moreover, the role of agencies in developing trust in rural communities, through network development, is worthy of

research investigation. Trust is widely viewed as a fundamental characteristic of networks more generally, facilitating interaction between actors, knowledge exchange and innovation (Murphy, 2006; Sökjer-Petersen, 2010; Besser and Miller, 2011; Newbery et al., 2013; Jarratt and Ceric, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to examine how trust is formed, and lost, across various forms of rural support and the underlying factors that moderate trust formation. The paper poses two research questions: (i) how is trust developed within rural support networks, and (ii) how do these processes vary across different models of rural business support? With this focus, the paper makes three main contributions to theory development. First, it offers a conceptualisation of trust formation in rural network-client relationships, which seeks to explain the components of trustworthiness and the underlying elements that moderate trust. Conceptualisations of trust and its moderating influences have been lacking in the rural advisory literature. Second, it explores the challenges advisors face in building trust and the problematic issues leading to loss of trust. Third, it provides insights into the conflicting narratives around trust formation, from the institutional actors (advisors) and the participants (clients) in various forms of business support. A qualitative approach, with a longitudinal dimension, provides the basis for the empirical study, drawing upon cases demonstrating varying levels of trust.

The paper is structured as follows. First, definitions and conceptualisations of trust are considered, before moving on to review the literature on trust in rural network models of business support. Next, the empirical study design is described, which consisted of case studies of business advice programmes offered to artisanal food enterprises in Northern Ireland and displaying varying degrees of trust. The results of the empirical study are reported and then discussed, with reflections on how trust evolved in each case, and the ways in which trust was lost.

2. Conceptualisations of trust

2.1. Trust defined

There are many definitions of trust across disciplines and literature in the fields of psychology, economics, sociology and organisational science, where attention has been focused on trust within and between organisations. A commonly used definition is that proposed by Mayer et al. (1995) and in subsequent studies (see for instance; Rousseau et al., 1998; McEvily et al., 2003) in that trust is viewed as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations about the intentions or behaviour of others. Thus, when one party extends a willingness to be vulnerable to another party, they are expressing their faith, or trust, that the second party will behave honourably. Trust may be understood in terms of the ability to form expectations about aims and partners' future behaviours in relation to those aims (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). In this, each party holds expectations that something will be forthcoming, based on common past satisfactory experiences. The themes of risk and opportunistic behaviour are closely linked to vulnerability, where the act of trusting involves a willingness to assume that a partner will bear the vulnerability stemming from the acceptance of risk (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Trust is developed incrementally, over time in a cyclical way but where there is no history of trust parties must be willing to take a risk and a leap of faith is required to initiate the cycle (Curry, 2010).

2.2. Trust development

Studies have attempted to provide greater understanding around the complex nature of trust development through categorisations. Mayer et al. (1995) considered trust development in relation to trustworthiness, where perceived trustworthiness is a key predictor of trust. Mayer et al. (1995) consolidated earlier dimensions of perceived trustworthiness into a threefold categorisation: ability (relevant skills and competencies);

benevolence (a positive, caring orientation towards others); and integrity (adherence to acceptable principles/values). Curry (2010) extends the scope of trust beyond the individual trustor-trustee to the social system/network level and proposes that trust exists in three forms: personal (whether individuals trust one another); system (whether partners or networks trust each other); and instrumental (whether individuals/networks have belief in the wider system and things that they cannot actually know for sure). Rousseau et al. (1998) characterise trust in its different forms to include: deterrence-based trust (emphasizes the roles of sanctions in place for breach of trust, that would thwart opportunistic behaviour); calculus based trust (based on rational choice and credible information regarding the intentions or competence of another); relational or affective trust (based on repeated interactions over time between trustor and trustee); and institution-based trust (at the organisational and societal levels). The terminology used to describe forms of trust by various authors may differ but describes essentially the same phenomenon. For instance, Johnson and Grayson's (2005) cognitive trust, which is knowledge driven (for example, a firm's reputation or service provider expertise) and based on reputation in the market place, is similar to Rousseau et al.'s (1998) calculus-based trust. Likewise, there are similarities between Rousseau et al.'s (1998) and Uzzi's (1997) institution-based trust and Curry's (2010) system trust.

The temporal dimension of trust has been explored in studies that have sought to explore the processual nature of trust building. According to Akrouf and Diallo (2017) trust is stage dependent and its forms change over the relationship stages. Meyerson et al. (1996) developed the concept of "swift" trust to account for the emergence of trust relations in situations where the individuals have a limited history of working together, have limited prospects of working together in the future, and are involved in tasks that are often complex and involve independent work, with associated deadlines, and requiring continuous interrelating with others in the group to produce an outcome. Parallels may be drawn with the group of individuals involved in a business support network where many of the

characteristics of such temporary systems, requiring a swift trust based on faith in one's own ability and the expected ability of the other members, can be observed. In such cases there is neither enough time nor opportunity in a temporary group for the sort of experience necessary for thicker and stronger forms of trust to emerge (Meyerson et al., 1996). The development of trust that exists in temporary group situations is made possible by the presence of the advisor whose reputation is also at stake because he/she is responsible for assembling the group in the first place. The decision, therefore, to be a part of the temporary group will come about as a result of an assessment of the trustworthiness of the advisor. The role of the advisor within the context of rural support networks is discussed next.

