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**Building Trust in Public Sector Networks:  
The Role of Rhetoric and Persuasion**

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# **Building Trust in Public Sector Networks: The Role of Rhetoric and Persuasion**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates how rhetoric is used to generate trust in public sector inter-organisational networks. Drawing on evidence from a Local Safeguarding Children Board in England, where formal control systems were recognised to be insufficient to deal with the uncertainty inherent in the particular policy area, we explore how trustworthiness is negotiated amongst network partners, through network leaders' use of persuasive rhetoric. The main contribution that we bring to the existing literature is providing a description of the processes through which trust is generated in a public sector multi-partner setting. Our findings suggest that these are established within a feedforward control framework within the given network setting.

**Keywords:** networks, trust, control, rhetoric, persuasion

# Building Trust in Public Sector Networks: The Role of Rhetoric and Persuasion

## 1. Introduction

*“This is the third baby in the last 18 months who has died with an unascertained cause of death in a neglectful household. [...] The Chair felt that if some of the lessons learned from the previous cases had been fully embedded, this may possibly have made a difference to this little boy.” (LSCB Meeting Minutes, April 2011)*

This excerpt comes from the minutes of an inter-agency partnership meeting, where partners from different child protection agencies discussed organisational alignment which could potentially be more effective in keeping children and families safe. Setting up inter-organisational networks in response to adverse events, which could not be prevented by the actions of any one agency, is not rare, and many are mandated by governments (Rodriguez et al 2007; Provan and Kenis 2008). Attempts from mandating governments to coordinate previously isolated organisational efforts have been referred to in the literature as inter-organisational control mechanisms (Kominis and Dudau, 2012). They are meant to gather and use information aimed at evaluating performance, adjusting strategic direction when required, strengthening collaboration and avoiding opportunistic behaviours. In this article, we report findings from one such network, the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), introduced in England and Wales in 2005, in response to numerous adverse events with child victims. Little has actually changed in terms of the number of such events and child deaths since the creation of the LSCBs, which prompts questions about the effectiveness of this sophisticated system of controls.

As there seem to be as many cases of inter-organisational network failure as there are successes, we argue control is exercised differently in some than in others. In this paper, we draw evidence from one LSCB, which has not seen any notable practice failures, to investigate how professionals working in inter-organisational networks can be “persuaded” to engage effectively with one other and with the formal control mechanisms across traditional organisational boundaries.

Inter-organisational networks are constellations of organisations that come together through the establishment of social agreements and / or binding contracts (Barringer and Harrison, 2000) to achieve commonly agreed goals. They are viewed as vehicles to address complex social problems by taking advantage of a broader set of resources and increased capacity (see, for

example, Bryson et al., 2006). Given their prominence in tackling policy complexity in areas of public sector which are typically characterised by high level of uncertainty and unpredictability (Huxham and Macdonald 1992), inter-organisational networks have attracted the attention of some management control scholars investigating the use of control mechanisms to manage network outcomes in such dynamic contexts (Caglio and Ditillo, 2008). Termed in the literature as inter-organisational control mechanisms (Kominis and Dudau, 2012), these systems are meant to gather and provide information for performance evaluation, adjusting strategic direction if and when required, strengthening collaboration and discouraging opportunistic behaviour. In practice, these systems are found to take a variety of forms, ranging from well-defined, formal mechanisms of a diagnostic nature (Simons, 1995), which are designed to measure partner performance and evaluate ex-post the achievement of results against pre-set targets; to more informal forms of control, of a more enabling nature, which aim at facilitating interactivity across the partner network and increase trust among network partners for the achievement of the network's objectives (Cäker, 2008; Dekker, 2004; Free, 2008; Langfield-Smith, 2008; Mouritsen and Thrane, 2006; Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman, 2000, 2006; Dudau and Kominis 2013). The choice between the former and the latter patterns of control is said to largely depend on the type of environment in which the network operates (van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman, 2000; Langfield-Smith and Smith, 2003; Sartorius and Kirsten, 2005). In environments characterised by clarity about the key success factors and their cause-effect relationships, and therefore of high task programmability and output measurability, more mechanistic, 'bureaucratic' patterns of control appear more suitable. In contrast, in environments where future contingencies are unknown, and therefore task variability is high and output measurability is low, patterns of control based on social relationships (Ouchi, 1979), rather than rigid control systems, appear more prevalent.

Inter-personal trust has been identified as a form of control of the latter type (see, for example, Das and Teng, 1998). Trust is arguably particularly relevant to the successful operation of networks and the achievement of their stated objectives, as it is seen as a means of managing uncertainties associated with inter-organisational relations (Das and Teng, 2001; Sako, 1992). Indeed, inter-organisational networks, similarly to other forms of inter-organisational relationships (joint-ventures, alliances, buyer-supplier relations), are exposed to two types of uncertainties: uncertainties relating to unknown factors that can adversely affect the successful achievement of the goals of the inter-organisational relationship (performance uncertainties), and uncertainties relating the possibility that not all the organisations involved in the partnership will cooperate fully (relational uncertainties) (Das and Teng 1996). Although mechanistic

management control systems can tackle these uncertainties through rewards for desirable behaviours and measurable results, thereby motivating partners to act in the network's best interests, the development of inter-personal trust among network partners has been found to act as an alternative uncertainty-reduction strategy, capable of mitigating these risks through the fostering of inter-organisational relations (Dekker, 2004, 2008; Tomkins, 2001; Velez et al., 2008).

