



A new perspective on the trust power nexus from rural Australia



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Natural resource management
Interpersonal relations
Public goods
Social dilemma
Farmers
Invasive plants

Many of the world's most challenging environmental problems are trans-boundary in nature, requiring the cooperation of diverse actors. This study aims to assess the roles of trust and power in achieving environmental collective action among rural land managers. The empirical example used is serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*), a highly invasive, noxious weed that covers more than two million hectares in south-eastern Australia. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore relations among the suite of actors responsible for controlling this weed in two case studies—Cooma, NSW and Bacchus Marsh, Victoria. Interactions between trust and power were found to be useful for explaining the development of positive and negative relations among these diverse actors. When trust and power worked in synergy, land managers and government staff were more likely to share information, provide support and defer to enforcement. When trust and power acted as substitutes avoidance, disengagement, resistance and retaliation ensued. The author argues that long-term collective weed control will only be achieved when the focus shifts from enforcement to building stronger rural social relations in which trust and power work in synergy.

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1. Introduction

Many of the world's environmental problems are challenging, not only because of their persistence, but because they represent collective action problems. For example, climate change, losses of biodiversity and the invasion of pest plants are all trans-boundary problems—they are not contained within property, state or national borders—creating interdependencies among social actors. Resolution of these environmental problems requires diverse actors to be willing to cooperate and coordinate their activities (Ravnborg and Westermann, 2002). Understanding the social relations that underpin collective action holds a key to explaining if and how these environmental problems might be resolved.

In rural Australia, invasive plants present a significant agricultural and environmental problem. Almost three-quarters of Australian farms are affected by weed-related issues and four-fifths of farms undertake activities to prevent or manage weeds (ABS, 2006). More than \$1.5 billion is spent each year in control activities in addition to \$2.5 billion in lost production (DSEWPC, 2012). The costs of weeds on Australia's natural environment are estimated

to be similar to, or greater than, the costs to agriculture. Looking forward, the agricultural and environmental problems caused by weeds are predicted to increase because weeds are spreading faster than they can be controlled, despite the considerable effort and resources being invested (DSEWPC, 2012).

Despite the scale of the problem presented by weeds, their control has primarily been addressed at an individual property level for the last century. Current and historic weed policy across Australia involves government officers inspecting individual properties and engaging with a myriad of property owners. Similarly, much of the social research focuses on the individual motivations that shape perceptions and use of a variety of weed management practices (e.g. Llewellyn et al., 2004, 2007). Given that 90,000 agricultural establishments are infested with weeds in Australia it is evident that such an individualistic approach has had limited success.

Past research into environmental collective action problems reveals that individuals' willingness to cooperate is strongly related to their expectations about the behaviours of others (Lundqvist, 2001; Marshall, 2004; Pretty, 2003). In particular, trust is argued to be of central importance for achieving cooperation (Ostrom, 2010). Trust leads to expectations that others will reciprocate and when these expectations are met, long-term obligations develop (Pretty, 2003). Thus, trust provides a mechanism for *depending* upon others, whose future behaviour is unpredictable and uncontrollable (Govier, 1993).

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The emphasis on trust in collective action research means that less attention has been given to other concepts that may influence an individual's expectations of others. Some collective action research recognises that power is significant because it *influences* others to act as expected. However, these researchers tend to view power: 1) from a limited structural, rather than an agent-centred perspective (e.g. Adhikari and Goldey, 2010); and 2) as a constraining, rather than an enabling force (e.g. Theesfeld, 2011). This indicates a limited understanding of the role power plays in the social relations that underpin collective action.

Serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*) is one weed currently wreaking havoc in Australia. It is a highly invasive plant—each adult plant can produce up to 100,000 seeds per year—capable of withstanding a range of soil and climatic conditions. Its seeds can be carried up to 15–20 km by wind and can remain viable for more than a decade (Michelmore, 2003). This plant was accidentally introduced at the turn of last century and is now pervasive across two million hectares of south-eastern Australia despite \$45 million being spent annually in weed control and lost production (Osmond et al., 2008). It out-competes native pastures, reduces biodiversity and diminishes the productivity of grazing lands.

