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

Bjørn Gunnar Hansen^a, Egil Petter Stræte^b and Gunn-Turid Kvam^b

^aTINE SA, Advisory service, Ås, Norway; ^bRuralis- Institute for rural and regional research, Trondheim, Norway

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.

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Advisor; inter-subjectivity; power; relational competence; farm visit; dairy farmer

Introduction

In agriculture, the advisor role is more essential than ever in providing necessary specialist support to farmers, who struggle to meet the demands of changing production technologies, legislation, environmental processes, and policy issues (Ingram 2008). This calls for specialist advice that is tailored to the farmers' physical and business circumstances (Faure, Desjeux, and Gasselin 2012). Furthermore, different inputs of specialist expertise need to be integrated with the farmer's own understanding, expectations, and skills (Proctor et al. 2012).

Some agronomist–farmer knowledge-exchange encounters are characterized by an imbalance of power, distrust, and the divergence of knowledge, while other encounters

provide a platform for the facilitation of farmer learning in their transition to more sustainable practices (Ingram 2008). The client–consultant interaction is the most important factor for successful consulting projects (Schön 1983). However, we still do not have a good understanding of what consultants and clients do, and particularly what they do jointly (Sturdy et al. 2009). The poor understanding mainly arises because researchers seldom have access to consultant–client visits (Messervy 2014), as most consulting firms are unwilling to allow interviews with their clients (Nikolova, Reihlen, and Schlapfner 2009). Following Nikolova, Reihlen, and Schlapfner (2009), we think that focusing on what clients and consultants do within a practice-based approach will further enrich the understanding of this critical knowledge exchange relation and what influences the farmers' perceptions of visits.

Farm advisors from the Norwegian dairy cooperative Tine (key advisors) make one mandatory visit to farmers per year. The advisors have two main tasks. First, advisors are supposed to help farmers in detecting problems and constructing solutions (Faure, Desjeux, and Gasselin 2012). Second, they control the production conditions in the cowshed. Because the visit is mandatory for both parties and because it includes an element of control, the advisors have formal power. Our research team attended 10 such consultant–client meetings on farms and interviewed both the farmers and the advisors. Our aims were to shed light on what happens in such meetings between consultants and clients, as well as important factors for how farmers perceive the meetings.

A point of departure in this article is that the degree of inter-subjectivity is a main factor for the farmers' perceptions of the meetings. The relation between the advisor and client and its quality are fundamental in modern advisory theory (Kvalsund 2015, 42). This includes the advisor's ability to enter the relation with the client (the farmer) in a good, confidence-building, and efficient way (McLeod 2013).

First introduced by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, the term inter-subjectivity is used to conceptualize the psychological relationship between people during conversation – for example, for the process of understanding another person's 'lifeworld' and building a shared understanding – which we think is decisive for a positive perception of the meeting. Inter-subjectivity is about creating and sharing a joint room for interaction and thus represents the goal of the advisory dialogue (Haugan 2016). Therefore, we regard the concept of inter-subjectivity as useful to explore the meetings between the farmers and advisors and to shed light on the aims of our study.

This paper explores the inter-subjectivity in the visits, the factors that determine the degree of inter-subjectivity, and how farmers perceive them. Our research question is, 'What determines the degree of inter-subjectivity and farmer's perceptions in a setting where the advisor has formal power?' The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we present relevant literature and describe the empirical material and methods used. We then analyze interviews and transcripts from the visits. Finally, we discuss the findings and conclude the paper.

Literature review and theory

Inter-subjectivity and factors that influence causes of inter-subjectivity

Inter-subjectivity refers to an experience community for sharing emotions, intentions, and thoughts (Stern 2004). This state is established in communication between actors where

both parties understand each other. This situation is sometimes referred to as a ‘temporarily shared social world’ (Rommetsveit 1974, 29). Inter-subjectivity is about shared communication and the coordination of participants’ contributions. Shared communication means designing a recursive communicative process that makes the participants interested in each other’s contributions (Rommetsveit 1989). Understanding the intentions, goals, and emotional states of oneself and others is the primary inter-subjective mode (Bateman and Fonagy 2004). Reaching a high degree of inter-subjectivity in an advisory farmer meeting will probably increase the possibility of the discussion and advice being appropriate to the farmers’ needs and thus contribute to a positive perception of the meeting.

