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

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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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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.

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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 megaproject 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 multidimensional 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...
companies (Lu et al., 2016) and recent laws like the UK’s Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 which have for the first time placed a duty on the construction sector to consult communities in which they build (Burke and King, 2015; Farag et al., 2016).

1.1. Stakeholder theory in project management

The concept of stakeholder management was originally introduced into organisational studies by Freeman (1984) who defined a stakeholder as any person or group which can influence or be influenced by an organisation, or who claim to have legal or moral rights and interests in its activities. Cleland (1986) is widely credited with introducing the notion of stakeholder management into the field of project management by emphasising the importance of the identification, classification, analysis and consultation process. Subsequently, this notion became embodied in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) where stakeholders are defined as “the people and organizations who actively participate in a project or whose interests may be affected as a consequence of the execution of the project or of the completion of the project.” (PMI, 2013).

In simple terms, stakeholder management theory conceives a project as a complex, dynamic and interdependent network of multidimensional relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders, the quality of which, can affect or be affected by its activities and vice versa. Achievement of organisational objectives depends on how well organisations manage and nurture these relationships strategically and importantly, how managers should pay attention to and keep on side. When this is not possible then they should be excluded from the consultation process. More recently, Littau (2015) adopted Winch’s (2004) typology of five categories of stakeholders as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ they are essentially technocratic according to Pryke and Smyth’s (2006) chronology of project management theory and out of alignment with contemporary trends in community engagement which would consider the term ‘management’ as indicating a desire to control communities rather than genuinely engage for mutually beneficial outcomes (Bryson et al., 2013; Barker, 2013). This is also reflected by the NIMBY (not in my back yard) literature which according to Burningham et al. (2006) represents an ill-defined and biased catchphrase to label the community as opposition, or worse, to imply that citizens opposing controversial projects are irrational and selfish.

Banerjee (2007) also critiques such models for focussing manager’s attention on stakeholders in possession of assets that are critical to a firm’s success, leading to the potential exclusion of minority, disadvantaged and disempowered groups (such as indigenous communities). Rather, what is needed in contributing to Pryke and Smyth’s (2006) new ‘Relationship Approach’ to project management theory is a better understanding of what drives communities to engage in protest against construction projects. While we agree entirely with Pryke et al.’s (2017: 446) statement that “Conceptualising a construction project as a network allows for an in-depth analysis and understanding of individual and organisaional behaviour in construction project organisations by facilitating relational and contextual conceptualisation of the complex networks in which those actors are embedded”, the recognition of communities as legitimate and important stakeholders in project is missing from their most recent conceptualisation of this approach which largely focusses on inter-firm relations which make up construction project coalitions. As Touzi et al. (2016: 4) states “Up to now, there is little research focusing primarily on the tools of conceptual development of the management of stakeholders and frameworks in order to better manage the stakeholders. … the literature lacks the empirical research and theorizing on how the stakeholders try to influence the project and how to manage these influences”. We agree with Boutilier and Zdziarski’s (2017:498) contribution to Pryke et al.’s (2017) further conceptualisation of the Relationship Approach to project management which states that “Project managers would benefit from approaches that can predict which groups or coalitions within the stakeholder network have sufficient
influence and motivation to delay progress and that can suggest interventions to reduce that risk”. However, we do not agree with the view that communities must be seen as a risk and that community networks should be controlled in some way to build support by empowering supporters and marginalising and therefore silencing potentially disempowered groups. Rather, we believe that the focus of a relationship-based approach to project management should be on community engagement rather than on community management which requires a better understanding of communication structures which enable the resolution of community concerns, rather than their suppression or marginalisation. To this end, the following section seeks to integrate for the first time, theories of community protest with construction project management literature.

