



Quality, Coherence and Co-operation: A Framework for Studying the Mediation of Qualities in Food Networks and Collective Marketing Strategies

EGON NOE AND HUGO F. ALRØE

[Paper first received, 1 February 2010; in final form, 13 December 2010]

Abstract. The aim of this article is to present an analytical framework to examine how qualities are mediated between producers and consumers, and how this is linked to the way the food chain is constructed, who is involved, and the way the market is developed. The framework is a reorientation to see food networks as consisting of triadic value relations that transform and mediate qualities through the chain, using an analytical typology of quality dimensions. From this perspective, a meta-analysis of case reports from collective farmers' marketing initiatives in Europe has been performed. The cases differ greatly in the number of quality dimensions involved, and they represent very different strategies to mediate the qualities from field to table. We find that the performance of the marketing strategy is related to coherence in terms of whether the individual value relations are able to carry the involved quality dimensions throughout the whole network. In conclusion, this framework is a promising tool to radicalize our understanding of how qualities are mediated through food networks.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on high value food products that incorporate additional, non-standard qualities, such as organic food, as a way forward for European agriculture. By way of incorporating special cultural, aesthetic and ethical qualities in high value products, farmers and the food industry may break out of the increasing competition and narrowing profits on the global bulk markets (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). This development has the potential to combine the goals of business opportunities, rural development and sustainable agriculture, as indicated by the growth of organic agriculture and terroir marketing, which are key examples of such a development. It is not clear what the conditions and prospects

Egon Noe is Associate Professor in Rural Sociology at the Department of Agroecology and Environment, Aarhus University, Denmark; e-mail: <egon.noe@agrsci.dk>. His current research interests are in decision-making, forms of co-operation, quality of food and rural development and he has published in the areas of rural sociology, multifunctional agriculture and cross-disciplinary research. Hugo F. Alrøe is Associate Professor in Philosophy of Science and Ethics at the Department of Agroecology and Environment, Aarhus University, Denmark. His current research interests are in the structure of scientific perspectives and the ethics of systems and he has published in the areas of philosophy of science and cross-disciplinary research, organic and sustainable agriculture, and agricultural and environmental ethics.

are for new segments of the food sector to enter successfully this alternative development path, but it is obvious that it requires forms of co-operation and collective action far beyond what is needed to compete in a bulk market (Noe, 2006).

Farmers' collective marketing can thus be an important element in combining sustainable agriculture and rural development goals in a European context through high value products. First, because co-operation could secure a bigger share of the value added in the food chains to farmers, and thereby benefit the farmers and indirectly rural areas. Second, because co-operation could support a marketing strategy where farmers are not only competing on price and quantity, but where other quality aspects of farming, such as environmental concerns, landscape and animal welfare, are evaluated via the marketing chain.

Discussions in a Danish stakeholder forum on collective farmers' marketing strategies within the COFAMI project,¹ showed a shared understanding of the importance of quality as something that has to be carried throughout the whole food chain, from production at the farm, through transformations in the network to final consumption – the understanding that quality is not only linked to the product, but also to the relation between the involved actors. An experienced director of a company that imports cheese specialities, used the metaphor 'to carry the "smile" all the way through to the consumer' as a way of explaining the importance of the fact that many qualities are dependent on the acknowledgement and skills of the people involved in mediating the qualities through the food chain. Another output of the stakeholder forum was that different forms of qualities put different demands on the food network in terms of handling and mediating. The big challenge of these collective marketing strategies is therefore not only to ensure the production of high quality food items, but also to ensure that these qualities are mediated and supported throughout the network to the consumers.

Within rural sociology there is an emerging tradition for looking at food chains as actor networks (see e.g. Lockie and Kitto, 2000; Marsden, 2000; Goodman, 2001; Murdoch and Miele, 2004; Holloway et al., 2007) and a 'turn' to quality associated with the proliferation of alternative agro-food networks (Goodman, 2003). Still, we miss analytical tools to examine the question of how quality is mediated. The question of how to carry quality through food chains touches a deep, difficult and substantial question for sustainable food production. The ambition of this article is to present and apply a relational perspective on the mediation of quality in food networks.

There are a number of studies of quality in agri-food networks based on convention theory (e.g. Renard, 2003; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Convention theory focuses on the role played by macro-level normative systems in shaping interactions between individuals by way of establishing legitimacy and justification (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Denis et al., 2007). This is quite compatible with our approach, but these studies tend to focus on the overall co-ordination among actors and treat qualities as objects of collective understanding and negotiation, whereas we treat qualities as aspects of the empirical relation between actor and object. Mansfield (2003), who argues that quality is something that exists in interactions and relations among elements in the commodity chain, is an example of a study that comes close to our relational perspective on qualities in food networks, a perspective that is connected to a broader relational view of values (Alrøe and Kristensen, 2003, p. 76f).

The 'economy of qualities' is an elaborated relational approach to the concept of quality, which describes the dynamic economy of the product where quality is obtained through processes of qualification, through which qualities are attributed,

stabilized, objectified and arranged (Callon et al., 2002). Goods are (temporarily) stabilized products, and qualities allow goods to be differentiated from one another. The good, as a configuration likely to vary in a continuous process of qualification-requalification, is thus an economic variable in line with price, and the qualification of goods is at the heart of economic competition.

