

# BUILDING SOCIAL CAPABILITY: A STRUGGLE TO BE DIFFERENT

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## **ABSTRACT**

Agricultural policy in Australia has shifted from a principal focus on production to the development of sustainable production systems. This shift has demanded greater attention for the social dimensions of rural development, which has led to the adoption of community based approaches to change management within government agencies. This heralds a radical change in the identities of those working within agencies servicing rural communities. The paper examines a state government project that aims to contribute to this shift through a social capability building approach that focuses on the development of both organizational and community capability for change. This project struggles to establish a meaningful project identity. Prevailing organizational narratives operate in a way that assimilates the different approach the project represents into the dominant way of doing things within the organisation. Furthermore, the experience of the case study project shows that participation in a change process is dependent on alignment between stakeholders. However, it is clear that such alignment can be negotiated through processes that reconcile differences in a way that assimilate or marginalise certain groups and perspectives.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent times, agricultural policy in Australia has shifted from a principal focus on productivity to the development of sustainable production systems. This shift has demanded greater attention for the social dimensions of rural development, which in turn has led to the adoption of community based approaches to change management within government agencies.

This paper will discuss how this shift challenges the identities of the agencies and their staff involved in servicing rural communities. More specifically, it will examine a state government project that aims to contribute to this shift through a social capability building approach that focuses on the development of both organizational and community capability for change.

The paper will use the concept of narrative identity to explore how this project struggles to establish a meaningful project identity. It is argued that it is through the narrative that elements that are constitutive of identity, are organised and identities are constructed: "[I]f you ask someone about their identity, a story soon appears" (Sarup 1996:15). The paper will highlight how prevailing project narratives operate in a way that assimilates the different approach that the project represents within the dominant and prevailing way of doing things within the organization. This will provide insights into the change process, which has important implications not just for the development of organizational capability, but also for the way in which the organization constructs its relationship with the broader community.

## **2. THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE FOR NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AGENCIES**

The methods and practices within agricultural extension in Australia have evolved from a productivity basis and these emphasise science and technology as the drivers of innovation and change (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995). However, with the shift in focus from productivity to sustainable development, a growing number of extension professionals and researchers recognise that the linear science based transfer of technology model is no longer adequate as a comprehensive strategy to deal with the complexities of natural resource management issues (Woodhill and Roling 1998; Mullen, et al. 2000). These issues have highlighted not only the social and moral aspects of development, but have also widened the stakeholder base in agriculture to incorporate the farming industry as well as the broader community. State agricultural agencies are required to reconcile the diverse interests of a broad range of stakeholders to achieve economic, social and environmental outcomes (Mullen et al. 2000).

In recent times, community participation and capacity building have increasingly been emphasised as important strategies in facilitating change in the agricultural context. This has increased the interdependencies between agencies and other stakeholders (Aarts and van Woerkum 1999).

Maarleveld (2000) explores some of the implications of these interdependencies for a groundwater management organization in the Netherlands. She argues that this organization used to derive its identity primarily from its status as a centre of hydrology research. However, as the organization changed from driving change through science and technology, towards facilitating the multiple and competing interests around groundwater management, significant changes in the identities, roles and style of the organization were required. Organizations such as that of our case study project are similarly shaped by increasing interaction with other stakeholders.

However, despite the ramifications of these interdependencies for the organizations involved, community capacity building approaches are often couched in terms of the agencies' relationship with the *external* environment. This divide between the agency and the broader community is challenged by those who argue that the interdependencies involve mutual testing and reflection about resources, knowledge and operational schemes, in a way that changes not just the community but also the agency itself (Hemidy and Cerf 2000). The case study project that is the focus of this research was therefore designed to contribute to the development of both organizational as well as community capability. Similarly, our research is positioned at the interstices of rural development and organizational studies, even though our identities are historically located within the rural development context.

### **3. PARTICIPATION**

Both the rural development literature and organizational studies are characterised by a body of literature that advocates participation as a key strategy to facilitate positive change. For example, much of the rural development literature emphasises collective learning, interaction, networking and interplay between stakeholders, alignment of norms and values and integration between different actors and practices as important factors in effectively facilitating change (e.g. Engel 1997; Paine 1997; Cerf et al. 2000; Cocklin et al. 2001). In fact, many extension researchers have adopted a systems perspective that advocates exchanges between a broad range of stakeholders. It is argued that from the interaction and dialogue between a diversity of participants, new understanding and knowledge emerges. As such a systems approach is to open up a diversity of perspectives and a concomitant multiplicity of pathways for change (Drinan 1997; Woodhill and Roling 1998; Cerf et al. 2000; Kersten 2000).