1.2. The social psychology of construction protest in a project management context

Growing community concerns about the risks of business and government activity has been a subject of interest to social scientists for several decades. Poortinga and Pidgeon (2003) were one of the first to reveal a growing crisis of trust in business and government, developing a social amplification of risk framework which described how both social and individual factors act to amplify or attenuate community perceptions of risk, regardless of what businesses or governments say. More recently, growing public concerns around issues like climate change, air pollution and nuclear power have added impetus to research into the social psychology of how communities perceive risk and how they react to these perceptions (van der Linden, 2015; Stoutenborough et al., 2013). As Janmaimool and Watanabe’s (2014: 6291) study into factors contributing to community perceptions of business risk shows, such research is important because “understanding the differences in the risk judgments of residents of industrial communities potentially provides insights into how to develop appropriate risk communication strategies”. This research shows that risk is not simply a technocratic concept but a social and psychological construct determined by individual, organisational and societal values, expectations and norms. In other words, as Close and Loosemore (2014b) argued, communities impacted by construction projects respond to the world they perceive around them, not the world constructed for them by construction project managers or by the experts and scientists they may draw on for advice. As Wester-Herber (2004: 109) points out, while it was once “believed that if the public was only given the right information, conflicts over risk could be resolved...” we now know that this top-down approach does not work. These ideas have been reflected in built environment research. For example, Tea and Loosemore’s (2014) analysis of community participation and activism in urban regeneration and controversial construction projects showed that communities affected by a construction project should not be treated as a single homogeneous, easily identifiable group but as a multitude of overlapping, competing and often conflicting interests groups which shift over the life of a project, through planning, design, construction and operation. These communities can be widely geographically spread, with some large projects having a significant “ripple effect” through local, national and international communities. Collectively, it is these dispersed, complex, multidimensional and dynamic characteristics of communities affected by construction projects which make them challenging to engage with effectively. In the US, Kinawy and El-Diraby (2010) recognize that communities are not involved enough in large scale infrastructure projects and propose the concept of the e-society to address this problem. Aligning this idea with the concept of the smart city Kinawy and El-Diraby (2010) argue that communities can represent a significant risk to project success if they are not engaged effectively through better two-way communication between project managers and community residents. More recently, Christina et al.’s (2016) analysis of community concerns around large public private partnership infrastructure projects in Indonesia, argues that objective, actuarial and technical measures of risk associated with construction activity, although easier to operationalise, have little meaning if they are separated from the social and behavioural context in which construction activity is experienced by the community.

When communities feel they have not been consulted effectively in construction development activity, their only option is to engage in collective action to exert influence on decision-makers in business or government to sway development decisions in their favour (Klandermans and Stekelenburg, 2015). Ganesh and Stohl (2014) define ‘collective action’ as any kind of discretionary participation in organised effort, coordinated activity and collective sense making in the production of shared benefits that advance public interests and community outcomes. As van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2010) have shown, collective action can involve a vast array of behaviours ranging from low level actions which conform to social norms (such as petitioning and demonstration) to high level actions that violate social rules (such as illegal protests, violence and civil disobedience) with different socio-psychological dynamics underlining each type of protest.

In seeking to better understand community protest from a project management perspective, this paper seeks to mobilise theories of collective action. In doing so it also draws on theories of ‘collective identity’ and ‘social capital’ which have emerged as two important theoretical constructs in this debate. These are discussed below.

1.3. Collective identity

Collective identity has long been acknowledged in the social movement literature as one of the most important drivers of collective action (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010; Russo, 2014). Fominaya (2010: 393) defines collective identity as the emotional connection to a broader community generated and created between individuals who share a sense of shared consciousness, collective agency and ‘oneness’ or ‘we-ness’. While collective identity does not necessarily require a complete alignment of ideologies, beliefs, interests or goals by group, it is anchored in shared experiences (such as repression) and perceptions of shared interests (such as opposition to a
construction project) among those who comprise a collectivity. Collective identity is also typically defined by the development of a common language and by the creation of cultural and symbolic artefacts and a set of shared rituals and practices that is reinforced through activists’ storytelling (Prins et al., 2013). It also requires a network of active relationships which distinguishes the collective from other groups, which creates barriers to entry to outsiders and which creates a boundary that allows it to be recognized by out-groups as distinct (Hunt and Benford, 2004; Yang and Xin, 2016). Another important characteristic of collective identity is the way that group commitment, solidarity and commitment is maintained and forged through trust, sacrifice, shared leadership, organisation and collective action (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010). In essence, collective identity enables people to think, act and behave as members of a group rather than as individuals, transforming individual action into collective action, and Crowther and Cooper (2002), Castells (2004) and Russo (2014) argue that at a community level, collective identity is able to rekindle a ‘community spirit’ and an enhanced consciousness of local issues that help to drive protest against threats such as major construction projects. Interestingly, while protest research has traditionally focussed on low status disadvantaged groups challenging powerful groups, social identity theory also explains how high status groups can often align their support in solidarity with low status groups in protest against change, especially when minorities threaten their power base or better represent their values than incumbent groups (Shriner and Adams, 2013; Ewick and Steinberg, 2014). It also shows how people’s identities can change over time and how people can hold multiple identities at the same time which can often be in conflict with each other. For example, an individual may on some occasions protest against an issue which is supported by another group that they would not normally identify with.

Ashmore et al. (2004) has proposed a framework that considers the multidimensional nature of collective identity which is useful in understanding how the internalisation and externalization of collective identity helps sustain protest participation against construction projects. The framework is utilizes elements such as: ‘self-categorization’ which is the extent that an individual labels themselves as a particular social group; ‘evaluation’ which is the positive or negative attitude towards the social category or identity; ‘importance’ which is the degree of importance of group membership to the individual’s overall self-concept; ‘social embeddedness’ which is the degree to which a particular collective identity is embedded in the person’s every day ongoing social relationships; and ‘behavioural involvement’ which is the degree to which the person engages in direct actions relating to the identity in question.

