

A GROUNDED THEORY OF PROTEST MOVEMENT CONTINUITY

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Using a thematic story telling approach which draws on ethnographic method, a grounded theory of protest movement continuity is presented. The grounded theory draws from theories and activist stories relating to the facilitative role of movement networks, social contagion theory and the cultural experience of activism. It highlights the contagious influence of protest networks in maintaining protest continuity over time and how this leads to common perceptions of development risk and opportunity within communities. It also reveals how communities use collective values and identity, social capital, emotional dynamics and symbolic artifacts to maintain protest continuity.

Keywords: community participation, conflict, contagion, continuity, protest, social networks.

INTRODUCTION

Heightened perceptions of development risk have been brought about by growing community concerns over issues such as climate change and increasingly empowered communities are confronting developers and demanding that their concerns be met (Cleland and Ireland 2007). When managed badly, as they often are, damaging conflicts can arise between communities and developers which not only damages both interests but negatively stigmatises the industry as whole (Foster-Fishman *et al.* 2007). To avoid this happening there is a need to better understand the factors that create and sustain community-based protest over time. There has been very little research in this area within and outside construction. To this end, the aim of this paper is to investigate the social networks and relational ties that underpin movement continuity against construction projects. This is important to communities, developers and the construction industry as a whole. Not only will it enable communities and firms to engage in meaningful partnerships for mutually beneficial development outcomes but it will have positive social outcomes for communities and reputational outcomes for an industry that is being increasingly stigmatised by association with corruption, malpractice and insensitivity to the needs of communities, indigenous populations and minority groups (Murray and Dainty 2009).

THE DRIVERS OF PROTEST MOVEMENT CONTINUITY

Grassroots protest, which is the kind most often experienced in construction projects, focuses on collective action at a local level aimed at the advancement of local interests

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(Gamson 2003). A range of competing theories have the potential to provide useful insights into what influences peoples' willingness to engage in such protests. For example, Le Bon's (1960) crowd behaviour theory first explained the power of crowds in influencing individual behaviour. Critical mass theory suggests that large and resource rich groups are more attractive than small impoverished groups (Monge and Contractor 2001). Resource mobilisation theory argues that engagement depends on the ability of groups to recruit extra resources through initiatives such as incentives etc (Dalton *et al.* 2003). Political opportunity structure theory has shown how political and social trends can influence participation in protest (Klandersman and Staggenborg 2002). Most recently, theories of group dynamics have become a central element of understanding collective action (Gupta 2001). These group dynamics can affect movement continuity at two levels: intragroup and intergroup. At the heart of intragroup dynamics are feelings of identification and interdependence which make a group meaningful to its members strengthening cohesiveness and feelings of belonging, attachment and long-term commitment to its cause and other members (Castells 2004). In contrast, intergroup dynamics arise out of competition or alliances between different protest groups that come together to share resources and exchange information to fight a common cause.

Participation in protest can also come about through the contagion effect of movement networks. According to contagion theory, behaviours and perceptions initiated by one group member will influence others in the same network, the strength of the contagion effect being influenced by the structure and quality of the relationships within the network (Scherer and Choo 2003). For example, social network theory suggests that the social contagion effect is likely to travel along designated pathways based on existing social network structures. It is also likely that social cohesion will affect social contagion through the development of shared understanding of issues (Monge and Contractor 2003).

In addition to protest network structure influencing movement continuity, the shared experience of engaging in collective action will also sustain participation over time (Johnston and Klanderman 1995). There has been a considerable amount of research which has explored how protest groups and social movements foster a sense of collective identity to mobilise and retain activist participation in protest (Bickerstaff *et al.* 2006). This research suggests that collective identity is a precondition to collective action and that it is created and maintained within movement networks and particularly core network members who play an important role in sustaining it over time.

Another important sustainer of collective action is the social capital imbedded within the networks of social relations that represent a protest group (Stone 2001). This can be effectively utilised to overcome deficiencies in other forms of capital such as financial, physical, intellectual and human that often limit the ability of protest groups to influence the actions of large well resourced developers (Stone and Hughes 2002). The importance of social capital in sustaining collective action works at two levels. First, there is the social capital imbedded within the internal core protest group relationships and second, there is the social capital that resides in the community from which protest groups can draw (Crowther and Cooper 2002).