We share the emphasis on quality as an empirical reality found in the economy of qualities, but our focus here is on the mediation of qualities that are rooted in primary production, and not on the open and unbounded qualification processes that Callon et al. discuss. Where they come closest to discussing mediation, Callon et al. say that there is a host of different actors that share a product and pass it on to the next in line, and who can propose and prepare qualifications, including consumers (see also Stræte, 2008), and they emphasize that the co-ordination between these actors is difficult. It requires, as they say, 'an apparatus of distributed cognition in which information and references are spread out between many elements'. Along the same line, Brunori (2007) states that the success of local food networks depends on the capacity of the strategy to 'align' actors along shared axes of meaning as the condition to co-ordinate their action, noting that: 'The process of qualification brings a gradual "objectification" of a set of quality characteristics, obtained by consolidating actor-networks around agreed meanings that relate to the product'.

The economy of qualities is not at all incompatible with our approach here, but it is not directly applicable either, due to an important difference in focus. Some qualities can only be created in the primary production, and not through qualification processes in other parts of the food chain, and these qualities are key elements in collective farmers marketing strategies. In this article, we focus on how these 'primary' qualities can be mediated through the food chain, and not on the more general and less bounded qualification processes in food networks.

Because our focus is on qualities created in the primary production, in particular localized settings – qualities that will elude us if we treat them like material features or characteristics of the product, or if we treat them like meanings that are ascribed to the product without any material basis – we pursue a more fundamental and radical relational conception of quality. In this article, we will unfold such a relational conception of quality to examine how qualities are mediated in food networks.

The fundamentally relational understanding of quality that we advocate in this article is closely related to Robert M. Pirsig's notion of Quality. In Pirsig's (1991, 1999) understanding, quality is a relational entity that is prior to the objects involved in the relation. This understanding contains a radicality that we find can contribute to sharpening the analysis and understanding of mediation of qualities in food networks. Based on Pirsig's ideas, we have developed an analytical framework for examination and exploration of the correspondence between quality, marketing strategy and coherence in food networks.

The proposition of this article is that a deeper understanding of how the values and qualities of food products are mediated in different food chains, and what this means for the producer-consumer relationships, can, on the one hand, help to understand the different development pathways of collective farmers marketing initiatives in various parts of Europe and, on the other hand, help the involved actors in developing and improving primary production based networks of high-value food – as two sides of the same coin.

The two mutually supporting aims of this article are therefore: 1. to present an analytical framework to examine how qualities are mediated between producers

and consumers, how this is linked to the way the food chain is constructed, who is involved, and the way the market is developed; and on this basis, 2. to contribute to a deeper understanding of what makes collective farmers marketing strategies successful.

Method and Approach

This article builds on a combination of theoretical and empirical analyses. In the following, we first give an introduction to Robert M. Pirsig's notion of qualities as primary to objects and not as features of objects, and develop this into an operational analytical framework. The analytical framework is based on the idea that the mediation of qualities can be represented by way of triadic value relations, using the comprehensive theory of semiotics from Charles S. Peirce (1931–1958).

The analytical framework is used to perform a meta-analysis of nine selected case-studies of collective farmers marketing initiatives across Europe from the COFAMI project, which represent a variety of product assortments and marketing strategies. The COFAMI project studied the potential role of collective farmers marketing initiatives in finding adequate responses to changing market and policy conditions, aiming to identify the social, economic, cultural and political factors that limit or enable the development of such initiatives. As a core research activity, the project carried out 18 in-depth case-studies in 10 countries, covering the strategies, relevant networks, sustainability impacts and support strategies of different types of collective farmers marketing initiatives. The case-studies provide detailed insights into the influence of different factors that limit and enable the development, performance and continuity of collective farmers marketing strategies, and they also assess the performance of the initiatives in terms of social, economic and environmental impacts. Another important part of the project was to organize national stakeholder forums, where key stakeholders from various parts of the food chains have been involved in discussing the implementation and findings of the project.

To further operationalize the analytical framework for use in the meta-analysis, a typology of quality dimensions is developed to give a simplified description and categorization of the variety of qualities that are mediated in such alternative food networks. In the final part of the article, the analytical framework and the typology of quality dimensions are used to examine the mediation of qualities in the selected COFAMI case-studies, how this is linked to the way the food chain is constructed, who is involved, and to the way the market is developed, and what the level of coherence is between the type and number of quality dimensions that are mediated, and the marketing strategy.

Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

'Quality is not just the result of a collision between subject and object. The very existence of subject and object themselves is deduced from the Quality event. The Quality event is the cause of the subjects and objects, which are then mistakenly presumed to be the cause of the Quality!' (Pirsig, 1999, p. 91).

Our analytical framework is based on Pirsig's notion of Quality as the primary empirical reality of the world (Pirsig, 1991, p. 76). This basic assumption will be developed upon below. The theoretical and methodological framework for analysing the mediation of qualities in food networks that is developed in this article shall be seen as an element in a larger theoretical framework for analysing farming and food systems with semiotics as the main corner stone (Noe and Alrøe, 2006; Alrøe and Noe, 2008; Noe et al., 2008).

The strength of the Pirsigian notion of qualities as the primary reality of the world is that it breaks radically with our habits of thinking of qualities as properties of objects and forces us to see qualities as relational, and thereby forces us to take a completely different empirical position. Pirsig's point is that he wants to break fundamentally with the scientific tradition of describing the world objectively as a number of objects and seeing the relation between subject and object as secondary. Instead, he claims that there are no objects or subjects before value relations – substance is a stable pattern of values (Pirsig, 1999). Therefore, a value can be defined as the unity of subject and object. This means that materiality is an unconditional part of a value relation.