1.4. Social capital

Social capital refers to the “the norms and networks that create the necessary trust for people to cooperate to solve collective action problem” (Garrido, 2014: 413). Colclough and Sitaraman (2005) and Gibbs et al. (2015) also note that the relations imbedded in these social networks and an individual’s position with them, provide people with a greater amount of resources and power than they would normally hold (‘linking’ social capital), through access to resources such as information, knowledge, people, money and power (‘bridging’ social capital) and psychological support which builds trust and reciprocity (‘bonding’ social capital). From the perspective of collective action and community protest, social capital is nurtured over time through close physical interactions between activists and provides direct access to community resources that can be converted or used to facilitate and maintain protest (Zhou, 1997; Bankston and Zhou, 2002). A protest group opposing a construction project will often leverage its social capital by drawing specialist expertise from within the group to fight a developer. It may also tap into other social networks which individual members may be part of, to access information, resources and expertise (Hwang and Stewart, 2016). For example, if a lawyer is involved in a protest group then they can access their legal networks to provide insights and information and advice which the protest group would otherwise not have access to. Furthermore, a protest group may have members who are also involved in other protests enabling them to pool their resources to fight a range of issues on a number of fronts which are similar in nature and mutually interdependent. Gould (2002) and Hwang and Stewart (2016) also show that a protest might also tap into wider community networks not directly involved in the protest which may not participate directly in protest, but are essential in providing access to resources and support necessary to sustain protests against construction projects. For example, Kirkby-Geddes et al. (2013) have highlighted the importance of community spirit and localised networks in the maintenance of community protest by providing donations, food and site materials to protestors.

2. Method

To investigate how social capital and collective identity shape community activism against construction projects, an ethnographic investigation was undertaken into a community protest against a highly controversial housing project in Australia. The ethnographic approach was adopted to allow a true, meaningful and in-depth account of protest continuity, with the researcher immersing herself in the protest movement over a period of time so as better understand the complex and multifaceted nature of protest. The intense nature of the ethnographic approach meant a single case study approach was chosen because of the large-scale, scope and duration of the community action undertaken. Also, single case studies allow an intensity of focus which is not afforded by multiple case study research, allowing complex social phenomenon such as community protest to be deeply investigated in its specific cultural and social context and natural setting (Yin, 2014). While Flyvbjerg (2006) acknowledges that single case study research has often been criticised on the grounds that its findings are not generalisable, he also argues that universal truths are problematic in the study of human affairs and that
elicited questions on protest network characteristics, patterns of communication and activists’ personal stories and experiences of the protest. The population of activists was sampled for the interviews using cluster sampling through attendance at protest events where people invited to volunteer to be interviewed. Snowball sampling was also utilized with interviewees asked to recommend other potential interviewees of interest. To ensure a balanced sample of activists at various levels of involvement, random sampling was also used by selecting interviewees from a list of protest participants who were not necessarily able to attend protest events. A total of twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the effects of social capital on sustaining movement continuity through the development of a collective protest identity (see sample structure in Table 1).

The result of these multiple sources of data from a range of stakeholder perspectives was a series of in-depth stories which could be cross-referenced to produce a validated, balanced and reliable account of the issues that shaped movement continuity that transcended the accounts of individual protestors. Detailed field notes of observations during protest events, picket duty and group and public meetings were also created to provide insights into group dynamics, behavioural norms and patterns of communication and leadership. Internally circulated information on the protest movement e.g. newspaper articles, internal newsletters and protest group documentation and media releases were also analysed to provide further insights into the protest group dynamics.

The data was analysed in three ways: using social network analysis, content and narrative analysis. (1) The content was manually coded to identify key themes related to collective identity and social capital using Ashmore et al.’s (2004) conceptual framework discussed above (self-categorization; evaluation; importance; social embeddedness; behavioural

