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Pragmatic engagement in a low trust supply chain: Beef farmers' perceptions of power, trust and agency

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1 *Article*

2 **Pragmatic engagement in a low trust supply chain: Beef farmers' perceptions of**
3 **power, trust and agency**

4

5 **Abstract**

6 The academic discussion of power in supply chains has changed from a discussion of
7 the use of coercive power to one which emphasises the role of trust in embedding co-
8 operation and disincentivising opportunism. Whilst a number of empirical studies have
9 suggested the former is alive and well, this paper argues that power relations may also
10 be constituted by the self-perceptions of weaker actors as much as by the explicit
11 actions of more powerful ones. This study explores the role of power through the
12 perceptions of subjugated actors, which set the 'rules of the game'. Our case centres on
13 perceptions of Northern Irish beef farmers and their reflections on their 'powerlessness'
14 in relation to the larger, more consolidated processors that they sell to. We find that the
15 way farmers make sense of the power relations they encounter is influenced by the
16 individuating character of the power relations exercised by the processors, which
17 debilitates their ability to collaborate and resist collectively. What emerges is a story
18 about the process of accommodation whereby farmers pragmatically resign themselves
19 to play by 'the rules of the game' to remain 'part of the game'.

20

21 **Keywords**

22 Power, trust, agency, buyer/supplier relationships, qualitative analysis, farmers

23

24

25

26 **Introduction**

27 Various theories of effective supply chain organisation and management argue that
28 leveraging or creating value in modern economies requires greater supply chain
29 coordination to improve efficiency and long term competitive advantage (Womack et
30 al., 1990; Simons et al., 2003; Duarte Canever et al., 2008). It is argued that improved
31 co-operation and co-ordination in supply chains, however, requires trust (Dwyer et al.,
32 1987; Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994); but that the development of trust
33 can be hindered by the exercise of certain forms of supply chain power (Blau 1964;
34 Hingley 2005). The effects of power are often downplayed because its expression is
35 sometimes difficult to identify as it is experienced subjectively (Fleming and Spicer
36 2014). Similarly supply chain actors, particularly those who exercise power to their
37 advantage may do so defensively which complicates understanding of motives by those
38 affected (Bowman et al 2013). The lack of overt and unambiguous understandings of
39 how power is expressed and what its effects are within a supply chain, gives rise to an
40 interesting yet sensitive area of research; and one which lends itself to a constructivist
41 approach.

42 Employing thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with farmers, this paper
43 explores their perceptions of power, trust and agency in the sector. This paper therefore
44 adds to the growing corpus of literature on supply chain power (Hingley 2005;
45 Lindgreen et al., 2005; Storey et al., 2006; Duarte Canever et al., 2008; Bowman et al
46 2013; Fleming and Spicer 2014; Hingley et al., 2015) by exploring the process of
47 accommodation amongst weaker parties in one sub-sector of an industry characterised
48 by low trust and strong power relations. This theoretical contribution is discussed in
49 relation to our empirical case - Northern Irish beef farmers - who are good case to

50 explore such themes given their relatively fragmented character and the concentrated
51 nature of the Northern Irish processor segment.

52 A first section reviews the extant academic literature on the effects of power on trust
53 in supply chain. A second explains the sectoral context within which power is
54 expressed. Methods and discussion of findings follows in later sections. The paper then
55 ends with a reflection on the impact of power on trust and agency in this sector.

56

57 *Power and Trust in Supply Chains: Theoretical Considerations*

58 The effects of supply chain power on inter-organisational trust is an important area of
59 research within studies of business organisations and supply chain management. But
60 over the last 40+ years this discussion has moved from the use of power to coerce to the
61 role of power in embedding legitimacy and co-operation in supply chains to the
62 importance of trust and the way it mitigates the expedient and opportunist use of
63 coercive power. It is worthwhile revisiting this literature briefly.

64 The study of power has come some way since Dahl's (1957) original statement that
65 '*A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not*
66 *otherwise do.*' Applying this definition to a supply chain context was always fraught
67 with difficulties when, for example, it was never clear what B would 'otherwise do' in
68 the absence of A's power, when B was locked into a relationship with A because B was
69 reliant on A to purchase his/her goods or services, and the relation between A and B
70 might be zero sum (B's margin was A's cost).

71 One response was to refine Dahl's definition and make it more relevant for a supply
72 chain application. Hence Wilemon (1972) argued that: '*power refers to the ability of*
73 *one channel [supply chain] member to induce another channel [supply chain] member*
74 *to change its behaviour in favour of the objectives of the channel member exerting*

75 *influence.*' This made Dahl's subtle distinction more apparent: power is not just
76 something one partner 'has,' but is also something that one partner 'exercises'; power is
77 a relation as much as a possession. This distinction led to what Gatski (1984) referred to
78 as the growth of 'channel power and conflict theory' – the study of the impact of one
79 supply chain member's power (its character, source and extent) on the amount of
80 conflict with their chain partners.