Due to asymmetries between the farmers and the advisors, the professional vision of the advisor may easily become the dominating and acknowledged one, as the advisor is the representative of the institution that has set the agenda (Bergeå, Martin, and Sahlstrom 2008). To overcome this dilemma, advisors should reflect upon their role by challenging the frames for participation in extension encounters (*ibid.*). Another challenge for the advisor is to understand and interpret the relational needs that occur in the helping relation (Kvalsund 2015, 45). It is therefore crucial for the advisors’ relational development to understand themselves, who they are, and how they can observe and reflect upon themselves in different interactions. Thus, relational consciousness and introspection are important advisor characteristics that influence their relational competencies. These concepts include the ability to relate to oneself and to ‘observe’ oneself from the outside. Similarly, the relational needs also embrace the advisor’s ability to create a context supportive of autonomy, competence and relatedness, which motivates and commits the farmer in an advisory setting (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Inter-subjective experience is an empathic experience and occurs when we put ourselves in the other person’s shoes. Thus, empathy is pivotal in social interplay (Rökenes and Hanssen 2015). It can be defined as ‘the capacity to share and understand another’s state of mind or emotion’ (Ioannidou and Konstantikaki 2008). Empathy means recognizing others’ feelings and the causes of those feelings and being able to participate in the emotional experience of an individual without becoming part of it (Keen 2007). According to Kierkegaard (1859), empathy is pivotal in helping other people reach their goals and is thus an important trait of an advisor. We suppose an advisor’s empathy is decisive in developing relational competence based on engagement and willingness to support the farmers.

High relational competence means that advisors should start the process of communication and learning with the clients’ current situation and what they perceive as meaningful and understandable (Rogers 1969). Advisors should be respectful and honest and give farmers unconditional positive recognition. In other words, they must create what Rogers (1990) denotes as a ‘therapeutic atmosphere’ or ‘climate.’ Advisors with high relational competence show reliability, trustworthiness, impartiality, and the ability to empathize with clients’ needs and problems (Waldenström 2002). They establish a high level of confidence, which increases the learning outcome of farmers, particularly if the advisor challenges them and questions their working practices (Hansen 2015). Relational competence is important for farmers and advisors to learn from each other (De Rosa, Bartoli, and La Rocca 2014; Sewell et al. 2014) and presupposes understanding-oriented communication (Karterud 2006). In this type of communication, both parties work

toward a common understanding and thus contribute to inter-subjectivity. In contrast, purpose-oriented communication aims at making the farmer accept the advisor's understanding. These two different communication styles are related to what Andersen (2004) denotes as the profile of the advisor, which influences the interaction with farmers.

Taken together, these perspectives embrace an individual's relational competence, which implies having a reflective view on how the context influences the interaction, knowing oneself, showing empathy, and being able to facilitate fruitful relations and interactions (Rökenes and Hanssen 2015, 43). It differs from action competence (Karterud 2006), which includes instrumental knowledge and skills, or what we in the following denote as professional competence, which is decisive in satisfying farmers' needs for new knowledge. We think that both the advisors' relational competence and professional competence influence inter-subjectivity and farmers' perceptions of the visits.

Power

Power can be defined as individuals' 'chance to put through their own will in social intercourse, although other participants in the collective life should resist' (Weber 1971). Thus, power is a property of all social relations. Basically, farmers are the owner of the dairy company and are supposed to be the principal, but the asymmetric division of power may turn this upside down. However, if the cowshed is filthy or the milk quality is poor, Tine can stop collecting milk. In 2016, Tine stopped collecting milk from 210 farmers out of 8584 in total due to poor quality. Although most farmers managed to improve their quality and start up again quickly, this example illustrates that Tine and the advisors have considerable power over farmers.