<table>
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<th>Demographic information</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
<th>% of response</th>
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<td></td>
<td>45 to 64 years old</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Over 10 years</td>
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involvement) and Coleclough and Sitaraman’s (2005) model of social capital discussed above (linking social capital; ‘bridging’ social capital and ‘bonding’ social capital). (2) The interviews yielded data on protest network characteristics and patterns of communication. These were analysed using social network analysis which was undertaken using software called UCINET (Borgatti et al., 1999) to produce sociograms depicting the relational structure of the protest group respondents. And (3) Reissman’s (2008) approach to narrative analysis was used based on four different analytic approaches: thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, and visual analysis. The thematic analysis involved categorizing aspects of the respondent accounts guided by the research cited above which has identified a range of cost and benefits associated with volunteering for each stakeholder. In this part of our analysis we left the respondents’ stories of protest intact, retaining the richness of their content and insight and connecting and cross-referencing themes in their stories to create a collective narrative of the protest over time. These are described in our findings below. In effect, these costs and benefits became our initial coding strategy for our structural analysis which used content analysis to explore the ways in which these narratives were structured in terms of the strength and nature of various themes within the text as described in our findings below. The dialogic/performance analysis focusses on “performed” accounts and visual analysis focusses on the analysis of all visual accounts and physical artefacts which emerged around the protest such as the community picket and Aboriginal tent embassy which are described in our findings below. Theoretically, as discussed above, all of these elements are critically important in understanding how the concepts of collective identity and social capital work to form and sustain collective action and protest against construction projects.

Although there is some dispute among researchers who conduct narrative analysis about whether the results of narrative analysis should also be presented as a narrative (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000), it was decided to summarise the narrative of the discussions in selected quotes rather than reduce the data to quantitative counts of variables. There are two reasons for this. First, given the lack of theory and prior research in this area, we did not seek to test the relationship between any independent and dependent variables in this research. We simply wanted the respondents to tell us about their experiences of working as community protest activists and volunteers. Second, we wanted the results to retain the full richness of insight contained in the narratives we collected. Meisel and Karlawish (2011) argue that the power of narrative is in translating respondent accounts into data that people can comprehend. Clearly, it is not possible to recount everything participants said, instead we present the main themes emerging from the data and selected quotes to illustrate these themes.

3. Results

Using the two guiding theoretical frameworks around collective action discussed above, the results below are presented under two headings: collective identity; and social capital.

3.1. Collective identity

The social network in Fig. 1 depicts a tightly coupled network of activists connected to each other through a variety of different paths. The outside of the network is relatively loosely coupled while the centre of the network is more tightly connected into a core group of protesters which orchestrated the entire protest movement. There was no clear leadership of this highly anarchic group and the core group shared and swapped leadership roles over time as activists became burnt out or peripheral to a particular challenge or need. It is this central group which acts as the psychological and physical glue which ties the network together, ensuring that no two activists are further than two connections apart, even if they might live in highly geographically dispersed areas.

The results showed that activists’ participation and socialisation within the protest campaign over time facilitated a strong sense of collective identity (akin to being a member of a family) as a result of serving as a ‘picketer’ on the 24 hour community picket or from collective acceptance as a protest group member (often facilitated through initiation processes, ceremonies and background checking by other group members). Generally however, the symbolic act of serving on the community picket (which often involved sleeping overnight) and participating in (not just attending) protest activities and events, was the main way in which people forged a sense of collective identity with the protest movement:

“... it was a great place for discussing and talking and disseminating knowledge and informing people and having meetings etc. etc., as it was very sociable and it was very different from just a formal meeting place... you can socialise there, you have barbeques, it was very very different as a meeting place and a focus... where there is more of a family atmosphere and a bit more sociable than the normal...”

(Activist C)

“... it (the picket) is fundamental to..., I think what is critical in term of keeping people motivated to remain involved is having some sort of interaction with other people and emails are not enough, you got to have a few spots where people actually come together for it to continue... there needs to be a physical spot where people actually get together to congregate, to talk, to discuss, to meet, and so it (picket) has been very important... because it does provide that link, that focal point that speaks, and it is visual to the community. I mean that’s one of the reasons why you have a picket...”

(Activist M)

This demonstration of collective identity was evident at protest events where activists (particularly those in the core group) were overheard referring to each other as members of a ‘family’, a term also used by an activist to refer to the protest group in an editorial published in the local paper:

“... it is kind of just like a big extended family after a while.”

(Activist I)
"...it is like a family, you know, you can't stand some of them but you are still family and you still have the same aim, like a love-hate relationship"

(Activist W)

"I became a familiar member of the family as opposed to a distant cousin".

(Activist D)

Many responses also highlighted at a personal level, the activists’ internalisation of the protest group’s collective identity and pointed to a high level of group cohesion and pride based on mutual respect and the sharing of resources such as knowledge and time to the group’s common ends:

"I became part of the landscape."

(Activist D)

"My primary identification is as a community activist."

(Activist O)

"I am full of admiration for the people who have been involved in this fight. I think they are amazing. It’s just that everybody brought some strength to this action, just about everyone. And everyone has different things to offer."

