



The social identity approach to understanding socio-political conflict in environmental and natural resources management



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ABSTRACT

Insights from the social identity approach can be useful in understanding the drivers of dysfunctional conflict in environmental and natural resources management (ENRM). Such conflicts tend to be shaped by multiple factors including: the governance arrangements that are in place and how deliberations are undertaken; the conduct and interactions of stakeholders and the wider citizenry; and the conflict legacy, which can perpetuate a 'culture of conflict' around particular issues. This paper presents an integrative conceptual model of the socio-political landscape of ENRM conflict, which draws these multiple factors together. The social identity approach is then introduced as an appropriate lens through which the drivers of conflict in ENRM can be further interrogated. Key social identity mechanisms are discussed along with their contribution to the proliferation of dysfunctional conflict in ENRM. Based on this analysis, it is found that the social identity approach presents a way to understand the subtle and sometimes invisible social structures which underlie ENRM, and that ENRM issues ought to be viewed as a series of conflict episodes connected across time and contexts by the conflict legacy. The conceptual model, and its interpretation through the social identity approach, raises a number of implications for the current theory, practice and institutions involved in the wicked socio-political landscape of ENRM. These implications are examined, followed by a discussion of some opportunities to address the impact of social identity on dysfunctional conflict drawn from empirical Australian and international examples in the literature.

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1. Introduction

In environmental and natural resources management (ENRM), successful environmental outcomes are recognised as being inextricably linked with social acceptance and engagement (Beeton and Lynch, 2012; Green and Dzidic, 2014; Welp et al., 2006). Despite this, proposals to a change in land use or policy routinely trigger controversy and social agitation (Yasmi et al., 2006). When this distracts from optimal decision outcomes and focus shifts to the perceived incompatibilities between participants, the issue is considered to be a dysfunctional conflict (Amason, 1996). By definition, dysfunctional ENRM conflict becomes focused on the inter-relationships between participants and is often characterised by those participants working against each other as a result of the issue at hand. The social identity

approach, from the field of social psychology, is an appropriate lens through which this dysfunctional conflict in ENRM can be examined and understood (Lute and Gore, 2014). The social identity approach describes and explains the way groups of people interact with each other, and how an individual may come to be a member of a group. An individual's social identity is not simply a statement of who they are, but also describes how they perceive their place in social groups, and indicates the social norms to which they are likely to adhere (Haslam 2000; Unsworth and Fielding, 2014). Some scholars have used social identity to understand inter-stakeholder interactions in the business context (Crane and Ruebottom, 2011; Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003), and while the field of environmental psychology has examined the role of social identity in pro-environmental behaviour, attitudes, and activism (Bliuc et al., 2015; Dono et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2014; Stets and Biga, 2003; Unsworth and Fielding, 2014) and place-identity (Devine-Wright, 2013), its application in understanding stakeholders in ENRM conflicts is relatively rare. Although some scholars have used the social identity approach to describe and understand the changing identities of, and relationships between,

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stakeholder groups in distinct ENRM conflicts (Bryan, 2008; Lewicki et al., 2003; Lute and Gore, 2014; Wondolleck et al., 2003), the use of the social identity approach to analyse and understand the broader socio-political context of ENRM conflicts remains unexamined in the literature.

The breadth of the social identity approach examines group norms and relationships between groups, offering implications for deliberations and decision-making, and insights into how people engage with an issue. As such, the application of the social identity approach to ENRM requires an integration of the core elements of conflict in ENRM: governance, stakeholders, the citizenry, and the conflictual social context. This paper presents a brief review of these elements of ENRM conflict, before presenting an integrative conceptual model for ENRM conflict which is based on four key theoretical perspectives. The conceptual model is then evaluated through the social identity lens, and insights and implications of the conceptual model and the social identity approach are discussed. We explore how this integrative social identity approach presents a way to understand the subtle and sometimes invisible social structures which underlie ENRM conflict, and how this approach opens the way for new ideas for adapting current ENRM practices in order to avoid dysfunctional conflict.

