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OVERVIEW ARTICLE

Reimagining the language of engagement in a post-stakeholder world

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Abstract
Language matters in shaping perceptions and guiding behaviour. The term *stakeholder* is widely used, yet little attention is paid to the possibility that its use may inadvertently perpetuate colonial narratives and reinforce systemic inequities. In this article, we critically examine the limitations of the stakeholder concept and its ambiguity, normativity, and exclusionary implications. We emphasise the importance of using language that gives a voice to marginalised groups, promotes inclusion and equity, and fosters meaningful and reflexive participation in decision-making processes. In critiquing the use of the term and calling for alternative practices, we aim to contribute to the decolonisation of research norms and the creation of more inclusive and equitable societies. Therefore, rather than advocating a single alternative term, we suggest a focus on the people, places, and species affected by decisions, interventions, projects, and issues.

Keywords Decolonisation · Engagement · Epistemic justice · Inclusivity · Ethical communication

Introduction

Language matters. The specific words we use represent knowledge, construct concepts and convey meaning and are, therefore, central to how we relate, communicate, engage, and even conceptualise the world. Language facilitates and guides our thoughts, behaviours, and actions, and so directly influences decision-making processes and, perhaps most profoundly, shapes our perceptions of the world (Zlatev and Blomberg 2015; Altarriba and Basnight-Brown 2022). By giving voice to our human experience, language has the ability to promote inclusion and 'fairness in knowing' (Medvecky 2017) or, conversely, foster exclusion and 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker 2007). As such, language conventions matter, because words, and the context of their use, guide our practice, can confuse others if ill-defined, and may (un)intentionally exclude others by sending value-laden messages about who belongs and whose ideas do or do not matter (Cheng et al. 2023). Careful use of language is also essential for conceptual clarity to underpin inquiry and practice (Alejandro and Knott 2022).

The nuances of language and language choice drive our call to refrain from using the term *stakeholder*. We issue this call while recognising that *stakeholder* has been used extensively in processes that aim to inform, consult, engage, co-produce, and work collaboratively with those who could be affected by resulting decisions and other actions (Baum et al. 2006; Reed 2008; Reed et al. 2009; Kindon et al. 2010; McGrath and Whitty 2017; Carroll et al. 2020; Dwivedi et al. 2022; Koren et al. 2022; Merkle et al. 2022). While our primary emphasis lies on knowledge acquisition, engagement, and impact within the research and higher education sectors, it is worth noting that the term *stakeholder* is used widely across multiple domains. Although the term is widely accepted in both formal and informal settings, we, and others, have identified inherent issues with the term in some contexts as it perpetuates colonial harm, and may undermine or contradict the positive intentions that initially justified its adoption.

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This paper originated from online conversations and a workshop facilitated by the lead author in November 2022. That workshop built on existing critiques of the *stakeholder paradigm* and suggested a need to summarise the current practice and literature, as we do here. Following the workshop, we used an open authorship model in which contributions were invited via a community of practice on impact culture and an online call for contributions. Our aim was to facilitate inclusive contributions, while prioritising the need to open this debate more widely as soon as possible. The goal of this paper is not to propose a new term for universal usage. Rather, given the importance of increasing attentiveness to decolonisation, diversity, and equity, we aim to:

- critically examine some of the current issues surrounding the use of the term *stakeholder*;
- raise awareness and encourage dialogue more widely about issues inherent in the *stakeholder paradigm* (not just the term itself);
- discuss whether it is appropriate to propose alternatives, while considering the merits of alternatives that have ethical and conceptual integrity and are already in use or could be popularised.

