

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article studies the relevance of shared identity in responding effectively to emergency missions in multi-agency setting amongst the police, the fire and rescue service and the ambulance service. The interoperability in such settings has proven weaknesses. Even the establishment of joint working principles to guide multi-agency emergency response some years earlier, has not solved the challenges. The article aims to find solutions to tackle those challenges through a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative, behavioral and qualitative data. An experiment of six discussion-based exercises is built to test the functionality of collaboration in imaginary emergency circumstances. Pre and post questionnaires, a recording of the discussion exercise itself and a focus group interview after the exercise was collected as material. The research setting aims to explore why interoperability challenges might persist and what can be done to help prevent them.

Research problem

The article is well motivated and contextualized. It sets an ambitious task to address a timely and societally important problem in the field of emergency services, approaching interoperability as a key source of malfunction in joint multi-agency missions. The setting for the article is an interesting combination of various expertise. The idea to keep searching the answer from the degree of shared identity amongst the collaborators is an insightful one, and it is well-founded by existing literature and knowledge about the topic, pointing to the fact that procedural guidelines and cognitive instructions are not sufficient to secure interoperability. A setting eliciting a ‘talk-through’ planning of the multi-agency response nicely complements analytic grasp of the phenomenon in the field of study. However, a question also arises if the virtual format of the exercise and its planning (compelled by coronal restrictions), affects the emergence or mode of shared identity. It seems also fair to ask, how well a discussion following the procedural principles in an abstract imaginary setting equates with immediate real-life reactions in a real-life situation.

Findings and conclusions

The research setting produced results to support the view that psychological factors matter in interoperability, the sense of shared identity strengthened during the exercise, and it is associated with stronger sense of working together effectively. Findings from all sub-sections of the analytic setting were illustrated well. It would facilitate reading, however, to separate qualitative data extracts more clearly from the research text, for example with indentation. Biggest problems in the

discussion exercise turned out to be caused by miscomprehension deriving from too specialized a terminology. The connection between accessible vocabulary and shared identity remained vague though.

The conclusion to take the findings into account in the training and practice of the emergency field is good in principle but it is haunted by the same gap as mentioned earlier between the abstracted imaginary scene and a real one. The fact that a sense of shared identity can grow during the exercise, as a result of careful constructive discussion, does not offer much tools to reply the question posed in the beginning on what can be done about weak interoperability of multi-agency emergency responses as such. It is neither intuitively clear that a larger sample size would guarantee a better understanding of the evolvement of shared identity to 'develop more targeted recommendations'. Another alternative for future research might be to record real-life emergency responses and compare failures with successful ones. Thus, instead of observing whether discussants followed the principles of JESIP in a joint discussion, it would be possible to investigate the methods they use to accomplish intersubjective understanding and commitment in real-life interaction (eg. Whalen & Zimmerman 1987, 1998; Whalen et al. 1988), thus focusing on the situated sense-making practices of the participants themselves. This analytic angle and its potential to provide concrete solutions to persistent challenges in the field could be reflected upon in the conclusions.

Language and core argument

The interplay of the earlier literature chosen and the argumentation was running smoothly in the text and the overall structure was logical and coherent. The abstract of the article might benefit from a concrete example of the scene (eg. listing the key actors of the police, FRS and the ambulance) to begin with so that the reader gets an instant grasp of the topic through complex conceptualizations. There are two different years mentioned (2012 and 2021) for the establishment of JESIP principles. All in all, the article provides relevant social scientific findings. Acknowledging the significance of an appropriate 'code of conduct' and orientation towards co-actors in successful interoperability is a crucial one and opens up perspectives for interesting future research.

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