3. Trust within rural communities and the role of advisors

3.1. Trust within rural communities

Trust within the rural context has been considered within the human geography literature as phenomenon that springs from, or is an expression of, strong social relations in communities. The concept of community has been defined in terms of the role of community as a social base, rooted in *place*, for a range of enterprises of different kinds, and the social foundation of the enterprise, where community enterprise can be understood in terms of the forms of social capital that enterprises engage in (Somerville and McElwee, 2011). Rural communities are often portrayed as being high in strong ties (Atterton, 2007) and bonding capital (Ring et al; 2010), and both of these are conducive to development of trust between actors (Huggins, 2000; Sage, 2003; Fisher, 2013). The nature of trust is viewed to be different in bridging and bonding relationships where trust is deemed to be thicker in bonding social capital, based on commonly shared norms, values, professional standards, and codes of behaviour (Fukuyama, 1995). However, increasingly, studies have challenged this assumption, noting that rural communities with abundant strong ties/bonding capital (particularly in proportion to weak ties/bridging capital) are at greater risk of insularity and

groupthink from network “over-embeddedness” (Uzzi, 1997), and for poor performance outcomes when actors are trusted too readily with tasks/roles that they do not fulfil (McEvily et al., 2003).

In the rural, agri-food context, it has been argued that networks, involving business actors, such as government support agencies and third level institutions, are critical to successful and sustainable rural development (Oreszczyn et al., 2010; Faure et al., 2012; Phillipson et al., 2016; Bourne et al., 2017; Landini et al., 2017; Nettle et al., 2018). Here, the role of advisors as “champions” (Hewes and Lyons, 2008) or “grassroot leaders” (Sokjer-Petersen, 2010), is key. These actors are embedded locally within the community, where they live and work, and are able to bring groups of actors together and motivate them to become personally involved in the network (Phillipson et al., 2004). The implication is that farmers tend to trust advisors more when they can identify with them. Trust and confidence in the advisor is also influenced by frequent meaningful interaction over a long period of time (Kuehne et al., 2015). Advisory actors face being alienated if they are perceived as lacking a detailed understanding of local businesses, politics and group dynamics and must bring extensive external knowledge to give credibility to their support role (Laschewski et al., 2002).

3.2. Challenges in building trust

In the literature on rural advisory services, the numerous challenges that advisors face in building trust have been documented. First, there are a range of client types and ways in which clients seek information from advisory services (Klerkx et al., 2017). The challenges presented here for advisors include providing appropriate expertise to meet the specific knowledge demands, developing trust relations, motivating disinterested parties who are not interested in change, and simply making contact with small rural enterprises and farmers that are less visible to agencies and who are hard to reach (Smallbone et al., 2003;

Labarthe and Laurent, 2013). Second, there is the complex task of negotiating between the needs of the firms in the network and goals of the policy or programme which finances the action (Juntti and Potter, 2002; Mole, 2002; Klerkx and Leuwis, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2013). Advisors have to deal with bureaucratic practices (Juntti and Potter, 2002) and the pressure on agriculture departments to improve scheme performance. Third, the success of networks requires impartiality and a neutral broker (Laschewski et al., 2002; Rijswijk and Brazendale, 2017), where the advisor should seek to be neutral in their interactions with clients, whilst also performing a guiding or steering function for the network (Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2009). Research has found that there can be some difficulty in convincing farmers and land managers of the value of external expert knowledge where there is the tendency of farmers not to trust “scientific” expertise or Government, generally (Oreszczyn et al., 2010; Fisher, 2013). In rural business networks the detrimental impact on trust of heterogeneity between firms' goals in a network, and the lack of transparency by agencies or decision-makers has been noted (Curry, 2010; Phillipson et al., 2006). Fourth, rural development initiatives risk being seen as too centralised by those in rural communities and for the benefit of larger farms (Wellbrock et al., 2013). Here, various studies have noted the importance of business support taking into account the socio-cultural context of communities to be effective (North and Smallbone, 2006; Ring et al., 2010). The example of the Emilia-Romagna region in north-east Italy is often cited, with its deep culture of reciprocity and trust (Rosenfeld, 1996). Finally, advisors are required to move beyond the role of knowledge provider to one of facilitator, with the need to deal with complex social and group processes which require strong interpersonal skills (Nettle et al., 2013; Landini et al., 2017). Advisors have been traditionally strong on technical knowledge but not in the management of social processes and group relations (Landini et al., 2017).

The literature reviewed here offers many helpful insights into the nature of trust in networks and the nature of advisor-client relations. Nonetheless, there are a number of gaps in knowledge that the current paper seeks to address through the research questions

outlined in the introduction. Firstly, trust building and trustworthiness have received little attention in empirical studies, with most attention given to the forms and elements of trust (Welter and Smallbone, 2006). Secondly, there has been little conceptualisation of how trust or distrust emerges in a particular social or economic context (Murphy, 2006). Thirdly, and in relation to the social/economic context, there is a gap in knowledge on the nature of trust, and how it is manifest, in rural communities (Richter, 2017). Fourthly, within the growing literature on rural advisory services where reference has been made to trust issues, this has been framed in terms of the advisor-client, one-to-one, relationship and there has been limited attention given to trust development within group networks. This study thus seeks to address these gaps by providing further understanding of how trust develops, or not, within the contextual setting of rural and agri-food business support networks. We seek to explore the processes for building trust through the conceptual lens of trustworthiness, where trustworthiness is viewed as crucial to the development of trust (Mayer et al., 1995; McEvily et al., 2003).