In similar vein, but within an organizational studies context, Ashmos et al. (2002) argue that participation in decision making opens up organizations to a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations on issues, which provides it with a much larger repertoire of adaptive behaviours. They critique the reductionist or mechanistic model of organizational behaviour that reduces complexity in a way that limits sensemaking opportunities. Instead, they advocate 'complexifying' strategies, such as participation, that allow the organization to 'absorb complexity' in order to enhance sensemaking and enlarge the pool of adaptive behaviours.

However, at times various authors assume that participation *per se* leads to a positive and inclusive change outcome. For example, Ashmos et al. (2002:194) suggest that:

"Ideas, and their unfolding meaning and use will be amplified and expanded as a *naturally* occurring part of relationships. New ideas will more readily emerge as a consequence of an expanded data set and an expanded range of meaning" (emphasis added).

While participation undoubtedly has the potential to increase the repertoire of sensemaking options and adaptive behaviours, there is nothing 'naturally' positive or constructive about this process. In fact, engaging participants in a project is hard work, resource hungry and time-consuming. Furthermore, serving the interests of all those involved is a challenge for all participatory projects.

Our research examines the participatory methodology more closely and explores how shared identities emerge in a change context characterised by diversity and contradictions. In other words, our research examines what happens in the process that Ashmos et al. (2002) refer to as 'complexity absorption'. The paper will present initial findings of our research into a state government project that has implemented a participatory methodology with the aim of building the capability of people in agriculture to manage change.

In the following section we will discuss the conceptual framework that guides our analysis, which revolves around the concepts of sensemaking and identity construction.

#### **4. SENSEMAKING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

According to Lillrank and Kostama (2001) particular product/process cultures within an organization will often dictate the behaviour of individuals to a greater extent than any overriding organizational cultural imperative. Their concept of product/process culture is useful in understanding the change context in agriculture which could be described as comprising a number of product/process cultures. However, rather than conceive of these as sub-cultures that somehow sit underneath and challenge an overarching culture, it may be more useful to view them as simultaneous, competing and multiple identity narratives that construct and are constructed by people. The notion of subcultures assumes that there is an overarching culture, with neatly distinguishable sub-cultures, that act as wholes within their own spheres and groups of people. This fails to recognise that different identity narratives operate and compete in the same space as they intersect with groups and individuals. For instance, within the current agricultural context science and technology narratives and community narratives operate simultaneously and subvert one another, as people locate themselves within a multiplicity of narratives while making sense of themselves and their environment.

Weick's (1995) conceptualization of sensemaking highlights how people construct themselves and are constructed by the world around them. According to Weick, sensemaking is a retrospective process, whereby we make sense of a lapsed experience or action to which many possible meanings could be attached by selecting meanings, imposing coherence and framing things in a way that is congruent with our sense of self. He stresses the word 'making' in sensemaking, arguing that people do not live in and respond to an external environment, but enact, or produce the environment as they make sense of it. In other words, sensemaking is about

interpretation and understanding (sense), as well as action and enactment (making) and as such it keeps action and cognition together.

Weick suggests that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction as it occurs in order to maintain a consistent and positive self-conception. People will make sense of an ambiguous situation in a way that maintains and enhances their sense of self. However, it is important to note here that sensemaking and identity construction always occur within a particular temporal, spatial and relational setting (Somers and Gibson 1994), and identity construction is therefore multiple and discontinuous. Furthermore, it is a process that is always ongoing and therefore incomplete (Weick 1995). Consequently, while coherence is always sought, it is never achieved.

Despite the complexities surrounding the concepts of identity and sensemaking, they do allow us to examine the process whereby alignment and consensus between participants within platforms of change is negotiated. In fact, identity is a versatile concept (Albert et al. 2000). Identity construction involves a simultaneous process of establishing similarity or sameness on the one hand, and difference or distinctiveness on the other (Jenkins 1996; Albert et al. 2000). Through the construction of sameness and similarity people engage with each other, while difference allows for agency and change. There is no identity without both similarity and difference. As such identity allows for an analysis of the integrating forces within a particular context, without losing sight of diversity, complexity, multiplicity and fragmentation. Furthermore, as identity situates participants, groups, projects as well as the organization and explains their connections, it allows for an integrated exploration across levels of analysis (Albert et al. 2000).