Situating the stakeholder paradigm in the contested language of research engagement

Several initiatives (Cheng et al. 2023; The EEB Language Project 2023; Hà et al. 2023; Ellwood 2023) have emerged within individual disciplines to tackle problematic terminology. Similarly, we have seen moves towards person-centred language in many domains, such as a 'person in prison' rather than a 'prisoner' or 'offender' in criminology (Harney et al. 2022) or a 'person with disability' rather than a 'disabled person' (Murugami 2009). The arguments informing these shifts assert that certain terms inherently dehumanise and perpetuate stigma. These terms are not only experienced as hurtful, exclusionary, and judgemental by the person in question, but also reinforce damaging biases in the minds of those who use and hear the language. This self-fulfilling prophecy—in which labels actively contribute to sustaining the negative conditions they describe—means that there are both normative and practical reasons to select language that actively contributes to reducing social harm and stigma (Becker and Carper 1956).

However, there has been limited discussion of alternatives to the term *stakeholder*, despite concerns about its conceptual and ethical integrity. Above all, the *stakeholder paradigm* reduces the relationships between people and place to financial or economic transactions that ignore the cultural and spiritual significance of the land and the non-human species to which people are inherently connected. Moreover, the term stakeholder has been used to legitimise extractive policies by corporations and governments on Indigenous lands, on the basis that the interests of corporations and governments are as legitimate as Indigenous communities. This framing ignores power imbalances and the histories of colonisation and dispossession that have impacted those communities over many generations. These exploitations inherent in the stakeholder paradigm are directly relevant for research, which aims to engage individuals, groups, organisations, and, in some cases, non-human or other species in decisions, interventions, projects, and issues (Reed and Rudman 2022).

'Engagement' is interpreted differently among different practitioners, disciplines, and areas of research. Typically, 'engagement' describes the ways that individuals, groups, and organisations can be involved in the design, conduct, and dissemination of research. For example, the national research funding body UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) defines engagement as "all types of activity that seek to break down the barriers between research, innovation and society" (UKRI 2023, no page number). In keeping with this paper's intent to approach such work through an equity lens, we advocate a more specific definition of engagement in research, as a way of "effectively and ethically engaging people in processes, structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives, working with them to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes on their own terms" (Kindon 2010, p. 518). We will note, however, that the terms and implications of engagement have been (and continue to be) fervently debated. These debates include critiques of (in) equity and trust, power relations, and whose reality *counts* in participatory decision-making and other engagement processes (Chambers 2006; McDermott et al. 2022), alongside approaches that have sought to promote greater 'symmetry' in how research is conducted in partnership with minoritized groups (e.g., Lepore et al. 2023; MacGregor et al. 2024; Tandon and Hall 2014).

Similar contested discourse exists around the use of *stakeholder*. The term is often poorly defined and used as a catch-all term to encompass groups as diverse as audiences, the public (or publics), communities, citizens, employees, policy makers, funders, research participants, species, and more. This is a problem, because poorly defined terms can leave room for (mis)interpretation and bias (Reed 2008; Chilvers and Kearnes 2019; Rowe and Frewer 2005). This lack of specificity arguably creates confusion (Stoney and Winstanley 2001; Waxenberger and Spence 2003; Wagner Mainardes et al. 2018; Miles 2011a, b). Indeed, Miles (2011a, b) found a new definition for every 1.13 articles in her analysis of 435 different definitions from 493 articles. Although wide usage of a term may indicate high semantic utility, based on both its etymological origins as well as

colloquial usage (Leeson and Mason 2007), Miles (2011a, b) suggested that the large number of definitions indicated that *stakeholder* was 'essentially contested', following the philosophy of Gallie (1956). Gallie suggested that arguments around the definition of essentially contested terms, such as *stakeholder*, can never be resolved, and so, no single definition should be sought.