81 For some authors the results were predictable and conclusive. Robicheaux and El-
82 Ansary (1977) for example argued that when one partner possessed significantly higher
83 levels of power, this led to an increase in the coercive use of that power. This was
84 reinforced by many laboratory studies which demonstrated a positive correlation
85 between power and coercion (Dwyer and Walker 1981; Roering 1977). But others were
86 more sceptical of this reading. Lindgreen et al. (2005) argued that the existence of
87 power relations did not imply the abuse of those relations, whilst Frazier and Summers
88 (1986) argued these lab experiments could not replicate reality and misunderstood the
89 complex trade-offs necessary for maintaining long term supplier relationships.

90 Those longer term trade-offs might, for example, include that between the gains from
91 coercion and the loss of trust; powerful actors gained legitimacy by *resisting* their
92 ability to use power coercively (Blau, 1964). In this way, it was argued, co-operative
93 supply chain relations could co-exist with significant power differentials, provided
94 larger firms did not abuse their position and weaker supply chain members understood
95 and accepted this power imbalance (Hingley, 2005; Hingley et al., 2015).

96 For others, it was not just that restraint was important, but that legitimate power
97 could be used constructively to facilitate supply chain co-ordination (Stern 1969;
98 Provan and Gassenheimer 1994). Power could be exercised to positively reward instead

99 of negatively coerce, maintaining greater co-operation and efficiency (Maloni and
100 Benton, 2000; Benton and Maloni, 2005).

101 These ideas (arguably) became dominant within supply chain management texts. In
102 the 1990s this led to a subtle shift in emphasis away from how restraint might embed
103 legitimacy, towards a discussion of trust as a means of mitigating opportunism and
104 coercion. Trust would supposedly embed co-operation (Moorman et al., 1993),
105 encourage commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), help overcome mutual difficulties
106 (Dwyer et al., 1987), and stimulate risk-taking and risk-spreading (La Londe, 2002),
107 thus avoiding the need for forcible, directive demands as a method for supply chain co-
108 ordination (Ellram and Cooper, 1990; Storey et al., 2006). The intellectual shift, in other
109 words, moved from the relations between 'power and coercion' to those of 'trust and the
110 curtailment of coercive power'.

111 This shift set many authors on a search for the organisational supports towards trust-
112 building in supply chains (Monczka and Morgan, 1997; Akkermans et al., 1999). This
113 included commitments to open communication and data sharing (La Londe and Masters,
114 1994), the development of shared technologies which bridge company boundaries
115 (Kaufman et al., 2000; Schönsleben, 2000; Vokurka, 2000), dedicated investment which
116 embedded co-operation (Nyaga et al., 2010) and the broader growth of a more holistic
117 management philosophy (Harland et al., 1999).

118 It followed then that trust might actually reduce costs, improve efficiency and nurture
119 a more sustainable competitive advantage for the whole chain (Harland, 1996; Chen and
120 Pulraj, 2004; Storey et al., 2006; Hartmann and De Grahl, 2011; Azadegan, 2011;
121 Paulraj, 2011). According to these authors, trust negated the need for expensive
122 surveillance and other transaction costs throughout the supply chain (Ballou et al., 2000;
123 Kwon and Suh, 2004). It improved quality (Hammer, 2001), enhanced planning and

124 forecasting (Kwon and Suh, 2004) and sped up responsiveness from suppliers
125 (Handfield and Bechtel, 2002). The supply chain management orthodoxy asserted that
126 trust relations disincentivised the use and abuse of coercive power and enhanced
127 collaboration to promote efficiency for the whole supply chain (see Morgan and Hunt,
128 1994; Batt, 2003; Lindegren et al., 2005; Hingley, 2005; Lindegren et al., 2005;
129 Doukidis et al., 2007; Fischer et al., 2007, 2008, 2010; Kähkönen and Tenkanen, 2010;
130 Terpend and Ashenbourn, 2012; Bryne and Power, 2014; Kähkönen, 2014).

131 This optimistic story has been, however, difficult to substantiate empirically. A
132 number of case studies found it difficult to find true examples of this kind of holistic co-
133 ordination, and found a continuing and recurrent use of coercive power (Bowman et al.,
134 2013; Storey et al 2006). Similarly it is questionable whether shared technologies like
135 open book accounting have embedded trust or encouraged predation when they make
136 visible a supplier's margin which can be cannibalised. We would suggest that the
137 balance of emphasis has swung too far in favour of 'the importance of trust' and ignored
138 the continuing importance of coercive power. Though these themes remain prevalent in
139 the global value chain literature on the governance of buyer-supplier relations (Gereffi
140 et al. 2005, Gereffi and Lee, 2016), in particular the role of conventions which
141 underwrite the exercise of power (Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). But here we would make
142 two observations.