Advisors also have power in what Goffman (1974) denotes as 'definition of the situation.' When actors exchange messages, they simultaneously frame what subjects should and should not be discussed without explicitly reflecting upon it. Similarly, Bourdieu's (1996) notion of 'symbolic capital' involves convincing others to adopt one's own notions of reality, such as what should be considered normal or deviant. Advisors also possess expert knowledge, which also gives them power in the relation (Petersen 1993). Taken together, these power relations are demanding situations for advisors. They must subordinate themselves to a relational division of power.

From other fields, we know that how advisors deal with this combined role as inspectors and advisors is crucial. Thus, threats of coercion are shown to be less efficient in fostering compliance with environmental regulations than enhancing other aspects of social or normative compliance (Winther and May 2001). Therefore, we agree with Nikolova, Reihlen, and Schlapfner (2009) and Landini (2016) that understanding the power dynamics in the discussion of client–consultant interactions will contribute to greater understanding of the process.

In Figure 1, we present our framework based on the literature review. The advisor's empathy and self-perspective are important for the advisor's relational competence, among the other factors mentioned. The advisor's communication style is a part of relational competence. We think both relational and professional competence influence the inter-subjectivity during the visit and thus the farmer's perception of the encounter. There is reason to believe that the advisor's competence also affects their identification of their role and advisor style; that is, if they are able to adapt their communication style to the farmers needs for advice. In turn, this ability influences the degree of inter-

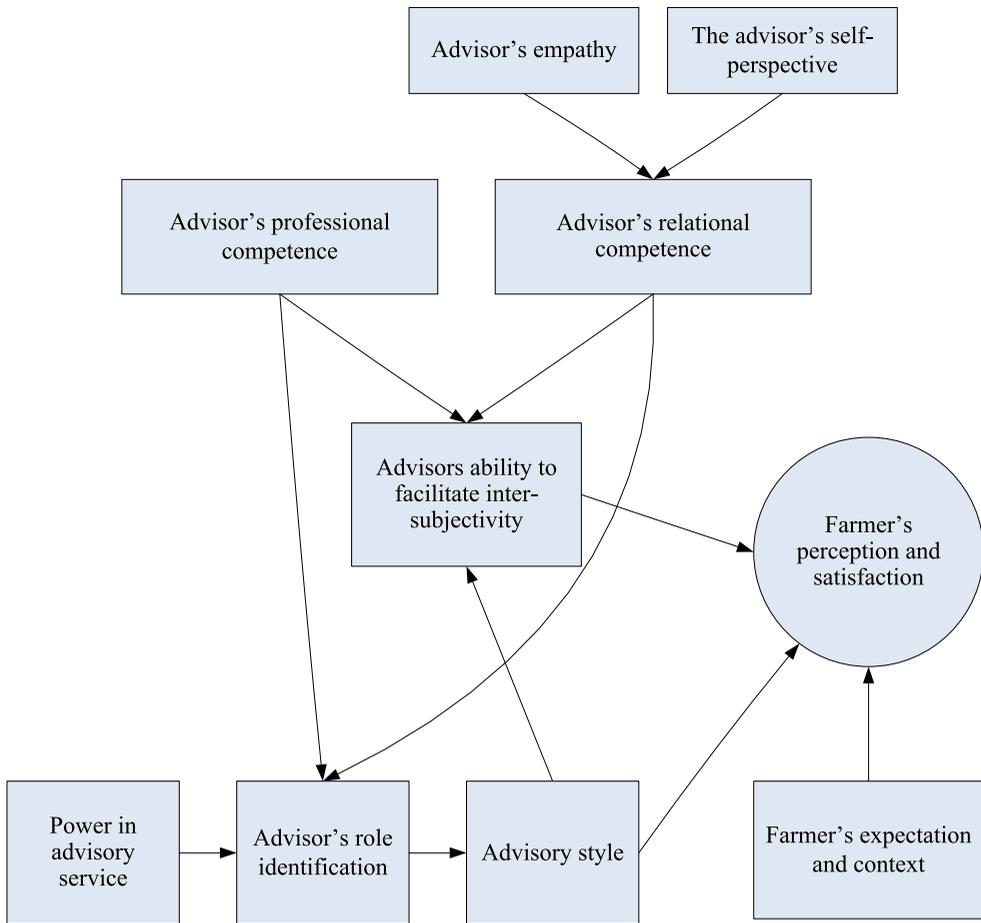


Figure 1. Factors influencing how farmers perceive the advisor visit.