#### **4.1 Narrative identity**

Our central concern is the alignment between individuals and larger collectives (i.e. participants, stakeholders, the project and the organization) and in particular the processes of identity construction and sensemaking through which this alignment emerges. According to Calhoun (1994) and Somers and Gibson (1994), modern social theory conceptualised the relationship between the individual and the collective in terms of a sharp dichotomy, whereby the individual, or 'self' is constructed outside or prior to this relationship with society, as the individual is perceived as a free and autonomous agent. In the organizational literature on identity we also see a divide between individual identity on the one hand and organizational identity on the other, particularly within the functionalist school (Gioia 1998). An 'essentialist' definition of organizational identity prevails that focuses on the central and enduring features of both the individual (Mishler 1999) and the organization (Gioia 1998).

Constructionists have challenged this distinction by emphasizing the way in which the collective determines the individual, as they see subjectivity as the product of the social processes in which it is embedded. In fact, at times they have challenged the notion of agency to the extent that the individual is conceptualised completely in terms of the hold that culture, or society has on it (Crotty 1998). As such constructionists have questioned the notion that individual identities are based on some 'essence' that is autonomous, coherent, fixed, singular and real (Calhoun 1994).

However, as Calhoun (1994:14) argues: "there is some risk ... that simply showing a process of construction fails to grapple with the real, present-day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt". For many people these identities and categories are a social reality according to which they live and structure their lives (Waldenstrom 1994). In fact, when groups of people come together they often like to define themselves as coherent and unified, and as such they construct some essentialist identity. Through political processes these 'essentialist' identities are made 'real' in the sense that they are institutionalised as political interests groups are formed (Sarup 1996), or institutional structures are developed. We cannot avoid thinking and structuring our lives in an essentialist manner. As Cahoun (1994) argues, we should recognise this, and add to this essentialist reason a constructionist perspective, which allows us to understand how our essentialist identities and categories are constructed within and among subjects.

Through the concept of narrative identity we are able to do that. Narrative, identity and sensemaking are concepts that are often linked in the contemporary literature. According to Weick (1995), what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story: Sensemaking is about narration whereby the world is ordered and given a reality, within which people place themselves and from which identity emerges (Waldenstrom 1994). It is argued that:

[P]eople construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories ...; ... people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and ... people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives (Somers and Gibson 1994: 38-39).

This concept of narrativity challenges any decontextualised positivist approach that is based on a boundary between the individual and the larger collective (such as the organisation), as its basic premise is that to understand, or make sense of anything about participants, it is necessary to understand the temporal, spatial and relational dimensions of the social network of which they are a part (Somers and Gibson 1994).

Nevertheless, this concept of narrativity retains agency. As people locate themselves within particular narratives, they change these and are also changed by them. However, as Somers and Gibson (1994:73) argue: "... this does not mean that actors are free to fabricate narratives at will; rather, they must 'choose' from a repertoire of available representations and stories. Which kinds of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power."

It is through the concept of narrative identity that we can study the 'essential' and coherent identities often invoked when people describe who they are, without assigning essential, single and coherent identities to individuals or organizations. As such this perspective retains the notion of individual agency, without losing sight of the fact that identity narratives emerge between people.

At this point it is important to clarify that as we analyse the narratives that operate in the context of the case study project, we make no distinction between narrative on the one hand and paradigmatic or canonical thought on the other. This distinction is sometimes made (eg. Carrithers 1995; Czarniawska-Joerges 1997), as it is argued that the former is a pre-modern and the latter a modern way of knowing. However, it seems that what is referred to as paradigmatic thought actually operates as a narrative: "... it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or social network (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices." (Somers and Gibson 1994:59). Hence, we explore both as narratives that people enact and reconstruct as they locate themselves within them like characters in a plot.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that the narrative is not necessarily present in a narrative form. Our analysis is not of stories, but of conversations, meetings, documentation, interviews and focus group discussions, where stories are sometimes told, but more often invoked and inferred through fragments of conversation (cf. Carrithers 1995). In fact, they are more like Boje's (2001) ante-narratives that reflect the ongoing, incomplete, multiple and discontinuous nature of storytelling, identity construction and sensemaking.

## **5. THE CASE STUDY: THE DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPABILITY PROJECT**

The Developing Social Capability (DSC) project that served as our case study, was developed by a natural resource management agency in Australia and aims to develop the capability of people within the agriculture and food sector to generate and respond to change. The project takes a systems view and as mentioned earlier, its design reflects the need to build both organizational and community capability to achieve the project goals.

A report commissioned by the project suggested that organizational capability could be enhanced by involving staff in research into issues and opportunities for change (Cocklin, et al. 2001). The project therefore comprised two stages. The first stage was a project development phase that involved agency staff in a participatory action research process to explore the issue of social capability further and to develop a social capability building methodology. In stage two this methodology is trialled within three existing extension projects. As such, the DSC project aimed to be fully participatory and emergent, both in terms of problem definition as well as solution development and implementation.

