

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

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One of the big challenges for social research is how to facilitate coordination and cooperation when existing processes and incentives support and reward individual outcomes. It is a challenge that has become more salient as our world has become more interconnected. In the context of climate change and global pandemics, it is clear that we need research to identify those factors that enable teams, organisations and even nations to subordinate their individual goals and ways of doing things for the sake of collective goals. Davidson, Carter, Drury, Amlot and Haslam use social identity theory to provide insight into this issue, using multi-agency emergency response teams as their focus and framing the issue as an interoperability challenge.

Emergency situations provide an interesting case for exploring cross-agency team interoperability since the protection of human life and property should serve as a salient, shared goal for these cross-agency teams, thereby providing strong motivation for collaboration. In addition, as the authors note, the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles introduced in 2012 also provide a framework and principles to guide joint working. In spite of these supportive factors, interoperability challenges are still experienced (as the authors illustrate with brief reference to the 2017 Manchester Arena attack, the Grenfell Tower fire and ‘a review of 32 major incidents that took place between 1986 and 2010, Pollock (2013)’).

Further analysis of emergency response teams in the context of the pandemic serves to illustrate the role of social identity factors (specifically, *context-driven salience* processes and *communication-driven strategic* processes) in contributing to interoperability. One section of the literature review could have benefited from more detail, namely, the paragraph discussing multiple social identities. The context-driven and communication driven processes seemed design to foster a superordinate group identity, yet in the aforementioned paragraph, the authors state that “employees will identify with a newly emerging organization more successfully if they are able to maintain their pre-existing social identity”. Which is the important factor? Facilitating the superordinate group identity, maintaining the subgroup identity or seeking congruence between the superordinate and subgroup identities? In this context, it would have been helpful if the research questions had a clear point of reference. For example, in RQ3, 5 & 6, which shared identity is being referenced? The superordinate group or the pre-existing group? Similarly, in the analysis of RQ3, the authors report that “no significant clustering within the data by group” was identified but it isn't clear whether the “group” in question is the agency that participants represented or the group that they participated in for the study.

Two factors limit the usefulness of the data and inferences drawn from this study. First, due to COVID-19, the exercises were completed in virtual teams (presumably the teams communicated via videoconference as well as via Chat messages, although this point is not clarified). The fact that the teams were not co-located nor able to communicate in person is likely to have affected social processes (which are, after all, the subject of this study). However, the key limitation of the study (if I have understood it correctly) is that the emergency response teams were only represented by their commanders. The participants are described as “operational (or ex-operational) commanders” and there were 24 of them in total. This situation was more likely to elicit a shared identity than if the full complement of each agency emergency response team had been present and participating in the scenario. In addition, the commanders' ability to transmit a superordinate identity to their team members ("by strategically reinforcing a sense of shared identity") is identified as an important factor in the literature review, yet it could not be observed in this study. Since the multi-agency commanders represented the only “team” involved in the exercises, it is not surprising that they developed a shared identity, but in this context, does it count as a superordinate group identity?

The key finding the authors draw from the study is that participants who formed a stronger shared identity were more likely to follow the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles. This, the authors argue, indicates that a shared social identity promotes cross-agency team interoperability. Although the conclusion seems reasonable, as it stands, this study does not provide a strong evidence to support it. The fact that the study was carried out in an artificial environment (discussion of scenarios rather than a real world emergency situation) represents a limitation but it meant that there was an the opportunity to manipulate factors and thereby provide a stronger test of the study propositions. For example, in an experimental condition, leaders could have been instructed to spend time communicating the shared goals and processes of the superordinate group to their teams. It would then be possible to investigate whether the transmission of a shared identity was successful in promoting a shared superordinate identity and, thereby, improved interoperability (relative to a control group).

I enjoyed reading the introduction to this study, which provided a good and engaging summary of the literature but it wasn't backed up with equally good research design and data. I hope that in the future, the authors will have the opportunity to carry out a larger study, involving all members of the emergency response teams. With all teams fully represented it would be possible to examine the interplay between superordinate and pre-existing social identities and ideally, manipulate the factors that are hypothesized to underpin their emergence. Such a study would provide more useful guidance for managers of cross-agency emergency response teams and more of a contribution to the literature.



