GETTING TO THE HEART OF COMMUNITY ACTION AGAINST CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

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Construction projects have a potentially large economic, social, ecological and cultural impact on the communities in which they take place. As these communities become increasingly empowered, educated, connected and organised, there is increasing evidence that they are able and willing to mobilise action when they become concerned about the impact of construction projects on their lives. From a construction project management perspective, there has been virtually no research into the structure of these groups and how best to interact with them for mutually beneficial outcomes. Using a thematic story telling approach which draws on ethnographic method and social contagion theories, an in-depth analysis of community action against a construction project is presented. It is concluded that these groups are largely anarchic but are held together and sustained by a core group of activists which are often invisible to outsiders. This raises numerous challenges for project managers in addressing community concerns and in mitigating potential cost and time escalations associated with such action.

Keywords: community, action, protest, project management.

INTRODUCTION

Communities are fluid groups of people, who are united by at least one common characteristic such as geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions (Thompson *et al* 1990). Healthy communities are well organised and to mobilise action in response to external threats to their common interests. As Kasperson *et al* (2001) noted, all development projects have a *"ripple effect"* through their impact on the local, national and international communities in which they are embedded. So from construction project management perspective, 'community' refers to the people whose interests can be affected by a project (Moodley 1999). However, as Atkinson and Cope's (1997) analysis of community activism against urban regeneration projects showed, communities cannot be treated as a single homogeneous, easily identifiable group, so it is clear that the term 'community' should be seen as an umbrella term representing a multitude of overlapping, competing and often conflicting interests groups which shift over the life of a project, through planning, design, construction and operation.

Numerous authors have explored the positive and negative affect that construction projects can have on communities (Awakul and Ogunlana 2002, Glass and Simmonds 2007, Murray and Dainty 2009, Spillane *et al* 2013). Close and Loosemore (2013) found project managers are generally ill-equipped to handle community concerns

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about these impacts and that there is a tendency for them to see communities as a liability rather than an asset. They also assume that community concerns have been resolved during the early planning stages of projects and avoid community consultation, seeing it as a time-consuming, stressful and burdensome process. Consequently, all too often, seemingly innocuous community protests escalate into lengthy and acrimonious disputes which cause considerable delays, financial cost and reputational damage to the firms involved and social damage to the communities themselves. Much of this problem is due to a poor understanding within the construction industry of how to manage community action. There is a paucity of research into how communities organise themselves and therefore no insights can be offered into how to best interact with them for mutual benefit. To address this gap in knowledge, the aim of this paper is to investigate the social processes which create and sustain community action against construction projects. In particular it is to focus on the role of core group members in driving and sustaining community action. Such knowledge is essential to inform more effective and evidence-based community consultation practices, enabling projects to progress smoothly in consultation with communities rather than in conflict with them.

THE SOCIAL BASIS OF COMMUNITY PROTEST

Communities engage in collective action or protest to exert influence on decision-makers in business or government (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). Political theories have has shown how changes in political climates and social trends influence community willingness to engage with protest over time (Klandersman and Staggenborg 2002). For example, publicised concerns about the health impacts of nuclear energy or wind farms are likely to strengthen the likelihood of protest against these types of projects. More recent work by van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010) shows there are many reasons why people might engage in protest ranging from actions directed at improving one's personal conditions (individual action) to actions directed at improving the conditions of one's group (collective action). There are also many types of types of actions that people may take ranging from those that conform to the norms of the existing social system (normative action like petitioning and taking part in a demonstration) to those that violate existing social rules (non-normative action like illegal protests and civil disobedience). According to van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010) the emergence of action against a construction project would depend on the presence of shared grievances, shared emotions and a shared identity within a community. According to their theoretical model, grievances would originate from common shared interests and/or principles that are perceived by the community to be threatened by a project. The more people feel that interests of the group and/or principles that the group values are threatened, the angrier they are likely to be and the more probable it is that they will engage in protest and non-normative action to protect their interests and principles and/or to vent their anger. Community action is made even more complex because behaviours and perceptions initiated by one community member can also influence others in the same community. Social contagion theory explains that perceptions of risk (and opportunity) associated with a project can change as they travel through community social networks and that this social contagion effect is likely to be influenced by levels of social cohesion within a community which is in turn influenced by the level of shared understanding of protest issues among community members (Scherer and Choo 2003). Importantly, Monge and Contractor (2003) have shown that some people are more able to promote contagion (by spreading ideas) by virtue of their unique location in a protest network (core group

membership). For example, people in central positions are more likely to be influential in spreading ideas about a project and it is this issue of core group influence that has been relatively neglected in the literature on community action. Monge and Contractor's (2003) research suggests that it is critically important to be able to communicate with this group in being able to address any concerns which might lead to an unnecessary escalation of protect against a construction project.

