



The role of core protest group members in sustaining protest against controversial construction and engineering projects



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 25 May 2014

Keywords:

Protest
Continuity
Community
Social contagion
Social networks
Collective action

ABSTRACT

Community-based protests against major construction and engineering projects are becoming increasingly common as concerns over issues such as corporate social accountability, climate change and corruption become more prominent in the public's mind. Public perceptions of risk associated with these projects can have a contagious effect, which mismanaged can escalate into long-term and sometimes acrimonious protest stand-offs that have negative implications for the community, firms involved and the construction industry as a whole. This paper investigates the role of core group members in sustaining community-based protest against construction and engineering projects. Using a thematic story telling approach which draws on ethnographic method and social contagion theories, it presents an in-depth analysis of a single case study – one of Australia's longest standing community protests against a construction project. It concludes that core group members play a critical role, within anarchic structures which provide a high degree of spontaneity and improvisation, in sustaining movement continuity by building collective identity, mobilising resources and a moving interface which developers find hard to communicate with.

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Introduction

A 'community' refers to a fluid group of people united by at least one common characteristic such as geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions (Parsons, 2008). Healthy community systems comprise well-integrated, interdependent sub-systems of individuals who represent specialised functions, activities, or interests, who share responsibility to resolve problems and work to enhance the well-being of the community as a whole. From the perspective of a construction project, 'community' refers to the people whose interests are potentially affected by that project (Loosemore, Raftery, Reilly, & Higgon, 2005; Moodley, 1999). Atkinson and Cope's (1997) analysis of community participation and activism in urban regeneration projects showed that these communities cannot be treated as a single homogeneous, easily identifiable group. Similarly, Teo's (2009) research showed that construction project communities comprise a multitude of

overlapping, competing and often conflicting interests groups which shift over the life of a project, through planning, design, construction and operation (Teo & Loosemore, 2011).

All development projects have a "ripple effect" through their impact on the local, national and international communities in which they are embedded (Kasperson, Jhaveri, & Kasperson, 2001). Research has shown that these impacts can be significant and both positive (urban regeneration, employment opportunities, infrastructure) and negative (natural habitat destruction, noise, dust, pollution, traffic congestion) and that they can affect many different interest groups in many different ways (Awakul & Ogunlana, 2002; Murray & Dainty, 2009; Sjöberg, 2004; Spillane, Flood, Oyedele, von Meding, & Konanahalli, 2013). As Loosemore et al.'s (2005) critical analysis of risk management in the construction industry showed, as communities become increasingly educated, informed, vocal and empowered, the risk of community action against even the most innocuous construction and engineering projects have escalated significantly. Close and Loosemore's (2013) research into community consultation has shown that construction project managers are generally ill-equipped to handle community concerns about projects and tend to assume that community concerns have been handled during the early planning stages of projects. Communities

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are widely seen as a liability rather than an asset and their concerns are often dismissed as being irrational, emotional and uninformed (Broadbent, 2003; Burgmann, 1993; Crowther & Cooper, 2002; Foster-Fishman, Cantillon, Pierce, & Van Egeren, 2007). The consequences of this ignorance is that 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 (Berglund, 1988; Cleland & Ireland, 2007; Crowther & Cooper, 2002). Much of this problem is due to a poor understanding in the project management community of how to manage community members who are concerned about development risk. As Close and Loosemore (2013) found, there is very little research into how communities perceive the risks and opportunities associated with construction projects and how they organise themselves in opposition or support. Currently, 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 to sway social, economic, political and other issues in their favour (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003). A range of theories have been developed over the last fifty years to explain this process. Le Bon's (1960, 2002) crowd behaviour theory explains how people's behaviour can be transformed by the influence of "crowds". Olson's theory of "collective action" explains how community protest groups attract members through "free-riding" behaviour (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). Research into "mobilisation theory" has also shown how a protest group's longevity is also related to its ability to access resources, recruit and retain participants (Dalton, Recchia, & Rohrschneider, 2003). More recently, "political theory" has shown how changes in political climates and social trends influence community willingness to engage with protest over time (Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002). For example, current media reporting about the potential health, environmental and social impacts of housing, road, dam, nuclear power and wind farm projects are likely to magnify perceptions of risk associated with such projects and catalyse community action against them. More recently, Jacquelin van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010) shows there are many reasons why people might engage in protest. For example, they may engage in action to improve their personal conditions (individual action) or do so to improve the condition of one's wider community (collective action). This action can take many forms on a continuum from behaviour that conforms to existing social norms (like petitioning and taking part in a demonstration) to those that violate existing social norms (like illegal protests and civil disobedience). According to Jacquelin van Stekelenburg and Klandermans' (2010) research the emergence of community action against a construction project would rest on the presence of shared grievances, emotions and identity within a community about the potential risks (and opportunities) associated with a construction project. The more threatened community members feel and the more shared their interests then the angrier they are likely to be and the more probable it is that they will engage in action to protect their interests and principles and/or to vent their anger.

The spread of risk perceptions through protest networks

The above theories have provided some insight into why communities may join protest groups and how the groups may push their behaviour beyond normal social norms. However, they do not explain how perceptions about project risks and opportunities escalate and spread through communities, building solidarity and commitment to protest over time. Given the lack of research in this area, these social dynamics are currently invisible to construction project managers and therefore represent a barrier to preventing the potential escalation of community action against projects. However, theoretical developments in contagion theory in other fields such as epidemiology, consumption patterns, gang behaviour, criminal and terrorist networks and of financial markets, are also of potential use in explaining how perceptions of construction project risk might spread through communities (Kretschmer, Klimis, & Choi, 1999; McPhail, 1994; Myers, 2000). According to social contagion theory, behaviours and perceptions initiated by one community member can influence others in the same community, depending on the structure and quality of the relationships within that community network (Jones & Jones, 1995; Scherer & Choo, 2003). Social contagion theory suggests that the social contagion effect is likely to travel along designated pathways based on existing social network structures. It also shows that the contagion effect is likely to be influenced by social network characteristics such as the frequency of interactions between people, network stability (existence of link over time), multiplexity (number of relationship types – friendship, advice, power etc), strength (time, intimacy), direction (reciprocity), density (level of connectedness), equivalence (similarity of ties) and network centrality (Brass, 1995, King, 2005). For example, highly centralised networks are more contagious than dispersed networks, as are networks with a high degree of structural equivalence (similarity of ties between network members).

Social contagion theory has also shown how the contagion effect of risk perceptions is likely to be influenced by levels of social cohesion within a protest group (the degree to which group members are attracted to each other and are committed to the issues behind the group's formation, Monge & Contractor, 2001). Other factors shown to influence the contagion effect include: the level of shared understanding of protest issues among community members; levels of external threat and; perceptions of protest success (Brown, 2000; Robbins, Millett, & Waters-Marsh, 2004). In particular, Monge and Contractor (2003) have acknowledged the potential influence of social structure on the contagion effect suggesting that some people may be more susceptible to contagion than others or 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 (the core protest group), who may be community leaders, local or imported activists or simple long standing residents who are well liked by other activists, are more likely to be influential in spreading ideas. Their power is magnified in divided protest networks where they form a bridge between disconnected protest cliques which may focus on different protest issues which might otherwise not communicate. It is this issue of core group influence that has been relatively neglected in the literature and on which this paper focuses.

Monge and Contractor's (2003) research indicates that it is critically important that construction project managers are able to identify and communicate with the core protest group to prevent the escalation of community action into non-normative forms which could severely disrupt project success and detrimentally affect the community itself.

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