The biophysical characteristics of serrated tussock make it ideal for the study of collective action because of the implications they have for social relations. First, it covers a large geographical area. This means that a diverse range of actors are responsible for controlling the weed including private and public land managers; comprising individuals, businesses and government agencies. Second, the highly invasive nature of the weed creates social interdependencies. If land managers choose to control weeds on their property, their success in maintaining weed-free properties will not only depend on their own efforts but also those of their neighbours. Third, the weed's persistence means that eradication can only be achieved if *every* affected land manager remains committed to a decade-long weed control program. Given these characteristics and the current individualistic policy approach it is unsurprising that community-wide cooperation on serrated tussock is yet to be achieved anywhere in Australia. This suggests the potential value of conceptualising the problem as one of collective action and exploring how individual land manager's expectations about the behaviour of others affect their willingness to cooperate.

The overarching aim of this article is to explore the combined significance of power and trust to a rural, environmental collective action problem. It considers the nature of the interactions between trust and power, and the effects of these interactions, if any, on expectations of cooperation in rural social relations. It will begin by explaining the three main conceptualisations of environmental collective action problems and the reason for adopting a social relations approach to collective action in this study. It then reviews the rural and sociological literatures on trust, power and the trust-power nexus that are relevant to understanding the collective action problem presented. It will then describe the study, the results, and their implications for advancing our understanding of the roles trust, power, and their nexus play in achieving cooperation.

2. Collective action, trust and power

The existing literature offers three main ways of conceptualising environmental collective action problems like serrated tussock: the rational choice approach (advocated by Olson (1965) and Hardin (1968)); the boundedly-rational, norm-based behavioural approach (proposed by Ostrom (1998, 2009, 2010)); and the social capital approach (encapsulated by Sobels et al., 2001). The rational choice approach focuses on short-term, self-interested decision-making by rational individuals and argues that rewards and sanctions can make cooperation more rational and prevent free-riding. It is

insufficient for assessing the serrated tussock problem because successive governments have been unsuccessfully using incentives and fines to persuade land managers to control this weed since the 1930s.

Despite the limited applicability of the rational choice approach it has some heuristic value because it draws a distinction between common pool resource and public good collective action problems. Common pool resources require individuals to exercise *restraint* and the benefits are *subtractable* whereas public goods are provided through active *contribution* and the benefits are *nonrivalrous* (Kollock, 1998). Social researchers have previously found differences in the ways individuals respond to public good and common pool problems (Van Vugt and Snyder, 2002). Thus it is important to note that the control of serrated tussock, and other weeds, is a public good problem (Perrings et al., 2002).

Ostrom's bounded-rationality approach attempts to overcome the limitations of the rational choice approach. It focuses on the heuristics, norms and past experiences with others that individuals draw on when making decisions about whether or not to cooperate (Ostrom, 2010). There are three key issues with applying the bounded-rationality, norm-based approach to serrated tussock. First, the approach draws heavily on findings from common pool resource problems rather than public good problems. Second, trust is considered to be the primary mechanism that affects cooperation (Ostrom et al., 2007). While trust has been shown to be highly significant for achieving cooperation in a range of contexts, rural research identifies other relational variables, such as power, affecting cooperation (e.g. Lyon, 2000, 2003, 2006; Tillmar and Lindkvist, 2007). Third, the approach is primarily focused on the decisions made by individuals, rather than the relations among individuals.

The social capital approach focuses on interactions among individuals to explain systematic factors that enable and/or constrain aspects of relations. Phillips and Gray (1995) and Scott (2000) argue that a social relations approach better explains behaviour that is unconscious, influenced by habits or norms, or a sense of obligation or commitment. The social capital approach has been useful for explaining the establishment of reciprocal social obligations among farmers (Sutherland and Burton, 2011) and land managers' willingness to work collaboratively on small-scale natural resource management projects (Sobels et al., 2001). This suggests that the social capital approach may be usefully applied to the problem presented by serrated tussock. However, the approach is not without its limitations. Critics argue that the 'dark side' of social capital is frequently ignored and that it is important to study power as well as trust in social relations (Putzel, 1997). This indicates a potential gap in our understanding of the role power may play in the social relations that underpin collective action.

The aim of this paper is to take a broader social relations approach to studying the rural, environmental collective action problem presented by serrated tussock. The conceptualisations of trust, power and the trust-power nexus adopted in this approach will be discussed next.

2.1. Trust

The sociological literature explains that interpersonal¹ trust enables the achievement of collective action through its cohesive

¹ Trust has been conceptualised to exist as a personality trait, a quality of interpersonal relations, a belief about organisations and as an emergent property of societies. These are known as generalised, interpersonal, institutional and cultural trust, respectively. Since this study is taking a social relations approach to collective action, the focus will be on interpersonal trust. All subsequent references to trust refer to interpersonal trust.

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