subjectivity. How advisors perceive their role and thus their advisory style may also be influenced by the power embedded in the service. Finally, the farmer's expectations, participation in the conversation, and the farming context also influence the degree of inter-subjectivity reached and how the farmer perceives the visit.

Data and methods

The cases

When selecting advisors and farmers, our aim was to represent variation along dimensions like geography, 'types' of farmers, farming context, and advisor gender. The fact that advisors had to agree to participate could cause systematic biases. There is also a risk that the advisors have chosen the easiest farmers to visit. Thus, there is reason to believe that we ended up with farm visits that are average or better than average.

The study was conducted in two regions of Norway during spring 2016, with six cases in Trøndelag (Mid-Norway) and four in Hordaland (Western-Norway). A case consists of

two farm visits per advisor and interviews with farmers and advisors. The farmers' ages range from 30 to 55 years, and their dairy herd sizes range from 16 to 50 cows. For comparison, the average farm in Norway in 2016 was 23.9 hectares, and the average dairy herd size was 26.1 cows. Although the average size is increasing, only three percent of the dairy farms have 70 cows or more (Committee of Budget for Agriculture 2017).

All 10 farmers in this study are men, but spouses attended two of the visits. The advisor's education spans from agricultural school to master's degrees. Their age spans from 29 to 60 years, and their experience spans from 5 to 38 years. All advisors are trained in using a coaching advisory style. Two advisors are women and three are men. In comparison, 48% of all advisors in Tine are women, and 56% are more than 50 years old. We denote advisors with an A and farmers with an F. For example, A1 means advisor number one, and F12 means farmer number two visited by advisor number one. In addition to the advisor group represented in this study, the staff of advisors include specialist advisors who offer paid services within different subjects, such as milking robots, feeding, etc. These advisors are called upon by farmers on request.

Methods

We held semi-structured interviews with farmers after the visits and with advisors both before and after the visits. To answer the research question empirically and ensure both internal and external validity, the context and situation should be close to the real world. Thus, we attended the visits but did not interfere with the conversation. One researcher attended each farm visit, made recordings, observed, and took notes. Witnessing the advisor–client interactions gave deeper insights than what is possible through interviews only. The method is well suited to study relations between informants and facilitates focus on the research questions (Thagaard 2010). The researcher can obtain rich information and an insider's viewpoint. On the other hand, bias and reactivity are magnified in participating observation. To avoid these potential sources of error, we informed the advisors and farmers beforehand about the purpose of the study. We also assured them that all information obtained would be confidential. Similarly, when interpreting data, we did our utmost to avoid letting our own views come into play.

After transcription, all three researchers analyzed the recordings. Following recommendations for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), we read all cases to obtain an overall idea of what they conveyed. We then used NVivo software to code interviews driven by a combination of data and relevant theory. All researchers defined and discussed all themes determined for the overall story. We identified 28 themes in total, such as the type of communication or whether the advisor challenged the farmer or not. The special setting with formal power inspired us to focus on power. Furthermore, the data showed clear differences between the advisor's professional and relational competence, as well as how this affected the inter-subjectivity and how farmers perceived the visits. Finally, we noticed how the farmer's expectation and the farming context (e.g. if the farmer had expanded the farm recently) affected the outcome of the visit.

