

# **The Problems With (and Of) Stakeholder Definitions: A Pragmatist Perspective**

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Since Freeman's (1984) seminal work, the problem of the definition, identification and prioritization of stakeholders has been largely debated among business ethics and management scholars (e.g. Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997; Phillips, 2003, and others). In the managerial applications of stakeholder theory, all these efforts have been aimed at helping managers to develop and adapt corporate strategy in light of some relevant aspect of the corporate relationships with its stakeholders. Moreover, the interesting recent work by Andy Wicks (2007), shifting the focus of the conversation from *Corporate* to *Stakeholder* Responsibility, also relies on Freeman's definition of stakeholders as the building block upon which his analysis is grounded. But, as Freeman himself has noted (McVea and Freeman, 2005), there are very important—and problematic—aspects in the definition of stakeholders itself, than the users of Freeman (1984) tend to undervalue. Looking back at Freeman's definition from a pragmatist perspective—in particular, by rediscovering some ideas written in 1927 by the American Pragmatist John Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*—in this paper I challenge the purpose and usefulness of *any* definition of “stakeholders” at all. I will show how there are at least four major problems with the use stakeholder definitions, if these are a-priori, de-contextualized, static and role-based definitions:

- 1) *Consequences cannot be pre-judged*, as they can only be *perceived, observed* (and, therefore, *taken care of*) ex-post;
- 2) *Context matters* to identify *real* stakeholders (human beings with names and faces);
- 3) *Stakeholder interests and identities are intertwined and overlapping*; and
- 4) *Stakeholders come and go*: as Dewey comments, “*In no two ages or places is consequences they entail when acted upon, and subject to revision in the light of observed consequences*” (1927: 202).

To cope with these issues I will conclude by providing some concrete suggestions that emerge from a pragmatist perspective on stakeholder management.