The existing literature on the role of trust in inter-organisational settings has mainly focused on the private sector with only few notable exceptions (see, Cristofoli et al., 2010; Cäker & Siverbo, 2011). What is more, extant research (Katsberg 2016 being the only notable exception) has been conducted in simplified two-party network contexts, which fail to capture the complexity of the relationships, and the ensuing uncertainty, characterising multi-party networks. Our article contributes to this stream of research by exploring the processes through which trust is engendered in a public sector inter-organisational setting in which multiple parties are involved. Looking closely into the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) which was introduced in England and Wales in 2005 in response to numerous adverse events with child victims, we explore the processes through which trust is generated, for example through persuasion mechanisms. In doing so, we draw attention to the rhetorical role of such persuasion mechanisms, by showing *how* trust is problematised and promoted among the various network members. Specifically, we illustrate how network leaders draw on formal control systems to channel *ad rem* and *ad hominem* persuasive arguments, in an attempt to establish partners' trustworthiness and underpin collaboration, both arguably critical for the successful achievement of the network's objectives.

## **2. Setting the scene: public sector inter-organisational relations**

For many years, work in the public sector has been reliant on inter-organisational efforts, yet traditionally it has been theorised within, rather than across, organisational boundaries. To illustrate this, we can point out that although it would now be absurd to claim that child protection could be tackled entirely by social workers, literacy by schools, criminality by the police and public health by hospitals and other health organisations, the burden of "control" for the way in which these issues are dealt with within the public sector has traditionally fallen on separate government departments. These departments are seen to delegate their "control" function to regulators (such as Ofsted, the Health Commissioner, Police Inspectorate, and so on). For their part, these regulators have typically engaged with organisations delivering

services to the public through inspections and performance evaluations, using various rating systems from “inadequate” to “excellent” or variations of such outcome labels.

During the 1990s, a heightened recognition of the need for mandated partnerships emerged, and in some cases, collaboration was imposed on partners. This was because it had become apparent that “meta-strategies” (Huxham and Macdonald, 1992), such as those commonly pursued in the public sector (for instance, “public health”, “child protection”, “public protection”), could not be tackled by any one organisation in isolation from others. The uncertainty which exists around these “meta-strategies” makes information-sharing (for example, around service users’ needs from multiple professional perspectives) an essential prerequisite for success. While offering clear advantages over silo working, however, inter-organisational collaboration creates a new set of uncertainties around, for example, reconciling intra-organisational strategies, priorities, resources and performance evaluation regimes, as well as intra-professional ethos and jargon. Some of these issues seem to be resolved, whether formally or informally, by boundary spanners who are able to translate between intra-organisational and intra-professional contexts (e.g. Dudau et al. 2018) and, in doing so, contribute to performance and trust building in partnerships (e.g. Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2017).

As control mechanisms (Kominis and Dudau 2012), mandated partnerships hold partners (in our case, the LSCB members) accountable for the work undertaken and for their contribution to the “meta-strategic”, inter-organisational goal – in this instance, that of “child protection”. Partners’ micro-level work is supported by more macro-level control systems, such as sophisticated inspection regimes, which are themselves reliant on collaborations such as Joint Area Reviews (JARs) for children’s services (Kominis and Dudau, 2012; Dudau and Kominis, 2013). The meso-level of control is represented by the “leaders” of these inter-organisational structures seen as “individuals” (such as the LSCB Chair or Business Manager) or “organisations” (such as the Children’s Services Authority that has a statutory duty to coordinate the integration of LSCB members). This study focuses on this meso-level.

### **3. Trust and control in public sector networks: theoretical positioning**

#### ***Management control in public sector networks***

While bringing public professionals and public, private, and voluntary sector organizations organisations together to tackle “wicked problems” in society is in itself a reasonable idea, there is a need to ensure that these efforts are managed effectively to minimize the risk of failure (Vangen and Huxham 2003; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Potential risks associated with task duplication or partners pulling back from work can be more daunting than the silo work culture which preceded the introduction of the previously described inter-organisational structures (for example, see Isett and Provan, 2005; Kenis and Provan, 2009). The use of control systems between, rather than solely within, organisations, is a way to monitor the effectiveness of these organisational alignments.

Networks, similarly to other forms of inter-organizational relationships (joint-ventures, alliances, buyer-supplier relations), are exposed to several risks. In particular, Das and Teng (1996) identify two main risks: performance risk and relational risk. Performance risk is the possibility that the goals of the inter-organizational relationship are not successfully achieved, although all the organizations involved in the partnership co-operate fully. This risk is not unique to collaborative relations and stem from external factors; such as complexity and ambiguity of problems they cope with and of the context they face. Relational risk (more recently discussed by Chung (2016) in this journal) refers to the possibility that the partners do not fully commit themselves to common effort. This uncertainty regarding the possibility that partners adopt opportunistic behaviours has been acknowledged by Ouchi (1980) as “the fundamental problem of cooperation”. Literature suggests that management control mechanisms may play a significant role to manage these risks in both private (van der Meer-Kooistra & Vosselman, 2000; Langfield-Smith & Smith, 2003; Phua et al., 2011) and public sectors (Cristofoli et al., 2010; Jahnsson & Siverbo, 2011), as well as in contexts involving both the private and public sectors jointly (e.g. Marques et al., 2011). In particular, a common view seems to exist among scholars that identify three rather different types of control patterns: outcome-based controls, bureaucracy-based controls and trust-based controls.