One of the major challenges of making such a radical break is that our notions and languages are embedded in the object-oriented understanding of the world, which makes it very difficult to communicate a relational view. The easiest way may be to use an empirical example to unfold Pirsig's assumption. Take a chair, for instance. A chair as an 'object with qualities' is linked to the evaluators of the object – the observers – and their value relations with the chair (Alrøe in Glover, 2003, p. 50).

1. The chair can be the observer's favourite chair to sit in and read the newspaper. In this case, the quality of the chair is linked to the value of comfort of the chair in relation to the habitus of the person, how she or he feels when sitting in it, etc.
2. The chair–observer relation can be based on sentimental value. Maybe the chair used to belong to the person's mother, and it sparks memories about the good and easy moments of childhood. The quality of the chair is then linked to the affective relation in the shared history of the person and the chair.
3. The chair–observer relation could also be linked to an antique evaluation, which means that the chair has got a generalized value to many observers, due to other value relations of the chair. For instance, the designer of the chair may be famous, or this particular chair formerly belonged to a famous person, or it is a very rare type of chair, and this would give the observer or the owner of the chair a special value relation to it.

In all three examples, the value relation and the quality of the object cannot be separated from each other. In the chair–person relation both the chair and the person are part of the relation. The value relation constitutes both the 'value for the person' and the 'quality of the chair'. The three examples reflect three different qualities that can be independent of each other, or can be at stake in the same relation. It may also impose some conflicts in the relation. If the chair holds a high antique value, the person may avoid using it for relaxing.

To operationalize Pirsig's ideas in this article, we utilize Charles S. Peirce's semiotics as a tool to represent value relations, where a 'sign' (or representamen) is something that stands for something (its object) to somebody (the interpretant) in some respect (Peirce, 1931–1958 [1897], CP 2.228). This triadic structure of the sign is akin to a triadic conception of a value relation, where the value stands for a qual-

ity to some 'valuer' or observer. For the further operationalization of this analytical framework, we therefore refer to value as the unity of the relation between observer and object (or, more generally, the unity of any relation between objects) and to quality as the analytically basic, one-dimensional 'object' of a value relation.

A quality is always monadic, in a Peircean sense, it is a (real) potential that may be actualized in dyadic value relations (Alrøe in Glover, 2003, p. 308f). Hence the concept of quality is often used as a means to speak about value relations in an 'objectified' way, a 'high-quality product', for instance. But Pirsig reminds us that quality is also a way of referring to the reality of quality as a dynamic potential (in a Peircean sense, the dynamical object), though quality is only ever actualized in relational form, as value. The quality behind an empirical value relation is sometimes ascribed to the object, e.g. 'she has a quality camera', and sometimes to the observer (or subject, in Pirsig's terms), 'she is a quality photographer', and we may underpin empirically such claims through comparative studies. But in reality, actual values are always relational and qualities are always potential (Figure 1).

Finally, operationalizing the framework into a tool for analysing food networks, the producer-consumer relation is viewed as a triadic value relation including the food items. These three elements – producer, consumer and food item – form a unity connected by the qualities actualized in this relation (Figure 2). It is a unitary relation because, first of all, it is obvious that it is not possible to speak about a consumer if there is no producer and no food item, and vice versa. Second, all three elements depend on each other to constitute the quality dimensions that connect them. As an

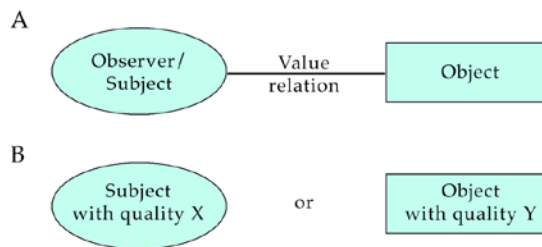


Figure 1. A value relation between an observer/a subject and an object (A) tends to be seen, and spoken of, as either an object or a subject with a certain quality (B), although qualities are only ever actualised in relational form, as value relations.

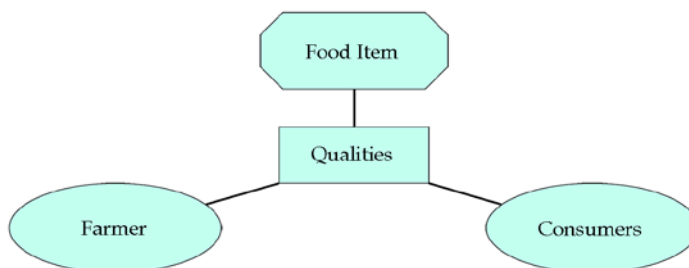


Figure 2. The producer-consumer-food item relation is the simplest unitary triadic value relation of the food chain. It is constituted by the qualities that are actualised in the value relation.

example, a food item is only organic when it is recognized by both the producer and the consumers. The producer could live up to the organic standards but that would not make the product organic if it is not recognized by consumers as such, or if consumers have other expectations to what organic qualities are, e.g. if they expect the food item to be tastier.

However, the situation where qualities are mediated in a direct relationship between producer and consumer, in terms of direct marketing, is the exception. The development has generally gone in the direction of differentiation, including more and more links of triadic value relations in between field and table and branching into complex food networks. We therefore need to generalize the analytical concept in Figure 2 to encompass an arbitrary relation in the food chain, in which what is explained above is applicable to every link in the chain or network.