METHOD

To investigate Monge and Contractor's (2003) theories around the existence and role of core groups in community action, an ethnographic investigation was undertaken into a long-standing protest against a large housing project in Australia. In exposing a number of commonly held myths about single case study research, Flyvbjerg (2006) acknowledges that the approach has often been criticized on the grounds that its findings are not generalizable. However, in response he also argues that since universal truths are problematic in the study of human affairs, context-dependent knowledge gained through case study research is arguably more valuable than the search for predictive causal explanations. Indeed, according to Flyvbjerg (2006), it is important to recognise that it is not always desirable to generalise case studies and that good quality case studies are of enormous value as highly valid narratives in their own right. While the advantage of large samples is breadth, the advantage of a small number of case studies is depth which can be achieved by an in-depth longitudinal emersion in the research setting which can significantly improve the reliability of the findings produced (Berg, 2001). Data was collected during the protest by a range of methods which included protest documentation (such as the protest website, other related protest websites, flyers, internal communications and media reports), semi structured interviews with protest participants, analysis of symbolic protest artefacts such as a community picket and Aboriginal protest camp and participant observation of protest rallies and site picket activities. A total of twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with protest members around patterns of communication and personal stories of protest involvement to identify core group members. Establishing trusting relationships with community members and gaining access to reliable and quality data was an intensive and engaging process which lasted over 2 years. It necessitated complete emersion in the protest, a difficult initiation process and participation in many protests and cultural events. There was no contact with the developer at any point before, during or after the protest since this would have undermined the trust shown by activists in the researcher and compromised the research.

Interview transcripts and documentary data was analysed using text mapping software called Leximancer which produces a concept map of key data themes and their relationships (Leximancer 2005). An example of a concept map is shown in Figure 3.

A concept map shows graphically: the main concepts contained within a transcript or text; how they relate to each other; the relative frequency of each concept; how often concepts co-occur within the text; the centrality of each concept and; the similarity in contexts in which the concept occur – thematic groups. Sociograms depicting the social networks underpinning the protest were also produced using a social network analysis software called UCINET (Katz 2004). They revealed the structure of communications within the protest group over time. A sociogram is illustrated in Figure 2 with nodes identifying individuals involved in a protest and the lines between them indicating the existence of a relationship (communication, friendship, family,

power etc). Finally, narrative analysis incorporating topic-centred storytelling was used to explore the deeper meanings that people attached to the protest and their role within it (Polkinghorne 2007). Narrative analysis of stories about the protest were used to ground the theoretical insights derived from the documentary analysis, ethnographies, concept maps, sociograms and literature.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The research discovered multiple layers of activism within the community (Figure 1).
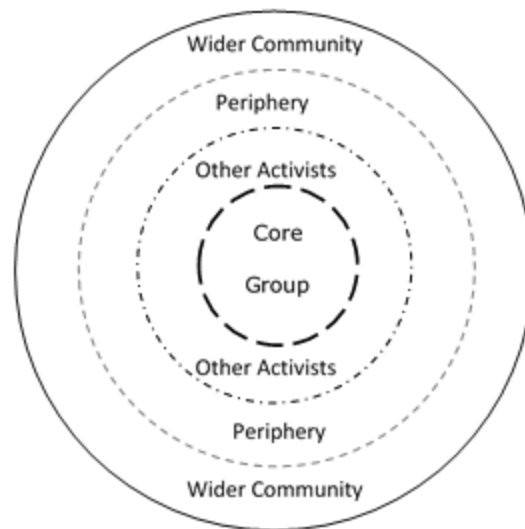

Figure 1: Protest network layers

In Figure 1, the outermost layer was the 'wider community' who were casually associated with the protest on an event-specific basis. As one of our interviewees stated:

"... there are a whole lot of people who don't want to do the picket but they are happy to deliver newsletters or letterboxing.... put up posters and things like that..."

The periphery layer depicted activists at the fringe of the protest who maintain an ongoing but limited and inconsistent involvement in protest activities.

 "I have always kind of been there, more or less on the periphery and contributed where I could... I kind of devote a bit of time every week to doing my little bit for the picket.."