Outcome-based and bureaucracy-based controls are both formal control systems (Smith et al., 1995; Dekker 2004; Langfield-Smith 2008). The former involves the specification of outputs to be realized and the monitoring of achieved results, while the latter involve the definition of expected behaviours and monitoring of the actual behaviours to verify their compliance with pre-specified ones. Trust-based controls are characterized by reliance on trust as a form of control (van der Meer-Kooistra & Vosselman, 2000; Phua et al., 2011; Johansson and Siverbo, 2011). Although, according to Williamson, trust cannot be a solution in a governance or a control structure, a significant number of management accounting scholars attach great importance to trust in hybrid governance structures (i.e., Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman, 2000; Tomkins, 2001; Langfield-Smith and Smith, 2003; Dekker, 2004; Cooper and Slagmulder, 2004; Hakansson and Lind, 2004). In particular, resorting to trust has been suggested to be an effective solution for control problems for those contexts in which the design and implementation of

either outcome-based or hierarchy-based are problematic, and may not even be feasible, as a result of the transaction characteristics, such as asset specificity, task uncertainty, task interdependence and output measurability (Speklé 2001, van der Meer-Koistra and Vosselman 2000, Das and Teng 2001, Langfield-Smith and Smith 2003; Dekker 2004; Caglio & Ditillo, 2008a; Cristofoli et al 2009; Ditillo et al 2015). In particular, trust-based controls are described as been associated with more complex settings, whereby tasks are characterized by high levels of uncertainty, together with high asset specificity, high interdependence of transactions, and low output measurability (Van der Meer-Kooistra and Vosselman 2000; Langfield-Smith and Smith 2003; Håkansson and Lind 2004; Dekker, 2004; Cristofoli et al., 2010; Ditillo et al., 2015).

All or most of these characteristics that make transactions uncertain and very complex often coexist in public service collaborative networks and may contribute to the occurrence of opportunistic behaviors. Although network partners often share a common goal, they may also have a number of institution-specific goals and interests that differ significantly from those of their counterparts (Romzeck et al. 2013, Keast, Brown, and Mandell 2007) and that can push them to not fully commit to the achievement of the common goal. This is particularly true for mandated networks, where the common goal to be achieved is dictated by a third party organization (Rodriguez et al 2007; Provan and Kenis 2008). Therefore effective functioning of trust-based controls comes to depend on how trust is generated and sustained within collaborative arrangements (Tomkins 2001; Free, 2008; Vosselman and van der Meer-Kooistra, 2009; Vélez et al. 2008).

### ***The role of trust in inter-organisational control***

Scholars have developed a variety of definitions of trust, and most emphasise on two key features: the risk associated to a relationship and the vulnerability associated to such risk (Nooteboom, 1996; Rousseau et al. 1998; McEvily et al., 2003). For example, a fairly widespread definition of interpersonal trust is “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the action of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective to the ability to monitor or control the other party” (Mayer et al. 1995, p. 712).

While frequently conceptualised at the personal level, trust can go beyond interpersonal relationships especially in the context of inter-organisational networks (Tomkins 2001). Within inter-organisational collaborations, trust may well establish between partners’ representatives (interpersonal trust), yet it can also span to partner organisations at-large (inter-organisational trust). In addition, trust can be located at the system level (system trust) whereby the network

is given trust by partners and stakeholders (Free 2008). This brings us a little closer to understanding how trust is constituted in inter organisational networks – the inter-personal level appears to be key. By looking at collaborative arrangements from a structuration perspective (Giddens, 1984), Sydow (1998) explores the ways in which system trust is re-produced by interactions between managers and ‘facework’, or between action and structure (Sydow, 1998: p. 44). According to his processual perspective, trust formation starts at the *individual* level via practices of communication and other managerial interactions. These are embedded in and adapt to structural features of the *network* including the formal and informal control mechanisms in place. Re-produced in managerial practices, trust progressively ‘lifts out’ from the realm of mundane exchanges to cement systemically. At the same time, system trust represents the background for generating further interpersonal trust when it is evoked and re-embedded in interpersonal exchanges (Kroeger, 2011; Sloan and Oliver, 2013). To this extent, in inter-organisational networks, trust becomes ‘both tied to, and decoupled from, individual actors and their personalities’ (Sydow, 1998: p. 42).

Constitution of trust appears to depend on parties’ trustworthiness (Free, 2008; Vosselman and van der Meer-Kooistra, 2009). The latter is conceived as a characteristic of the trustee. It encompasses not only the belief in the ability or competence of a partner to accomplish a certain task, but also the belief in the goodwill or positive intention of this partner (in other words, their benevolence) and the perception that they adhere to mutually acceptable values (Mayer et al., 1995; Serva et al., 2005). Trustworthiness can be inferred from the information we acquire on a partner. In this respect, communication plays a pivotal role in framing a party’s trustworthiness in the eyes of others. Crucially, Tomkins (2001, p. 173) distinguishes between information aimed at trust generation and information required for mastering events. While the latter is required to deal with issues at hand, network members appear to need certain communicative cues to be ‘willing to trust’ others (p. 172). Consistently, Ferrin et al. (2007) claims, drawing on a social exchange theory perspective, that the way in which informational contents on a partner are communicated to others may alter its perceived trustworthiness. In addition, a party’s trustworthiness can be inferred drawing on their cooperative behaviour in the past, especially in relation to ability and benevolence (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Mayer et al., 1995; Tomkins, 2001).