143 First, the emphasis on trust has created an almost binary divide between the
144 principles of co-operation and power, and in so doing presents a very narrow conception
145 of what power is and how it is exercised. Power continues to be exercised coercively in
146 many sectors, but we would note that power can be exercised through more subtle
147 means. Power may be more diffuse, oblique and systemic in character. Fleming &
148 Spicer (2014) for example argue that in organisations '*...power is not only exercised*

149 *through highly visible acts of direction or even back room politicking. It also infuses*
150 *many of the systems, processes, ideas and even identities that organisations constitute.'*
151 (p. 275). If we extend this idea to whole supply chains, we might observe that the
152 potential to exercise coercive power – or even perceptions about its potential exercise –
153 may deter certain forms of activity, whether coercion is explicitly used or not (Emerson,
154 1962, p. 32). This 'perceptual' source of power, particularly the perceptions of the
155 subjugated actor, can set the 'rules of the game' and can have the equivalent effect to
156 those of coercive instruction (eg Bacharach and Lawler, 1976). It is also possible that
157 this perceptual source of power becomes entwined with what Lukes (1986) refers to as
158 non-decision making power and Tedeschi and Bonoma (1972) call 'ecological control'
159 – the perceived absence of alternatives on the part of weaker actors, whose
160 understandings may be shaped by and in turn shape their positional dependence and
161 sense of powerlessness.

162 This leads to a second point, that if power is multi-dimensional then power relations
163 may be structured as much by the self-perceptions of weaker actors as much as by the
164 explicit actions of more powerful actors. In a Foucauldian sense, power is therefore not
165 'possessed' but rather embodied and enacted (Foucault 1982). Of course the two may
166 not be separate as we outline above, but it is still important to think about how
167 perceptions of the powerless characterise power dynamics 'from the ground up' (see for
168 example Beier and Ster, 1969). A weaker actor's perception of the need to respect and
169 comply with a powerful party (French and Raven, 1959) may encourage pragmatic, but
170 resigned engagement. Our focus for the purposes of this paper is hence less on the
171 active force of more powerful agents, but the process of accommodation among weaker
172 ones. This requires us to be sensitive to power as a relation, embodied in discourse and
173 practice.

174 This different emphasis allows us to approach the relation between power, trust and
175 agency. We therefore selected a sector characterised by relational power imbalances to
176 examine the pragmatic, but resigned engagement at one particularly vulnerable node.
177 Our sector of choice was the beef sector and our interviewees of choice were Northern
178 Irish farmers. This sector was chosen because of the extensive literature that highlights
179 the presence of adversarial market relations and the absence of co-operation and
180 collaboration within the agricultural sector in general.

181

182 *Research Context*

183 The domination of the UK agri-food chains by powerful multiple food retailers was
184 documented as far back as the 1980's in several Monopolies and Mergers Commission
185 (MMC) and Office of Fair Trading (OFT) reports (Burt and Sparks, 2003). Retailer
186 strength grew after the BSE crisis in 1996 as the various import bans across Europe
187 meant UK multiples became the only major outlet for UK beef farmers and processors.
188 This encouraged more hostile power relations, with much of the burden of adjustment
189 passed further down the chain to actors (farmers) (O'Keeffe, 1998; Buccirosi et al.,
190 2002; Consumers International, 2012).

191 Since then these power imbalances have become expressed through technologies
192 which ostensibly could be used to embed trust but are instead used to discipline
193 suppliers. For example, supply arrangements which have no defined contractual length
194 could be used to negotiate flexibility for all actors but in reality allow retailers to walk
195 away if they find better deals elsewhere or if they deem supplier practices to be non-
196 compliant (Burt and Sparks, 2003; Bowman et al., 2012; Bowman et al., 2013).
197 Similarly open book accounting practices could encourage information sharing
198 positively, but are used by retailers to cannibalise any margin gains by their suppliers

199 (Free, 2008; Bowman et al., 2013). These and other techniques like reverse auctions to
200 lower tender prices enable the retailer to dictate the terms of the business relationship
201 with their suppliers and pass the risks and costs onto them (Bowman et al., 2012;
202 Bowman et al., 2013). Consequently, suppliers are then incentivised to pass the cost of
203 adjustment onto processors, who in turn try to pass risk on to their suppliers and so on
204 until those pressures reach farmers (Taylor, 2006; Bowman et al., 2012; Bowman et al.,
205 2013). This kind of contractual predation has a fragmentary effect, encouraging sectoral
206 opportunism and a culture of dealing as actors try to exploit minor and often fleeting
207 sources of advantage. Trust formation within the sector becomes difficult to establish
208 with suspicion the norm.

209 The impact of the supermarket price wars with the emergence of hard discounters
210 like Aldi and Lidl has further amplified these trends. Figure 1 shows the respective
211 market shares of UK based retailers from November 2014 to November 2015 where
212 Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's market share has decreased over this period, while hard
213 discounters such as Aldi and Lidl have increased their market share by 0.8% and 0.6%
214 respectively. But the effects are trans-sectoral when all are forced to compete on the
215 price of staples.

