

Interactions between science communication and science policies

## IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATION: WHO COLLABORATES IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH?

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**Abstract:** Research collaborations involving stakeholder communities outside the research area are believed to produce more innovative and useable outcomes, and increase the support of external stakeholders and community groups for research. Yet social researchers also report that members of diverse research teams have a genuine inability to collaborate due to poor communication. Using concepts gathered from social identity theory (SIT), this paper examines the identity processes that enhance or inhibit communication between researchers and external stakeholder communities in areas of collaborative research. Participants highlighted communication activities associated five goals and all were associated with the management of social identity. The practical applications of these findings will be discussed.

**Key words:** Collaborative research, communication, Social Identity Theory (SIT), external stakeholders

Support for industry and end-user-relevant research is on the increase internationally (Adams, Chiang, & Starkey, 2001) and the Australian government offers many incentive programs encouraging research-industry partnerships and rewarding organisations that promote the uptake of technology. These collaborations are believed to produce more innovative and useable outcomes as the research has been “guided” by external stakeholders during its development. These collaborations are also thought to increase the support of external stakeholders and community groups for research.

A number of studies have found, however, that diverse research groups often fail to collaborate due to poor intergroup communication (e.g., Oliver & Blakeborough, 1998; Tushman, 1982). Social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1982), has already demonstrated its usefulness in examining group processes in organisational contexts (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kramer, 1991; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Northcraft, Polzer, Neale, & Kramer, 1995), including the role of stakeholders (Hogg & Terry, 2000) and is the theoretical approach adopted for investigating communication between research groups and external stakeholders in this study.

### Aim

Researchers and communication practitioners often want to know how effective communication activities are at influencing external stakeholders. This is a complex question, as communication is often mediated by the level of identification between the organisation and external stakeholder groups. Thus, it may be more fruitful to ask, How do communication activities aimed at external stakeholders reflect issues of identity and identification?

### Method

This study aimed to explore perceptions of stakeholders in Australian Cooperative Research Centres (CRC). Participants were 17 communication professionals (12 male and 5 female). They represented all sectors of CRC activity (three agriculture and rural-based manufacturing, nine environment, two medical science and technology, two mining and energy and one information and communication technology). In-depth individual interviews were chosen as the method of data collection and constituted semi-structured conversations with prompt questions to guide participants. Participants were asked to describe their CRC's communication activities with external stakeholders and to explain what they were trying to achieve with their external stakeholders through communication. The interviews were recorded and the transcripts were analysed iteratively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by looking at themes relating to issues of communication between the CRC and stakeholders.

### Findings

The communication activities with external stakeholders discussed by communication professionals centred around five goals. These goals were (1) developing source credibility for the CRC; (2) facilitating constructive contact between the CRC, CRC researchers and external stakeholders; (3) using boundary spanners in intergroup communication; (4) accommodating to the needs and values of stakeholder groups, with a focus on group differences between the CRC and external stakeholder groups; and (5) raising awareness among stakeholders about CRC needs and values, including actively engaging in agenda setting.

Communication activities focused on influencing the homogeneity of stakeholder groups, as well as encouraging these groups to think and act in terms of their group identity and the associated values, norms and behaviour. Other activities acknowledged the importance of understanding the group identity issues of the diverse group participants in order for communication activities to be effective. Some communication activities, however, showed a lack of understanding of the needs and values of all groups, and were often driven by the needs of one dominant group of internal or external stakeholders. There remained an idea among some CRC members that external stakeholder groups need to be "educated" rather than demonstrating a commitment to the collaborative process.

In summary, this study points to the pitfalls of a top-down approach to collaboration with stakeholders in collaborative research organisations, but it also highlights the opportunities to facilitate communication among stakeholder groups. Both the pitfalls and the opportunities are related to the management of social identity in these collaborative research organisations. Social identity theory, thus, provides a useful way to understand communication in such organisations, which are so important to solving important problems at the present time.

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