Conceptual ambiguity and linguistic uncertainty (and underlying ethical issues) around the word also hinder effective communication. For these reasons, the UK Local Government Association (Local Government Association 2010) described *stakeholder* as a 'non-word' in a list of words that public bodies should try not to use if they want to communicate effectively with local people. Likewise, the Think Local Act Personal partnership of organisations from UK central and local government, social care providers, the NHS, and the voluntary and community sector included the term in their jargon buster directory (Think Local Act Personal 2016). Similarly, in 2016, Lake Superior State University included *stakeholder* in a list of words to be banned (Lake Superior State University 2016). The term also regularly appears in popular lists of most hated jargon; for example, The Guardian newspaper's "10 worst examples of management-speak" (Poole 2023, no page number), and the results of a survey of 2000 office workers asked to identify the most annoying buzzwords (Watson and Cass 2003; Glassdoor 2020). Despite this, use of the term has been growing (Fig. 1) since the publication of Freeman's 1984 book, which first defined the term academically (Freeman 1984). The Google Books Ngram Viewer (2023), used to generate Fig. 1, is an online search engine that enables users to chart the frequency of any set of search strings using a yearly count of n-grams found in printed sources published between 1500 and 2019. In this case, the tool was used with the following filters: a time period of 1900–2019; the English language; case-insensitive spelling (which ignores differences in uppercase and lowercase letter usage); and smoothing to produce a smoother graph.

The ethical stakes of perpetuating the *stakeholder paradigm*

In addition to issues around the clarity of *stakeholder*, there are ethical issues regarding the term's colonial roots and its embeddedness within Western ways of knowing and being (Tuck and Yang 2021; Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Joseph 2018; Trisos et al. 2021). These concerns include the use of the term in contexts impacted by colonialism, especially when referring to Indigenous groups and used in ways that maintain rather than disrupt colonial logics (Liboiron 2021; Joseph 2018). Watson and Cass (2003, p. 3) suggested that terms like *stakeholder* are not only condescending buzzwords or jargon, but 'public language', which they describe as "the language of power" that is designed to overpower those who do not understand it, as an "ancient repressive artifice" that is "the foundation of all colonial empires" (Levi 1988, p. 1). Indeed, there are references in the literature to *stakeholder analysis* as a method for neutralising threats to company profits (Bernhart 1992). Examples abound of the term's use in both historic and neo-colonial settings as a way to 'other', socially distance, and devalue the contributions and concerns of certain groups and, thus, limit their agency within decision-making processes. This led Sharfstein (2016) to advocate that the term be 'banished' from modern usage.

In this context, it is worth examining the etymology of the word, and the power relations it has been used to indicate and reinforce. The word *stakeholder* derives from the word 'stake'. The original meaning of 'stake' was a stick or post,

Fig. 1 Increased frequency in the use of the word *stakeholder* since 1990

sharpened for driving into the ground, for example, to make a fence, tether an animal or support a structure, such as a tent (Online Etymology Dictionary 2023). Similar words emerged to describe 'stakes' in Old English (*staca*), Proto-Germanic (*stakon*), Old Frisian, Middle Dutch, and Middle Low German (*stake*). These words may have derived from the Proto-Indo-European root 'steg', meaning stick or pole. There are many historical and cultural uses for the word, including to be 'burned at the stake' (a form of capital punishment) and 'pull up stakes' (moving on or abandoning a position, referring to pulling up the stakes tethering a tent).

These literal uses were followed by use as a verb, 'to stake' (ca. fourteenth century), meaning to fasten, support, or tether something (Online Etymology Dictionary 2023). As a verb, the word has been used, for example, to 'stake a claim' (using stakes to mark out Indigenous land to be claimed by colonising settlers) and to 'stake out' (to claim ownership over or keep a place or person under surveillance) (Online Etymology Dictionary 2023). The word was also used, from around 1600, to refer to the money or item of value being offered in a bet. These wagers were, reputedly, placed on a post, so that all parties to the bet could observe and later have easy access to them. This function was later fulfilled by an independent person who would hold the wagers until the bet had been won, referred to as the *stakeholder*. The term was still being used in the context of neutrally holding other people's stakes (referring to money) in the nineteenth century in both English and North American courts (Chitty 1834). *Stakeholder* was, by then, considered to be a neutral party and the word 'stake' was used to refer to the assets at stake.