216 -----Insert Figure 1 approximately here-----

217

218 The impact of these pressures hit beef farmers in particular because they are unable
219 to pass on financial adjustment due to their position (the first node) in the supply chain
220 and their relatively fragmented organisational character. Farmers therefore tend to
221 experience significant financial insecurity and information asymmetry, which nurtures
222 myopia and insularity. The few studies available suggest suspicion that arises at this

223 level of the chain may not only be reserved for supermarkets, but may express itself as
224 suspicion of processors and even other farmers (Nitschke and O'Keefe, 1997).

225 There has been little work on trust and power in the Northern Irish beef industry
226 specifically. Perhaps the closest is that of Fischer et al. (2007) who found a mistrust of
227 processors at farm level in the Irish and UK beef chains due to issues of price,
228 transparency and the power imbalance within the chain. Similar findings were found in
229 the fruit and vegetable market where academic work has highlighted how these general
230 sectoral pressures have led to a series of disconnections and power asymmetries which
231 undermine trust (Batt, 2003; Doukidis et al., 2007). Outside the UK, there are similar
232 findings, where farmers' demonstrable mistrust of slaughterhouses is attributable to
233 power imbalances in the Dutch pork market (Lindgreen et al., 2005).

234 But it is important to be sensitive to the regional specificities of these markets.
235 Many studies tend to conflate the quite different markets of Northern Ireland and the
236 British mainland. For example, farming in NI is much more fragmented, with smaller
237 economies of scale compared to other regions such as England. Northern Irish beef
238 farms tend to be small for historical reasons. Land was typically divided among
239 generations of farming families, so that each farmer would own a finite amount of land
240 and that land would typically specialise in a particular stage of beef production, e.g. hill
241 land is not suitable for cattle close to being 'finished' for slaughter. Additionally, there
242 are more independent processors in England, compared to NI where competition is
243 limited as processing is controlled in the hands of a few companies. Reduced
244 competition in processing and the large number of small beef farms in NI, provides
245 processors with numerous supply options but farmers with limited selling options,
246 illustrating a unique competitive environment. This may make perceptions of
247 powerlessness and dependency more acute in the Northern Irish case, exacerbating

248 mistrust and hampering efficient co-operation, making it an area worthy of
249 investigation.

250 A qualitative interview technique was necessary to understand farmers' perceptions
251 of power, trust and agency in their supply relationship with processors. Details of our
252 methods used are described in the next section, after which we discuss our findings on
253 NI farmers' perceptions of power and their resigned engagement with processors. A
254 final section explores the supply chain dysfunction that results in the absence of trust.

255

256 **Methodology**

257 Beef farmers in Northern Ireland (NI) were recruited to take part in a semi-structured
258 interview using a purposeful sampling method. This method of sampling allows the
259 selection of specific participants to provide rich, detailed information on the topic of
260 interest (Patton, 2005). This meant ensuring participants from different age groups and
261 counties throughout NI and involved in different stages of beef production (i.e. suckler
262 calf producers and beef finishers) were recruited. Recruitment methods included emails
263 circulated via the Ulster Farmers Union, interviewer contacts, face-to-face invitations at
264 farmer auctions, and phone-calls to numbers obtained directly from the Department of
265 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs regional offices. Participants were
266 screened prior to interview to ensure they met criteria. In total, 20 male farmers were
267 recruited and interviewed (Table 1). Written informed consent was obtained from all
268 participants.

Variables		Number of participants
County	Antrim	4
	Armagh	4
	Down	4
	Fermanagh	2
	Londonderry	3
	Tyrone	3

Age group	20-30	2
	31-40	5
	41-50	2
	51-60	6
	61-70	4
	71-80	1
Production stage	Suckling	7
	Finishing	13

269 **Table 1. Participant Number by County, Age and Production Stage**

270 As our emphasis was on ‘perceptions’ we took a constructivist approach to
 271 ‘...understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their
 272 experiences...’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1 & 2). We were hence ‘...principally
 273 concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or
 274 otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live’ (Gergen,
 275 1985, p. 266).

276 We used semi-structured interviews to explore farmers’ self-perceptions. Using
 277 extensive literature (Fearne, 1998; Lindgreen et al., 2008; Cox et al., 2007; Fischer et
 278 al., 2008; Fischer et al., 2010), a semi-structured interview guide (with prompts) was
 279 developed to elicit these self-reported perceptions of the effects of power on trust and
 280 supply chain performance. Table 2 illustrates example interview questions. The
 281 interview guide was piloted for clarity, comprehension, reliability and timing with two
 282 beef farmers and refined. Interviews were conducted by an experienced interviewer
 283 (author) face-to-face between 16th March 2015 and 7th May 2015 and anonymity of
 284 interviewees was assured. Ethical approval was gained from the Research Ethics
 285 Committee at Queen’s University Belfast and the research was conducted in line with
 286 guidance under the Declaration of Helsinki.