Furthermore, a food chain not only consists of relations between market actors (companies, industries, farmers, etc.), but also of the internal relations within the actors. We can use a dairy to illustrate this. On the one side of this link we have the farmer–raw milk–dairy relations; on the other side we have the dairy–dairy products–retailer relations. Physically, there is a material flow through the chain, but the value relation may change considerably. The internal relations can be seen as the actors' strategies to mediate between the two sides of the chain relation. Again, processing is a transformation that is also a triadic value relation involving different quality dimensions. And it becomes an object of observation how the involved quality dimensions change between these links, and to compare what this means to the construction of the food network.

There is a surplus of potential qualities in each link, based on the involved actor–food value relations, but only a limited number of qualities can be actualized in a food network link. In food networks in general, there is an ongoing struggle between the different actors in the chain to obtain power over the quality definition of the food items by breaking or reducing the mediation of qualities downwards in the chain, e.g. in the battle between food company brands and the private labels of retail supermarket chains.

Figure 3 illustrates both the chain nature of triadic value relations in a food chain and the two kinds of ongoing triadic processes producing and reproducing the food chain and mediating the qualities related to food items through the food chain. Note that food networks in general are not simple chains but contain branches, which, for the sake of simplicity, are not shown in Figure 3. A last methodological point is that

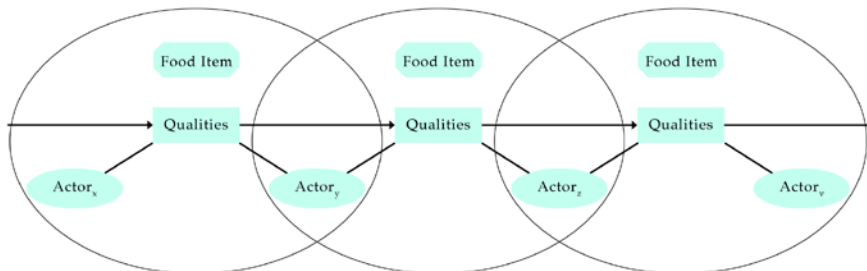


Figure 3. The food network as a chain of triadic relations. A food chain network not only consists of value relations between actors but also of internal value relations of the actors, transforming and mediating between the two sides of the chain.

the food chain does not start with the producer selling and ends with the consumer buying the food; it starts in the field and ends in the stomach. And, ideally, everything in between these two positions should be included in the analysis.

For the analysis of qualities of food in food network, this framework means, first, that we see quality as the 'object' of a triadic value relation and that a number of qualities can be involved in such a relation. This means that qualities cannot be understood and analysed independently of the triadic relations of the food network, however long or short the chain is. Second, the mediation of qualities is not pure construction and storytelling, because it cannot be analysed independently of the materiality and reality of the food item.

These ideas apply also to the ordinary scientific approaches to food quality in the form of empirical studies of freshness, nutritional value, substances, etc. The point is that these studies establish their own triadic value relations between the materiality of a food item and the observational tools and conceptions of qualities employed in the particular scientific perspective. This framework is thus not eliding the 'material function' of food, but treating this function as one among many other value relations to food and thus enabling a cross-cutting analysis of a variety of types of food quality.

Based on this framework, a mediation (or non-mediation) of qualities through the food network can (and shall) be observed and analysed with regard to the triadic value relations throughout the network from soil to table. From a farmer's point of view, this means that the quality produced in the soil–food–farmer triadic relation can only be carried to the triadic relation of consumer–food–dinner, if the triadic relations between field and table can mediate, take care of and reproduce these qualities throughout the network.

A Typology of Quality Dimensions in Food Networks

In the following sections we will use the presented analytical framework to perform a meta-analysis of the mediation of qualities in selected collective farmers marketing initiatives. To simplify this meta-analysis, we first develop a nomenclature of different quality dimensions involved in food networks. A typology is always a way to manage complexity from a certain perspective, and such a typology needs to be developed and improved empirically. The following typology of food quality dimensions is meant as a first attempt to do so.

There are some correspondences between our typology and the general typology of competing cognitive and evaluative rationalities ('worlds of justification' or 'orders of worth') developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Thévenot, 2002), which can be seen as constitutive conventions serving as macro-level forms of co-ordination between actors. For instance their 'industrial order of worth' corresponds to what we call 'qualities of safety'. But our typology also transgresses their original six orders (in line with their own suggestion of an emerging 'green' order), and our typology of quality dimensions is more specific and specifically oriented towards food networks. In this way, the typology developed in this article is somewhat similar to Brunori's (2007) typology of meaning in the operation of food systems, which includes five categories: functional, ecological, aesthetic, ethical and political meaning.

On this basis, and based on the Danish stakeholder forum and material from the other partner countries in the COFAMI project, we have developed the following

typology of quality dimensions to help categorize the qualities mediated between the actors of food networks, as a basis for our meta-analysis of COFAMI cases.