4. Methodology

4.1. Study context

This research was part of a wider study into the role of business support in knowledge exchange and innovation within artisanal food networks. The paper reports on one part of the study which explored trust relations between artisanal producers and business support actors, in the context of four cases of rural business support. The empirical material drawn upon in this paper provided a dataset from which case data were compiled. The geographical context for the study is the United Kingdom (UK) region of Northern Ireland. Under Northern Ireland's devolved, regional, government, the model of business support remains largely public based and there has not been the same degree of pluralism and level of privatization of rural advisory services that has been documented in

other parts of the UK (Klerkx and Proctor, 2013) and across Europe (Knierim et al., 2017). In the past, Northern Ireland regional policy has been criticised by agri-food sector representatives for failing to deliver one overall approach for the agri-food sector, and despite the numerous business development programmes in the area of food, at regional and local levels, there has not been an integrated approach taken to their delivery (Agri-Food Strategy Board, 2013). Therefore, in Northern Ireland advice for rural and agricultural clients takes various forms and continues to be supplied via a range of bodies and agencies, each pursuing discrete goals and priorities. This raises interesting questions about how clients view the contemporary business support landscape and the institutions which inhabit it, and it also raises questions about how trustful relations emerge between support service advisors and their clients.

4.2. Cases of rural, agri-food business support

From the analysis of the dataset, four distinct types of business support provider were identified as representative of the main supports used by small agri-food businesses and were selected to illustrate how trust is formed across various types of rural business support. The cases contain varying forms of business support, including one or more specific support programmes, or support that is provided on a more generalised basis rather than through delineated programmes. Only one of the cases (Case A) had a programme end date.

Table 1 provides an overview of the cases. The number and sub sectors of participants from the study sample are highlighted.

Insert Table 1 here

Case A is an intermediary model at local authority level which involved an advisor (consultant) providing mentoring, formalised knowledge, and networking opportunities, on a business development programme. This business development programme ran from 2009 to 2011, administered by the then Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), a devolved institution for delivering economic development policy for Northern Ireland (now the Department for the Economy). It was financed through EU Regional Development Funds matched by five local councils, plus small fee contributions from participants. The aim of the programme was to build a network of speciality food microbusinesses in the region, whose members would be supported by advisors to develop their enterprises via a mixture of internal knowledge exchange, learning and skills acquisition, and joint business development through relationships with external stakeholders (e.g. wholesalers, retailers and tourism professionals). The programme encompassed a package of activities, including themed knowledge exchange workshops, one-to-one mentoring, and introductions to external stakeholders.

Case B provides specialised rural business support through a devolved Government department for agriculture and rural affairs. It administers various forms of mentoring and financial assistance and provides innovation support for the agri-food industry and training programmes to help agri-food SME/small enterprises meet legislative requirements and enhance their technical competencies and business skills. Case B offers a broad range of innovation services to support product and process development including incubation facilities for new enterprises. Programmes have been designed specifically for small food enterprises to provide the opportunity to market test ideas where no immediate investment in food manufacturing equipment and facilities are required.

Case C provides generic business support services through a devolved Government department for economic development. It has a dedicated food division which encompasses all food industry development activity including food start-up activity. This team supports

market development and sector engagement with other programmes. The division is mainly focused on supporting export focused food enterprises. The agency promotes business collaborations through a network programme, and business to academia collaborations through a subsidised consultancy scheme.

Case study D is a regional food trade association that assists food producers to promote their businesses through its on-line directory and it provides assistance for food producers to exhibit at local food events. At a sectoral level, Case D seeks to market local Northern Ireland food produce generally through key agricultural events and good food guides. It views its role as to “support the food and drink industry to connect with consumers in local markets”.

4.3. The data collection process

A longitudinal, qualitative methodology was adopted, over a three-year period (during 2013-2015) incorporating the perspectives of artisan food producers and key business support actors. A staged approach to data collection was taken, which included interviews, focus groups, observations and documentary evidence. Producers and business support actors were identified through purposive and snowball sampling approaches to ensure that the selected respondents were information rich (Patton, 2015). Producers were identified from business support actors and from local council lists of businesses that had previously participated in business support from the local council or were currently engaged in a business support programme – thereby demonstrating a level of engagement in business support activity. The criteria for selection included that the businesses were micro in size (ten or less employees), were involved in either food or drinks production and represented a range of food sub sectors, which included: dairy, baked goods, oils/preserves, meats, confectionary, and alcohol.

Key business support actors were selected due to their experience with network support for the food sector and their knowledge and experience of the industry. These actors were representative of the range of agencies in the region with responsibility for providing business support programmes or influencing policy for the food sector. The business actors included representatives from public agencies such as local councils, trade body associations, central Government departments for economic development and agriculture, sector skills bodies, and innovation support agencies and private consultants involved in the delivery of government programmes for support.

The research process involved three broad stages of data collection. The first stage involved a review of the documentary analysis of policies and business support programmes in Northern Ireland relevant to the needs of small food producers. The sources of documentation included publicly available sources such as Government policy reports, industry reports, practitioner reports, and internal documents from business support programmes provided at local authority level. The documentary analysis allowed a mapping of current business support and key actors for artisanal food producers, which allowed for identification of business support actors for data collection and the identification of areas for questioning and probing with the respondents.

The second stage of data collection involved focus groups with artisan producers and business support actors. These group discussions explored themes around business support engagement at a general level and took place at business support events (these included events organised by local councils and also action learning workshops provided by the researchers). Unstructured observations were carried out at these events during this time. This consisted of informal discussions between the researchers, participants and business support actors, and observation of interactions between participants and business support actors. The interaction between participants and business support actors was particularly beneficial in providing insights into actor roles, motivations and prior experiences.

