A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA INTO COMMUNITY-BASED PROTEST IN CONSTRUCTION

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Many countries face enormous development challenges in adapting to demographic change, urbanisation and emerging issues such as housing affordability and climate change. These challenges are best resolved in consultation with communities rather than in conflict with them. A rich tradition of research and intellectual frameworks exist in the fields of urban geography and planning to understand and manage community concerns during the pre-development approval stages of new projects. However current theoretical frameworks are inadequate in construction management and a new research agenda is needed to develop conceptual frameworks to guide thinking about the role of communities in the construction process. By discussing the components of such a model, it is concluded that this would require a fundamental shift in thinking which challenges traditional structuralist paradigms. A new constructivist paradigm is presented that conceives community consultation as a negotiation process which does not stop at the pre-development planning stages but which continues over the entire life of a project.

Keywords: community, protest, social constructivism, development, housing, infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

In the face of climate change, demographic shifts and increasing global urbanisation, the way we design, construct and operate our increasingly dense cities has become a key determinant in society's stability, health, prosperity and well-being (UN-Habitat 2008). For example, in Australia, a growing and ageing population has created the need for substantive infrastructure investment and much of this will be directed towards existing urban environments: retooling, reshaping and reconnecting neighbourhoods and cities to address growing social, economic and environmental challenges. It is estimated that if the population grows as anticipated, by 2050 Australia will need 6,911,586 more homes and 173,348 km of new roads (CoA 2010). Similar challenges are faced by many other countries, creating growing community concerns about the ecological, social, economic and cultural impacts of development. While tensions between developers and communities have always existed, they have been exacerbated by the new nature and scale of these developments (UN-Habitat 2008). Addressing these urgent development needs in a way which involves rather than marginalises communities will therefore be crucial to achieving sustainable outcomes for developers, governments and communities. Recognising this, community-industry-government partnerships have become increasingly popular with governments around the world to effectively address community concerns over the environmental, social and cultural degradation associated with future urban development (Gilmour et al 2010). As Sharpe (2004: 4) argues, such partnerships

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bring construction teams into closer contact with communities than ever before and they 'live or die' on their relationship and reputation within them.

Unfortunately, current theoretical frameworks in peer-reviewed construction management literature tend to marginalise communities and are not adequate to address these new challenges (Teo and Loosemore 2010). While a rich tradition of research and intellectual frameworks exist in the fields of urban geography, urban planning and sociology to understand and manage community concerns during the pre-development approval stages of new housing and infrastructure projects (for example: Hackworth 2006), theoretical frameworks guiding thinking during the construction stages tend to dismiss community concerns as irrational, uninformed, ignorant or driven by nostalgia (McManus 2002; Cleland and Ireland 2007, Murray and Dainty 2009, Chinyio and Olomolaiye 2010, Teo 2010).

This leads us to the following problem statement:

"There is a common and problematic assumption underpinning construction project management literature that communities have been adequately consulted during the pre-development approval stages of projects and that no further consultation is required during the construction stages. Yet in reality, residual community concerns from pre-development stages often continue into construction stages to develop into costly and acrimonious disputes. Construction management research needs a new intellectual framework that is able to acknowledge that community concerns can emerge during construction as the scale and nature of development becomes physically evident to communities and as major decisions continue to be made which have significant potential community impacts, sometimes over many years".

The aim of this paper is to address this problem and to discuss how this deficiency in knowledge could be addressed in theoretical and methodological terms.

THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF COMMUNITY PROTEST

Controversial housing and urban infrastructure projects are those that have obtained government sanctioned 'development approval', but not 'community approval', and have triggered NIMBY and grassroots protest that escalate into lengthy, costly and often acrimonious conflicts between communities, industries and governments (Chinyio and Olomolaiye 2010). A good example of this is the controversial Barangaroo development in Australia which is currently an unused 22-hectare site on the foreshore of Sydney Harbour that includes parklands, cultural space and a large business and urban residential area. State Premier Barry O'Farrell was forced to debate the controversial development in Parliament when protesters amassed more than 10,000 signatures opposing the project. As Sydney lord mayor Clover said "There is significant concern across the community about the future of Barangaroo - a very important public site, adjacent to our city and on our precious harbour," (SMH 2011: 4). Sapountzaki (2007) found that while housing and urban infrastructure projects like this can serve important local and national needs, triggers to protest are typically situated at a local level and associated with negative community perceptions of a project's ecological, social, cultural, and economic impacts. For example, new housing developments, while needed to alleviate national housing shortages, may be perceived by local communities to exert unacceptable stress on natural ecosystems, existing social infrastructure such as hospitals and schools and to potentially disturb social harmony or balance (Glasson 2005). As seen through an increasing number of community protests in response to new housing and urban infrastructure projects, they

