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# **Is there “I” in “We”? Exploring dilemmas of individualism-collectivism in framing intentionality and intentional actions in the context of construction work**

**Farhad Eizakshiri, Paul W. Chan, Margaret Emsley**

## **ABSTRACT**

The constitution of human intention is not confined to the realm of the individual. We do not act alone, we share our knowledge and co-operate with each other. This raises interesting issues regarding the possibility of collective intentions. However, this issue is subject to great controversy in philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences since many philosophers believe that individual intentions alone cannot explain collective actions (see Searle 1999; Bratman 1987; Tuomela 2005). To explore these philosophical dilemmas, we draw on empirical examples from a current study into delay in construction industry. The problem of cost overruns and time overruns in projects is a longstanding one e.g. the Channel Tunnel and the Scottish Parliament. Recent scholars, like Flyvbjerg (2009), argue that these failures are not due to the systems and processes but stakeholders involved in the projects. They state that stakeholders intentionally make changes in the project plan and deceive others in order to achieve their wicked goals: to secure their job; to increase the likelihood of revenues and profits; to gain satisfaction; and to get larger budgets for the cities. Flyvbjerg coined the phrase “strategic misrepresentation” to explain these sorts of behaviours. However, it is clear to us that strategic misrepresentation is an over-simplification because it ignores the interplay between the convergences, divergences, conflicts, and connections between I-intentions and we-intentions. Therefore, in this article we design an experiment to explore the dilemmas of intentionality, specifically reconciling I- and we-intentions, by re-examining the work of Flyvbjerg. Through this, a number of critical questions were raised, including how can one evaluate the weakness or strength of the commitments? Are collective intentions different from mere summation of individual intentions? How an agent’s self-interest could affect or satisfy the collective intentions?

## **INTRODUCTION**

Intentionality plays a significant role in the epistemology of cognitive sciences and the ontological status of social entities. It is “the power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs” (Jacob, 2003). By giving the centrality of intentionality to social phenomena we would be able to pin down some important aspects of

social ontology such as describing the basic concepts of social reality, the social nature of human agents, and the status of social entities such as collectives, organizations, communities, and institutions. The relation of individual to collective intention is fascinating for social sciences such as management and economics. Many professionals and scholars want to know and explain “why” individuals contribute to various group activities? (Bardsley, 2007), and “how” stakeholder intentions are collectively constituted? (Eizakshiri et al, 2011). Yet, there is a lack of research in these fields exploring the interplay between I-intention and we-intention, and the way they influence outcomes.

Individual intentions shape and inform individual actions. But, the content of the individual intention derived from the collective intention is often different from that of the collective intention (Tollefsen, 2004). To underpin these differences in philosophy, this research builds on empirical example from construction projects. This would be helpful since the intentions of decision makers bear consequences on and for others in a social-interactive context of projects. In addition, many tasks in a construction project e.g. planning and forecasting are not individual, but collaborative processes. Understanding different intentions of stakeholders and the content of their intentional actions is crucial in order to answer the question of “why things happen”. This question has been instrumental in advancing human knowledge. Many scientific discoveries have resulted from man's attempt to understand and explain things.

## **WE-INTENTIONS**

Collective intentions entail a sense of acting and willing something together. When people formed this type of intention, they make commitments and incur obligations. Searle argues that a single person can have the collective intention “we intend to do X”. He gives an example regarding a football team trying to execute a pass play: no one in the team can have “we are executing a pass play” as the entire content of his intention since no one can execute a pass play alone. Each player will must make a specific contribution to the overall goal. However, as Gilbert (1994) argues, Searle fails to capture the normative relations that are an integral part of collective intentions. Because, in the example above the football players are obligated to perform certain actions and if one fails to do his or her part the other players have a right to rebuke their teammate. This rebuke shows the normativity involved in joint action.

Bratman, as opposed to Searle, argues that an individual cannot have a shared intention since a collective intention is the complex of attitudes of individuals which are interrelated and

reflexive. Further, he explains “collective intentions in terms of individual attitudes with common contents that are distinctively social in the sense that solitary individuals could not have them” (Tollefsen, 2004). He believes when “I intend that we do something” there is something out of control. It is the important equal role of “you” which is neglected in settling what will be done. However, there are two criticisms about his work: firstly, like Searle, Bratman failed to consider the normativity of collective intentions. Secondly, it could be argued that there are no intentions with common content, as intentions need to make an implicit reference to their subjects. “Art can intend to go to a film and Mary can intend to do the same; but their intentions do not have common content, since Art’s intention is *his* going to the film and Mary’s is *her* going to the film (Stoutland, 1997)”.