Field notes were taken during the observations and written up immediately afterwards. Emerging themes from the focus groups and observations were then used to inform the third stage of research, semi-structured interviews with food producers and business support actors, in order to explore research areas and emerging themes in more depth. Producer interviewees were selected from the business support events and focus groups, and from a larger database of eligible businesses constructed by the researchers. Table 2 summarises the various forms of data collection and the timeline of activity. In total, the compiled case data included 24 producers (who had participated in one or more of the case programmes) and 16 business support actors (representatives from the case organisations).

Although there was a broad sequential approach to the data collection, it can be seen from Table 2 that the data collection process was largely iterative in nature. While the focus group discussions commenced before the interviews and informed areas for further exploration in interviews, focus groups continued after initial interviews had commenced, as opportunities arose to participate in business support events that brought respondents together. The simultaneous data collection and analysis processes over a longitudinal period in effect meant that the nature of questions posed during the semi-structured interviews, and the group discussions, changed throughout the study as new patterns and themes emerged. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for prolonged engagement in the field whereby the researcher spent enough time in the context being studied to overcome any distortions or biases that are due to the researcher's impact and provided an "insider-based" perspective (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) to illicit a rich understanding of what was taking place in the sector over a period of time. The longitudinal design, and the triangulation of methods and sources, thus enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The data analysis followed a thematic approach based on repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes, in order to formulate relationships in the data. Analysis began

with a first reading of the data and codewords that were attached to the text. Once initial categories were developed, the next stage was segmenting the data into small pieces of information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A third stage involved coding, or applying categories to the segments. Next, more abstract, higher-order categories were developed and further reading of the data undertaken to get a sense of their scope, to check for “recurring regularities” (Guba, 1978) and for “emerging themes or patterns” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). This activity was accompanied by note-taking, in which observations and ideas were captured (Tesch, 1990). The qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (10) was used to assist with analysis of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews and the identification of core themes. The benefits of using this approach is that it allows for a more complete set of data for interpretation than might occur when undertaking this task manually. Therefore, this helps to ensure rigour within the analysis process (Bazeley, 2007).

Insert Table 2 here

5. Findings

There were varying degrees of trust exhibited across the cases. Two of the cases demonstrated high levels of trust (Cases A and B), and two cases demonstrated lower levels of trust (Cases C and D). Table 3 characterises the nature of trust in each of the cases, around three main components that engender trustworthiness in the advisor and the support institution. These components are knowledge capabilities, local embeddedness and empathy. The discussion will now move to consider each of these in relation to the cases. Thereafter, the challenges facing advisors in building trust will be considered. The findings that follow will make reference to trust at the interpersonal level (trust in the advisor) and trust at institutional level (in the organisation responsible for the business support).

Insert Table 3 here

5.1. Trust development

Strong trust building approaches were evident in Cases A and B linked to advisor knowledge and bridging/connecting capabilities. In both Cases respondents spoke of the proactive and enthusiastic nature of business support actors that allowed access to specialist knowledge and connected the participants to informal networks. An approach that centred on securing strong knowledge capabilities led to high trust levels in Case A. This included a clear focus on identifying and making connections to delivery agents/advisors and other contributors with specialist knowledge and the requisite expertise to bolster knowledge capabilities:

“We really worked hard at bringing in the right people. So they were given something they were not getting every day of the week. Making sure that if we brought them out to that workshop, it was worth attending.” (Advisor, Case A)

The advisor in Case A reflected on her network building role and the bridging capital that developed from that and on the degree of signposting and directing of participants to networks outside of the group. Case A demonstrated strong elements of trust and reciprocity that emerged from the development of friendships and a strong degree of socialisation, over time, within a small group setting: *“because it was a small group....we had all got quite friendly”*. (Participant 2, Cider). The advisor worked to supplement the interactions that took place within the more formal features of the programme with a breadth of informal encounters where participants could socialise in a relaxed manner. The trust the advisor inspired in participants became extended to peer to peer relationships as the trust building processes over the duration of the programme moved from formal knowledge transfer towards informal, peer to peer networking. The full benefits of the relationship development between participants were apparent following the end of the formal programme itself, as participants continued to meet and exchange experiences. The value of this form of

on-going contact after the programme finished, and the continuation of contact between the participants, as the nature of network involvement moved from the formal to informal, was noted. Reference was made to the *“the friendships that came out of the group and the willingness of people to share information....”* (Participant 8, Baked Goods). This deepening of ties was referred to by the advisor, whereby she continued to provide support to the participants long after the programme had finished:

“I would see some of them regularly, some of them had me back to do more work for them outside of the programme. That peer support network still exists after all these years. 7/8 years later that role still exists.” (Advisor, Case A)

The advisor thus played a key intervention role which helped to sustain peer support networks that emerged from the programme. The reference here to the deepening of embedded ties following the formal lifetime of the programme suggests that stronger trustful relations are developed over the longer period through the relationship building that occurs organically between the programme participants, and that is facilitated by the advisor, who is viewed as working for the best interests of the group.

Knowledge exchange in Case B was more formally structured with less opportunity for peer to peer informal network relations. However, the knowledge capabilities and connections/bridging role to the producers that was displayed in Case A was again evident and help was provided for network development, through the use of physical spaces and the facilitation of access to more advanced support. An advisor from Case B provided an example of her role in facilitating network building among producers by providing a physical space for interaction, whereby network development took place in the canteen area *“over a cup of coffee”*. In this case trust was built from the participants' familiarity with, and prior knowledge of, other participants on the programme through meso-scale processes or the setting within which trust is cultivated (Murphy, 2006). This process of trust formation, where

participants were encouraged to interact through the physical space surroundings, arguably allowed Case B to overcome issues of mistrust and perceptual barriers that the agricultural community may have had towards institutional or science-based advisors.