can become a site of contestation reflecting a conflict between provision of a 'public good' determined at a national or metropolitan scale and the perceived impacts of those decisions at the neighbourhood level (WRI 2007).

The perception of community irrelevance which persists within the construction project management literature has created a significant gap in theory and knowledge which, in contrast to urban planning research, maintains a poorly conceptualised understanding of community protest in this field. Consequently, while government approval procedures provide opportunity for community consultation on proposed developments during planning stages, they rarely flow-through to the construction stages, where frustrated and resentful communities are too often forced to engage in protest (Teo and Loosemore 2009; 2010). While practical initiatives like the UK's Considerate Constructors Scheme (http://www.ccscheme.org.uk/) monitor construction companies against a Code of Considerate Practice, which considers the community, without guiding theoretical frameworks, construction professionals will remain intellectually ill-equipped to understand and manage community concerns.

A THEORY OF COMMUNITY PROTEST FOR CONSTRUCTION

Avoiding community conflicts and their significant costs to communities, industry and government is critical to creating socially cohesive, healthy and sustainable communities. But it raises big questions which require new ways of thinking for those involved in the construction of this new infrastructure and the development of different theoretical frameworks by those who research it. As Loosemore et al (2005) and Murray and Dainty (2009) point out, construction management research lacks appropriate theory to understand such issues and currently relies on linear structuralist paradigms which make many untested assumptions about the role of communities in the construction process. These assumptions include the view that: communities behave irrationally when they protest; community concerns are the responsibility of urban and town planners to resolve before work starts on site; community consultation should primarily occur during early planning processes; and that community consultation during construction phases will only delay progress and cost money to little advantage (Teo 2010; Chinyio and Olomolaiye 2010).

In an attempt to address these theoretical deficiencies, Teo's (2009) research into community protest against controversial housing projects in Australia produced a conceptual framework which highlighted the importance of social identity, social contagion, social networks, social capital and collective action in understanding community protest. In summary, Teo found that community-based protest networks are anarchic, unstructured and deliberately complex and dynamic, resulting in shifting and unpredictable identities between construction project teams and community groups. It also contends that protest is sustained by common perceptions of community risk and opportunity associated with development, high degrees of interconnectivity and overlapping membership with other protest groups, by relational multiplicity between activists and by strong emotional connections which are built, reinforced and expanded over time through the act of protest participation. Social cohesion and social identity also features as a powerful driver of protest continuity, influenced by social participation rates, common emotional experiences of external threats and by cultural experiences of activism provided by protest activities such as marches, and symbolic artefacts such as community pickets, embassies and permanent meeting places where protestors can exchange 'war' stories and information. Collectively, these social processes and forces promote the positive internalisation of a

collective protest identity and enables the strategic development and sharing of social, human, financial and intellectual capital to address imbalances of power with developers who typically have access to far more resources than community groups.

Teo's (2009) research findings offer a new and potentially powerful perspective to inform and challenge current thinking within construction management research about community protest during the construction stages of controversial housing and urban development projects. In particular, it shows the potential power of using social constructivist theories to inform new thinking in this area. For example, social identity theory can provide new theoretical insights into the construction of distinct and conflicting social identities (eg. protestors, communities and developers) during the construction stages of new projects; why and how people form cohesive protest groups; their resultant norms and behaviours; and why group members are likely to avoid contact with others categorised as different, meaning that in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination can persist at a local level despite shared interests at a regional and national level (Brewer 2007). Theories of collective action can complement these insights by revealing the processes that collectively harness the community's resources, expertise and networks in opposing controversial projects. Theories of collective action can also help explore the social drivers that inspire protest group formation and collective action, strategies to build group cohesion and mobilise participants and how mass media and social networks facilitate collective action (Ansell 2003). Social networks play a particularly critical role as conduits for the transmission of information, ideas and perceptions through communities and social network theory can provide new insights into this social contagion effect by explaining how community relationship structures (friendships, kinships, neighbours, protest group memberships etc) can amplify or attenuate common perceptions of risk and opportunity associated with development (Shemtov 2003, Son and Lin 2008).