(Activist I)

To maintain group cohesion and protect group identity, new members were subject to an informal and lengthy initiation process to ensure that they are a good fit with existing group members:

"... it (the protest) needed new people, it always needed new blood, new energy, but with the caveat that you wanted the right people, you wanted people who understood the issues who were there for the right reasons, who were supportive and could do some work and who would help. They were the ones who stayed..."

(Activist C)

"...the initiation process is showing you can be responsible... (so) it is basically a process of gaining respect... it (acceptance) was a gradual process... The fact of acceptance
Once initiated into the protest group, members were expected to contribute to the protest through active and on-going contributions that included picket duty, organising events and assuming temporary and role-specific leadership positions like the picket monster. This expectation was critical in sustaining the protest within the anarchic and leaderless group:

“It goes on because people, individuals will at certain time take on certain responsibilities... (or) undertake to do a certain job, for example someone might do rostering for the picket, somebody might undertake to build something or organise something, people volunteer for things, it's not that difficult to get people to volunteer for things, if you sit down and have a discussion, it's evident that certain things need to happen, it's a natural progression that people will undertake and someone will, it just happens and you don't need anybody dictating that.”

(Activist D)

The implicit importance or saliency also varied among activists with some seeing their collective identity as the predominant and central focus in their lives, while others had a more casual commitment to the protest:

“... it's the feeling everyone get that they are contributing to something that is very worthwhile... like she spends her life doing it and other people spend an hour a week, or some people might only come to a meeting once a year...”

(Activist H)

“...she is really good and she does a lot of work and it is almost as if everything in her life is revolved around getting a good outcome for the project, which is more than most can do because of other commitments that people have...”

(Activist J)

The data also showed that social embeddedness (the extent that activists’ collective identity in protest is embedded in their social relationships), and embraced in a similar capacity by others within their social circle, had shaped their adoption of the collective identity over time. In other words, the stronger the social ties outside the network the stronger the ties are likely to be within it:

“We are friends and that's where the friendship sort of gets in... the six of us often work together, we have an arrangement with catering (for picket events) for instance... we just know how to do it and we are great friends and we work altogether and it just works...”

(Activist H)

“... we do have things in common... he's a surfer and we go surfing, and he is a bush regenerator, so we sometimes work together. And the same for some of the other guys, he for example, his kids are the same age as mine, they are friendly and go out, maybe watch a movie...”

(Activist J)

Another indicator of collective identity was activists’ willingness to partake in protest actions which was widely seen as the ultimate physical manifestation of their internalisation of that identity:

“Most of the action was part of the collective push, in conjunction with all the people that I have mentioned, and many many more, that have opposed the residential development...”

(Activist J)
“More like kind of a group and try to do things collectively. There has been many days of protest and public meetings, I have even been in attendance or helping in some capacity, just the general keeping things going... its with the picket, its all one entity...”

(Activist Q)

As the protest continued, the strong sense of collective identity that emerged over time helped to circumvent the increasingly negative emotional impacts of anger and frustration of protest participation by tapping into social support systems and friendships that have developed over time:

“... sometimes the pressure does get so great that the community starts feeding on itself. And they start attacking each other and I think one of the strengths of this particular campaign is that we have been aware of that from the beginning...”

(Activist S)

“... it’s called each other. That’s the emotional support. When people get together and talk things out, that’s the whole thing of having community. That’s why it is so much easier to be involved in a campaign where you have got other people who are going through the same thing who can be there... An activist campaign very quickly becomes a family and it takes care of its family issues where possible.”

(Activist D)

3.2. Social capital

The data also showed that the existence of social capital within the close-knit local community where “everyone knows each other” (Activist J) was instrumental in the provision of much needed resources, expertise and support in maintaining the protest:

“This is a fairly close-knit community, and many people are friends with each other as well, there is friendship links, and it is a small geographic space, you can’t underestimate... People just know where each other are and what their movements are... part of that was already there among some people, and then the (protest) struggle actually builds that all closer.”

(Activist O)

The location of the protest in a locale that had a rich local history and tradition of activism also seemed to provide an important source of social capital through local knowledge, experience and heritage of protest over a long period of time:

“Some people give technical advice, some people give legal advice, people help according to their skills and knowledge. People have basically volunteered that they are prepared to help on issues, there are some legal people here and they have stood up and said they would help, and what could be done, and there have been quiet conversations following that.”

(Activist W)

“The great thing about the campaign is that it is in a community that has a heritage of generations of being a community that fights and has fought against injustices, going back to the miners. So I think it would be a lot harder to try and set up something like that from scratch especially in a wealthy community with no history of struggle.”

(Activist D)

“There is a very strong community here for a start, there is a lot of networking just within this community, if you talk to people like the surf clubbers, it’s a big focus for the community.”