In addition to the use of physical space surroundings, and the development of informal relations and trust, Case B demonstrated further trust building through the instigation of more formalised networks with set goals. An example of this occurred when an advisor from Case B brought a group of producers together to form a cooperative network. The advisor recounted how he had facilitated the group for the purposes of a food quality (PGI status) application:

“They didn’t really speak to each other, they had no combined marketing - they just heard about this particular food thing and thought it sounded like a good idea, to one of them primarily, the others were a bit dubious... It took about two years to get through the whole process.” (Advisor 2, Case B)

The process represented a long-term commitment from the advisor to form the network in the face of initial opposition from the producers. The advisor was effectively working as a “champion” (Hewes and Lyons, 2008) and “grassroot leader” (Sokjer-Petersen, 2010), embedded locally within the community to bring groups of actors together and motivate them to become personally involved in the network. The network began to flourish when the advisor identified one of the producers as a second champion and influencer for the project. Here, the advisor recounts how he cajoled the producer to take on this role as he educated him on the background to PGI status and its benefits:

“He was bigger - he had a bit more control over what he was doing, so he, I guess, could see the benefits it might bring in from marketing. I sat and talked to him about Parma Ham and Welsh lamb, told him the story.” (Advisor 2, Case B)

Through these various trust building activities, advisors from Case A and Case B took a supportive, relationship building approach which displayed a high degree of benevolence and empathy with the clients. Support in Case A was characterised by a high degree of empathy, moving beyond a caring/benevolent approach towards a deep understanding of client needs, with the support tailored to company needs. This empathetic approach was key to trust development. Respondents referred to the importance of availing of tailored support and receiving mentoring from expert consultants. Demonstrating an empathetic approach, this programme manager from Case A signalled the importance of a flexible approach to business programme development:

“There has to be flexibility built into them to allow different businesses who have very, very different needs, especially food businesses...it has to be flexible, it has to allow for change if you need to change things...” (Programme Manager, Case A)

The advisor delivering the support in Case A was perceived as highly empathetic. Participants spoke warmly of the high degree of importance she placed on getting to know each of them, in order to understand their motivations and expectations. The advisor’s approach was therefore focused on relationship building with participants. A noteworthy consequence of this empathy was the high level of engagement of participants in programme events. The trustworthiness she inspired between herself and the participants also boosted morale within the network. In Case A, integrity was built by being true to one’s word and in following up on actions, and developing “chemistry” with owner-managers in order to develop their confidence:

“...doing what you say you will do, knowing enough that you will add confidence to the business, but there is also a chemistry thing that you will get on with them, you have to build that relationship. It is like selling to someone, if they do not like you, trust you, you are not going to get anywhere with them.” (Advisor, Case A).

This case illustrates that where clients trust the advisor, they tend to trust each other within the network, resulting in a strong culture of trust, where bestowing trust leads to an increase in trustworthy behaviour in the other party (Curry, 2010). Trust and confidence in the advisor in Case A was influenced by frequent meaningful interaction over a long period of time (Kuehne et al., 2015) which represented a level of consistency that fostered strong trust relations.

The process of trust building was evident in Case B as Advisor 2 reflected on a change in outlook that had seen him take a more proactive and inclusive approach towards building relations with participants, moving more towards an empathetic and benevolent style. This advisor further explained the importance of developing empathy through a communicative approach with the participants, using language and terminology that they clearly understood to gain their trust:

“I think I said to them that I understand their language...so I didn't say this is big bad Brussels that they need to impress, which again is their language...They knew I was doing it for them, so instead of thinking there is the man from the ministry... they knew I was doing it for their benefit.” (Advisor 2, Case B)

This signalled a move away from a reactive approach to one where he effectively took on the role of project champion.

5.2. Challenges in building trust

In Cases C and D, the regional economic development agency, and the food trade body, respondents were more distrustful. The common issues around lack of trust in institutional bodies (Fisher, 2013) were more readily observed here in relation to Case C. The perceived knowledge capabilities of this institutional actor was a significant factor in the

development of trust and impacted on producers' involvement in networks, and in turn restricted or facilitated knowledge exchange (Fisher, 2013). Respondents formed negative perceptions of actor knowledge in Case C from prior experiences and network involvement and this in turn shaped attitudes towards subsequent involvement (or lack of) with this regional Government department. The agency was viewed very much to be aligned with large business and a focus on export development. For the producer respondents these issues were compounded by a lack of understanding of how to get involved in the business support networks promoted by Case C, confusion around multiple offerings and frustrations with the levels of bureaucracy involved in applying for support. Respondents interpreted and assessed the level and effectiveness of this support in relation to offerings in other regions of the UK and indeed other countries. The Republic of Ireland in particular was cited as a supportive environment for small food production, moreso than Northern Ireland:

“The South have a different attitude.... The funders in the South (attitude) is, we have this money, how can we give it to you? Up here (Northern Ireland), we have this money, how can we stop giving it to you.” (Participant 2, Cider)

Furthermore, respondents believed that regional Government (Case C) knowledge capabilities had not developed sufficiently to keep up with emerging sectors. Thus, attitudes towards knowledge capabilities were also shaped by the sub sector context and its stage of development. For sectors at nascent stages of development or emerging areas of artisan production in Northern Ireland, such as cheese and cider production, some respondents bemoaned the lack of a knowledge base for specialist production:

“There was no-one else doing artisan cheese making in Northern Ireland at that stage. So their perspective is probably the same as a creamery...those big guys who produce thousands and thousands of kilos.” (Participant 3, Dairy).