By explaining community protest using these theories, within the context of controversial housing and urban infrastructure projects, we argue that a new theoretical framework can be developed to inform construction management research and practice about the importance of community interaction. To this end, we propose that a number of further questions need to be asked beyond Teo's foundational work to begin to develop such as framework. These are:

1. How do community concerns and perceptions about the risks associated with the construction stages of new housing and urban infrastructure projects spread through communities?

2. Is there a social contagion effect in creating common risk perceptions and how does it work?

3. What is the role of community-based networks in promoting or hindering protest group formation, participation and recruitment during the construction stages of projects?

4. Are these protest groups stable or do they change over time?

5. What is the nature of relationships and narratives linking protest groups to each other and to developers and how do these relationship change over time?

6. What determines the strength of protest group identities? i.e. identification of members with the group and its symbols, loyalty to the group and other group members, perceived shared interests and values?

7. What defines protest group boundaries? Who are perceived to be in-group members, how inclusive is each group, what defines "us" vs "not us" and do groups perceived themselves to be part of a larger super-ordinate (state, nation, industry, NGO etc)?

8. What are the perceived relations to other groups e.g. overlapping in-groups (shared members, resources and interests), or allies (distinct identities but perceived convergent interests), or enemies (in-group and out-group distinction, perceived conflicting interests)?

To build trust within communities, Teo and Loosemore (2010) argued that the objective in answering the above questions should not be to find solutions to reduce protest during construction. This could be construed by community members as serving the dominant enterprise culture which characterises the construction industry (Ness and Green 2009). Rather, the aim should be to build a better theoretical framework to understand, explain and manage community concerns, alongside the challenges of delivering projects within increasingly demanding programs and budgets.

METHOD

The research questions proposed above are best addressed using case studies and ethnographic methods. The value of ethnographies lie in developing an insider's view of what is happening when a project is being built (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but "feels" what it is like to be part of the group. This in turn requires protestor's behaviour to be studied in everyday contexts, the research team getting close to the protestors being observed in a natural protest setting, understanding protestor's points of view and sharing as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the people in the protest setting. This also requires the intensive study of a small number of protests, through an omnibus field strategy that simultaneously combines different forms of data collection such as documentary analysis, interviewing of protestors, direct participation and observation, and introspection. Past and current research in sensitive areas such as community activism and protest indicates that triangulation using multiple sources of data is especially important when investigating emotive topics where many different versions of events may emerge from different perspectives. The case study approach has also been used extensively by researchers investigating community activism in different contexts from gay and lesbian rights to homelessness , environmental activism and social injustice (Baxter et al., 1999; Snow and Trom, 2002; Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002 Gamson, 2003). In particular, case studies are ideal to explore longitudinally and intensively the way that networks of protest form, evolve and shift over time during the construction stages of housing and urban infrastructure projects. Finally, case studies are well suited to the practical and emotional challenges of research into highly emotional and protective community groups. In this risky context, where relationships between researchers and respondents can be fragile and strained, establishing open, honest and trusting relationships with community members is crucial to gaining access to quality data and is an essential part of the data collection process.

To study community protest during the construction stage, it will be important that the case studies are controversial projects which have recently transitioned from planning to construction stages. These case studies will need to be projects embroiled on-going community protests during their construction phase after development applications