### **5.1 Our research approach**

Our research was set up as an action research project. One of us has participated as an active participant on the project team since May 2001, when the project was first set up and funded. The other two authors have regularly provided critical input to the project. Our involvement will conclude when the project finishes in June 2003.

Active participation in the project included approximately twice-monthly day-long team meetings. Participation also included other activities, such as training courses, seminars and research activities. Furthermore, we have conducted two rounds of interviews with the eight

project team members, including one round conducted at the start of the project, and one at the end of the project development phase.

In this paper we will present the findings of our analysis of data collected during the project development phase. This data included transcripts of the interviews and eight focus group discussions conducted by the project and notes of meetings, conversations and other activities.

From our analysis a number of project narratives emerged, some of which will be discussed below. More recently, these narratives and in particular the ambiguities presented by them, have provided the basis for dialogue with team members. As researchers we have highlighted where, why and by whom the various narratives were told, while also connecting these with theory (cf. Czarniawska 1998). This has resulted in a period of more intense and purposeful reflection on project activities within the team in recent months. As such our approach has been consistent with action research principles that advocate stronger connections between the work of researchers and that of practitioners (Reason and Bradbury 2001).

The remainder of this paper will focus on the project narrative that were constructed and enacted by project team members during the project development phase.

## **6. PROJECT NARRATIVES**

Throughout the project development phase, team members struggled to establish a meaningful project identity. As we have mentioned earlier, there is no identity without the construction of similarity (identification) as well as difference. However, the team found it difficult to construct the project in terms that were familiar and engaging to others in the organization. At the same time the team struggled to represent the project as a new or different way of doing things. Conversations and reflections with and amongst team members continuously focused on this issue. Nevertheless, it is clear that the project (along with others) challenged the dominant way of thinking and acting within the organization, as it focused on social science and soft systems methodologies as a basis for dealing with the organization's stakeholders.

From the beginning divergent project narratives existed within the project, including social research, soft systems, project management and evaluation narratives.

### **6.1 Constructing difference**

As the project methodology was designed according to participatory action research principles, an emphasis on social research skills and an understanding of social processes came to the fore. Connections were made with social researchers from various institutions. Through these interactions with primarily outside researchers, team members reflected on their activities and accessed sensemaking narratives that challenged the science and technology based approach within the organization. These social research narratives afforded the team opportunities for the construction of difference, to redefine themselves as social researchers within the organization.

However, during the project development phase connections with social researchers often did not include the whole team. Ongoing relationships with social researchers were maintained by one or two team members, which meant that not everyone was involved in making sense of the project through this interaction. This impeded the emergence of shared identity narratives around social research.

Another narrative that was important in terms of establishing the project as 'different' emphasized the project's role in forging a new relationship with the community. According to this project narrative the organization was to become 'one' with the community. When one of the project's leaders presented her view of the project in the second meeting, she located it within this narrative through a historical account of extension professionals' interaction with the community. According to this account the extension officer's role has changed from technical expert to facilitator. However, while extension practice has taken on systems thinking, the extension professional is still defined as outside the system, as the extension officer becomes a facilitator who works on the system, rather than within it. In this narrative, the DSC project represents the next step, as it aims to work from within the system. In other words, the agency and the broader community are constructed as interacting within the one system and this affects change in the organization, as well as the community.

This narrative was particularly prevalent in the early stages of the project, during the initial meetings and in the first round of interviews conducted with team members. In defining the project, almost everyone referred to it in terms of building networks and relationships with the community. However, this narrative lost prominence over the course of the project. Team members often chose not to use this narrative to explain the project to others, as they felt that the soft systems concepts were hard to grasp in a 'hard' science world.

## **6.2 Constructing similarity - Identification**

Team members believed that in order to engage others in the organization, in particular senior managers and extension practitioners, they needed to emphasise that the project would deliver new extension methodologies. This narrative located the DSC project within the project management framework that prevails in the organization and defines the project in terms of finite processes, activities and outcomes. In fact, it was this narrative that gave the DSC project an identity in the first place. It simply could not exist in any other form.

Hodgson (2002) highlights how project management is often perceived as a neutral and objective framework for structuring activities within an organization. His account shows how it is far from neutral, but in fact acts as a control mechanism. In the DSC project, project management was also taken for granted as the obvious way of organizing the project, even though there are many instances where team members and other stakeholders recognised that project management procedures clashed with the objectives of the project.