In network settings, rhetoric is used to negotiate the trustworthiness of partners: as Bartach convincingly put it, inter-organisational relations are: “a matter of exhortation, explication, persuasion, give and take” (Bartach 1998, p. 238). Public management literature has associated the role of the negotiator and persuader to network brokers and boundary-spanners (Agranoff

and McGuire, 1999, 2001; Dudau, 2009; Dudau et al. 2018; Marques et al., 2011; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2017; Williams, 2002). Network brokers actively attempt to affect partners' perceived trustworthiness via rhetoric in the face of partner turnover (Cropper, 1995; Huson et al., 1999). In addition, they can use rhetoric to mediate the group's understanding of past performance and construct shared perceptions of the trustworthiness of partners involved (Mayer et al., 1995).

In this study, we adopt Meyer's 'problematological' approach (2010; 2017) to rhetoric to explore how trust is constituted within a public sector network. Meyer (2010, p. 408) defines rhetoric as "the negotiation of the distance (or difference) between individuals on a given question" (italics in original), so where the use of rhetoric is effective, the distance between the speaker and the audience reduces, aligning the two parties on the same side of the argument. This approach to rhetoric recognises the constitutive role questions have in initiating and shaping communicative processes: "questions are what cause discourse to take place and communication to ensue" (Meyer, 2010, p. 409). This questioning dimension of the framework has a broad reach, because it opens a door to persuasion. The problematological approach views rhetoric as one amongst many means of negotiating social relations (Price-Thomas and Turnbull, 2018) and one which rests on language being integrated in social relations. For Meyer (2010; 2017), the way to do this is by negotiating the distance from one's interlocutors on a given topic by appealing to *ad rem* or *ad hominem* arguments. While *ad hominem* arguments refer to the values or ethos of the interlocutors, *ad rem* arguments are used to express opinions on the object of discussion. These types of argument can be used separately or in combination to persuade, by varying the distance between the speaker and their audience in a dialogical process of negotiation. The aim is to reduce the distance to a minimum, until an agreement emerges between the parties. To illustrate, a speaker will choose the arguments they are going to use in a conversation based on a projection of what the audience may find relevant and persuasive. There may well be a difference between this projection and what the "real" audience is prepared to accept as a justifiable argument. The argument the speaker provides will ultimately augment (+), reduce (-) or leave unaltered (=) the distance separating them from various parties in the audience. There is also the possibility for a speaker to recast or re-qualify an argument by, for instance, presenting a different line of thought. Ultimately persuasion originates when distance is reduced to a level of shared acceptability between the parties.

This work concentrates on the process of trust constitution in the context of public sector inter-organisational networks (Sydow, 1998). Amongst the managerial practices that may affect the generation of trust in these collaborative settings, we concentrate on trust-enhancing

communications amongst partners. (Tomkins, 2001; Sloan & Oliver, 2013). To this extent, our empirical enquiry is guided by the awareness that persuasion to trust can address many ‘objects’, including interpersonal relations, *partner organisations* and the *network as a whole* (Free, 2008). Drawing on Meyer’s (2010; 2017) problematological approach to rhetoric, we study how network brokers use persuasion to negotiate partners’ trustworthiness in the context of the LSCB board meetings.

#### **4. Research design**

##### ***Research Methodology***

The study employs a “middle range” (Laughlin, 1995, 2004) case study-based methodology. Middle range thinking typically involves the derivation of a theoretical “skeleton” from previous studies, which is not predictive or used to derive testable hypotheses, but rather provides, in a “skeletal” sense, a set of conceptual definitions, a language and a structure with which to approach particular organisations and specific contextual issues, without restricting the understandings available (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1998). The empirical analysis provides the “flesh” (context), which makes the “skeleton” (theory) meaningful, as well as providing a source to reshape the conceptual framework, should this fail to adequately express the empirical situation (Laughlin, 1995). In this sense, middle range thinking suits case study research, reflecting the richness of particular contexts and generating deeper understanding of it, but at the same time allowing a contribution to knowledge, which can be used in other situations. As Broadbent and Laughlin (1997) point out, middle range thinking has the potential to “recognise both the specificity and the generalizability of particular social contexts” (p. 645), but also, from an epistemological point of view, this suggests that the relationship between theory and the context in which it is used is reflexive. Thus, the theoretical framework of the process through which trust is built is applied to the case studies to facilitate analysis and enhance understanding of the underpinnings of policy change in a particularly challenging public sector environment.

##### ***Research Setting***

The case context for this study is a Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in North-West England. LSCBs represent mandatory partnerships working on child protection which were formally created in 2006, but set up by most local authorities in 2005 after the Children's Act (2004).

The core agencies involved in LSCBs are social services (children's services and adult services), education, health authorities, Connexions (an organisation offering employment advice to young people), the Child and Family Court Advisory Service, local probation boards, Youth Offending Teams, local prisons and the police. In addition to these, there are voluntary and community sector organisations, which may choose to get involved, but are not under a statutory obligation to do so. The partnership encompasses a variety of professionals with different backgrounds and responsibilities. To ensure coordination, the interaction among network members is led by the Children's Services Authority (specifically the Director and Assistant Director of Children's Services) and the board also benefits from an "independent chair" who is not employed by any of the partners and ensures an independent voice for the LSCB (see Munro and France, 2012).

### ***Data Collection***

In this study, we use an in-depth case study approach (Yin, 2003) to investigate the role of trust in an LSCB. While there is a vast body of research on trust and on inter-organisational relations, the management control literature discussing the role of trust in public sector inter-organisational relations is still largely underdeveloped. Hence the choice of the case study method is suitable, as it provides the opportunity for rich descriptions in context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Otley and Berry, 1994).