2. Governance and deliberation

Environmental and natural resources management (ENRM) in Australia, and similarly governed nations, functions within the bounds of the socio-political system of *governance*. Governance is the practice of decision-making occurring jointly between government and civil society through collaborative and deliberative methods (Lane et al., 2004), as distinguished from the traditional top-down style of government decision-making (Lockwood et al., 2010). Through embracing pluralism and integrating a range of values and interests (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010), governance is believed to lead to best practice outcomes, public acceptance, civil engagement, democratic expression, and dynamic interaction as both instrumental and intrinsic goods (Lane et al., 2004; Lockwood et al., 2010; Jennings and Moore, 2000; Reed, 2008; Zammit et al., 2000). Such interactions can represent functional conflict, which enrich and strengthen the democratic process (Amason, 1996). Additionally, engaging the public with decision-making is considered a goal for both the process and the outcome of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD), which in principle guides policy direction and development in Australia (Zammit et al., 2000). Though the governance process may vary based on the objective, scale or instigator, the core defining trait of governance is normalising the integration of a range of voices in ENRM decision-making (Lockwood et al., 2010).

This transition from government to governance has been complex. While a greater range of non-traditional voices now have access to ENRM decision-making, the vestiges of traditional government processes have led to what has been described as 'hybrid governance' (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010). In this hybrid governance system, a neoliberal government regime presides over competing non-government parties which represent a plurality of values (oftentimes values incompatible with the neoliberal ethic). In this way, legitimisation of agendas through policy and distribution of funding depends on non-government parties competing for dominance over the political and governance regime (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010). The complexity of this 'hybrid governance' devolves responsibility for ENRM decisions to non-government parties, while retaining power within the traditional walls of government (Lockie and Higgins, 2007).

Deliberation serves as a process by which decision-making occurs in the ENRM governance system. Deliberation can be

centred on specific decisions (e.g., the regulatory framework for minerals extraction), or broader policy agendas (e.g., the priority afforded to environmental protection). The rationale for deliberation is built on expectations for constructive and solutions-focused debate and exchange which negotiate the range of values being represented by the parties involved (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010; Carpini et al., 2004). However, the relational system within which deliberation occurs has been shown to influence the strategies and conduct of the parties. This, in turn, impacts on the potential for conciliatory outcomes (Howard, 2006). In this way, a governance system, such as 'hybrid governance' which is predicated on competition between parties and an imbalance in power, may contribute to perpetuating conflict as conflict itself is viewed as the *modus operandi* of the system (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010; Howard, 2006).

Governance, too, has provided a platform for the institutionalisation of not only civil engagement in decision-making in a general sense but also, more acutely, the embeddedness and professionalisation of particular actors in civil society (Kahane et al., 2013; Lane and Morrison, 2006). At times, co-option of the process by special interest groups in pursuit of narrow agendas may occur (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013; Morrison et al., 2004), and there are concerns that deliberative governance creates opportunities for captured outcomes (Lane et al., 2004). This is often due to the concentrated power held within a group of elites who have the skills and resources to dominate the process (Kasperson, 2006). This concern is echoed by Lockwood et al. (2010, p. 990) who state that there is evidence of governance processes leading to the "erosion of democratic process, entrenchment of local power elites, problems with accountability and legitimacy, and insufficient attention to public good outcomes". This similarly provides space for corruption of outcomes through the potential for vested interests to co-opt the governance process to achieve sectoral, or at times personal, gains at the expense of the public interest (e.g., ICAC, 2013). These reservations about governance, particularly those outlined by Lockwood et al. (2010), can be attributed to the agenda setting actions of interest groups, which have the potential to:

- commandeer the decision-making space for non-democratic ends by only pursuing the interests they represent, which may be proportionately smaller than the power they wield (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013; Hull, 2009);
- reinforce the position of particular groups with the power and skills to maintain their position, potentially at the expense of the access of others (Morrison and Lane, 2004);
- co-opt deliberative processes for the purposes of policy rent seeking with government (Herath, 2002); and
- cause a decentralisation of decision-making accountability from a government entity to a tapestry of civil parties, in effect privatising the process and obscuring the link between deliberations and public good outcomes (Lane, 2003).

Within the bounds of governance in a pluralistic society where interest groups pursue agendas through deliberations, conflict becomes institutionalised as these groups broadcast competing claims to vie for political traction and public acceptance (Lane, 2003). Agenda setting can be aimed at dividing public opinion in order to increase awareness and generate public interest and support for the issue, thus influencing public opinion and shaping the frames which guide further interactions, discourse, and decision-making in relation to the issue (Howard, 2012; McLennan et al., 2014; Shmueli, 2008). As a result, conflict between the parties, and their interests, becomes entrenched not only in the governance process but also in the public discourse, in what Yasmi et al. (2006, p. 544) describe as a *culture of conflict*. These actors

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