Example questions
How would you describe the typical relationship between you as the farmer and the processor?
How would you describe the power dynamics in the supply chain?
How do they exercise that power?

Who holds the power in the supply chain?
How would you describe your relationship with other farmers?
How does power impact the functioning of the supply chain?
How does power impact your ability to work with processors/ other farmers?
How does mistrust influence the ability to work with processors/ other farmers?

287

288 **Table 2. Example questions asked in participant interviews**

289 Interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed in full, reviewed by the
290 interviewer for accuracy, and coded thematically (Braun and Clark, 2006) using the
291 qualitative data analysis programme NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd, Doncaster,
292 Victoria, Australia). Initially, transcripts were read and re-read to achieve data
293 'immersion'. Subsequently, four transcripts were randomly selected and independently
294 coded by the interviewer (Stephanie Brooks (SB)) and one outside researcher (Fiona
295 Lavelle (FL)). Both coders discussed the preliminary codes within the data to reach a
296 consensus on the validity and reliability of their application to the data. The remaining
297 transcripts were coded (SB) and checked for coding consistency (FL). Both coders
298 agreed that data saturation had occurred as no new codes emerged from the final five
299 interviews. For further analysis, codes were grouped into potential themes and inspected
300 for overlap to ensure that there were identifiable distinctions between themes. To
301 increase intra-observer reliability, themes were critically discussed by three members of
302 the research team (SB, Michelle Spence (MS) and Moira Dean (MD)) and the outside
303 researcher (FL) who were all experienced in qualitative data analysis. As a final step,
304 (SB, MS, MD and Adam Leaver (AL)) discussed the findings and selected key quotes to
305 represent each theme. Although participants reviewed the results to ensure that they
306 could not be identified, they did not provide feedback on the findings.

307

308 **Findings**

309 *Perceptions of Powerlessness and Control*

310

311 *“...I think if I was being hitched to the Titanic or if I was being forced to steer the*
312 *same course as the Titanic because I was in a wee boat being towed behind, I would*
313 *like to be up on the bridge of the Titanic having a say. ‘Now, I think we’re going too fast*
314 *now boys. I think we should be slowing down.’ But I’ll be down in the engine room of*
315 *the Titanic shovelling the coal in and I’ll be the one that sinks, because the captain*
316 *might get into the boat and get away... that’s the sort of analogy I feel.” (P05)*

317

318 In the above quote, one of our interviewee’s characterised his sense of powerlessness
319 within the sector by outlining two perceived dimensions of power – an inability to ‘have
320 a say’ proactively in the way the sector operates and the idea that when things do go
321 wrong, the farmer is the most vulnerable actor because of the perceived absence of
322 alternatives (Tedeschi and Bonoma, 1972). The imagery of the bridge versus the engine
323 room also implies the different status, hierarchy and even class that exists between
324 farmers and processors. The feeling of powerlessness of farmers to act when there are
325 problems is a recurring theme in a number of interviews.

326 This sense of powerless is seen to arise from the structural inequalities of market
327 power within the Northern Irish sector:

328

329 *“[In] England, Scotland you’ve a lot more competition...you’ve a lot more small*
330 *factories whereas in Northern Ireland you’re now down to a handful of...big processors*
331 *and they very much control the price...quantities...movements and specifications.”*

332 (P15)

333

334 In addition, from NI farmers' perspective, the power differential between them and
335 the processor is further reinforced structurally through processors' collective power by
336 their communal membership in Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA)
337 which is seen as giving processors more political clout on matters of policy and strategic
338 business ventures. NIMEA's political strength is perceived to be significantly greater
339 than the Ulster Farmers Union, partly due having more resources and closer ties to the
340 Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (referent power, see French
341 and Raven, 1959). Farmers believe the processors' closeness to Department of
342 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs enable processors to instigate policy
343 changes and award subsidies in their favour. Farmers argued processors also have
344 greater political sway with Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
345 because of their relative size, the tax revenues they generate and the local employment
346 they offer compared to the Ulster Farmers Union:

347

348 *"It's a political cat and mouse game half the time with them [processors]... I*
349 *remember the BSE time, the whole big thing was how many jobs were lost, then all*
350 *these grant subsidies came after that and the jobs were never really lost...the farmer*
351 *unions should have more fight, more push in them. I'm in the union myself, but we don't*
352 *have time. It is a group of farmers together...we've no voice."* (P20)

353

354 The structure of farmers within the Ulster Farmers Union and the economic and
355 political clout of processors are used by farmers to explain the differential power
356 structure within the Northern Irish beef sector. Respondents' suggestion of how the
357 structural advantage of processors is then exploited and power is often used explicitly
358 and coercively, which is closer to Robicheaux and El-Ansary classic understanding of

359 power (the more powerful the actor, the greater the use of coercive power) than Blau's.
360 Farmers' responses often contained conjecture and extrapolation. There was a sense that
361 farmers were 'filling in' missing information or 'joining the dots', particularly when
362 they were unable to articulate the specifics of how processors, for example, use their
363 lobby power. This points to the idea, outlined in Emerson (1962), Gaski (1984),
364 Fleming and Spicer (2014) and others, that perceptions of powerlessness may in certain
365 circumstances be self-reinforcing if they begin to structure action and response amongst
366 weaker parties. If you believe your buyers to be all powerful and you perceive yourself
367 to be powerless, this will have an impact on negotiation and bargaining strategy.