This quote infers that the agency did not understand this new form of artisan food production. The findings further indicated a lack of trust in, and engagement with, Case C which was associated with fears around diminished control of the business and its identity, due to excessive interference from the agency:

“...sometimes what happens with businesses is when they accept help like that they end up with a totally different business to what they basically started with, because they have taken everybody’s advice and they got lost in the middle of it all.”
(Participant 4, Baked Goods)

This example of heightened fear reflected an underlying cautious approach to growth. Here, the intervention of the business support actor is viewed more ominously, where the actor is seen in a negative way to move the participant in a direction that is not aligned with the participant’s vision for the business, but rather one that meets advisor/institution goals. This is in contrast to the approach taken in Cases A and B which was more facilitative than directed in nature. These issues were compounded by a lack of consistency in advisors in Case C, whereby the frequency with which advisors changed hampered the development of relationships:

“...the major problem is the major changes from within and I certainly find on a personal level it is quite disconcerting for staff in there, one minute they have a portfolio, the next their job spec is changed either marginally or completely.... Continuity is a major problem in there, particularly for developing businesses, for people like ourselves.” (Participant 10, Dairy)

The findings also revealed contrasting narratives between advisors and clients in Case C and D. In Case C, the advisor invoked stereotypical narratives of trust to offer explanations for lack of engagement in its business development programmes. The advisor

in Case C attributed lack of engagement in support programmes to historical cultural issues surrounding the industry in that a wider culture of mistrust tends to pervade the sector and, by inference, lack of engagement is only to be expected in business support programmes in this area. On this theme, the advisor referred to the nature of family businesses in Northern Ireland that have been established over several generations and have an ingrained aversion to working with businesses that they have traditionally been in competition with: “...*only God and the accountant know their details; nobody else is allowed!*” This actor also made comparisons to other regions and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where in the Republic of Ireland “*companies seem to collaborate and come together easier*”. The respondent used the example of the comparative number of European funding applications in each jurisdiction to support this assertion. Conversely, where particularly trustful relations have been developed in Case A and B, there is no reference to wider societal cultural issues around trust, and there is a sense of greater engagement, which may suggest there are other factors at play rather than a systemic lack of trust among this group.

The conflicting narratives and sense of disconnection from support actors was also evident in Case D. Again, there was a perception that trade bodies increasingly tended to represent and reflect the interests of larger food businesses, who were not artisanal or specialist in nature, and that the enterprises were very much left to fend for themselves:

“(Case D) to me has lost its way, because they started off for small artisan food producers like ourselves, and now they have been taken over by the big multiple food companies, the big boys...they (food body) have more interest in promoting the big things in Northern Ireland, and the big companies of Northern Ireland, and for export outside of Northern Ireland, it’s all export led.” (Participant 12, Meats).

With Case D, respondents expected a more proactive approach in helping them to develop networks with other producers. Reference was made to the failings of Case D in

making connections and bridging to other networks. This viewpoint however would seem to misinterpret Case D's role which is aligned to industry promotion and reputational building rather than network building. This did not call for a high level of one-to-one engagement and empathy in terms of listening and tailoring support to meet client needs. The advisor did not see herself as providing formalised networking or even a signposting service (*"In theory yes but in practice we don't do an awful lot of it"*), but did see the need for *"encouragement, connections and contacts"*, thus demonstrating a degree of empathy for the needs of the producers.

6. Discussion

This study has sought to address a gap in knowledge around rural business support and trust by exploring advisor approaches to building trust and the factors that impact upon trustworthiness across various forms of rural business support. Table 4 presents the main themes emerging from the findings in relation to trust building approaches, the components of trust and the factors that moderate trust. These key themes from the findings will now be discussed and extended further, and several contributions to knowledge will be identified.

Insert Table 4 here

The findings provide insights into the nature of trust development in varying rural business support contexts. Moreover, they support the argument that the form of interaction between advisors and clients may vary between different types of supplier, depending on the client's perception of the provider's level of expertise (Curran and Blackburn, 2000; Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003; Mole et al., 2017) and how participants define and interpret the role of the various support agencies and their advisors. This is based on prior experiences and reputation of the support agencies and the advisors representing the

agencies, and the perceived qualities of trustworthiness (Sligo and Massey, 2007). In the current study, three components have been identified as pivotal to development (or not) of trustworthiness and resultant trust here, and include knowledge capabilities, local embeddedness, and empathy. The boundaries between these components are not clear cut however. For instance, relationship building is a theme that cuts across all three components. Mayer et al.'s (1995) conceptual model of trustworthiness suggested that the characteristics of trust are separable and thus may vary independently of each other. However, our findings indicate that the three components of perceived trustworthiness are highly synergistic, and necessary, for the development of trust in rural business support networks. In each of the cases of high levels of trust, the three components were demonstrated. In contrast, in the cases of low trust none of the components were observed.