When exploring the advisors' relational competence, we focused on the communication and interaction during the visit. We also concentrated on the extent to which advisors showed empathy and managed to put themselves in the farmer's situation while focusing on the farmer's needs, their communication style, and whether they challenged the

farmers. We looked for how the advisor managed the power relation during the encounters and how this influenced their role identification or their advisory style and the inter-subjectivity. For example, if the advisors let the farmer set the agenda for the visit, this gave us a hint. In exploring inter-subjectivity, we tried to capture the degree to which the two parties developed a common understanding and how interested and engaged they were in each other's contributions. In addition to the verbal communication, their body language also gave us a clue. We based the exploration on analyzing the communication between the two parties and the interviews with advisors and farmers.

The empirical study

For all five advisors, checking the herd recordings is an important part of preparing for visits. However, advisors use this information differently during visits. Some advisors have a clear purpose of the visit, as A4 put it:

One part of the visit is to ensure that the herd data from the farmer are correct. Beyond that, for the farmer, we try to find areas for improvement and present them. Or we can find out what the difficulties are and make the farmers detect their errors and come up with them ... and if they do not, we may have to help them.

Similarly, A3 also emphasizes the importance of controlling the herd recordings and the farm:

The visit is done to check that everything is in order, both animal welfare and areas where the farmer should improve. It is also done to check the herd recordings. Then it is to challenge the farmers on areas where they can improve ... we leave no stone unturned and can help to find areas of improvement.

The expression, 'leave no stone unturned,' clearly reflects that A3 assumes an inspector role and is aware of his power. Both A3 and A4 emphasize their own roles in detecting possible areas of improvement. This somewhat contrasts with a coaching advisory style, where farmers are supposed to set the agenda and decide themes to work on. This role identity with the advisor as an expert reduces the farmers' role to one of a recipient of advice. A good example is when A3 visited farmer F32 and his wife, who are in their forties. They recently built a new cowshed with robotic milking. Initially, both seemed somewhat hesitant about the visit, and A3 looked bothered to occupy their valuable time. A3 did not discuss the agenda, and after praising their effort in starting the new cowshed, he handed out copies of the herd recordings. Thus, A3 took power over the situation and kept it for the rest of the visit when asking questions about the recordings. The couple answered politely, but it was obvious that the conversation was based in a sense of duty. They asked few questions and looked bored. Thus, the advisor's empathy and the inter-subjectivity were low. After one hour, the husband received a phone call and left the room, and shortly after the husband's return, the wife left the room. We asked A3 what he thought about the visit:

I'm not sure ... But I praised them, and I think they were left with a good feeling. At least I hope so. But how useful they think it was, of that I am more uncertain.

While A3 was doubtful about the outcome of the visit, F32 had a clear opinion: 'Well, it was alright, but regarding the usefulness – not too much I would say.' Given that the

couple had invested millions in the cowshed, one would expect them to have several topics to discuss with an advisor, as F32 admitted:

F32: Yes, there are many topics I would like to know more about, the milking robot, herd fertility, and the economy.

Interviewer: Could these topics have been discussed at this visit?

F32: Well, I am not sure whether he (A3) is the right person, it is more interesting to have someone who really knows the different subjects ... who can contribute something.

F32 questions A3's professional authority, which explains the couple's low expectations about the visit's outcome. Notably, F32 hires another advisor from Tine who specializes in milking robots, and F32 thinks his knowledge is much more relevant. We notice how the advisor's role identification as an inspector influences the outcome of the visits and the importance of the advisor's professional knowledge. Clearly, A3 had not updated his knowledge to match the totally new context on this farm, and therefore, the farming couple did not find the encounter interesting.

In contrast, A3's visit to F31 tells another story. F31 is planning a farm expansion over the next 10 years. A3 used the same approach as with F32 and went straight on to handing out copies of the herd recordings. A3 initiated by saying, 'I need an overview of what has happened since the last visit.' The following sequence from the conversation was typical:

A3: But if we look at the beef production, you have delivered nine young cows for slaughter ... but nine are quite a few then ...

