# Understanding community protest from a project management perspective: A relationship-based approach

Melissa M. Teo [a,*], Martin Loosemore [b]

[a] *Science and Engineering Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia*
[b] *Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, Australia*

## Abstract

Communities negatively affected by construction projects are becoming increasingly empowered, organised and willing to engage in protest. The importance of communities as project stakeholders is widely recognized in the project management literature, but there is little empirical research to help project managers understand how to effectively engage with communities to prevent protests developing and escalating. Contributing to the emerging 'Relationship Approach' in project management theory which focusses on communities as legitimate stakeholders in projects, this paper draws on theories of collective identity and social capital to present an ethnographic analysis of community action against a large-scale and highly controversial construction project in Australia. The results show that dealing with community protest is a complex and dynamic challenge for project managers due to the anarchic and self-organising properties of community-based protest groups. It is concluded that effective community engagement strategies require project managers to adopt trust-building strategies early in projects and an intimate understanding of community concerns and social structures.
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*Keywords:* Collective action; Community; Protest; Project management; Collective identity; Social capital

## 1. Introduction

According to Pryke and Smyth (2006) project management theory has gone through three main stages of development. First, traditional project management theory - focussed on the development of tools and techniques for application. Second, functional project management theory – focussed on the strategic front-end management of projects. Third, information processing project management theory – focussed on technocratic input/output models. However, Pryke and Smyth (2006) argue that the dynamics of relationships, which are critical to the success of a project have yet to be articulated theoretically or practically in the project management literature. This they argue creates the need for a new fourth stage of theoretical development which they call the 'Relationship Approach' which seeks to explain how project stakeholders, both internal and external, interact to influence a project's outcome. This has also been supported by Touzi et al.'s (2016: 4) stakeholder analysis of transport projects which concluded that "despite the recognized importance of the management of stakeholders, research projects still lack theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence from different projects and stakeholders-related phenomena …". Most recently, in a further articulation of the relationship approach to project management, Pryke et al. (2017) criticise traditional conceptualisations, analysis and design of project organisations for being inappropriate to capture the social, relational and self-organising aspects of current construction and engineering projects, calling for new relationship-based research to better understand these complexities based on a focus on actors and their behaviour in projects and theories of social networks.

\* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* Melissa.teo@qut.edu.au (M.M. Teo),
m.loosemore@unsw.edu.au (M. Loosemore).

This paper seeks to address this need for more theoretical insights into project stakeholder management and contributes directly to the new body of project management knowledge which Pryke and Smyth (2006) have labeled the 'Relationship Approach'. More specifically, by mobilizing theories of social identity, social capital and social networks it focusses on communities as actors, which were largely missing from Pryke and Smyth's (2006) original analysis and which remain an important but neglected stakeholder in the project management debate and indeed, in Pryke et al.'s (2017) more recent advancement of the relationship approach. It does so in the context of the construction and engineering industry where according to Boutilier and Zdziarski's (2017: 498), "socio-political risk from stakeholders is one of the most unpredictable types of risk faced by construction project managers" and where recent evidence indicates that project managers have a poor record of engaging with the local communities in which they build. For example, Close and Loosemore (2014a) found construction project managers are generally ill-equipped to handle community concerns development activity and that they view communities as a risk and liability rather than an asset and opportunity. There is also a tendency for construction project managers to assume that community concerns have been resolved during the early planning stages of a project and to avoid community consultation once construction starts on site, seeing it as a time-consuming, stressful and burdensome process. Boutilier and Zdziarski (2017) argue that even when all legal licences and permits are in place, this too often leads to costly and acrimonious disputes between project managers and communities which can severely damage the progress and cost of projects, the reputations of the companies involved and in extreme cases lead to the repudiation of the project's social licence to operate. This is supported by Littau's (2015: 4) recent analysis of stakeholder management in European mega infrastructure projects which concluded that "stakeholders have huge impact on the performance of megaprojects.... Effective design and delivery means not only insuring that the mega-project is delivered on-time and to budget but that it satisfies the societal and commercial needs that motivated its creation and that it continues to do so throughout its entire life-cycle." Indeed, Graetz and Franks (2016) also argue that companies which do not manage community stakeholders effectively risk their reputational capital and licence to operate which can severely limit or prevent access to future projects.

This research is set within a wider context of communities around the world becoming increasingly skeptical and mistrustful of developers and government approaches to construction and infrastructure development (Christina et al., 2016). In Australia for example, the Government's recent Productivity Commission Report into Australia's infrastructure (PC, 2014) sector cites evidence of growing information asymmetries between communities, governments and developers translating into greater instances of community protests around new social and economic infrastructure projects. Noting the international relevance of this problem, the Productivity Commission Report states that "This focus on public infrastructure and how community expectations about its provision can be met is also an international phenomenon, as evidenced by interest from the G-20, the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund" (PC, 2014: 3). These concerns are reflected in a growing body of knowledge around the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) phenomenon, much of it in the field of planning, which has sought to classify the typical nature of opposition attitudes and arguments, the factors that determine them, and the range of strategies available to alleviate them (Dear, 1992). For example, Sun et al. (2016) undertook comparative studies in Shanghai and Hong Kong to examine public participation impact on environment NIMBY conflict and environmental conflict management, showing that there is often no public participation during the planning/project decision-making stage of projects and that the approach adopted can have a significant impact on public opposition. Involving key stakeholders early on in genuine rather than tokenistic engagement, being open and transparent with information like making environmental impact assessments available, and timing participation in the project lifecycle process are typical strategies suggested for environment NIMBY conflict and environmental conflict management. However, while this research has been useful, NIMBY label is a derogatory term which implies that community protest is motivated by personal interests, selfishness, ignorance, and irrationality (Petrova, 2016) and in this paper we argue that such an approach is unhelpful in developing effective project management strategies to engage with communities which often have genuine and justifiable development concerns.

We argue that to interact with communities effectively project managers need to understand them, and while numerous project management researchers have recognized the importance of community stakeholder management to the efficient delivery of construction projects (Ward and Chapman, 2008, Spillane et al., 2013, Murray et al., 2011, Close and Loosemore, 2014a, Hartmann and Dewulf, 2015), few have explicitly singled-out communities as a stakeholder group. Instead there is a tendency to bundle all community stakeholders into a singular homogenous group whereas in reality, communities affected by construction projects are highly complex and multi-dimensional and layered (Teo and Loosemore, 2014).

It is within the above context that the aim of this paper is to investigate the community processes which drive protest against construction projects, mobilising theories of collective action, collective identity and social capital to reveal the social processes at work. The value of collective identity and social capital theory is its ability to provide important new conceptual insights into how protest participation over time works to evoke a sense of belonging, build solidarity and facilitate the creation and internalisation of protest identity that is conducive to sustaining protest participation which is in line with contemporary understanding of protest as a socially embedded process which has real meaning for protestors (Russo, 2014). Such knowledge is essential to inform more effective and evidence-based community consultation practices, and is particularly relevant and important in the context of increasing construction industry scrutiny by social and environmental activist groups (DeLuca et al., 2016), growing CSR disclosure requirements on construction