Managing the expert-lay relationship: The uses of membership categorization

Drs. Karen Mogendorff

University of Wageningen, Social Sciences group, META, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen

E: Karen.mogendorff@wur.nl; http://www.com.wur.nl/UK/Staff/Mogendorff/

Supervisors: prof. dr. B. Gremmen, prof. dr. H. Te Molder, prof. C. van Woerkum

Project Dynamics in interaction between plant (genomics) scientists and stakeholder groups (2009-2013)

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Introduction

– (Plant) scientists are increasingly expected to involve stakeholders in technology development (Leach et al., 2005).
– Involvement of stakeholders is expected to result in higher acceptance levels and greater utility of technology;
– whether scientists do involve lay people partly depends on their understanding of lay people;
– based on interviews with scientists who work on the problem of phytophthora in potatoes it was investigated:
  (1) how Dutch plant scientists construct lay people in relation to their research;
  (2) why and to what extent plant scientists do or do not take into account lay views or involve lay people in the development of genomics technology.

Method: Discursive psychology

Interviews were analyzed with discursive psychology principles (DP). DP assumes that talk reflects and shapes (institutional) practices (Fairclough, 2001; Potter, 1996). Therefore analysis of talk can further insight into concrete practices such as development of (genomics) technology.

Analysis focused on how scientists construct the expert lay relationship and what effect this has on how they relate to lay people.

Results: membership categorization

– All interviewed scientists use – among other things - contrastive membership categorization devices to describe and manage the involvement of lay people in science.
– To prioritize scientific knowledge over lay knowledge interviewed scientists contrast responsibilities of scientists with lay people's freedom to think and do whatever they like. They also claim membership of the lay category (e.g. I am a consumer too) to show that they:
  (1) understand lay arguments;
  (2) they do not necessarily need to involve lay people to incorporate lay views when relevant.

Phytophthora infected potatoes.

Example of analysis according to discursive psychology

A scientist accounts for the lack of interaction between scientists and lay people with help of membership categorization:

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5    well that in the beginning when the whole
     movement started to be against it
     I think that good questions have been asked eh
     [several lines omitted]
10   we get always the same arguments from the same
     opponents
11   who appear not to have learned or do not want
     to learn
12   that in the meantime we that scientific
     progress has been made
13   and that several things that they claim
14   That long ago it has been proven
     That that is NOT true
15   and that you then should reconsider
     your position
16   well you cannot do that when you are an
     opponent
17   I do understand that but..
18   So there is not really a discussion going on
     with those groups
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In this interview fragment a scientist talks in _us_ and _them_ categories. _Us_ are the scientists _them_ are lay representatives who are also referred to as _those groups_ and _opponents_.

With this the lay-expert divide is essentially depicted here as a relational issue. The speaker creates by his portrayal of lay representatives as improper behaved and scientists as proper behaved the image that lay representatives are responsible for the current bad relations between scientists and lay people.

This ascription of responsibility is then used to explain current lack of interaction between laymen and experts.

Finally, the speaker leaves the possibility open that in the future laymen and scientists may constructively interact with each other again. This he accomplishes by referring to good behaviour of lay representatives in the past (line 5).

Membership categorization devices are culturally available resources which allows one to describe, identify and make reference to or evaluate other people or oneself (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008: 36). A membership device consists of several categories e.g. the category scientists belongs to the membership category device expert.