F31: Yes

A3: Similarly, nine older cows are registered as slaughtered ... and the mean weight is 281 kg

F31: Yes

F31 simply confirms A3's assumptions and sometimes provides additional information. Thus, the visit was more about updating the advisor than the farmer. Had A3 instead asked himself, 'Is it my own needs or the farmers' needs I am trying to satisfy now?' it would have indicated a higher level of introspection. However, unlike the other visit, the parties at least had a dialogue, and F31 made it a priority to attend the visit. Thus, the inter-subjectivity was higher than in the first visit. However, although F31 listened carefully, he was not eager to obtain more knowledge or advice from A3 and asked few questions. It was also evident that F31 did not view A3 as a professional authority either, which contributed to the medium degree of inter-subjectivity. It was apparent that A3 had requested the visit. However, F31 receives much practical help from A3. For example, A3 phones him if there is a problem with the milk quality. F31 adds, 'And if I need help with other farm disciplines, he helps me contact the right person.' Thus, A3 clearly shows empathy.

F31 was satisfied with the visit. One reason for his greater satisfaction than F32 is his different expectations about A3's competence: 'I think it is good ... he knows a little about a very wide range of disciplines, and that is his job.' Thus, F32 does not expect A3 to specialize in a particular subject but to have an overview. F31's different phase of farming also explains why he is more satisfied. A3's advisory style and competence fit better with farms in a state of 'business as usual.'

The female advisors A1 and A5 have different perceptions of the job. Similar to A3, A1 prepares by checking the herd data, but she uses this preparation as only background information. She takes a supporting role:

As advisors, we are supposed to be an interlocutor for the farmer and support them in their choices. If we think they are totally off course, we try to adjust it and give them some alternatives. And we should challenge them and come up with some practical advice if necessary.

A1 is an empathic advisor who cares for the farmers, and she clearly expresses this attitude to them. This allows her to use direct speech towards farmers when necessary. She reflected upon this and showed introspection: 'But of course I cannot behave like that everywhere, I do it because I am confident that he (the farmer) and the whole family know I want the best for them.' Thus, she observes herself and exhibits well-developed self-perspective, which enables her to enter the relation with farmers in a confidence-building way. A5 has a similar role identity:

What is good about the way we practice advising in Tine is that the farmer is at the center. One should try to listen to what he wants ... We are there to help them, not to control. As a consultant, you should clarify the farmers' needs and find out what they are interested in. Quite often they have some goals but no plan to reach them. Then we can support them and coach them, and perhaps suggest an action plan.

A5 also shows introspection when she reflects upon how she has developed in the role as an advisor:

A5: When I started, I was too conscientious when considering what an advisor should do. Instead of using common sense, I was very much concerned with goals and measures ...

Interviewer: You had a checklist?

A5: Yes, and an agenda that was too tight. What happens then is that you risk forgetting what the farmer is thinking about. ... Now I have become more relaxed with farmers I know well and involve them in setting the agenda.

Thus, A5 reflects upon how her speech and actions affect the farmer. She also shows confidence in the advisory role and that she has made the job her own. A5 also showed empathy and exhibited high relational competence:

Of course, it is tempting to comment if they do not fill the milk quota and they work outside the farm. ... But if their goal is to deliver only 80% of the quota and have an okay life, then it is not for me to tell them that they should produce more.

In contrast, A4 used a very purposeful communication style when he visited F42. A4 repeatedly tried to persuade F42 to expand his farm without recognizing that F42 was not yet ready for such a decision. The result was that F42 felt he needed to excuse himself.

The two female advisors in this study practice more of a coaching style (Moen 2013) compared to their male colleagues, and they leave more power in the farmer's hands. Their communication is more directed towards understanding, yet they also make use of purposeful communication, but mainly in purely practical tasks. They also switch more adeptly between the two communication styles. As recommended by Rogers (1969), they start communication with where the clients are and what they perceive as meaningful. Before the visit to F52, A5 reflected upon how the visit would be:

I took a printout of the herd data, but if farmers are about to embark on a building process, that is often their only focus. So my plan is to adapt the visit to what he is concerned with.