We gathered evidence for this study through a combination of primary and secondary sources of data. Our data collection started by retrieving archival documents such as legislation and policy documents, LSCB business plans and founding agreements, as well as the minutes of Board meetings. We conducted a thematic analysis of the minutes of twenty LSCB meetings of the case study LSCB, which took place between February 2011 and April 2014 when leadership of the Board was constant. For each meeting we identified the key speakers and discussion issues and explored the patterns of "distanciation" generated in each discussion. Finally we studied the type of argument used by interlocutors (that is, *ad rem* or *ad hominem*) and the rhetorical strategies used to support them. Such preliminary steps guided the creation of an

interview protocol (Lillis, 1999), on the basis of which nine semi-structured interviews with members of that one LSCB in England, UK were carried out. Table 1 below shows the list of our key informants.

-- Insert Table 1 here --

Interviews explored how rhetoric is involved in the functioning of the LSCB. For this purpose we prepared an interview protocol comprising five sections: (1) general information about the network; (2) nature of relationship between agencies; (3) accounting and accountability mechanisms in use; (4) network leadership and leadership style; (5) network functioning and ability to achieve its purposes. Each interview lasted between 90 and 130 minutes, questions were adjusted iteratively as the interview process progressed, in light of the functions and responsibilities of different respondents. We also took into account perspectives and insights emerging from the respondents to inform subsequent queries.

### *Data Analysis*

Our findings are derived from a thematic analysis of LSCB minutes of meeting and interview transcripts. Specifically, we adopted the -step approach to thematic analysis illustrated by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching, reviewing and defining themes, and writing up. This is not too dissimilar from other thematic data analysis procedures, such as Gioia's 'first order concepts', 'second order themes' and 'aggregate dimensions' (Gioia and Corley 2004).

First, we gained familiarity with the data by transcribing the interviews and cataloguing relevant archival material. Transcripts and archival documents were organised chronologically. Opinion patterns emerging from interviews were cross-checked with relevant documents (i.e. meetings' minutes, internal guidelines, national policy documents). Based on this systematisation, we were able to produce a set of preliminary codes. Then, we derived themes, as we moved one step further from the data and towards theorising. These themes were reviewed and redefined, becoming fewer and more abstract as we moved towards our proposed theory of trust generation in inter-organisational settings (see figure 1). Braun and Clarke (2006) provide guidelines for

revising the set of emerging themes, corresponding to the last stage in their approach. Specifically, they indicate that themes should be validated by assessing their “internal homogeneity” (that is, the codes included in a theme form a coherent pattern) and “external heterogeneity” (that is, themes can be meaningfully applied to the full set of data).

-Insert Figure 1 here-

Two of the authors engaged with this process analogously, in order to engage meaningfully with latent themes (underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, informing the semantic content of the data –see Braun and Clarke 2006) while a third author applied the coding structure to the data set by means of a computerised data management programme. While this only allowed for semantic content to be thematically analysed, it did however help us match each code with relevant segments of text and allowed us access to a reliable data management system. Fine-tuning and revision of the coding structure, both digital and analogous, continued throughout the process of data analysis.

## **5. Findings**

### ***Controlling under uncertainty: the case for trust***

The centrality of uncertainty in child protection work has been recognised in the literature (for example, Kominis and Dudau, 2012; Dudau and Kominis, 2013; Dudau et al., 2016). It has also been addressed in comprehensive practice reports, such as Munro’s (2011) review of child protection practice:

*Child protection work involves working with uncertainty: we cannot know for sure what is going on in families; we cannot be sure that improvements in family circumstances will last. Many of the problems in current practice seem to arise from the defensive ways in which professionals are expected to manage that uncertainty. For some, following rules and being compliant can appear less risky than carrying the personal responsibility for exercising judgment. (Munro, 2011, p. 6).*

Our evidence supports the view that agencies and frontline professionals are confronted on a daily basis with the task of identifying signals of potential children safeguard issues. As the Director of Children's Services in our study states:

*"It is always a judgement call, because you need to decide whether the issue you're addressing is something which is a safeguarding issue or not and potentially a crime." (Director of Children's Services - 21 July 2014)*

The network deals with such issues by setting up formal procedures of enquiry and reporting and by investing in training. At the same time, its overall performance is assessed and benchmarked at the central level (that is, through JAR inspections) in terms of results achieved against targets set out in the business plan. However, interviewees identify a gap between the scope of the formal control systems in place and the array of potential issues with which front-line operators can be confronted. Specifically, the behavioural controls in place fail to cover the whole spectrum of relevant cases which agencies encounter. To allow correct case identification, professionals require information available from other agencies and need to make sense of different pieces of information from various sources. While interviewees recognise the provision of timely feedback as a necessary prerequisite for the network to function effectively, they find it difficult to see how improving procedural guidelines or information sharing systems would shed light on such particularly complex tasks. The Assistant Director of Children's Services summarised such concern as follows:

*"It's difficult to see how putting more procedures and systems in place would improve the quality of what happens, because the issues we often [encounter] are about collaboration and communication of particular circumstances which generate concern." (Assistant Director Children's Services - 25 July 2014)*

The key issue highlighted here appears to concern communication (both between clients and professionals and amongst professionals themselves) rather than the lack of existing systems and regulations. It underlines the importance of finding the right balance between trusting professional integrity and judgement to make the right decision within an uncertain context or instituting additional formal monitoring mechanisms to control this uncertainty. In our case, the preference among network members seems to be tilted towards the former. Trusting the professionals from the various partner agencies in the network is viewed as key in allowing the network to achieve its objectives. A statement from a Prison Governor is particularly illuminating in this respect:

*“I think it is difficult for them [i.e., the LSCB Chair] to control anything we do because we are working together so they don't control anything, they control small elements so they have to trust us and [...] it is about influencing [...] and persuading people”.*  
(Prison Governor - 09 December 2014)

*“it [is] all down to professional judgement and we just need to trust that everybody will do the right thing.”* (Assistant Director of Children's Services – 25 July 2014)

Indeed, our interviewees recognised the need for leaders and other members of the network to trust fellow partners. Whether, however, reliance on trust is a choice or a necessity in this context of high complexity and unpredictability, is open to interpretation.