The next layer represents the activists who get involved on a more consistent basis such as picket duty and attendance at meetings and protest events but typically do not get involved in organisational activities.

"... you know who you can count on, and for instances, some people will help with raffles and some people will help with the barbeque selling food or something like that..."

Finally at the heart of the protest is the core group comprising a small number of respected long-term activists who have played a central role in the protest over time by motivating people, organising events and shaping perceptions and opinions through the provision of information via newsletters, an email network web etc.

"... there is a fairly loose central structure which has representatives from major groups.... I mean you certainly had the movers-and-shakers at the picket too, the picket monsters and that..."

While it was possible to identify a core group which drove the protest, the protest network was described by many activists within as being an informal, amorphous, anarchic and unstructured.

"You have a bunch of volunteers that have no rules or real structure... an individual or group can initiate something... you don't have to be a member to attend, it's very loose, there is no real control over it... that's why this campaign has been very hard to pin down, there is no real cookbook on this one..."

The existence of the core group can be clearly seen in the sociogram of the activist group in Figure 2 (shaded area). The nodes in Figure 2 are interviewees.
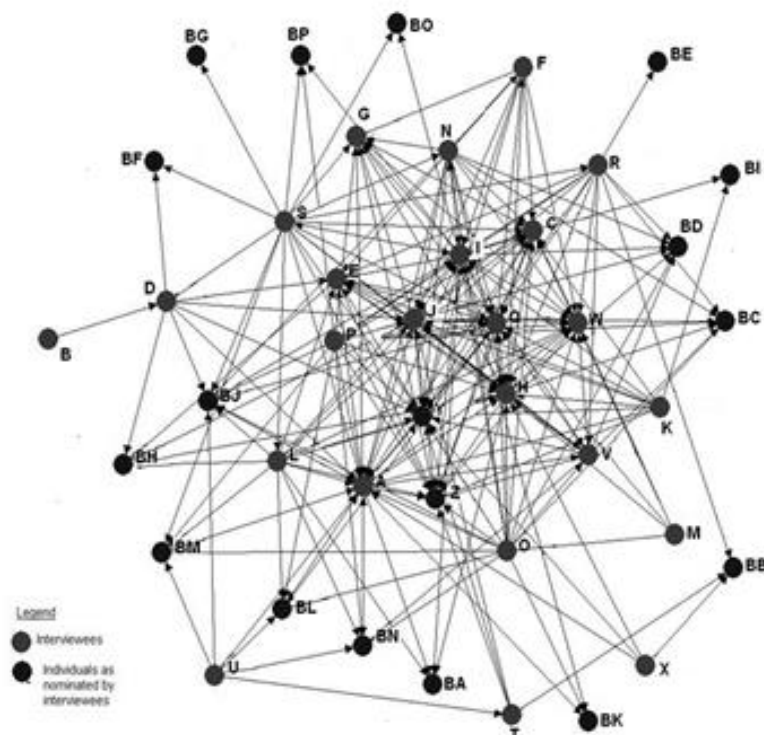

Figure 2: Sociogram of protest network core

The centrality of communications (as indicated by the number of arrows in and out of each node) and a content analysis of the communications with the core group members in Figure 2 showed that the core group played a critical role in facilitating interaction, providing information, mobilising collective action, deciding on strategy and by doing so, shaping opinions, perceptions and in sustaining action over time.

Figure 3 depicts a Leximancer analysis map of important concepts that emerged from the interviews regarding the qualities that core members exhibit which determine their ability to influence opinions, perceptions and sustained action within the movement network.

Figure 3: Map of thematic groups of concepts of key qualities of core group members

In interpreting Figure 3, respect was a central theme, as was evident in activists accounts below:

".. some are more influential and effective that others.....they know he is a very balanced, cautious and sensible person .. a lot of people know him and just have confidence in him. A lot of respect for him.."

Active and sustained participation over time was another theme identified as common among core group members who played a pivotal role in connecting activists old, current and new:

".. people like him who has been there all the time… he has been a common kind of component of it all.. he has been central to virtually everything that has happened."

Knowledge was also a key factor in the central group. As one core group member said:

"... people see me as an expert.. so you have your experts who could help you and you build up a community group of people who could be useful..."

It was also evident from the interviews that certain skill sets are also critical to core group membership:

"... there has been natural order in terms of skills... he is "Mr Leader" with fundraising and banking and all those administrative things ."

