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What Guides the Ecological Management of Animal Health? A Categorization Approach of the Advisory Networks Built by Dairy Farmers

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Today's livestock is subject to various political, economic, and social expectations on farming practices. In the case of dairy production, farmers must face the challenge of ensuring quality milk production while reducing their use of chemical medicines for the health of their herd. It is now well-known that agricultural professionals (technical advisors, veterinarians, processors, peers etc) may individually help farmers in learning new practices, but we do not know how a farmer chooses these professionals and learns with them how to ecologically manage the health of their herd. This raises questions about the coordination and coherence of the recommendations made by each of these professionals, and to what extent they help farmer change towards more ecological practices. We thus choose to think of this set of professionals as an "advisory network". The aim of this study is to explore the organizational diversity of advisory networks built by dairy farmers.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 26 dairy cattle farmers in the Massif Central Region of France, chosen for their ecological management of animal health. We carried out a qualitative analysis of the speeches, exploring the advisory relationships between each farmer and his advisors as well as the knowledge exchanged between them. Using the repertory grid tool, we identified a typology of advisory networks modeling the various organizational forms built by farmers regarding the social and cognitive distribution of advising for health management.

These types show how a farmer uses distributed human and cognitive resources, whether it is a centralized network around few trusted advisors or it is a large network structured around an autonomous farmer. Beyond the risk of classifying a farmer in a category for his lifetime, our sample puts forward various degrees of autonomy of farmers in managing health, related to their trajectory, their experience of pathologies, and relationships with advisors.

This categorization of advisory networks for health management opens avenues to investigate the convergence or divergence of health representations among farmers and their multiple advisors. Qualifying these networks regarding their potential for farmer's learning will also raise some important highlights for farmers' and advisors' education and training.

Keywords: advisor network, advising, distributed organization, health management, dairy farming