First, knowledge capabilities included the extent to which clients felt advisors had the skills and competences necessary to carry out their job. This included not only the technical knowledge advisors possessed themselves, but also their leadership abilities, and capacity for connecting participants into productive and beneficial external networks. The knowledge capabilities component was evident in Case A, the intermediary, local council model of business support and Case B, the regional Government agriculture department. In both cases the advisor's knowledge and capacity for delivering real benefits impacted upon personal trust in the advisor (Mole and Capelleras, 2018). The findings thus support Huggins' (2000) assertion that the energy, enthusiasm and experience of intermediaries or brokers is key in generating effective interaction and exchange between participants. In such cases, the programme advisor is effectively a "grassroots leader", i.e. someone who can trigger collaboration in local settings, and is driven by passion and not by monetary incentives (Sokjer-Petersen, 2010). This is similar to the concept of animatorship, or the role of the animator, as more recently proposed by McElwee et al. (2018), where the animator inspires and encourages others to be entrepreneurial.

In contrast, Cases C and D illustrate the level of mistrust that arises from perceived knowledge capability deficiencies, where perceived deficiencies in advisor knowledge capabilities, formed from prior experiences and compounded by a lack of understanding and some confusion around support provision, impacted on involvement in business support networks. Here, participants make an assessment of the value of the institutional support in part based on repeated interactions over time between trustor and trustee (Rousseau et al., 1998) and in part based on reputation in the market place (Johnson and Grayson, 2005). In Cases A and B trust was built from the participants' familiarity with, and prior knowledge of, the advisors and other participants on the programme through meso-scale processes or settings, and the facilities and props that can mediate exchanges (Murphy, 2006). Cases C and D did not offer the same opportunities for face to face encounters, group meeting spaces, and repeated interactions, that would generate trust. An interesting aspect to emerge from the findings is how these interpersonal processes shaped clients' interpretation and sensemaking of support. This may be explained further using the example of a highly used form of support - the Innovation Vouchers programme. The programme is administered by Case C but is delivered through subject experts in universities and colleges. Although Case C introduced the initiative and manages it, the client goodwill only extends to the delivery agent, Case B, which suggests that trust develops primarily from relationships between individuals (personal trust) through the proactive, facilitating and committed role of the advisor, in close proximity to the client. This also highlights the issue of the institutional support provider (Case C) operating more at arm's length, not effectively communicating its association to the programme. This may be reflective of public bodies' changing roles with the agricultural community, with less direct interaction, and moving towards more coordination of support activities, as observed by Knierim et al. (2017). However, the findings signal the impact on perceived trustworthiness that in turn can impact upon levels of engagement.

Second, local embeddedness refers to client identification with advisors, which leads to credibility and legitimacy. Here, trust and legitimacy is achieved through being known locally or having a good working knowledge of, or relationship with, the local agricultural community, where “champions” are embedded locally within the community. The findings support the belief that clients tend to trust advisors more when they can identify with them and this gives advisors legitimacy (Laschewski et al., 2002). Cases A and B demonstrated high embeddedness, shaped by group dynamics and social interaction and the continuation and deepening of (client-client and advisor-client) ties following the formal end of the programme (Case A) and through the actions of the advisor in acting as a “champion” for a defined project (Case B). In contrast, for Cases C and D the findings indicate that a loss of local embeddedness leads to credibility and legitimacy being damaged, and trust lost. Here, clients’ perceptions of the institutional goals (focus on large business and export orientation) fostered a feeling of disconnection and isolation from these support providers which was largely related to the type of support provided, rather than as a result of spatial or physical distance (Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2006).

Third, empathy refers to the degree to which the business support actors attempt to understand and fulfil participants’ needs. The findings strongly support the assertion that business support advisors need good interpersonal skills (Ingram, 2008; Klerkx and Proctor, 2012; Proctor et al., 2012; Landini et al., 2017; Mole et al. 2017), and that the most effective network brokers are able to successfully mix the economic goals with softer social interests of participants (Huggins, 2000). It suggests that the interpersonal aspects of advisor skill-sets are critical in gaining access to knowledge and networks. Therefore, resistance or support for the programmes is a function of the degree to which the institutional actor creates a sentiment of trustworthiness in the mind of others (Murphy, 2006). A failure by the advisor to stimulate such an environment reduces the likelihood of embedded relationships developing, and thus of establishing sustained collaboration and co-operation. Reflexivity skills are needed on the part of advisors in order to recognise where trust is building or at

risk and to make adjustments to their approach if necessary. This infers the importance of strong personal relations and networks of relations in generating trust (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1997; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Alder and Kwon, 2002). Cases A and B demonstrated highly empathetic approaches, through the adaptation of programme content and relationship building. Cases C and D were characterised by lower levels of empathy. For Case C, this could be illustrated through inadequate matching of institutional goals (export and large company orientation) to client needs and a generic model which did not cater for emerging, specialist forms of artisan food production. Likewise, Case D was not considered to represent the needs of the smaller food business, artisanal and specialist in nature, and this impacted upon trust development. A contribution from the findings is the evidence to suggest that the interpersonal nature of trust, and a high degree of empathy shown by the advisor, can take precedence over the institutional aspect. This can be seen in how trust emerges through the role of advisor as champion/animator (Case A and B) and the interpersonal relations developed through close proximity between delivery agent and client. In the cases where trust is weak, greater levels of adviser empathy may have been deployed to overcome a mismatch between institutional level programme goals and client needs.

This conceptualisation of trustworthiness is subtly different to that proposed in earlier work, such as Mayer et al.'s (1995) categorisation of ability, benevolence, and integrity. In the current study, empathy captures aspects of both benevolence and integrity, representing not only the extent to which a trustor feels a trustee understands his/her needs, but also the extent to which a trustor views a trustee as someone who acts honourably and fairly. A marked difference in the current study's conceptualisation of trustworthiness is local embeddedness - the belief of trustors that they can relate to a trustee, thereby conferring credibility and legitimacy on him/her. While this component does not feature in Mayer et al.'s (1995) categorisation, the concept of embeddedness has been employed widely within rural research, given the values of community, and informal and friendship patterns in the rural setting (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Bosworth and Atterton,

2012; Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Hence, the results here signal a need to revisit existing conceptualisations of trustworthiness, with a view to building in a local embeddedness dimension.