Upon arriving at the farm, the farmer had already started the excavation work for the new cowshed, and the whole visit revolved around the new project. Their discussion included how F52 could provide enough milk and cows to fill the quota and how he could obtain more farmland. A5 also helped him to make a milk forecast. They then discussed the drawings of the cowshed in detail. In this session, the learning outcome for both parties was high:

A5: Usually, we do not recommend putting up a wall here because it hinders the cow traffic

F52: Yes, you mean not to put up a wall at all?

A5: Yes because the cows will have a better overview when they walk around hereAnd those who put up walls often tear them down again.

F52: Yes ... I had not thought about that until now.

A5 took most of the initiative, yet the farmer was very interested and asked many questions. They understood each other well, and the inter-subjectivity was high. This session clearly shows the importance of the advisors' professional knowledge. F52 was very satisfied with the visit and the collaboration with A5: 'I think we collaborate well; she gives constructive criticism, and that's what we farmers need.' He told us why he trusts in A5:

Yes, I do as she tells mebecause at the first visit we decided to change the feeding of the calves, and the results came immediately. That is why we trust in her.

As this passage shows, professional skills and knowledge combined with high relational competence are efficient in building trust and high inter-subjectivity.

One part of an advisor's relational competence is knowing how to challenge the farmers. A1 and A5's coaching advisory style does not preclude them from challenging the farmers. F11 had experienced tough times in recent years, which included a strained economy. He explains how A1 differs from other advisors:

Yes, she is perhaps more assertive than the one we had before and tells us the truth. She speaks straight from the heart.

An example is when A1 commented on the slaughter weight of the cows: 'But look at the cows – they are outrageously fat when you slaughter them.' However, F11 obviously appreciated being challenged: 'Yes, we need a wake-up call now and then ... But of course, farmers are different.' Because F11's farm is in a state of 'business as usual,' most of the conversation was at the operational level. However, A1 sometimes also changed her focus to the strategic level.

One reason why A1 can challenge F11 is that she had been his advisor for several years. She also exhibits high relational competence during the conversation, switching between challenging and praising F11 and his wife: 'And look at the milk quality ... that's unbelievable, the cell count is so low.' A1 also uses humor, and there is much laughter in the transcripts. Thus, she manages to create a good atmosphere and engage both the husband and wife. All parties dare to show vulnerability, partly because there was no doubt about A1's

intentions, as F11 commented: ‘She really wants the best for both the animals and the farmer, that I have understood.’ The communication between the advisor and the farmer is good. The farmer is satisfied with the advisor’s language and how she presents knowledge. A1 is also satisfied with F11, and overall, the inter-subjectivity is high.

Three farmers called for the male advisors to challenge them more. F41 was one of them: ‘What is important is that the advisor does not just beat around the bush you know, but tells me how it is and how I can improve my farming results.’ All 10 farmers expect to be challenged by their advisors. If they are not, the conversation often becomes insufficiently concrete, or the farmers spend most of their valuable time updating the advisors, and the learning outcome for the farmer is low. Taken together, the interviews revealed that the farmers with female advisors were more satisfied than those with male advisors. The two females exhibit higher relational competence and ask better questions as compared to the three males, which challenge the farmers and keep them on track. They are more empathic, focus less on power, and achieve higher inter-subjectivity. In short, they practice a different advisory style.

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 Gasselín (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 (Dzecoá, 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.

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Notes on contributors

Bjørn Gunnar Hansen holds Master degrees in agricultural science and economics and management, and a Ph.D. in economics. He currently works as a dairy scientist in TINE SA, the Norwegian cooperative dairy company, where the research was carried out. His interests cover all aspects of dairy farming.

Egil Petter Stræte is an agricultural economist from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) (1987). He received a doctoral degree (dr.polit.) in economic geography from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in 2006. His general research interests are related to business development, regional development, rural development, and agriculture.

Gunn-Turid Kvam holds a doctoral degree (dr.ing) in business organization and management from NTNU. Today, she holds a position as a part-time associate professor at this institute. Her main research interest is to explore how the development in rural areas can be organized in order to ensure value generation and a sustainable development.

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