368 Of course, such perceptions do not emerge in a vacuum. There is always a structural
369 context, and many farmers identified control mechanisms - including a variety of divide
370 and rule tactics used by processors- to embed weakness among farmers. For example,
371 financial incentives were often offered on an individual basis to farmers who were able
372 to provide a consistent supply of meat that met processor specifications. This
373 individualised bargaining created mistrust, suspicion and fragmentation between
374 farmers themselves (see Nitschke and O'Keefe, 1997). This one-to-one negotiation
375 tactic meant farmers received quite different deals from the processors, which forced
376 farmers to compete amongst themselves, discouraging collective negotiation and the
377 formation of farmer co-ops.

378

379 *"...the meat plants always approach you outside the group..."* (P20)

380

381 In addition, farmers did not feel they were in a position to negotiate with different
382 processors if they were unhappy with the deal they received as collusion between
383 processors prevented any form of countervailing power from farmers:

384

385 *“If Farmer X walked into Processor Y and said 'What will you give me, and I'll do a*
386 *contract with you?' He has to get out of the contract he has with Processor Z and then*
387 *Processor Z is going to lift the phone to Processor Y and he is going to say ‘...you're*
388 *after taking a man of mine...it'll cost you.'...Processor Z owns the processing for any*
389 *further processing that it [offal] needs...it has to go to his place...if you don't tow the*
390 *ball he could say 'I'm not talking your offal'.” (P16)*

391

392 According to our respondents, structural practices and tactics allow processors to
393 dictate prices through information asymmetries in the supply chain. Processors have
394 access to cattle information via the Animal and Public Health Information System
395 (APHIS) and through the practice of farmers registering cattle with processors at birth
396 or purchase. This information allow processors to make projections of supply and
397 demand and thus negotiate lower prices for cattle. Farmers see processors importing
398 cheaper stock as a mechanism to control local prices. Additionally, processors use the
399 threat of substitution in their negotiations with Northern Irish farmers to bargain price
400 reductions. Farmers say they are unable to know if the threat is genuine or a bluff given
401 their inability to access relevant information:

402

403 *“...I feel I have a blindfold on, because they [the processors] have access to APHIS*
404 *and...can age profile the cattle in Northern Ireland...They [know] when there's going to*
405 *be a shortage in six months' time so they can... avoid paying a high price for that six*
406 *month shortage. I don't know when the shortage is going to come up...” (P05).*

407

408 “...everybody knows whenever beef gets to... a certain price here, they’re [the
409 processors] off to Poland or wherever to buy container loads of beef because they know
410 that will keep us [farmers] suppressed at a level.” (P19)

411

412 Although these moves may not be part of a deliberate and orchestrated attack to
413 ‘keep farmers suppressed’ and more likely to be a reflection of the processors own
414 competitive pressures, as was the conclusion of previous studies of Dutch pig meat
415 farmers who expressed similar sentiments (Lindgreen et al., 2005). Nevertheless, these
416 perceptions reflect a certain amount of suspicion and an exaggerated tendency to regard
417 the behaviour of others as if it were related to or targeted toward oneself (Fenigstein and
418 Vanable, 2006). These feelings of suspicion do however arise within a context of
419 asymmetric power relations, and the particular form through which power is exercised.
420 This all has an influence on how farmers experience, internalise and rationalise their
421 influence and manoeuvrability within the sector:

422

423 “...the processors are operating inside [outside] the gates now. I think they will be
424 operating inside the farm gates as well, they will just have people working for them...
425 They will own the cattle...They are taking control; it is all about control.” (P11)

426

427 Farmers make sense of the power relations they experience, which impacts on their
428 ability to collaborate, resist and exercise power reactively if those perceptions
429 discourage organisation and action. In this sense Gaski (1984) is right when he argues
430 that power is a ‘...function of the perceptions of power bases on the part of the one
431 subjected to the power or influence’ and suggests it maybe more correct to regard the
432 perception of power itself as the source of power. Similarly the power held by

433 processors may derive from farmers' perceptions of constraints on their own agency or
434 dependence upon an individual processor or group of processors (Emerson, 1962). We
435 will now develop this idea in more detail.