1. Qualities of safety. The main issue of the industrialization and globalization food regime. In the Danish context, it has more or less overruled all other quality aspects completely, especially due to the Danish interest in sensitive export markets.
2. Qualities of health. The dominating discourse of food quality, mediated by the table of contents, and mediated by the whole industry of functional food. However, there is also a whole range of alternative quality of health movements at stake.
3. Ethical qualities about fair trade, environment, animal welfare, etc., mediated by labels, certification, rules and control. Organic farming is mainly embedded in this quality dimension.
4. Aesthetical qualities linked to the consumption of the food, like taste, flavour, look, rituals. These qualities are based on differentiation and not standardization, and are mediated by e.g. brand and culture.
5. Qualities of rootedness. Reconnection to soil and nature, that the food is produced somewhere by someone, cultural and artisanal.

Meta-analysis of COFAMI Cases from a 'Triadic Mediation of Quality' Approach

In the next two sections, we will use the presented analytical framework to perform a meta-analysis of the coherence between the different quality dimensions involved in the marketing of the products and the market networks of collective farmers marketing initiatives. This meta-analysis is based on nine selected case-studies carried out for the COFAMI project, which show different specific interesting aspects and elements of mediation of quality (Assouline, 2007; Kalnina et al., 2007; Noe, 2007; Oostindie et al., 2007; Roest et al., 2007; Sanders and Moschitz, 2007; Schermer and Rieder, 2007). Table 1 contains the first step in the meta-analysis. For every case, it shows the type of products marketed, the type of marketing network, the quality dimensions mediated through the triadic relations of the food network, the degree of differentiation of qualities in the triadic relation of primary production at the farm level, the ownership of the 'quality label', and to which degree the ownership is vertically distributed in the network.

The selected COFAMIs represent a variety of different products, ranging from initiatives marketing specific products such as cheese or meat to initiatives with a larger assortment of e.g. organic fruit and vegetables. Furthermore, there is an initiative that seeks to market a whole range of products from a certain area. At the same time, the cases represent very different kinds of market networks, from direct marketing through more targeted and dedicated networks to heterogeneous market networks that often also include mainstream market actors. Hence, the cases represent a large diversity, both in kinds of products and types of marketing strategies, but all have in common that they apply a co-operative strategy to market food qualities that go beyond mainstream bulk production. Moreover, as we can see in Table 1, none of the cases in their marketing strategy strive to differentiate with respect to the food safety quality dimension.

Table 1 makes clear that there is no simple mechanistic relationship between the degree of quality differentiation at the farm level, who the 'owners' of the quality la-

Table 1. Marketing strategy and quality dimensions of case-studies of collective farmers marketing initiatives.

COFAMI	Marketing network ^a	Quality dimensions carried by the network	Degree of quality differentiation at farm level	'Owner' of quality label	Vertical mobilisation of market actors in value relations
<i>AMAP (France)</i> Array of local products	Direct	Health Ethical Aesthetical	High	Consumers	Strong
<i>Biologisch Goed Van Eigen Erf (Netherlands)</i> Organic fruit and vegetables	Direct	Health Ethical Aesthetical Rootedness	High	Farmers and co-operative	Strong
<i>Bio-direct (Switzerland)</i> Array of organic products	Direct	Health Ethical Aesthetical	High	Bio direct	Strong
<i>Thise (Denmark)</i> Organic dairy products	Targeted	Ethical Aesthetical	High	Thise co-operative	Strong
<i>Fejø Fruit (Denmark)</i> Apples	Targeted	Health Aesthetical Rootedness	Low	Co-operative Retailer	Medium-low
<i>Preiļi farmers' co-operatives (Latvia)</i> Organic fruit and vegetables	Targeted	Health Ethical Aesthetical	Medium	Farmers co-operatives	Medium-weak
<i>AOC Beaufort (France)</i> Cheese	Heterogeneous	Aesthetical Rootedness	High	Owned by the origin	Strong
<i>Walserstolz (France)</i> Cheese	Heterogeneous	Ethical Aesthetical Rootedness	High/ Medium	Cellar-wholesaler	Medium
<i>Asprocarne Piemonte (Italy)</i> Beef	Heterogeneous	Ethical Rootedness	Low	Region (ASPRO-CARNE)	Weak

bel are, and which quality dimensions are at stake in the marketing networks. In the following section, we will further deepen the analysis of how the triadic mediation of quality is managed coherently within the different COFAMI strategies, in order to explore the general preconditions of successful mediation of quality from field to table.

Quality, Coherence, Strategy and Distribution of Ownership

The COFAMI cases globally represent three different marketing strategies to obtain coherence between the quality dimensions involved and the organization of the marketing network. The first strategy is to keep a very close value relation with the consumers. The second strategy is to strive for a distributed ownership of the quality dimensions throughout the network, in order to mobilize all the triadic value relations in taking care of and supporting the involved quality dimensions. The third strategy is to create a product brand that is strong enough to mobilize a whole range of other actors in different market outlets around these multidimensional value relations and mediate them to the consumers.

Close Relations between Producers and Consumers

Three of the initiatives with a strong coherent marketing strategy are characterized by a close relation between producers and consumers by means of different forms of direct marketing.

The closest relation we find in the French consumer-driven AMAP case (Assouline, 2007), where groups of consumers have entered into strong buyer co-operation to support local small-scale producers and thereby created a purchasing activity that can involve many different quality dimensions and values. One can say that these AMAPs build on a co-operative buyer strategy to completely decouple the purchase from the industrialized market outlets and networks, as an opposition towards these. AMAP is driven by and very dependent on the consumers, but also farmer-driven initiatives based on direct marketing via box schemes and web portals are successful, and there seems to be a good coherence between strategy and the involved multidimensional value relations between producers and consumers.