(Activist H)

The bonding capability of social capital in terms of building trust and reciprocity was also evident in respondent accounts as activists expressed an inherent faith and willingness to count on each other as part of the collective:

“Money is one, there's got to be trust before you put your money in, and people have donated a few dollars here and there, for the picket and the court cases...”

(Activist W)

The bridging capability of social capital which leverages off activist affiliated networks to access resources and opportunities not typically available otherwise, was also evident in the results:

“I have the union connection, so if for instance anything needs to be written to the Minister, that’s where I come in. I use the group as an instrument to get to the Minister because in a way it has more credibility unfortunately than the community front... That’s why I stay in...”

(Activist G)

“... I was bringing in people from other environmental groups up in Sydney who haven’t previously been involved... (also) individual media people such as Daily Telegraph, ... I was in a position with the media where going to the media on an issue when you are a journalist and can say ‘I have worked on your paper, so-and-so was my editor’, when you deal with the media as another journalist as opposed to being another member of the community is an entirely different ball game.”

(Activist D)

Finally, the linking capability of social capital in forming relationships with powerful actors in the regulatory system was also evident in data we collected:

“There were the 2 independent councillors responsible in our northern area... he was the main councillor who would work with the community in trying to get some of our
concerns addressed... he was very good, we would raise all these issues and he would be the one in council who would have to stand up and fight... in council... so that was pretty important.”

(Activist C)

“...the Greens New South Wales was highly supportive as well. And both the upper house members of parliament... asked questions in the (upper parliament) house, came down to demonstrations, regularly attended public actions that kind of thing. The Greens at the parliamentarian, the state and national bodies and local group... At every level, the Greens were involved, but the local group... was the main and most regular people who were active.”

(Activist O)

Despite an awareness of the need to engage people in authority or power, activists’ linking capability in social capital was limited, with a lack of engagement with major political parties or local and state government being a product of deep-seated distrust and conflicting vested interest of both sides.

4. Discussion

The investigation of the dual concepts of collective identity and social capital and their role in shaping protest continuity reveal that both collective identity and social capital play an instrumental role in shaping the long-term protest participation by the local community. Specially, from a collective identity perspective, our narrative analysis provides numerous references to support Fominaya’s (2010) definition of collective identity as an emotional connection to a broader community generated and created between individuals who share a sense of shared consciousness, collective agency and ‘oneness’ or ‘we-ness’. This sense of ‘we-ness’, nurtured through repeated participation in protest actions over time, suggest that project managers have a small window of opportunity early on in the protest to engage the community in meaningful dialogue to understand community concerns and to build trust. Project managers also need to act swiftly and honestly to resolve community conflicts before sustained community protest participation leads to collective identity building and solidifying. Our results provide evidence of a strong collective identity among activists created over years of protest participation, which is articulated in the form of “family” or “picketer”, built on their shared emotive experiences of protest over time. The highly diverse and anarchic nature of the protest group we investigated, made up of people from different interests, backgrounds and motivations, also supports Shriver and Adams’ (2013) acknowledgement that collective identity does not necessarily require a complete alignment of ideologies, beliefs, interests or goals by group. This suggests that there is no stereotypical profile for a protestor, and often times, no consensus on what the protest goal and outcome should be. This poses a challenging problem for project managers to resolve, and a way forward is to consider a targeted communication strategy to address the individual and group concerns towards resolving the conflict. The research also points to a sense of collective identity as being rooted in the protestors’ shared experiences (such as sitting on the community picket and attending protest events together) and their perceptions of shared interests (fighting the developer and government planning system which they perceived to be corrupt). Prins et al. (2013) also point out that collective identity is typically defined by the development of a common language and by the creation of cultural and symbolic artefacts, which in this case study was represented by the community picket and Aboriginal tent embassy which created a meeting point for protestors and a physical symbol of their struggle. It is notable that this picket was eventually burnt down in a controversial arson attack and such was the importance of this physical artifact to the protest identity, that the community protest finished soon after this happened. While this signalled the end of the protest, the implications of the protest from a project management perspective is that while the developer ultimately won the fight, it was achieved at a serious and irreparable damage to the community that could have been minimized if community concerns were considered and incorporated into decision making early in the planning stage.