This led to the idea that someone with a stake in a transaction held an interest in the outcome, meaning that they could lose their stake. The meaning of *stakeholder* as a neutral party has persisted in legal terminology up to the present. However, by the eighteenth century, being an interested party became more widely used, and common parlance saw *stakeholder* come to mean that *being a stakeholder* is to "have an interest in the turn of events, have something to gain or lose" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2023). At this point, the meaning of 'stake' had shifted to something less neutral and more metaphorical than its original meaning as a physical object (a stick), actual money (a wager), or a neutral person who would hold wagers; instead, it encompassed the idea of having an interest in an outcome. It is this last meaning that was used by Freeman (1984, p. 49) to define *stakeholders* as being **"**those groups who can affect or are affected by" a decision. Crucially, in this definition, a stakeholder is not only affected by a turn of events or decision but may alternatively (or also) be able to affect the decision or influence the turn of events. This use, coined in the organisational management and business literature, is linked to the idea of value creation. A 'stake', therefore, can imply that there is a risk (or reward) for those involved in some precarious activity, which also signifies the power dynamics involved. That is, it is usually an organisation in power that uses the term *stakeholder* to define those who fall outside of itself to preserve the organisation (protect it from risk). Attempts to mitigate such issues have been offered by Kujala et al. (2019) who suggested that trust is the 'oil in the wheels' of stakeholder relationships, because trust builds resilience and reduces strain on relationships in situations of change. As such, power relationships are inherent in the terms *stakeholder*, 'shareholder', and 'rightsholder'. Indeed, the latter two are often given primacy alongside stakeholders in corporate governance (MacDonald 2008; Keay 2011).

Whether intended by Freeman (1984) or not, the concept of a stake is something that is owned, and that may be held, possessed, and hoarded to centralise resources (including knowledge), and maintain or exacerbate existing, imbalanced power relations. These are colonised ways of being—of relating to knowledge, to each other, and to the world we inhabit—that are at odds with Indigenous, decolonised and ecosocial justice-informed practices of sharing, reciprocity, and respecting wider dimensions of knowledge and practice. Therefore, using the term *stakeholder* to describe those who have an interest in an issue, we use a loaded term that implicitly normalises West-centric and Western-imposed power structures. For this reason, Porter (2006, p. 389) argues that using the term *stakeholder* without explicit attention to historical marginalisation is problematic in certain decision-making contexts:

> ...conceptualising Indigenous peoples as 'stakeholders' in planning processes fails to appreciate their unique status as original owners of country that was wrested from them by the modern, colonial state… Indigenous peoples in Australia must occupy a position more significant than that of another stakeholder in land management questions.

Thus, it is clear, at minimum, that *stakeholder* should be avoided when working with Indigenous groups. Indeed, calibrating language to best engage with individuals is a central premise of ethical and effective communication (Merkle et al. 2022).

A quest for alternative terms is not sufficient

Since continued use of the term, in any setting, acts to reinforce colonial ways of being—and numerous ethical challenges, as discussed above—we contend that alternatives should be considered, wherever possible, not only when working with indigenous groups. However, given the wide range of contexts in which the term can be used, it may be difficult to find a universal alternative. Indeed, it is unlikely

that any single term will satisfy all purposes (e.g., to refer to partners versus other interested groups). Also, the meaning of any given term will change between contexts (e.g., geo-political and ethnic) and over time (e.g., considering the likelihood that meanings will change over time as well as between contexts).

For example, in Canada, researchers are encouraged to refer to the individual group(s) with which they are working, rather than using 'Indigenous groups' or the term 'First Nations' as a catch-all. In the UK, it is possible to offend someone from Northern Ireland by referring to them as a 'Brit', because Britain only refers to the island of Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales), not the United Kingdom, which came into being with the annexation of Northern Ireland. Further, for many Scots, the 'Brit' label is one of colonial powers from which they are striving to achieve independence. The word 'Hispanic' has generated similar debates in Latin-American communities. Similarly, countries, including Eswatini, Myanmar, Ghana, and Sri Lanka, reclaimed their power and identities by eschewing the names given to them during periods of colonial rule. Certainly, universal labels can serve as a convenient shorthand for external observers. However, they are rarely precise or respectful. Further, inaccuracies about people's identities, history of oppression, and more are likely to play into stereotypes (Dovidio et al. 2010). In turn, these generalisations can contribute to disengagement or even more adverse outcomes (Gimenez 2001).