Tuomela (2005) goes further in exploring the analogy between groups and individuals. He introduces We/I mode of intending as an answer to an objection made on Searle’s account. He notes that a We-mode social group has collective commitments to action and accepts the set of the constitutive goals, values, beliefs, standards, norms, and practices. However, he puts a distinction between we-intentions (aim-intentions) and action-intentions: he believes that in the latter the agents have the “belief” that they could perform the action. In this case, a we-intention is a participant’s “slice” of their joint intention. Therefore, agents are socially committed to each other to perform their parts of the engaged commitment to the content of the intention. He argues, when You and I share a plan to carry a heavy table *jointly* upstairs and perform this plan, we both can be said to have the *joint intention* to carry the table. “The content of the intention here involves our performing something together and the pronoun ‘we’ of course refers to our group”. In other words, participants will be collectively committed to the plan partly because of the mutual knowledge that they share a plan, and thus intention (Tuomela, 2005). This would be more problematic since it is related to various personal and, especially, joint desires and mutual and other beliefs of a group.

As Pettit and Schweikard (2006) argue, “doing one’s bit is not the only contribution that a person might make to a joint performance. We can imagine a scenario in which one or another member of a plurality is in a position to exploit, manipulate, or coerce others and so is specially empowered to intend that they together enact a certain performance”. In this study, we observed the similar issue in construction projects. As mentioned, Flyvbjerg (2009) argued so far that stakeholders lie with numbers and misrepresent by overestimating benefits and underestimating time and cost of project intentionally to get the project. If his assessment of strategic misrepresentation holds true, then one could question how such misrepresentation

is intentionally invoked when creating project time and cost plans. Since the decisions are making collectively as “we”, then in what degree A’s strategic misrepresentation as “I” would be problematic? Obviously, it is not that simple as A do strategic misrepresentation to distort the time and cost. However, we believe that Flyvbjerg’s view point is an over-simplification of the actual situation, and we need to go beyond this simplistic view by exploring the role stakeholders’ intentions (I-intention and we-intentions) play. In so doing, we draw out some of the implications of philosophical perspectives to raise three critical questions which would help us to tackle with this issue.

*1- How can we evaluate the weakness or strength of the commitments?*

When any individual intention to action is abandoned, the commitment is lost. Bratman points out that the agent forms “the intention at one time by making a decision to perform the action. Then, unless it is revised, the intention will directly lead the agent to perform the action” (cited in Holton, 1999). He believes that humans are “epistemically limited creatures. Information is scarce, and costly to obtain”. So, there is no guarantee for these intentions to be survived until the time of action, rather volitional commitments. The stability and controllability of these future directed intentions during the time period is questionable. Steller (1992) demonstrated through an experiment that the commitment to an implementation intention enhanced by asking participants to additionally tell themselves, “I strongly intend to follow the specified plan!” Similarly, Bratman (1992) knows “commitment to a joint activity” and “commitment to mutual support” as two essential characteristics of shared activities. He believes that these two features need to be considered together, and not alone, to make a joint cooperative activity. Yet this has proven to be a very rational approach since it assumed human to work within these constraints (Holton, 1999). Tuomela (2005), additionally, explained that group members should be collectively committed to the action, and also “socially” committed to each other. However, it is quite prude to assume that in the context of projects where stakeholders have different interests and conflicting intentions the commitment to action can satisfy both Bratman’s features of a shared activity. Bratman himself provided an example of a two people in a row boat who row together. “They have never given promises to each other; such rowers may well have a shared intention to row the boat together” (Bratman, 1993, 98-99). But, doing the task together does not insure that they shared an intention together. Explicit promises (as the commitment to action) are not sufficient to conclude that the action is collectively performed. Individuals might be lying and

have no intention towards the task (Tollefsen, 2004). This is consistent with what Flyvbjerg argued so far about strategic misrepresentation.

### *2- Are collective intentions different from mere summation of individual intentions?*

It could be argued that shared intentionality in a group is not necessarily reducible to an aggregate of individual I-intentions. The reason is that no set of I-intentions even supplemented with mutual beliefs will add up to a we-intend (see Bratman, 1992; Gilbert, 1994; Searle, 1990, 1995; Rakoczy, 2007 and Tuomela and Miller, 1988). According to the Bratman's example, two rowers might end up moving the boat beside each other but not together. Tuomela (2005) distinguishes collective intentions (to X) from collective intentions as aggregated private intentions: 1) there is a difference concerning the commitments and control of the intention-content; and 2) a difference in mode (I-mode versus we-mode) related to the achievement process; and 3) a difference related to the satisfaction conditions of the intention content itself. Hence, reductive analyses fail to account for the cooperative and coordinated character of collective intentionality. This is why Bardsley (2007) states that there is a need to take non-reductive approach of collective intention into account, since "their rational resolution requires people to act as members of teams, rather than as instrumentally rational individuals". Similarly, Ryland (2010) concludes that "public interest assertions made in various governmental actions are best understood when attributed to forms of collective we-modes that are not reducible to individual actions or interests".