For example, people on the team were acutely aware of the way in which the fully emergent nature of the project as it was defined through the soft systems narrative outlined above, created difficulties in terms of developing a project description that needed to include pre-defined

outcomes, processes and timelines. The narrative that emphasises the development of extension methodologies was useful in this context, as it allowed people to locate the project within valid and legitimate organizational structures.

The project management framework also hinders the development of a new relationship with the community. Community members aired their frustrations about dealing with agency staff, who in their view seem to be coming and going as projects come and go. The project management framework structures the relationship with the community in ways that alienate it.

In terms of the project identity, the narrative about the development of extension methodologies locates the project in the project management framework that validates the project within the organization. As such it contributes to the process of identification within the organization. However, it competes with the construction of 'difference'. In fact, the extension methodology narrative has operated in a way that it assimilates the different approach that the project represents into the dominant and prevailing ways of doing things in the organization.

Another project narrative operated in a similar fashion. While the team struggled to make sense of the project through social research in the project development phase, evaluation activities were more successful in allowing the team to make sense of the project. The project team had strong connections with the evaluation support team of the organization.

This team advocates the use of Bennett's hierarchy for project development and evaluation . Bennett's hierarchy is an evaluation framework that was designed specifically for extension programs. It structures programs according to a hierarchy of objectives and activities. This framework is based on an analysis of the chain of events that characterises most extension programs (Evaluation Support Team 2002). It is not surprising then that it is largely consistent with the linear transfer of technology model of extension.

The development of the project's Bennett's hierarchy was a milestone event for the team. This constructed a project narrative that allowed several team members to see for the first time how the various project activities, processes and stakeholders connected together. A (temporary) collective understanding of the nature and goals of the project emerged. However, some team members did express concern about the contradictions between the project's systems approach and this linear approach to evaluation.

Nevertheless, the use of Bennett's hierarchy was justified by team members and members of the evaluation support team as they believe it is useful in communicating what the project is about in terms that others within the organization understand. According to a member of the evaluation support team, projects within the organization can 'talk to each other' and be compared through the use of Bennett's hierarchy. As such the use of Bennett's hierarchy provides legitimacy and credibility to the project within the organization.

The construction of the project in terms of Bennett's hierarchy had significant consequences for the project. In locating the project within Bennett's hierarchy, the team identified a hierarchy of users for the project, distinguishing extension practitioners as intermediate users from other

(community) stakeholders who were defined as the next (or end) user. This was consistent with the narrative that defined the project aim primarily in terms of the development of extension methodologies. However, it further subverted the soft systems narrative according to which it makes no sense at all to represent the relationship with other stakeholders in this linear fashion.

This linear way of conceptualizing the relationship between various project stakeholders has become a prominent way of making sense of the project. As the project is entering its final stage, it is almost entirely defined in terms of these linear narratives. In fact, while the community featured very prominently in early meetings of the project, a network mapping exercise more recently made hardly any mention of the community, and featured internal audiences as the primary focus for the project. So over the course of the project, several sensemaking narratives have operated in a way that has shifted the focus of the project from the broader system to internal processes and systems. This has literally marginalised the community.

Overall, the project has struggled to construct difference. There is an inherent tension between the construction of similarity on the one hand, and the construction of difference on the other, which is evident in the project. In constructing similarity, team members engaged with identity narratives that constructed the project in a way that competes with the construction of difference. In fact, in constructing similarity 'difference' was subverted and assimilated into the prevailing way of doing things.

While the process of identification, or the construction of similarity is important in engaging others, a meaningful project identity cannot be constructed without the simultaneous construction of difference.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In the project development phase the DSC project set out to forge a new relationship with the community and to develop new extension methodologies. It aimed to do so in a participatory fashion. As mentioned in section three, participation is heralded as an important strategy in increasing the sensemaking opportunities within a particular change context. Our account has shown that this process must not be taken for granted. In fact, it is important to question the process whereby alignment and consensus is constructed within a change context.

Often the focus on participation, engagement and consensus within participatory approaches emphasises the construction of similarity, or processes of 'identification with'. The experience of the DSC project shows that participation and engagement in change processes are inherently dependent on 'identification', nevertheless, the construction of difference is equally important in the construction of identity and the building of social capability for change.

We started our research with the assumption that social capability could be defined by alignment and shared identities in a context for change. However, it is clear that such alignment can be negotiated through processes that reconcile differences in a way that assimilates or marginalises certain groups and hence disempowers them. Therefore attempts to build organizational and community capability should not rely only on the development of shared identities or

identification, but on a recognition of difference and diversity. In fact, it is critical for participatory projects to reflect on the ambiguities presented within a project in order to embrace difference, rather than assimilate it.

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