The Swiss Bio-direct (Sanders and Moschitz, 2007) and the Dutch Biologisch Goed van Eigen Erf cases (Oostindie et al., 2007) are not regionally embedded initiatives. Biologisch Goed van Eigen Erf is an umbrella organization for a range of regional initiatives, providing a general label/brand allowing the individual producers to communicate and market their products not only locally. Bio-direct is founded by a smaller group of farmers together with two IT specialists to promote the marketing of organic products in Switzerland more generally. Besides the focus on direct communication, they also focus on high degrees of service, targeting busy families, for example through direct delivery to homes and by providing recipes. In both cases the direct relation between consumers and producers compensates the lack of a clear region brand and the web-based relation can contain many different quality dimensions. In both cases, there is a strong emphasis on mobilizing capacities for the professional development of an e-commerce platform.

The strong involvement of the farmers and their co-operation seem to be the main strengths of these initiatives, both in mobilizing farmers in the nursing of quality and for their abilities to enter into multidimensional value relations with consumers. Both cases face challenges to maintain the strategic consistency in the nearby future. The Dutch case is struggling with competing ideas about the further development of the initiative. Part of the members wants to turn the co-operative into a stronger policy organization, while another group wants to focus on commercialization via e-trade and shared branding. In the Swiss case, the strong sharing of the ideas and values of the founder is mentioned as one of the main elements of the strong and unequivocal brand of the initiative. The suggested involvement of more partners in the initiative will undoubtedly challenge this coherence.

Vertical Distribution of Ownership and Long-term Strategic Alliances

The Danish organic initiative Thise Dairy (Noe, 2007) is one of the examples of how it is possible to establish multidimensional value relations in mainstream market outlets. The strategy to obtain this has been the building of long-term strategic alliances with a relatively small range of actors in the dairy market. Especially, the long-term relation with the small supermarket chain Irma has been of great importance. Three factors have been crucial to the success, the first being a continued focus on the aesthetic processing qualities of the products and on new products. A second

key factor has been a continued attention on improving the value relations of the primary produce, by focusing not only on organic production methods, but also on health and animal welfare, the history and identity of the supplying farms, and differentiation between several kinds of milk (e.g. the fatter and more condensed milk from Jersey cows is used to make yoghurt). Third, the company has stayed with this strategy both in times of booms and regressions. This has only been possible due to the strong cohesion between the farmers and their strong support of the dairy factory. Generally speaking, this strategy has been held together by their ability to share ownership for the brand and quality with the other actors. For instance, the milk is sold under a mixed Irma/Thise logo in the Irma supermarkets, which means that all parties of the chain have had an interest in and benefit from supporting and protecting the value relations.

Contrary to this, we see the implications of the lack of distribution of ownership and thereby a lack of coherence in the Danish case Fejø Fruit (Noe, 2007). Here the farmers are hardly involved at all, despite the many dimensions of quality (including local embeddedness in terms of the links to the small island Fejø) involved in the marketing relations between the co-operative marketing company and the retailer as well as between the retailer and consumers. This can be explained by the way the initiative is organized, with the Fejø Fruit brand being owned partly by the co-operative marketing company 'Danish Pome Fruit' involving farmers from all over the country. The brand Fejø Fruit contributes to the branding of Danish fruit, but Danish Pome Fruit has no particular interest in supporting the pome growers from Fejø rather than the other members of the co-operative. On the other hand, the growers on Fejø have, so far, not co-operated well enough to take over the marketing of Fejø Fruit. This means that no share of the premium price of the brand is distributed to the pome growers, and there is no contribution to local development. It also means that there are no clear incitements to the farmers in contributing to develop new value relations. They are not remunerated for this, and therefore there is a lack of driving forces to further develop the quality dimensions in distinction to other fruit producers.

Another type of lack of coherence due to the failure of distribution of ownership is exemplified by the Latvian case of Preiļi (Kalnina et al., 2007). The primary objective of this initiative is a collective strategy to obtain a better negotiation position for marketing and distributing the farmers' organic products. Although there may be many benefits of this collective marketing initiative, the initiative is suffering from a lack of trust in collective marketing, which means that, despite of the collective efforts, all producers maintain the individual marketing of their produce. This lack of internal co-operation makes it very difficult to build long-term strategic alliances, and thereby value relations, with the other market agencies.

Strong Identity/Brand and Horizontal Distribution of Ownership

Where the previous strategy builds on distribution of ownership and strategic alliances as a means of obtaining coherence of multidimensional value relations, AOC Beaufort cheese (Assouline, 2007) is an example of a successfully and coherent multi-quality-dimensional marketing strategy involving a heterogeneity of market outlets. The core components of this strategy are a strong, organizational and legally protected territorial anchoring of the brand. This is linked to the rich artisanal and cultural tradition of producing cheese in the area and a strong local and social commitment

to protect and develop these traditions. Additionally, the producers of the area have a pragmatic but co-operative approach to marketing. This serves as a good fundament for a strong and distinctive brand, with an unequivocal connection to a specific area, which again supports a strong coupling to local rural tourism. Especially the linkages with rural tourism play an important role in producing and reproducing the multidimensional qualities in relations with the consumers. Even though only a small share of the cheese is sold directly to tourists, it supports a strong triadic value relation between both producer–cheese–consumer and consumer–cheese–territory. Combined, these elements create a brand that is strong enough to mobilize various food outlets to support and mediate the set of quality dimensions throughout the chain and, so to speak, to mobilize the other actors into these multidimensional value relations.