Our findings reveal that the main components of trustworthiness are built on a number of elements that foster trust relations and these go some way to understanding the difference in trust relations across the various support programmes. These elements include consistency, communication and integrity. The findings reveal insights into how these play out across various forms of business support, and account for differences in trust relations across support programmes. In Cases A and B, where trust relations were good, consistency, longevity, and integrity were evident. This indicates the power of affective and relational aspects of trust in explaining differences (Rousseau et al., 1998). More sporadic contact in Cases C and D has had a detrimental impact on communication between the parties and, in turn, the formation of trustful relations (Fisher, 2013). For Case C a failure to effectively communicate offerings led to a lack of understanding of the support provision offered by the agency (Loader, 2018). The case of the food association (Case D) illustrates the difficulties that can arise when clients are unclear as to the trade association's *raison d'être* and the scope of its activities (Newbery et al., 2016). Moreover, there were consistency and integrity issues associated with Case C. In this economic development agency a regular change of advisors restricted relationship building with clients and agents were not viewed to be working in the best interests of the client (or lacking integrity). This led to some mistrust, where clients sought to maintain control over the focus and direction of the business.

The findings also demonstrate how wider sectoral-cultural issues can be used by business support actors to explain the deficiencies in programmes wherein there is a narrative of a wider culture of mistrust tending to pervade the sector. This transpired in Case C, where the difficulties experienced in recruiting participants to support programmes were

attributed to systemic mistrust. However, the experiences in Cases A and B would contradict this narrative and suggest that distrust may be endogenous rather than exogenous or cultural in nature (Sutherland et al., 2013) and not reflective of a general, sectoral distrust of institutional sources as suggested in the literature (Fisher, 2013) or the impact of the macro, structural context (Murphy, 2006) in restricting collaboration. This would imply that it is possible, through appropriate actions, such as improving the expertise of advisors and by taking a benevolent approach, to regain trust in institutional performance. If facilitation is empathetic and content is well tailored, there is evidence that cultural barriers can be overcome.

7. Conclusions

The paper will conclude with some final thoughts on the components that lead to trustworthiness in rural business network-client relationships and the problematic issues leading to loss of trust. The implications for management of rural support programmes and future research are considered. In response to a lack of conceptualisations of trust and its moderating influences in the rural advisory literature, the study sought to provide insights into the role of business support agencies and their advisors in developing trust in rural communities. A number of conclusions and contributions may be derived from the findings. First, trustworthiness in advisors and their institutions is dependent on the degree to which the components of knowledge capabilities, local embeddedness and empathy are present. Second, there is evidence to suggest that the interpersonal relationship between advisor-client as opposed to institutional level programme goals fosters trustworthiness. Third, the findings reveal the elements that underpin the main components of trustworthiness and how consistency, communication and integrity account for differences in trust relations across rural support programmes. Fourth, wider sectoral-cultural issues can be used by business support actors to explain the deficiencies in programmes wherein there is a narrative of a wider culture of mistrust tending to pervade the sector.

This study's limitations are common to other studies on trust in that respondents' perceptions of trustworthiness may be incomplete and perceptually biased. The specific limitations of this study and the implications for future research will now be considered. First, the study focused solely on food artisans within one geographical region. Further exploration of the nature of trust in artisan engagement with business support actors and the relevance of the components and moderators of trust in other sectoral and geographical contexts is needed. Second, this study did not set out to look at the links between institutional and interpersonal trust, though some reference was made to these linkages. It would be interesting to further explore the relationship between interpersonal and institutional trust. Some questions here would include whether advisor empathy can overcome a mismatch between institutional level programme goals and client needs and in turn whether strong institutional level trust can overcome poor interpersonal relations between advisor and client. Third, the study did not examine the impact of perceived trustworthiness on business performance in terms of measurable outputs such as innovation and financial performance. While this could prove challenging both conceptually and methodologically to investigate, future research should attempt to measure the actual impact of strong/weak trust relations between rural support actors and their clients. In relation to this, rather than assuming that trust has inherently positive impacts on business development, studies should take a critical perspective (Welter and Smallbone, 2006).

There are a number of policy implications arising from the findings. First, a lack of institutional trust in support agencies may be addressed to some degree by a greater degree of public and private body collaboration, or through the intermediary model (Phillipson et al., 2004). This model would appear to work well at local authority level when delivery is provided by skilled private sector partners. Second, the findings on the contribution of food body associations and a lack of engagement with these associations among artisan food enterprises would suggest the need for further strengthening of food producer associations

to represent the needs, and defend the interests, of such enterprises to a greater extent. As suggested in recent work (Faure et al., 2017), such a development would facilitate interaction and dialogue between producer organisations and the private and public sectors for the support methods necessary to gain the trust of their members. Third, effective design and management of business support networks, to foster trust and artisan engagement, requires a participatory approach where advisors would assume the role of facilitators rather than technical experts, requiring the development of strong interpersonal skills and training in dealing with complex social and group processes (Landini et al., 2017). Specifically, as empathy was found here to play such an important role in the development of trustworthiness, the interpersonal aspects of advisor skill-sets are critical to their repertoires. Technical competence and relevant experience are important for relationship building with clients, but not sufficient for advisors to perform the roles effectively.

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