### ***Trust building through rhetoric***

In the LSCB we studied, the onus for trust-building seems to fall on the network leaders, who need to reinforce the importance of collaboration. This is mainly done verbally, through what appears to be a variety of persuasion mechanisms utilised during board meetings. According to network leaders, the ability to persuade partners to collaborate with each other, and put their trust in other members' goodwill and competence, is central in such meetings:

*“I think their [i.e. network leaders'] capacity to influence, charm, persuade, cajole is key really.”* (Assistant Director Children's Services - 25 July 2014)

*“There is a certain phraseology you can use so there [are] ways of positively encouraging [partners] to share information.”*  
(Business Manager - 21 July 2014)

Our problematological approach to rhetoric allows us to identify a number of rhetorical devices network leaders use to negotiate trust between partners. Depending on the issue at stake, they appear to negotiate collaboration by having in mind a projection of the type of arguments their audience may find persuasive.

First, leaders problematise whether network members *can* trust each other. As a response they appear to formulate persuasive statements aimed at emphasising the network's underlying commonalities in terms of work values and beliefs. Our evidence suggests that such arguments are particularly frequent in the case of member turnover, when the shared beliefs of the network need to be reaffirmed. Arguably these statements are aimed at reducing the distance between the leaders' ethos and that of other network members. Through these *ad hominem* statements,

network members are invited to recognise shared professional bonds, which, in turn, corroborate the trustworthiness of other members and leaders. Such an ethos acts as a prerequisite for stimulating collaboration between members. Talking about her role in the network, the Director of Children's Services stated:

*“There's something for me to do about how you support people to be able to have an engaged relationship with other members. It's about being able to say to agencies: 'look, you're both actually after the same thing here. You both want to stop kids being abused.'”* (Director of Children's Services - 21 July 2014)

Similarly, leaders frequently use *ad hominem* arguments to reaffirm the capabilities of different partners and reinforce the idea that parties within the network are trustworthy, as shown by the following excerpt from the LSCB minutes:

*The Independent Chair praised the Business Manager for being directly involved [in the Safe Sleeping Implementation group], her expertise will make sure our implementation plan is recognised elsewhere [...] The Independent Chair indicated that two other LSCB are now looking to implement [the LSCB's] own implementation plan in their respective areas [...] (Meeting Minutes, 14 February 2011).*

Thus, it appears that network leaders attempt to negotiate the perceived trustworthiness of partners by using *ad hominem* arguments to emphasise their competence and goodwill.

In addition to arguing that agencies *can* trust each other's goodwill and individual abilities, network leaders problematise whether partners *should* trust the network's capabilities to act as a feedforward mechanism. Responses in this case build on *ad rem* arguments referring to the network's collective ability to deal effectively with environmental uncertainties. Leaders make reference to its recent achievements – usually drawing comparisons with similar LSCBs – subsuming the cooperative behaviour of network members at that time.

*“To trust somebody is something that you have to test over a period of time [...] it needs to be supported by the belief that you will approach a challenging area of work in a collaborative way.”* (Assistant Director Children's Services - 25 July 2014)

In such appeals, past success or avoidance of failure are meant to prove *ceteris paribus* the network's potential to achieve similar results in the future, and hence collaboration becomes a

necessary prerequisite for success. To this extent, arguments are deemed to appeal to the audience's emotions, either by eliciting a sense of pride or by referring to events that could touch the sensibility of Board members, such as the death or injury of a child. The extract below explores how rhetoric is used to link collaborative efforts to past achievements with respect to a recent Ofsted Inspection:

*“The Board was informed that the Ofsted Inspection of the Fostering Service has now taken place and the overall rating has been given as outstanding. The Independent Chair summarised by saying that there is a lot to be satisfied with, if we build on our collaborative strengths...” (Meeting Minutes, 19 December 2011)*

By contrast, the following extract from the minutes of a Board meeting offer evidence of how the Chair and Independent Chair evoke the “risk” of a serious case review in order to solicit collaboration on updating the LSCB training programme. In this context, leaders make reference to historical data on casualties to support the idea that the network had been capable of avoiding serious case reviews in the past:

*The Chair highlighted a gap in undertaking the return visit to the homes of young people when they run away and then return, hopefully the gap will be picked up by the Gateway Team. This is potentially positive and a good move forward. The Chair informed the Board that [another LSCB] is undertaking a Serious Case Review on the death of a young person [in similar circumstances] (Meeting Minutes, 23 April 2012).*

*Ad rem* and *ad hominem* arguments are used jointly or in isolation in exchanges, and these types of argumentation contribute to shaping the distance between speaker and audience, ultimately affecting the speaker's persuasiveness (Meyer, 2017). In our case these arguments are used to shape different elements of trust that network leaders deem to be negotiable via rhetoric. *Ad rem* arguments are used for steering the network by negotiating shared ideas of performance in order to affect ongoing collaboration. This type of argumentation is used to concert shared understandings of what LSCB collaboration should entail, and reinforce its perceived desirability by increasing (+) or decreasing (-) the distance between parties. Instead, *ad hominem* arguments are used to recast ( $\pm$ ) mundane discussions by soliciting a deeper consideration of partners' abilities and intentions. The following excerpt portrays a Board discussion regarding the implementation of a network database covering cases of child suicide.