The Austrian case *Walserstolz* (Schermer and Rieder, 2007) is in many senses similar to the *Beaufort* case. *Walserstolz* is a regional traditional culinary cheese, but the ownership and horizontal organization of brand is problematic in relation to the coherence of the strategy. The label is owned by the private cheese firm *Hosp*, which is maturing and quality labelling the *Walserstolz* cheese for the dairies. *Hosp* has recently been bought by a Swiss firm and this external ownership of the brand is a source of internal conflicts. One of the participating dairies is marketing the same cheese under different labels in Germany and would like to use the label *Walserstolz*. However, this would conflict with the current organization of the supply chain. Compared to the *Beaufort* case, *Walserstolz* seems to lack a clear governance structure over the whole chain and a more direct ownership and involvement of the farmers in developing and promoting the brand.

Several initiatives strive to brand certain products of a region, through a branding of the region globally, like the Italian *Asprocarne* case that markets meat from Piemonte (Roest et al., 2007). However, this branding strategy seems difficult if the branding is not linked to the materiality of the products and thereby to the triadic value relation. In general, in such cases the co-operative organization is not able to introduce a quality differentiation in comparison with other areas and to obtain a premium price for these qualities, and many farmers continue their individual labelling and marketing strategies even though they are members of the association.

If the brand is not strong enough, a common trap of incoherence within the strategies of heterogeneous market networks is trying to establish different kinds of value relations with regard to the same produce and, for example, compete on one-dimensional price–volume–value relations in supermarkets while at the same time establishing multidimensional value relations in specialty shops. These attempts have a number of pitfalls. First, the lowest dimensional value relation in reality constitutes the quality of the products. Second, it is too costly to operate with different quality dimensions of the same product – either production costs are too high compared to the value added in the traditional market or marketing costs to obtain the multidimensional value relations are too high. Internal conflicts concerning the strategy and short-term opportunistic marketing possibilities are competing with long-term multi-quality-dimension branding necessary to obtain added value (Noe, 2007).

Discussion, Conclusions and Perspectives

Quality originates in the primary production at the farmers place in the triadic value relation soil–farmer–produce. The meta-analysis of the COFAMI cases shows that

a precondition for quality differentiation at the farm gate to be recognized by consumers, and thereby result in a demand and willingness to pay for these, is that the different qualities can be supported and mediated cohesively throughout the whole food chain – all the way to the triadic consumer–food–dinner relation.

The analysis of the cases reveals that there is not just one strategic model to organize a food network that is able to carry multidimensional qualities throughout the whole food chain. However, the results point out that coherence is an important condition from the perspective of added value at the farm gate. First, there must be cohesion between the quality dimensions at the farm gate and the way the network is organised, and quality differentiation must start at the farm gate. And second, all the triadic value relations of the network must be able and willing to support and carry these distinctive quality dimensions forward.

The meta-analysis of the selected COFAMI cases reflects three different general strategic approaches to obtain a coherent multidimensional quality-marketing network. The first is direct marketing. The second is distribution of ownership and strategic alliances throughout the network of triadic relations. And the third is to create a brand strong enough to mobilise a heterogeneous network around the multidimensional quality dimensions of the produce. Coherence is the keyword: success depends on whether there is cohesion between quality dimensions, marketing strategy and the triadic relations involved. Examples of initiatives where this is not the case are for example where there is internal disagreement among the involved farmers about quality dimensions and strategies, and where actors are tempted by short-term opportunistic market possibilities and do not build long-term strategic relations.

The meta-analysis of the COFAMI cases from the 'quality mediation approach' is in itself interesting and valuable, but in addition to the presented empirical findings this analytical framework is a promising tool to radicalize our understanding of how qualities are mediated through food networks. The triadic value relation perspective tends to be very fruitful and easy to apply. It contributes to the ability to handle many different quality aspects in the same analysis, and helps to reduce the level of abstraction of the analyses. Also, the analyses performed here appear to have a strong power to explain the degree of success of different cases and strategies.

The idea to develop this methodological framework emerged from our involvement in the COFAMI project. However, the original case-studies were not carried out on the basis of this approach and therefore its potential has not been fully explored yet. Based on this analytical framework, it will be possible to analyse deeper how qualities are mediated in food networks through closer studies of the specific value relations. In spite of this, the article demonstrates three strong points of the framework: 1. it allocates an ontological space in the analysis to quality as a basic empirical reality and thus allows for the connection of communicative and material analyses of quality; 2. it suggests a typology of food quality dimensions that simplifies the analysis; and 3. it provides a tool to combine quality dimensions with concrete food networks by way of triadic value relations. The framework offers a very tangible empirical approach to explore which dimensions of qualities are at stake in different producer–consumer networks by analysing the triadic value relations mediating qualities in these networks. From this perspective, quality is not a matter of pure communication or pure materiality, but a semiotic relationship that comprises all the techniques and instruments involved, from the field to the food that is consumed at the dinner table, in the restaurant or on the street.

This approach is not only valuable to analyse alternative marketing networks, it can also be used to explore the logic and struggles within mainstream marketing networks: how and where in the network is the quality dimension of the product defined, which measures and instruments are involved, what parameters of competition are chosen, etc. A concrete example could be the struggle between organic producers and private supermarket labels, and its implications for the successful mediation of different quality dimensions linked to organic products.