have been approved, and the construction firms have been left to handle a hostile community. These case studies should be selected on the basis of their longevity and the complexity of issues posed which may include social, cultural, ecological, heritage and economic. These case studies should also be mature protest movements that have been on-going for at least one year since research indicates that such protests have a greater tendency to be more stable than emergent movements, which have variable memberships (Hirsch, 2003; Whittier, 2002; Klandermans, 2003). Having said this, past research indicates that no matter how suitable the case study seems, ultimately it will depend on the researcher's ability to gain access to the respondents. Previous studies have shown that the emotional, sensitive, anarchic and factionalised nature of protest groups can make gaining permission to undertake research challenging (Blee and Taylor 2002). Teo's (2009) experience was that this is best overcome by cultivating relationships with people in local networks where protest is based over several months, before making an approach to undertake any research. It is highly likely that the leadership structure of protest groups will not be immediately apparent (a deliberate tactic to avoid legal action by developers) that they will comprise a number of sub-protest groups with overlapping memberships. Research in this area indicates that access is also likely to involve presentations at community meetings, meeting protest group leaders to discuss the research and allowing due diligence on our backgrounds. Indeed, it is not uncommon for initiation ceremonies to be gone through in order gain acceptance into a group. Within the movement, these rituals or symbols serve to reinforce activists' basic moral commitments, stir up emotions, and reinforce a sense of solidarity within the group (Jasper, 2003). Emotions are a product of an individual's participation in collective action and its internal rituals serve as symbolic embodiments, at salient times and places, of the beliefs and feelings of a group. These rituals can take a variety of forms, including singing and dancing, which serve to provide and harness the positive emotional energy (Jasper, 2003). For example, Teo's (2009) experiences of initiation into protest groups against construction projects involved sitting (and sleeping) on community pickets, attending rallies and even being verbally abused by one particular group gate-keeper.

Once commenced, the construction of ethnographies will require the researcher to be deeply involved with each protest over a considerable amount of time (perhaps years). Previous research shows that levels of protest activity will fluctuate over time as issues come-and-go and that the researcher will need to have the flexibility to respond to these changes. Ethnography relies on up-close, personal experience and participation, rather than just observation. Therefore, the ethnographic process will involve being involved in community protests, attending community meetings, rallies and protest events, participating in email discussion networks and circulation lists etc. In additional, where permitted, researcher should seek to film and photograph aspects of the protest activities such as meeting places for protest groups and artefacts which are symbolically important for group cohesion. For example, Cadena-Roa (2002) reported on the effectiveness with which a movement in Mexico City utilised dramatic representations and culturally embedded symbols in the form of a masked crusader to reflect the injustice, corruption and political mismanagement they opposed. In a construction context, Teo (2009) pointed to the importance of a community picket which was built out of locally salvaged materials, as a meeting point and source of identity for a community protest. Collectively, previous research indicates these methods of data collection will allow rich descriptive accounts to be produced of activists' experiences of protest that can be cross-referenced to construct context-specific explanations of the experience of protest as understood by protestors. Activist

stories will need to be be validated through narrative-orientated semi-structured interviews with a representative selection of members from each identified group to yield a series of shared stories that will transcend the accounts of individual protest participants. Again, previous protest research indicates that the number of groups will likely vary from one case study to the next meaning that it is not possible to accurately identify in advance the number of interviews to be conducted. As with all ethnographic research, sampling for interviews will involve selecting knowledgeable respondents who are familiar with the activities of the community protest. Using snowball sampling (Brace-Govan 2004), respondents can be asked to identify other respondents who represent the community protest, also revealing common social denominators connecting protestors into groups and sub-groups.

CONCLUSION

In proposing a series of key research questions emerging out of Teo's formative research and a methodology for investigating them, this paper sets a new agenda for construction management research. This agenda will begin to address a vital and pressing need to develop new ways of thinking which will help managers balance the needs of developers and communities affected by construction activity. It is crucial that construction management research has a conceptual framework which recognises that community engagement does not stop after the predevelopment government approval process and is not the sole preserve of Town Planners but the collective responsibility of all stakeholders involved throughout the entire life-cycle of housing and urban infrastructure projects – from inception to completion. The social benefits of improved community relations resulting from this research should not be underestimated in strengthening the social fabric of our cities and rebuilding eroded public trust between communities, public institutions and private firms, creating more harmonious, happier, healthier and productive communities.

However, this will require a fundamental shift in thinking and the adoption of a new constructivist paradigm that enables researchers to conceive the construction process as an ongoing negotiation between communities and industry representatives. Communities are traditionally neglected as legitimate constituents by many construction management researchers and practitioners and research into these issues is badly needed in overcoming long-standing and ingrained theoretical positions that alienate communities in the development process. Not only will this research contribute novel insights to construction management research, it will also contribute new transferable insights into more established mainstream research on community activism and group psychology.

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