*[Board member] stated that the value to the Board of the figures reported did not reflect the time and effort used in collecting this data. The collection of data already available via agencies may be more useful for the Board [...]*

*[Board member] highlighted the fact that because a lot of the data is missing it [i.e. the new dataset] did not achieve its purpose. The Independent Chair stated that the dataset nonetheless includes some key messages that will be incorporated into the WSCB Annual Report. She reiterated that working together to progressively inform our response to the safeguarding agenda as happened in the past was a positive way forward. [...] [She] stressed that the helpful data was probably available but stressed only Board members have the skills to identify the correct people for the data extracted within agencies. LSCB agencies were therefore asked to reflect on their data, what would be useful to gather and share and what is easily available without writing special reports (Meeting Minutes, 15 August 2011).*

As can be observed, network leaders use *ad rem* arguments to manage the distance between positions held by various parties in the conversation. To illustrate, they increase (+) the separation from parties arguing for abandoning the new database, while, at the same time, they reduce the distance (-) from those who support a mediated implementation of the system. Past success is evoked for substantiating their position, yet it indirectly limits the capability of the network to achieve its purposes. In addition the reference to a partner's ability is used to shift ( $\pm$ ) the focus of the conversation from the database project to an *ad hominem* appreciation of this partner's trustworthiness. Used in combination, *ad rem* and *ad hominem* argumentations make it possible to negotiate the terms of collaboration and shift the realm of persuasion from the "concrete" topic under discussion to the very existence and purpose of the network.

## 6. Discussion

The relationship between trust and control has been discussed recently in this journal (Kastberg, 2016), yet as it is still a relatively new field of interest for scholars of management accounting and control, we appear to be rather far from achieving a consensus as to how the two concepts relate to each other. Traditional management control theory views the concepts of trust and control as substitutes. From this perspective, trust and control, or more accurately, the exercise of trust, or the reliance on formal controls to regulate the relationships between the members of an organisation (or the members of a network), are alternative and equally valid strategies to absorb uncertainty, reduce complexity and deal with the freedom of others (Knights et al., 2001). Since both trust and control allow for the development of expectations with regards to social actors' future behaviours, and increase predictability (Luhmann, 1979; Nooteboom, 2002), they are considered to be alternative routes to arrive at the same outcomes (Gulati, 1995).

Our findings concur with this view, and suggests that the choice between trust and control depends to a large extent on the context within which the choice has to be made. In conditions where there is a low level of complexity, where means-ends relationships between key success factors are well understood and decision-making and action-taking are largely programmable (Emmanuel et al., 1990), the design and implementation of control systems is a feasible option and can be effective in providing timely information for the reduction of uncertainty and the management of intra- and inter-organisational relationships. In more complex settings, however, where the number of critical variables and the dynamic interplay between them necessitates more non-programmed decision-making and action-taking, the design of formal control systems is problematic, and may not even be feasible. In such contexts, organisations and organisational members are more likely to opt for trust, and mechanisms fostering trust, as a more efficient alternative to manage opportunistic behaviour (Fryxell et al., 2002). Indeed, our LSCB case is one characterised by openly acknowledged uncertainty and complexity in relation to multi-professional decision-making, and it is in such a context that we have observed the prominence of trust-instilling persuasion mechanisms that are meant to facilitate feedforward thinking and collaboration.

Our findings show how trust gets instilled and reinforced through the use of rhetoric for persuasion in a context of mandated collaboration. We argue that this trust-building process is a necessary ingredient for success in this setting and that it is conducted through the problematisation of partners' trustworthiness and the network's capability to achieve its mandated objectives, at three levels: inter-personal, inter-organisational and systemic (often

from beyond the remit of the network itself but of interest to it). Network leaders employ *ad hominem* argumentations to persuade partners that they can trust others' abilities and goodwill, while drawing on partners' emotions to reinvigorate the need for collaboration via *ad rem* arguments. The former aims to persuade that one can trust the benevolence and ethos of partners (seen as both individuals and as organisations included in the network) and frames trustworthiness as a pre-requisite for sustainable collaboration. *Ad hominem* rhetorical arguments are only loosely linked to information produced by formal control systems, e.g. performance measures. In respect of the latter, *ad rem* communication, such arguments aim to persuade people to trust the network's capability to achieve its objectives. In other words the network is trustworthy from a 'competence' (rather than 'goodwill', which *ad hominem* arguments advocate) perspective. Here, trustworthiness is framed as a pre-requisite for avoiding risks in the future and rhetoric is more clearly linked to information produced by formal control systems e.g. performance measures. While our data shows evidence of each of these two rhetorical approaches separately, it also shows how such arguments can be used in combination to negotiate trust within the network.

Rhetoric has been a popular theoretical (and methodological – Chang, 2015) construct in this journal but it has been used primarily to mean “discourse”, use of language, in contrast with, or explaining, practice (for example, Brusca and Montesimos, 2013; Yamamoto, 2004; Guthrie, 1998; Pettersen, 1995). In our arguments, we have used it differently, in the Aristotelian sense of a persuasion tool, similarly to Chang (2015), who, however, limited his analysis to ethos-led (credibility) persuasion. Taking a wider perspective on rhetoric contributes to a fuller spectrum analysis of how rhetoric contributes to trust among members of inter-organisational networks.

