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How private-sector farm advisors change their practices: An Australian case study

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest in the extent to which private-sector farm advisors support farmer responses to emerging challenges, such as climate variability or new forms of agricultural production. However, scholars have paid limited attention to what motivates farm advisors to develop their knowledge and how they go about changing their practice in areas outside their disciplinary expertise. This paper presents a qualitative study of the processes of change in the advisory practices of private-sector farm advisors who were provided with formal training as part of an Australian dairy sector extension program. This training focussed on the farm workforce and employment, and involved efforts to engage livestock production and agronomic advisors in this challenging area for farm management advice. We drew on theoretical concepts of practice and professional identity formation and found that engagement in the new area created conflict with how the advisors thought about their professional identity. Three key processes enabled advisory practice change: envisioning new advisory roles; experimenting with new advisory identities; and legitimisation of new advisory practices from both farmers and the advisors' business. While farming clients' demand for advice increased the advisors' interest in knowledge acquisition, this alone did not provide the environment for individual and collective reflexivity to cope with the complexity, risk and uncertainty of developing new advisory practices. The support of the dairy industry in forming a new practice community was found to assist the development of new advisory identities. A wider conceptualisation of the advisors' world (their identity, practices and their needs) is required if private-sector advisors are to play a greater role in helping farmers respond to emerging challenges.

1. Introduction

Governments in most developed nations have reduced their direct investment in agricultural extension (Laurent et al., 2006; Rivera, 2011). It is increasingly expected that farmers will pay for advice and private-sector advisors will provide support to farmers to address agricultural and environmental challenges (Klerkx and Jansen, 2010). Australia is no exception. However, the effectiveness of a largely privatised agricultural extension system in providing support to farmers is now a source of concern and a key national agricultural policy issue (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, p92). The situation has parallels with the European Union where initiatives to foster the development of farm advisory systems are underway (European Union, 2015; Prager et al., 2016).

An implicit assumption in greater private-sector involvement in agricultural extension is that private-sector advisors are willing and able to help farmers achieve 'new practices and outlooks in farming'

(Ingram, 2008 p406). This assumes advisors will pursue different knowledge (potentially outside their disciplinary or professional expertise in land, crop, animal or business management) and broaden their suite of professional practices (Landini et al., 2017). Few studies to date have critically examined these assumptions or the processes involved in advisory practice change related to areas of farm management that lie outside the farm advisors' routine disciplinary knowledge and service offerings (i.e. monetization of new combinations of activities). Authors have highlighted the important role of advisors in providing 'specialist support' and expert knowledge to farmers (Ingram, 2008, 406) and in facilitating learning (Labarthe and Laurent, 2013), however, there is limited articulation of the innovation processes *within* farm advisory businesses. There has been limited exploration or recognition of the advisors' 'knowledge cultures' that are recognised as important in farming and policy contexts (Tsouvalis et al., 2000), nor in the relationship between new knowledge and the development of new services (Labarthe, 2009).

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This paper aims to identify the key processes involved in private-sector farm advisors developing their knowledge and changing their advisory practices. The specific focus is the context of farm management challenges that involve new disciplinary expertise. For the purposes of this paper, disciplinary expertise refers to the common branch of knowledge studied by farm advisors, such as in agricultural sciences. The private farm advisory sector refers to: commercial advisors offering advisory services as part of farm input sales (after Prager et al., 2016); farm management consultants; veterinary surgeons and agronomists (providing fee-for-service advice on a unit or hourly basis) (Ingram, 2008; Klerkx and Jansen, 2010); farm advisors within the supply-chain (e.g. milk, meat or grain-processing companies); and farm advisors employed by farmer-owned and operated groups or employed in advisory or extension roles within sectoral or industry organizations. This latter group is common in Australia (Hunt et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2013). The processes of advisory practice change, the agricultural extension environment and the challenges facing private-sector farm advisor provided an important context for this study and are reviewed next.

1.1. The privatisation of agricultural extension

Privatization of agricultural extension is the result of the reduced role of the State and increased reliance on the private advisory sector to provide agricultural extension services (Kidd et al., 2000). Concerns related to the consequences of this privatisation have been emerging internationally over the past three decades (Nettle et al., 2017), including gaps in services (e.g. related to environmental sustainability) and access to services by specific groups of farmers (Sutherland et al., 2017). A critical issue is the under-investment in the reproduction of skills in extension and advisory services, a role provided by the State in the past (Labarthe, 2009). Scholars and practitioners have proposed greater investment in training of advisors, embedding knowledge in regular service contacts (Klerkx and Jansen, 2010) and fostering opportunities for knowledge exchange (Ingram, 2008). However, private organizations continue to struggle to integrate new or different knowledge into their services or connect effectively with research and education providers (Prager et al., 2016). This suggests a need for greater attention by rural scholars on the professional situation of farm advisors.