While there was no consistent and definable leadership role within the core group there were clear barriers to entry which ensured that members were able to maintain focus, minimise conflict and direct communications and activities in a consistent manner. The concepts that influenced the receptivity of the core group to new members are illustrated in Figure 4.
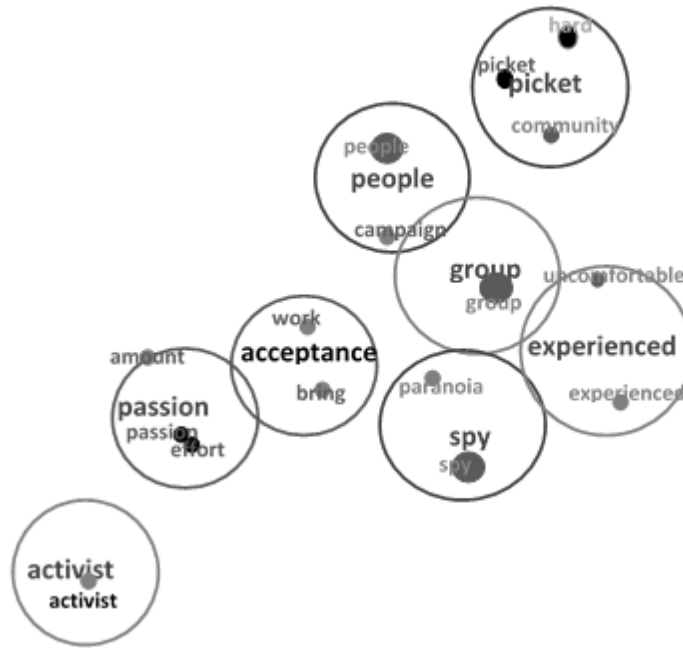
Figure 4: Concepts relating to core group entry

Entry to the exclusive core group membership involved an initiation process where people were tested in terms of their commitment to the cause, their reliability, trustworthiness, fit with existing protest group membership and their ability to contribute:

"... it depends on the newcomer, what ideas and what they can bring to the group, what they produce for the group and what sorts of things will add credibility.."

The core group was the key source of energy for the entire protest movement and exercised its influence on other non-core members in a range of ways including emails, community meetings, media exposure and personal lobbying of other group members to maintain enthusiasm and energy. Of particular interest was the role of the community picket (initiated and maintained by the core group) as a meeting point to sustain protest group identity, cohesion and news of progress. The symbolic and practical importance of physical artefacts such as the picket as a meeting point for the community was even more evident during the later stages of the protest after it had been burnt down by arsonists.

"... it used to be that you would bump into people ... whole lines of communication went down with the picket and the friendships you made were based on your efforts at (the protest) and they didn't really continue after that... "

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate the role of core group members in sustaining community action against construction projects. An understanding of the role of core groups is missing from both the construction project management and wider community action literature. Through an in-depth single case study of one of Australia's longest standing community protests against a construction project our findings indicate that it is a lack of formal protest group structure, rather than the existence of formal structure that is the most important factor in sustaining community action over time. This finding contradict Porta and Diani's (1999) research which

suggests that protest movements are more enduring when they are highly structured. The differences in our findings could be explained by the key role of the core group in managing and promoting cohesion among protest members so that this anarchic group functioned effectively. Our results suggest that the core group is the invisible driving force which sustains protests against construction projects. The core group is often hidden from the developer's view but is critical in driving communications, spreading perceptions of risk and building a sense of collective identity and responsibility that motivated on-going participation in protest actions in the highly transitionary outer protest layers. The core protest group had the highest barriers to entry, consistency in membership and dedication to the cause of any community layer. Members of this group could be defined by certain common attributes and were largely drawn from trusted activists in the adjacent layer and in response to the need for expertise and resources which were salient to emerging protest issues.

The lessons and implications for managers of construction projects from this research are numerous. First, it is clear that protest groups can develop a life of their own which is beyond the control of project managers and even the protest group members themselves. However, the discovery of different layers of membership and a core group of relatively stable *"leaders"* means that there is some hope of effective communication if a manager can discover who this central group comprises. The establishment of early contacts with thought-leaders in the community is thus an essential strategy that should be employed by project managers. These early contacts should aim to establish an open and trusting non-legalistic relationship with the protestors since our findings indicate that the more threatened the protest group feels, the more protective and cohesive it will become, and the more difficult it will be to communicate with.

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