436

437 *The Impact of Power on Agency and Trust*

438 As previously discussed, the dominant view is that in the academic literature around
439 supply chain management is that (coercive) power and trust are inversely related - as
440 coercive power is exercised, trust in the supply chain decreases (Doukidis et al., 2007).
441 Our respondents highlighted mistrust across three different relations: between farmers
442 and processors, between farmers and government (Department of Agriculture,
443 Environment and Rural Affairs) and between farmers themselves.

444 Many farmers expressed mistrust towards processors and similar results were
445 observed at a national level with a study by Fischer et al. (2007). Their study found high
446 levels of mistrust for processors among UK beef farmers, which increased as coercive
447 control was exerted by processors. This adversarial relation took on an almost
448 apocalyptic tone in some cases as one farmer made clear:

449

450 *"Farmers do not trust them factories [processors]...I've heard them call them things*
451 *I couldn't repeat. It's unreal what people think of them...there has to be a bit more*
452 *honesty...and if it doesn't come I don't know...what's going to happen...[I] just can't*
453 *handle them. They can do things that nobody else could do."* (P19)

454

455 Many farmers recognise the importance of farmer cooperatives to increase their
456 supply chain power and position, (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
457 Development, 2006; Fleming and Spicer, 2014 for discussion of benefits). Nitschke and

458 O'Keefe (1997) state the formation of such producer co-operatives require a great deal
459 of trust to develop practice that avoids opportunism and reinforces mutual goals.
460 However, results of this study suggest the processors use of (explicit or diffuse) power
461 had an effect on farmers' own sense of trust, collegiality and togetherness with each
462 other. This lack of trust and collegiality among farmers may be rooted in the suspicion
463 that their counterparts have been financially encouraged to function outside of the co-
464 operative format by processors, as discussed previously:

465

466 *"The small mindedness of Northern Ireland farmers. Rather than helping somebody,*
467 *they would cut their throat; that's the problem...If you did a deal with the dairy farmer*
468 *they would be think 'oh my, they're worth more in XXX today!' And they just wouldn't*
469 *stand over it, that's the problem."* (P13).

470

471 Farmers also noted the presence of strongly individualist sentiments amongst other
472 farmers which worked against the formation of co-operatives which might be able to
473 wrestle back some control within the supply chain. Respondents mentioned the failure
474 of co-operatives in the past due to farmer intransigence and an inability to organise
475 collectively:

476

477 *"...Farmers are particularly bad at working together...we are very much*
478 *individuals... we don't work together well for our own benefit."* (P22)

479

480 Farmers also expressed a mistrust of the government department, Department of
481 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and their willingness to act in the farmer
482 interests, related to the perception of processors' 'syndicate power' to lobby Department

483 of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs as a greater force relative to the power of
484 the Ulster Farmers Union who lobby on behalf of farmers. Farmers believe the mistrust
485 presents itself in both directions in that they also believe Department of Agriculture,
486 Environment and Rural Affairs do not trust them as farmers. Farmers see over-
487 regulation and the gold plating of regulations imposed on the farming community as
488 evidence of that mistrust, albeit characterised by further suspicions about other farmers:

489

490 *“...they [government] don’t trust us one bit...I don’t know, maybe there is some*
491 *farmers that need watching, but there’s also some department officials that need*
492 *watching as well...some of the schemes that they brought out to try and help farmers,*
493 *like Jesus, the hoops you’ve to jump through.” (P19)*

494

495 Much of this mistrust is derived from the farmer’s sense of powerlessness against
496 and dependence on the ‘powerful’ processors.

497 Despite widespread recognition that collaborative agri-food relationships between
498 supply chain actors should be encouraged (Lindgreen and Hingley, 2003; Barratt, 2004;
499 Boel, 2006; Fischer et al., 2008; Lindgreen et al., 2008; Fischer et al., 2010; Humphries
500 and McCombie, 2010; Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB), 2013), results indicate
501 farmers believe poor collaboration exists between farmers and processors and among
502 farmers. These practices are viewed by farmers as personal ‘attacks’, rather than
503 ‘normal’ business operations in the competitive market place. These ‘normative’ or
504 referent sources of power are more opaque and not immediately explicit, as Fleming and
505 Spicer (2014) suggest. This referent power is more subtle and relates to farmers’
506 perceptions of ‘the rules of the game’, their own agency with regard to what is and what
507 is not possible, and what they can and can’t do within their section of the chain. These

508 diffuse power structures have prevented farmers from organising themselves in a way
509 (e.g. farmer co-ops) to countervail power exerted by processors. This being said, even if
510 farmers could organise themselves in a way to countervail processor power, their efforts
511 may be fruitless due to the processors apparent ability to utilise imports as and when
512 required. What then emerges is form of pragmatic but resigned engagement drawn from
513 their perceptions of what they believe they *have to do* in order to be accommodating,
514 further disempowering the farmer. This also shapes the power relations in the sector and
515 dictates relationship norms. Indeed it may be the case that power is simply ‘built into’
516 these supply chain relationships (El-Ansary and Stern, 1972) ensuring that some form of
517 accommodation must be made to be ‘part of the game’. These kind of themes –
518 pragmatism, resignation, accommodation – recurred in a number of respondent
519 interviews:

520

521 *“I work with them [processors] very well and the rogues, they’re not really rogues,*
522 *because you have to work with them. You can’t win every battle, that’s what farmers*
523 *[do,] try to win every single battle and you can’t because there’s other times you have a*
524 *battle going on and you have to let it go.” (P13)*

525

526 *“I’d call... [the farmer-processor relationship] ‘midlin’. It means so-so, not*
527 *great...[and that’s] based on less trust and transparency” (P15)*

528

529 It is evident the diffused power possessed by processors has consequences on both
530 trust as well as agency. Perceived power effects trust among farmers, with processors
531 and with government (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).
532 Mistrust prevents these actors working cohesively together for the greater good.

533 Farmers feel a sense of helplessness and a need to accommodate and resign to the
534 powerful processor requirements in order to survive in the marketplace. Understanding
535 the processors perceptions on explicit and diffused sources of power may provide useful
536 insights to how relationships in the NI beef supply chain could become more
537 collaborative.

538 Power structures exist both explicitly and diffusely within supply chain relationships
539 but these results suggests it is power diffused in the normal environment that has a
540 significant effect on supply chain functioning in the NI beef industry, particularly
541 regarding the sense of suspicion that is created among farmers which prevent
542 collaboration. Thus to address the situation , power in the supply chain needs to be
543 acknowledged (Chicksand, 2015) and even accepted, in return for other benefits such as
544 long term commitment, (Hingley, 2005; Chicksand, 2015), provided these assurances
545 can be made. Approximately 80% of NI beef (and sheepmeat) produced serves the UK
546 (inc. NI) market (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2016),
547 with the food retail market contributing a significant share to this due to their plight for
548 UK/British origin beef. Therefore, these assurances already exist to an extent.
549 Additionally, the impact of diffuse systems of power in supply relationships needs to be
550 studied so that the effects and consequences of diffused power can be better understood
551 and ways of positive cooperative behaviour investigated.

552 One way to enhance collaboration in the beef industry lies with trust enhancement
553 provisions and leveraging opportunities that may arise from more trusting exchanges
554 between farmers and processors. Cuevas et al. (2015) suggest that trust can be built in
555 asymmetric power relationships via goal congruence, leading to positive outcomes.
556 Again these authors highlight the need for non-coercive power to maintain trust. In
557 addition delivering reliability, keeping arrangements, understanding and education of

558 requirements, exchanging of valuable information and fair pricing are other ways trust
559 can be built into the supply chain interactions (Lindgreen, 2003, Suvanto, 2012). In
560 order to build an effective trusting relationship with the processor farmers must be
561 willing to surrender some of their independence (O’Keeffe, 1998). It is apparent that
562 trust building is going to have to be a joint effort between farmers and processors with
563 both willing to make changes to their current business exchanges in order to overturn
564 supply chain dysfunctions.

565

566 **Conclusion**

567 To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to use a constructivist approach to
568 explore how diffused, embedded power in supply chain structures manifest perceptions
569 of powerlessness and mistrust from the ‘ground up’ in the weakest supply chain actor-
570 farmers. Farmers consider themselves to be powerless against powerful processors who
571 have access to supply and demand information and have substantial political clout
572 relative to them. Farmers describe a series of divide and rule tactics employed by
573 processors including, offering financial incentives to individual farmers in return for
574 consistent cattle supply. These practices reinforce the processors structural power and
575 consequentially discourages the formation of farmer co-ops further embedding
576 weakness among farmers. The practices are viewed as orchestrated acts by processors to
577 control and suppress farmers, rather than ‘normative’ operations or as a result
578 competitive pressures experienced by processors. How farmers understand the power
579 relations experienced, debilitates their ability to collaborate and resist processor power
580 or exercise countervailing power. A process of accommodation ensues whereby farmers
581 resign themselves to play by ‘the rules of the game’ in order to remain ‘part of the
582 game’.

583 As there is limited literature in the area of power exchanges in the farmer-processor
584 dyad, literature relating to more downstream relationships (processors-retailer) was used
585 which needs to be considered. Secondly, we only report the farmer perspective of the
586 relationship and therefore the processors view of the relationship also needs to be
587 addressed. This study provides a snapshot of beef farmer views on processors in a small
588 country context where farming is characterised by small, fragmented operations coupled
589 with a small numbers of processors. This context need to be considered when results are
590 extrapolated to different scenarios or other operations in the food industry. Despite this,
591 the study provides evidence of a relationship dyad in the beef industry that needed
592 investigation and provides compelling evidence of the strained relationships burdened
593 with issues of perceived power and trust dynamics in the beef sector.

594

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605

606 **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

607 The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

608

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