Review of: ""Same team, different colours": Examining the association between shared identity and interoperability in multi-agency discussion-based exercises"

Stefan Schilling[1]

1 King's College London

Recent work on multi-agency emergency responders has shown that many of the psycho-social issues undermining interoperability in emergency incidents can be assessed using a social identity lens. This novel study, using a mixed methods approach applied scenario-based focus groups and quantitative measures to assess the role of shared identity in joint multi-agency working. It suggests that greater self-reported shared identity during the exercises was associated with greater self-reported joint working, and that shared identity is linked to important factors such as increased motivation, trust, and respect.

The study's results are important as it not only extends prior work on how social identity can facilitate rapid and temporary collaboration between operational commanders from different responder agencies during emergencies, but also sheds some light on the circumstances under which this can occur. As demonstrated through the quantitative and qualitative data, first responders' familiarity with JESIP principles provided an important behavioural basis required to evaluate the scenario, develop a common goal, and collaborate towards attaining it.

Nonetheless, while the paper emphasises that shared identity can facilitate coordination and cooperation between group members, the study was only able to show an association between social identity, and self-reported effective communication, coordination, and co-location (quantitatively) and perceptions of joint working (qualitatively) in line with JESIP principles. It therefore could not determine whether social identity facilitates joint working. Considering how familiar participants were with JESIP principles (and are trained periodically on these principles) it may be that the JESIP principles – besides providing tangible operational guidelines for joint working – may also provide an easily accessible pre-existing framework of reference for the development of a common superordinate identity, which in an incident response can become salient. This question of directionality is only briefly addressed in the paper, but future research could benefit from speaking to this further. Further, given that collaboration in ad-hoc assembled teams in other contexts depends on swift trust on the basis of categorical stereotypes about a person's occupation, it is also likely that a benefit of JESIP principles and the frequent training of it for operational commanders may be the frequent interaction with personnel from other response agencies. Other work has highlighted that such frequent interactions aids in increasing understanding of roles and responsibilities and simultaneously reduce pre-existing out group stereotypes in inter-professional/ inter-disciplinary personnel.

However, as with other research in high risk and response organisations assessment of collaboration, social identity, or leadership, the study is somewhat limited, which the authors acknowledged when pointing to the disparity between the participants self-reported adherence to JESIP principles and the findings of incident reports. Unlike in a real incident, where operational commanders are working in a multifaceted hierarchical multi-agency environment, the scenario-based setting may have increased perceived superordinate identity because it allowed participants to discuss the scenario free from hierarchical demands and the complexity of real incidents. While the paper discusses briefly the literature on multiple identities as instructive for this case, it is likely that in a real scenario the benefits of a superordinate identity may not be sustainable when it is challenged by interactions with – and demands from – subordinates of their own response identity (e.g., FRS or Police) and out group members (e.g., other responders, the public).

Nevertheless, despite this limitation and the questions about directionality, the authors work is an important step in furthering our knowledge on the interaction between social identity, collaboration, and team outcomes in emergency responders. It also further highlights the importance of the need to engrain psychological factors in training and operational guidance to emphasise the importance of shared goals, principles, and understanding of roles and responsibilities.