Moreover, merely altering language within the specific setting, where the misalignment between intent and practice is most evident, does not lead to a comprehensive paradigm shift. Changing the term will not, on its own, tackle or indeed bring to the fore the heart of the issue, which is underlying structures of power and inequity. In addition to this, merely focusing on a new label may result, again, in a loss of credibility for any new term, or the emergence of other equally problematic issues. We can observe examples of this in debates surrounding state, corporate and academic appropriation and misuse of the term 'sustainability' (Benson and Kirsch 2009; Torkington et al. 2020), debates around engagement and participatory decision-making processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Stirling 2007), as well as wider efforts to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (Agyeman 2008; Agyeman et al. 2003; Táíwò, 2022). Terms like sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and participation have become universally popular rhetoric which promises the inclusion of diverse knowledge types, empowerment, and an array of other benefits. However, issues around power and equity are overlooked, and this can ultimately end up systematically reinforcing, rather than explicitly tackling and overthrowing, existing inequalities, and injustices (e.g. see Cooke and Kothari 2001; Stirling 2007; Agyeman 2008; Agyeman et al. 2003). Deeper change is needed to facilitate meaningful engagement with the myriad of human and non-human groups who are impacted by misguided (or malevolent) processes, which are often presented (or disguised) as *stakeholder engagement*. Consequently, we advocate for the avoidance of such terminology, more broadly, as part of a wider initiative to decolonise and democratise research. Finding a universal alternative need not be the goal. Rather, our collective and individual task, as engaged researchers, is to acknowledge and grapple with the problematic paradigm that the term embodies.

Therefore, we argue for a focus on the people, places, and species affected by decisions, interventions, projects and issues, and the governance and socio-political structures that underpin and frame these actions. We align with extensive arguments (Sultana 2023; Dei and Asgharzadeh 2001; Thiongo 1986; Spivak 1995) that efforts would be better spent creating processes that can centre the agency and empowerment of these groups, using whatever terms are appropriate to their context, rather than trying to come up with a new universal term. Such work must acknowledge people's right to choose their own preferred terms, and the right of individuals and communities to refuse to participate in research, particularly when researchers are outsiders to the community/cultural group. In other words, even when research is intended to be co-produced from conception through to design and onward (preferably with mutually beneficial goals), individuals and communities should have the agency and right to opt out of participation for various reasons. For example, co-producers of knowledge may opt out to retain autonomy or because they are disengaged and disempowered due to structural socio-economic disparities, a lack of awareness and knowledge of how to influence decision-making processes (Alexander and Conrad 2023), dislike of engaging (e.g., see Merkle et al. (2022) on Indigenous communities opting out), lack of time, lack of money and other resources, lack of access to venues or digital infrastructure to engage, and so forth (Gayo 2017). We, therefore, contend that the framing of engagement with others in research must, at its heart, challenge normative assumptions that people are willing, able and, indeed, obliged to engage. Nevertheless, it is likely that there will be some contexts where a researcher may need to select or adopt a term as a heuristic, especially given the prevalence of tools such as *stakeholder analysis* (Reed et al. 2009). Therefore, in the Supplementary material, we discuss a range of terms that could be explored in dialogue with the specific groups that researchers aim to work with.

Moving beyond terms

Ultimately, if the goal is to include and enable more people to engage with and benefit from research, whether as researchers, partners or as relevant others, then to be truly inclusive and facilitate both human and non-human agency,

we need to move beyond the term *stakeholder*. We need to use debates around language to draw attention to the injustices perpetuated through its use as a screen for unjust practices and paradigms. Therefore, we call on our colleagues, funders, editors, reviewers, and institutions to develop processes and language that can identify, represent, empower, and give voice to those we want our research to serve.