The results also support Hunt and Benford’s (2004) conceptualisation of a network of active relationships which distinguishes the protest group from other groups, creating barriers to entry to outsiders and a boundary that allows it to be recognized by out-groups as distinct. Initiation rituals, personal background checks and demonstrations of commitment to the cause through personal sacrifice were all examples of barriers to entry which were constructed by the protest group participants, before being allowed to enter the communication network illustrated in Fig. 1 which held the group together. However, our results also extend Hunt and Benford’s (2004) work by showing that a protest group might be made up of multiple and shifting subgroups and communication networks all working together in different variations towards a loosely defined end goal. The implications for a project manager, as an outsider to this group, is to work hard to maintain open and consistent lines of communication with the protest group through key gatekeepers, usually members of the core group, towards a common understanding and identification of possible resolutions to the conflict. Indeed, the role played by the core group of activists who ran the protest group and who were particularly secretive and protective of their social network (largely because they were often targeted by the developer using legal action which could potentially result in significant personal loss) contributed directly to protest continuity. This tightly knit group shared and rotated their leadership as they became burnt out and entry was reserved only for a privileged few who had demonstrated special commitment, made special sacrifices or had especially useful expertise and status in the community. This central group also coordinated other sub groups which shifted and morphed around ongoing challenges which required particular expertise. For example, if there was a legal challenge from the developer then a sub group of legal experts would be formed to respond to that. These results support Ewick and Steinberg’s (2014) assertion that an
important characteristic of collective identity is the way that
group commitment, solidarity and commitment is maintained
and forged through trust, sacrifice, shared leadership, organisation
and collective action.

The results affirm Castells (2004) finding that the emergence
of a collective identity within a protest is context-specific and
based on shared experiences of protest that are internalised by
activists over time. However, it also extends Castells’s (2004)
work by recognising the existence of multiple characterisations
within the collective identity e.g. “family” or “picketer”. This
self-categorization dimension of collective identity theory
identified in our findings also supports Kirkby-Geddes et al.’s
(2013) research which found that collective identity is based on
self-acceptance which is in turn dependent on how activists
perceive themselves as part of the protest group. It is clear that
different people play different roles in protest and that these
roles change over time, as the needs of the protest change. This
suggests that Role Theory may also be a useful lens to study
construction protest in future project management research to
allow project managers to better grasp the complexities of
protest identity and behaviour as they evolve and their role in
shaping protest participation. Role theory is based on the
observation that people behave in predictable ways in different
contexts such as work, sport or family, assuming different roles
based on social position and other factors (Hindin, 2007). The
potential value of Role Theory is that it shows that every social
role is accompanies by a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms
and behaviours that a person has to fulfill in a group which are
normally enforced through negative sanctions if they are not
adhered to. For example, the results of this research show that if
an activist did not adhere to the protest group’s strict but
unwritten code of practice, they would be ejected from the group,
publically castigated in circulated emails or even publically
questioned in and ejected from open community forums.

The evaluation dimension of collective identity theory in our
findings was associated with: activists’ mutual admiration and
respect for other like-minded activists; a sense of pride and
purpose in being a member of the protest group; positive
experiences of protest activity; and socialisation with others.
Each of these dimensions had a positive reinforcing effect on
the adoption and maintenance of the collective protest group
identity, reinforced further by the demonization of the protest
group by certain elements of the community (who saw the
development as positive or just a sign of “progress”), and which
made the activists more likely to rely on each other for support
and reaffirmation. This finding supports Ashmore et al.’s
(2004) research that a positive orientation of both the private
and public evaluation is conducive to activists’ internalisation
of their collective identity. Our research further shows that once
the collective identity is internalised, that it serves as a strong
m motivator to action that helps sustains protest participation over
time. For project managers, the strategy of waiting out the
protest is therefore seriously flawed as the case study findings
have demonstrated that the collective identity has an inbuilt
resilience that can span decades. Our results also indicate that
activists place a high level of explicit, as well as implicit,
importance on their collective identity. The explicit importance
was associated with how protest participation over time had
enabled activists to channel individual protest aspirations and
ideals towards a greater collective good such as saving the
community from over development and exploitation by outside
developers. This supports Prins et al.’s (2013) research which
found that participation in protest can lead to a reinforced sense
of local belonging and civic-ness. On the other hand, the high
implicit importance of the collective identity was associated with
activists’ internalisation of the protest group as an im-
portant and sometimes all-consuming focus in their lives. A
number of core activists did not have jobs and did nothing else
but lobby other activists, politicians, the developer and govern-
ment authorities to highlight the community’s concerns. The
case analysis also found a high level of social embeddedness
associated with activists’ adoption of a collective identity that
overlapped with other social relationships in their lives. For
example, many activist’s relationships were not confined to the
protest but to wider and longer-term friendships or membership
of other protest groups.