1.2. The professional situation of farm advisors

Market signals, such as substantive and economic demand from farmers or public funding to contract the private sector to provide services are considered necessary to stimulate changes in advisory services (Mullen et al., 2000; Garforth et al., 2003; Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2008; Rivera, 2011). However, demand from farmers is not necessarily uniform and, while the number of advisors may increase or existing advisors may provide more services, the quality of services and the advisors' capacity to alter or adapt their services and incorporate new areas of knowledge are rarely considered in studies of change in agricultural extension systems.

Further, changes in farming will have a strong influence on advisory services. Changes in the way farming is conceived and understood have been termed 'new farming paradigms' (Ingram, 2008, p.406). A feature of new farming paradigms is their level of knowledge intensity (i.e. requiring access to and manipulation of large quantities of information from diverse scientific disciplines) and the need to support experimentation and learning by practitioners. New paradigms create 'new professional situations' for advisors (Cerf et al., 2011, p.10) that are of increased uncertainty (i.e. risk to the farm and/or the advisory business) and complexity in integrating scientific and technical knowledge with farmers' own knowledge in the new topic area. These paradigms can also create further uncertainty between the advisory situation and the stated objectives of their organization (Cerf et al., 2011: 13) and the

business model of the organization, which is often based on fees for service or per hectare (Ingram, 2008; Prager et al., 2016).

The privatisation of agricultural extension combined with the challenge of new farming paradigms may, on one hand, provide an opportunity and a signal for private-sector farm advisory practices to engage and change. On the other hand, the risks and uncertainties for advisors and their business may constrain change. The dynamics of private-sector farm advisors' engagement in new roles and functions, and how advisors and their organizations overcome these risks and uncertainties remain identified gaps in knowledge (Botha et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2016; Landini et al., 2017). We argue that this is best understood by focusing on the processes by which advisors currently engage in change to their practices and overcome risks and uncertainties.

The research question framing this study is: What processes are involved in private-sector advisors changing their practices? In answering this question, the focus is the motivations for advisors to engage in training to develop knowledge and skills outside their current expertise and scientific disciplinary background, how advisors integrate new knowledge into their role, and the business and institutional factors that enable or constrain advisors' engagement in changing their practices. The next section outlines the conceptual framework for the study.

2. Conceptual framework for examining advisory practice change

Theoretical concepts that span individual and socio-organizational constructs are needed to consider and analyse the processes involved in private-sector farm advisors changing their practices. We draw from social theories of practice (Shove, 2010; Wenger et al., 2002) and link them with concepts from organizational studies relating to the formation of professional image and identity (after Ibarra, 1999).

2.1. Advisory practice

A farm advisor's practice is their routine activities and behaviours when working in an advisory relationship with farmers (Cerf et al., 2011). These include physical practices (e.g. visiting a farm, speaking by phone with a farmer); the use of technologies and tools (e.g. a computer-based decision support tool; soil tests); and the nature of interaction with others (e.g. farmers, other advisors, researchers). These activities are considered to embody competence (i.e. skills, knowledge and techniques used in work) and the meanings ascribed to the practices (ideas, symbols and aspirations) (Shove, 2010).

To understand how practices change, Shove et al. (2012) suggest consideration of how practices are performed (i.e. the interactions and dynamic processes involved). While this conceptualisation accounts for the socio-organizational context of the advisor and their interaction with farming clients, the broader social configurations associated with the 'recognition of expertise and competence' (Wenger, 1998, p5) in a wider network or advisory community need to be considered. Here, the 'community of practice' concept is useful (O'Kane et al., 2008, p197; Wenger et al., 2002, p139).

2.2. Professional identity formation and change

In organizational studies, a person's professional identity relates to the consciousness a person brings to define themselves in a professional role and the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of a profession (Ibarra, 1999). This includes beliefs, values, motives and experiences and the terms of their established professional relationships with clients and peers (Schein, 1978 in Ibarra, 1999). Professional identity is fluid, and develops over the course of the individual's career, and considered most malleable early in one's career (Tan et al., 2017). Social exchanges have been shown to be critical in the formation of professional identity (Lundberg, 1997, p195; Ibarra,

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