Our findings extend previous studies on control and control systems in public sector settings, arguing that in contexts where formal controls are ineffective or simply not feasible, interactive, feedforward forms of control gain prominence (Kominis and Dudau, 2012). To that we add that, if we accept that trust is a key component of feedforward control, the road to trust goes through rhetoric: the rhetoric promoted by network leaders to sustain partners' trustworthiness and elicit collaborative behaviour. It follows that our understanding of “trust” is close to that of those who argue that it is not a constant, unmovable concept, but one that is open to questioning and negotiation and brought about by persuasion. This essentially addresses the “how” question in relation to trust-building in public sector networks.

## 7. Conclusions

This study has explored how trust is generated in public sector network settings (that is, LSCBs). In particular, we focused on how trust is problematized and promoted by the network managers between the various network members through the use of persuasive mechanisms. Our results highlight that, in public sector networks of the type investigated here, trust building processes are framed through ad-rem and ad-hominem rhetorical arguments at an inter-personal level, to start with, but then cemented at inter-organisational and systemic levels.

The contribution of our arguments for research is three-fold. First, the paper adds to the literature on inter-organisational control by offering evidence on how inter-organisational relationships are managed within a network –rather than a dyadic – setting (Caglio and Ditillo, 2008). Secondly, this is one of the few studies investigating the control mechanisms in general, and of trust building in particular, implicated in the specific context of public sector networks. Thirdly, the study contributes to the public sector literature on service delivery network dealing with wicked issues. Previous literature recognised that trust is a cornerstone for creating the collaborative working to address wicked problems (Head and Alford 2015); in this article, we acknowledge the importance of trust, by providing evidence of rhetorical frames within which these mechanisms are built among partners organizations dealing with complex and difficult problems.

In terms of managerial implications, this study suggests that the dissemination of persuasive messages is one of the levers at disposal of network leaders in the construction of trust. However, they should select the appropriate mix of rhetorical appeals on the basis of the specific characteristics of their networks (for instance the readiness to accept specific arguments about their partners) and the types of trust (inter-personal, inter-organizational, and systemic) that they need to promote in order to guarantee collaboration and avoid the emergence of opportunistic behaviors.

As any piece of research does, this study, too, comes with several limitations. First, we portrayed how the trust building processes are framed, rather than assessing whether or not they have actually been successful. The latter is likely affected only partially by rhetoric and will depend on many other practices and their intended and unintended effects. Future studies may be able to investigate these in detail as well as building an understanding of the relationships between persuasion and other practices in the process of building trust. Secondly, our results

are exploratory in nature and not generalizable to context with different characteristics from the public sector network in our study. While there are increasingly more mandated partnerships like the LSCB in Britain as well as internationally, we suggest that our research context is fairly specific (in terms of policy environment and organisational composition) and future studies may wish to frame their data within their own policy context when comparing their findings with ours. Nevertheless, investigations of trust building rhetorical mechanisms used in partnerships serving other policy areas, located in different countries and with heterogeneous structural and governance characteristics, would be of value to the study of inter-organisational control and inter-organisational relations more generally.

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**Table 1. List of interviewees**

n.	Interviewee	Date
1	Assistant Director of Children’s Services	25 July 2014
2	Business Manager	21 July 2014
3	Detective Chief Inspector	09 December 2014
4	Director of Children’s Services	21 July 2014
5	Hospital Trust Representative	22 July 2014
6	Independent Chair	18 June 2014
7	Lay Member	03 December 2014
8	Lead Member	21 July 2014
9	Prison Governor	09 December 2014

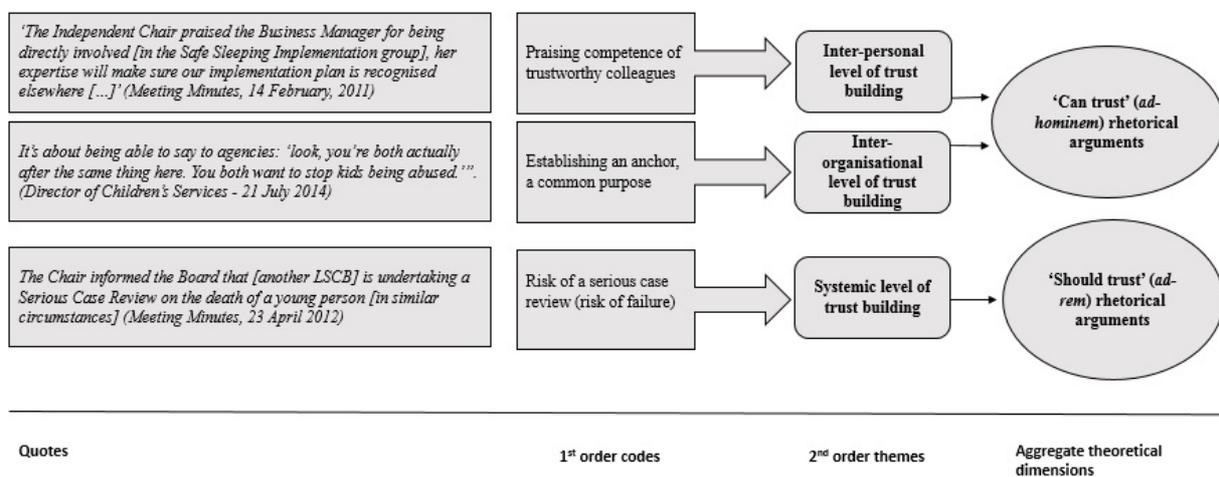


Figure 1: Diagram depicting theoretical categories extracted from the data