From a social capital perspective, our results also show that
the localised nature of the protest (centred around an individual
and clearly defined project with a primarily local impact) was
effective in engaging local networks and accessing community
social capital which was used as a hidden resource to facilitate
movement participation. The close-knit community networks
played a key role in sustaining the protest through the provision
of much needed resources, expertise and support which was a
product of a locale with a rich history and tradition for protest
where there was a strong sense of community, and stable
demographic characteristics. Our findings strongly support
Bankston and Zhou’s (2002) research which showed that social
capital is useful in overcoming deficiencies in other forms
of capital (such as financial capital) which are often reasons
why protests lose momentum and die. However, our research
extends this by highlighting how access to community social
capital is especially instrumental to collective action continuity
where no formal protest network structure exists. The effective
utilization of community social capital to sustain the project has
direct implications for project managers by highlighting how
project managers also need to tap into the same community
social capital used by protest groups to resolve community
concerns at the local level. This is because protests are an
inherently localised phenomenon, and as such when project
managers have a good understanding of, respect and sensitivity
to local culture and history, it can guide how they respond to
community concerns. This will assist in identifying opportuni-
ties to use community social capital, including hidden networks
and resources, to help resolve the conflicts.

The bonding function of social capital, which refers to the
existence of trust and reciprocity in social relationships and
its facilitative effect on helping the movement ‘get by’, was
strong with community help, resources and support readily
provided for protest activities. The bonding capability was also
instrumental in facilitating ongoing access to local expertise
and resources (for example, monetary donations). This finding
supports Kirkby-Geddes et al.’s (2013) research into the im-
portance of bonding social capital as an important resource that
people can count on, especially in times of crisis and when protest group resources become depleted. The bridging function of social capital, which referred to activists’ ability to utilize their overlapping or affiliate networks to ‘get ahead’ or access external resources and opportunities not available otherwise, was also evident in the prevalence of overlapping networks that underpinned the protest network in our study. This allowed activists to leverage their multiple and existing memberships in different but complementary ways, encouraging the participation of outside or affiliate groups as well as contacts and expertise to push the movement forward. This supports Gibbs et al.’s (2015) research of the affirmative role of social capital as leverage to improve access opportunities not otherwise available. Finally, the linking function of social capital, which referred to the extent that activists nurtured relationships with those in power or authority, was found in the case analysis to be limited to their local geographic area or a fringe political party that had narrow political clout. The underutilization of the linking capability of social capital was associated with mistrust of major political parties and local planning governance processes and structures and as such was not actively sought, although the impact on movement continuity was not clear.

5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper was to contribute much needed theoretical insights to the emerging “relationship approach” to project management research. It sought to do this by exploring from a community-based perspective, the role that collective action, collective identity and social capital play in driving community protest action against construction projects. It has shown through an ethnographic single case study research into a highly controversial construction project that while there is a common perception that community consultation has been undertaken and completed during the pre-construction planning phases of projects, it is clear that residual community concerns can spill-over into the construction phase creating the potential for protest and collective action. In managing these protests, we have also shown how existing project management theory and practice is currently lacking and out of step with contemporary community engagement thought. Beyond the theoretical contribution of this research in demonstrating the value of these theories in building project management knowledge in this area, the research indicates that from a practical perspective dealing with communities is a complex and constantly moving challenge for project managers and that current methods of consulting with communities commonly used on construction projects need to be more strategically directed towards leaders in the community for maximum efficiency and success. This can be used in conjunction with traditional untargeted project management strategies such as letterbox drops of leaflets that invite feedback, articles and advertisements in local newspapers, media releases, attendance at community events, dedicated community forums, exhibitions and public meetings, opinion surveys, focus groups and workshops. The results also indicate that once trust is broken with the community and negative perceptions of a project start to circulate, that it is very hard for a project manager to stop. To avoid community action and misperceptions of risk spreading through a community unabated, construction project managers must build, early on, an intimate understanding of community concerns and of the nature, membership and structure of community social networks. This is not easy since they are often deliberately made invisible to untrusted outsiders, are highly dynamic and agile, and often extend deeply into surrounding and even regional communities and other activist or protest groups. It is especially important that trust is developed as early as possible in the development process since once destroyed, trust is very hard to rebuild. Furthermore, any attempts to consult with communities must be meaningful and not seek to manipulate or disport perceptions of development risk and opportunity in the favour of the developer. This would be quickly noticed and undermine trust, forcing the exclusion of the project manager from the community network and any communications which would be critical to building better relations. The importance of early trust building cannot be overstated since this research has shown that if left alone, community action groups can develop an identity and life of their own which is beyond the control of project managers and even the protest group members themselves. This self-organising property means that perceptions of relative risk and opportunity associated with a project and feelings of resentment which lead to protests can quickly spin out of control. Once catalysed, the absence of a defined leader, the anarchic nature of the protest movement and the dynamic nature of protest group membership means that project managers are likely to experience significant challenges in intervening, communicating with a protest group and alleviating its members’ concerns. However, the discovery of different layers of membership and a core group of relatively stable shared leadership 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 opinion 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 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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