### *3- How an agent's self-interest could affect or satisfy the collective intentions?*

The problem of course, in a collective sense, is the possibility that self-satisficing outcomes could be detrimental to the satisfaction of others. So, it is not only a commitment issue, but a divergence of interests too. This is the situation where group members prefer their personal interests over the collective interests of the group. For instance, people know joint venture as the partnership that tries to serves their own interests. Hence, they pursue I-intentions by considering their own interests, and have a keen eye on whether other individuals do not harm their interests. Rather, they could have we-intentions with a sense of doing something together. (Vromen, 2003)

Searle provides the example of "businessmen who feel justified to act upon their individual intentions, because they have learned at school that Adam Smith's invisible hand sees to it that self-interested individual behaviour is turned into socially beneficial outcomes" (Searle

1990, p.404). Therefore, those graduates may come to believe and form an intention that the best way to help humanity is by following own selfish interests and not cooperating with anybody. They, also, may have mutual beliefs toward such an intention. “In such a case, despite all the businessmen having the same goal as well as mutual beliefs about their respective intentions, there is no cooperation and no collective action. What they lack is an intention to cooperate mutually” (Pacherie, 2007). To make it precise, when a project planner is forced to present wrong forecasts by clients, she may cooperate in the I-mode based on her self-interest in keeping her job. But she would not accept the ethos of the clients’ group in the we-mode due to the fact that the majority’s interests are formulated by the group. However, unlike Adam Smith’s businessmen, the planners’ action is embedded in the sense of doing something together -collective intentions.

## RESEARCH METHOD

We designed an experiment in order to contribute to these philosophical debates. We hypothesize that firstly the summation of individual intentions (I-intention) is not collective intentions (we-intentions) and secondly the individual and collective intentions of different stakeholders influence planned project time. Therefore, the independent variables which have been manipulated, to observe their effects on the dependent variable, are the human intentions including I-intentions and we-intentions. The dependent variable is the project-planned time, which is supposed to be affected or changed by human intentions.



Figure 1: *3D image of the Apple Tree House designed by LEGO Digital Designer*

In this experiment, we investigate the time predicted to build the Apple Tree House LEGO buildings by participants to see the tension between I-intentions and we-intentions (see Fig. 1). To build this, 120 participants would be selected and given the project brief, design and a 3D image of the house. Participants would be randomly assigned to a group of 3-persons. Then, they would be introduced the details of the task by the experimenter e.g. “you have 10 minutes to decide how long it will take your group to build the house. Bear in mind that the house should be built as specified in the drawings, and all the bricks you require are in this box”. Likewise, they will be asked to remove the watches and any other form of monitoring the time e.g. turning off cell phones. Before doing the experiment, participants will be asked to provide their individual estimations to the experimenter secretly. Next, they will be asked to estimate the time of their action collectively and write it down in minutes in a separate form. These two estimations will be compared to see whether collective intentions are different from mere summation of individual intentions or not. Furthermore, the results of the experimental studies will be validated by doing semi-structured interviews with participants and practitioners. Some questions are developed by experimenter including, 1) How do you make decisions regarding to the time of your daily activity? Are you optimistic about that or pessimistic? 2) How did you decide on the time needed to do the experiment individually and collectively? 3) How did you get consensus within the group? 4) Why you think there is a difference between what you have predicted from what you have achieved? It is interesting to see how the participants react, alter or reconstruct their viewpoints in responses to the questions. Again, the questions try to develop a typology of participants’ intentions. Notably, the experiment and interview will be video-recorded for the purpose of analysis, accuracy and better feedback.

## **CONCLUSION**

These collectivist and individualistic views are particularly important aspects with regard to dynamics associated with time planning between individual, pair and group in construction (Baarts, 2009). They are related to organisational culture (or in broader perspective to societies). As Chatman and Barsade (1995) mention, in collectivistic organisational cultures, priority is placed on collective goals and cooperative action, and members with a tendency to cooperate are likely to demonstrate well-practiced cooperative behaviours. In contrast, in individualistic organisational culture the individuals are given priority over the social whole, and members of individualistic societies are more satisfied by activities requiring individual achievement and fulfilment of self-interested goals (See Chatman and Barsade, 1995; Baarts, 2009 and Dumont, 1970). It could be argued that if individualistic priorities become too strong, I-intention become dominant over we-intention, strategic misrepresentation is likely



to be largest. Thus, one of the objective of the current research is to explore the nature and scope of I-intention and we-intention preferences concerning to the estimation of project time. The experiment is designed in a way to address this concern by investigating the interplay between I-intention and we-intention, and the way they influence project time.

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