Note

1. The research for this article was realized as part of the project 'Encouraging Collective Farmers Marketing Initiatives' (COFAMI) from 2005 to 2008 and funded by the European Commission under the 6th Research Framework Programme (SSPE-CT-2005-006541). The COFAMI project looked into experiences and policies related to collective farmers marketing initiatives in 10 countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Latvia and Switzerland) in order to obtain an overview of the development and dynamics of such initiatives across Europe.

References

- ALRØE, H.F. and KRISTENSEN, E.S. (2003) Toward a systemic ethic: in search of an ethical basis for sustainability and precaution, *Environmental Ethics*, 25(1), pp. 59–78.
- ALRØE, H.F. and NOE, E. (2008) What makes organic agriculture move – protest, meaning or market? A polyocular approach to the dynamics and governance of organic agriculture, *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, 7(1/2), pp. 5–22.
- ASSOULINE, G. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in France, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- BOLTANSKI, L. and THÉVENOT, L. (1999) The sociology of critical capacity, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2(3), pp. 359–377.
- BRUNORI, G. (2007) Local food and alternative food networks: a communication perspective, *Anthropology of Food*, S2, March 2007, published online <<http://aof.revues.org/document430.html>>, accessed 11 February 2009.
- CALLON, M., MÉADEL, C. and RABEHARISOA, V. (2002) The economy of qualities, *Economy and Society*, 31(2), pp. 194–217.
- DENIS, J.-L., LANGLEY, A. and ROULEAU, L. (2007) Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: rethinking theoretical frames, *Human Relations*, 60(1), pp. 179–215.
- GLOVER, D. (ed.) (2003) *Lila's Child: An Inquiry into Quality*. Fairfield, CA: 1st Books Library.
- GOODMAN, D. (2001) Ontology matters: the relational materiality of nature and agro-food studies, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 41(1), pp. 1–19.
- GOODMAN, D. (2003) The quality 'turn' and alternative food practises: reflections and agenda, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19, pp. 1–7.
- HOLLOWAY, L., KNEAFSEY, M., VENN, L., COX, R., DOWLER, E. and TUOMAINEN, H. (2007) Possible food economies: a methodological framework for exploring food production-consumption relationships, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 47(1), pp. 1–19.
- KALNINA, A., ŠUMANE, S. and TISENKOPES, T. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Latvia, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- LOCKIE, S. and KITTO, S. (2000) Beyond the farm gate: production-consumption networks and agri-food research, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(1), pp. 3–19.
- MANSFIELD, B. (2003) Fish, factory trawlers and imitation crab: the nature of quality in the seafood industry, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19, pp. 9–21.
- MARSDEN, T. (2000) Food matters and the matters of food, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(1), pp. 20–29.
- MURDOCH, J. and MIELE, M. (2004) Culinary networks and cultural connections: a conventions perspective, in: A. HUGES and S. REIMER (eds) *Geographies of Commodity Chains*, London: Routledge, pp. 102–119.
- NOE, E. (2006) The paradox of diffusion of organic farming: a case study in Denmark, in: G. HOLT and M. REED (eds) *Sociological Perspectives of Organic Agriculture: From Pioneer to Policy*, Wallingford: CABI, pp. 210–226.
- NOE, E. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Denmark, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.

- NOE, E. and ALRØE, H.F. (2006) Combining Luhmann and actor-network theory to see farm enterprises as self-organizing systems, *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 13(1), pp. 34–48.
- NOE, E., ALRØE, H.F. and LANGVAD, A.M.S. (2008) A polyocular framework for research on multifunctional farming and rural development, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 48(1), pp. 1–15.
- OOSTINDIE, H., RENTING, H. and MEULEN, H. VAN DER (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Netherlands, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- PEIRCE, C.S. (1931–1958) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6, 1931–1935, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds), vols. 7–8, 1958, Arthur W. Burks (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- PIRSIG, R.M. (1991) *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, New York: Bantam Books.
- PIRSIG, R.M. (1999) Subjects, objects, data and values, in: D. AERTS, J. BROEKAERT and E. MATHIJS (eds) *Einstein Meets Magritte – An Interdisciplinary Reflection: The White Book of ‘Einstein Meets Magritte’*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 79–98.
- PONTE, S. and GIBBON, P. (2005) Quality standards, conventions and the governance of global value chains, *Economy and Society*, 34(1), pp. 1–31.
- RENARD, M.-C. (2003) Fair trade: quality, market and conventions, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19, pp. 87–96.
- ROEST, K. DE, MONTANARI, C. and CERRUTI, R. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Italy, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- SANDERS, J. and MOSCHITZ, H. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Switzerland, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- SCHERMER, M. and RIEDER, E. (2007) *National Synthesis Report on Case Studies in Austria, COFAMI-project*. Published online <<http://www.cofami.org/publications.html>>, accessed 18 May 2010.
- SONNINO, R. and MARSDEN, T. (2006) Beyond the divide: rethinking relationships between alternative and conventional food networks in Europe, *Journal of Economic Geography*, 6, pp. 181–199.
- STRÆTE, E.P. (2008) Modes of qualities in development of specialty food, *British Food Journal*, 110(1), pp. 62–75.
- THÉVENOT, L. (2002) Conventions of co-ordination and the framing of uncertainty, in: E. FULLBROOK (ed.) *Intersubjectivity in Economics*, London: Routledge, pp. 181–197.