In summary, we provide the following recommendations:

- Recognise the role of language in how people experience the world and relationships. For research to retain (or, perhaps, regain) public trust, it must be experienced as inclusive, accessible, and fundamentally relational.
- When reflecting on the role and use of language, foreground questions of power to ensure that strategies for more inclusive research do not reinforce, but rather explicitly tackle existing inequalities. Be aware of the existence of negative understandings, meanings and beliefs associated with the term *stakeholder*, and avoid causing harm with alternative terminology. Focus more on principles (e.g., humility and inclusion), processes, and outcomes rather than terms.
- Apply a social justice lens to research and impact, underpinned by strong ethical values, inclusive practices, and conscious efforts to actively seek to do no more harm nor perpetuate existing inequities. Particular attention should be paid to engaging with and empowering minoritised groups in the processes, structures, decisions, and spaces that affect their lives. Promote and institutionally embed effective and ethical ways of engaging people in the structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives, including during and beyond research processes.
- Foster a culture of meaningful and reflective engagement, which supports researchers to engage with others in respectful, inclusive, and caring ways. Changing the language around *stakeholder* will only make lasting change when embedded in a wider cultural shift, with capacity building supporting more ethical, inclusive, and collaborative research cultures. Be open to change, willing to (re)learn and transparent about differences, including privilege.
- Recognise the historical and cultural identities of those researchers work with, and how the role of cultural heritage may shift perspectives and agendas within a community. Understanding the cultural heritage contexts enhances engagement and requires an understanding of nuance over time and space.
- Design, advocate for, and engage in processes that enable relevant parties to self-identify how they would like to be referred. For example, make co-developed vocabulary an explicit part of engagement, with the aim of recognising pluralities. Where this is not possible, use language that accurately describes those involved (e.g., as nature, people, organisations, partners, relevant groups, and relevant parties). When doing so, be mindful that groups are often not homogenous but, rather, consist of diverse (sometimes 'silent') perspectives, which need to be give voice, to ensure inclusion.

Building on these insights, future researchers and their institutions might usefully explore the inherent power imbalances between those involved in research, engagement and impact generation processes, and the tangible strategies that might manage these dynamics. Such research is needed as part of a wider shift towards, what Reed and Fazey (2021) described as, an 'impact culture', which is underpinned by equitable principles. There is an urgent need to understand how transformations in knowledge institutions can be supported to create cultures and systems that do no more harm; in which more inclusive, respectful, and impactful research can flourish. Building on this, future research could rethink who has agency and self-determination in decision-making, including consideration of how other species' agency is represented in such processes. Having said this, it is important to recognise limitations and context that may prevent research from being truly inclusive in all situations. For example, opportunities for engagement may be limited by resource and time constraints, and in some situations, it may cause more harm to create unrealistic expectations from engagement which ultimately undermine trust, for example where decisions have already been made and there is little opportunity for engagement to deliver change (Reed et al. 2018). In these contexts, the focus of researchers' role might shift towards critically examining the underlying assumptions and power dynamics regarding project timelines and priorities.

To authentically address these matters, future research, practice, and action also should use the resources at their disposal to engage meaningfully and inclusively with the widest possible range of relevant groups who are interested in, have influence over, or might be impacted by changes in terminology and research practice, and the cultures that underpin these shifts. This should include minority groups that have been, and continue to be, excluded and oppressed by dominant sections of society (e.g., those living with disability), and groups affected by colonialism (e.g., First Nations peoples in Canada and Australia; Māori groups in New Zealand) and those who are otherwise disempowered and seeking equity (e.g., people experiencing homelessness or drug addiction). In framing this discussion around an equitable and inclusive impact culture, our hope is to stimulate collaborative work that goes far beyond terminology. This paper is a call to decolonise engaged research norms and practices, and shift the values that underpin ways of knowing and being to create more just institutional cultures

that can respectively engage others in a post-stakeholder world.

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