Finally, the important role of emotions in sustaining or destroying collective action is increasingly being recognised. For example, Jasper (2003) showed how protest groups strategically seek to use emotions as a mobilisation tool and to drown-out and turn-

around potentially destructive emotions like depression and despair into externally targeted, empowering and action-orientated emotions like anger and pride to sustain movement continuity during difficult times. One mechanism often used by protest groups to generate sustaining emotions is “framing”, which involves the strategic construction of an opponent’s profile to generate collective hatred, anger and action against them. More positively, movements often adopt rituals, cultural events and other drama representations to create a symbolic focus for efforts, opportunities and places for activists to meet and celebrate success or simply to generate an enjoyable, stimulating and positive experience of fun, identity, belonging and family (Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004).

METHOD

Three propositions emerged from an integration of the theories discussed above.

Proposition 1 – protest movements consist of complex and dynamic networks of social relations

Proposition 2 – networks of social relations are sustained by the contagion effect, which is driven by network structure and social cohesion

Proposition 3 – the contagion effect shapes the cultural experience of activism and promotes movement continuity via the creation and retention of: collective identity, social capital, emotional dynamics and symbolic artifacts.

These were investigated by an in-depth analysis of a single case study of a long-standing protest against a controversial construction project. The case study was a community-based protest against a large scale 61 hectare highly controversial housing project in a sensitive coastal area south of Sydney. The area being developed is recognised as being of great natural beauty, of great ecological importance being one of the last green corridors in the region and of huge cultural and historical heritage importance to local Aboriginal groups. This development has been the subject to long-standing, sometimes bitter and even violent community protest over 15 years which eventually resulted in the establishment of Australia’s longest standing 24 community picket which was established in early 2001 but controversially destroyed by arsonists in 2006. The development also resulted in the erection of an Aboriginal tent embassy to protect the many thousands of aboriginal artifacts dug up on the site which included ancient 6000 year old Aboriginal human remains. This tent embassy is recognised nationally in Aboriginal communities as one of the few places where indigenous and non indigenous people have stood united in their fight for a common cause. Over the protest period, which continues, there have been and continue to be numerous court battles between the community protest group and the developer and numerous public meetings and rallies, hundreds of petitions with thousands of signatures signed. To date the community protest has successfully delayed a large portion of the project for 7 years and permanently halted construction of 13 stages of 20. It has also generated significant community distrust towards the state authorities, local council and developer and created widespread perceptions of incompetence, corruption and lack of concern for the local community.

These unique characteristics made this protest an ideal context in which to study the factors that sustain collective action. It epitomises movement continuity at work and represents one of the longest standing, high profile and organised community protests against a construction project in Australian history. The method of data collection and analysis used in this research are depicted in Figure 1.

In line with a grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis was divided into two phases with an intervening period of analysis, reflection and reconceptualisation. As Figure 1 shows, a combination of methods was used to provide multiple and mutually correcting insights into the propositions being investigated. The multidimensional qualitative data collected from interviews, observation, storytelling and documentary analysis was analysed using a combination of concept mapping software called Leximancer (Leximancer 2005), social network analysis software called UCINET (Borgatti *et al.* 1999) and narrative analysis of the stories told by community members. One cannot possibly describe in a paper of this length the practical and emotional challenges faced in undertaking this community-based research into a highly emotional and protective community group made up of Aboriginal and non-indigenous groups which itself was factionalised and which had an inherent and sometimes justifiable distrust of outsiders. Establishing trusting relationships with community members and gaining access to reliable and quality data was an exceptionally intensive and involving process which required complete emersion in the protest, movement through emotional initiation processes and participation in many protests and cultural events over a two year period. The researcher's journey through this research was a tricky, unpredictable and emotional one which illustrated the immense challenges in community-based research in a highly emotionally charged area but such experiences, as experienced by other group members also, were a necessary part of gaining detailed insights into the movement's culture and to enable people to share their "stories" in an open and trusting environment. The story of doing the research is a story in itself but this paper is restricted to reporting the results of the research.

RESULTS

Proposition one - Protest movements consist of complex and dynamic networks of social relations

The aim of this proposition was to investigate the social networks and relational ties that underpin movement continuity against construction projects. Our findings indicate that collective action in protest networks are maintained by a high degree of interconnectivity and relational multiplexity between participating individuals and external groups. However, we also found that overlapping group membership had a beneficial effect on protest continuity through access to back-up resources, knowledge and support which can address different protest issues. Although we did find that activists from different groups were cautious about demarcation issues, ambiguities were overcome by people emphasising their own identity over that of previous groups in times of ambiguity. These contradictions need to be further explored and are perhaps due to the different complexities in the range of issues faced by the protests studied in these research projects and the leadership structures in place.

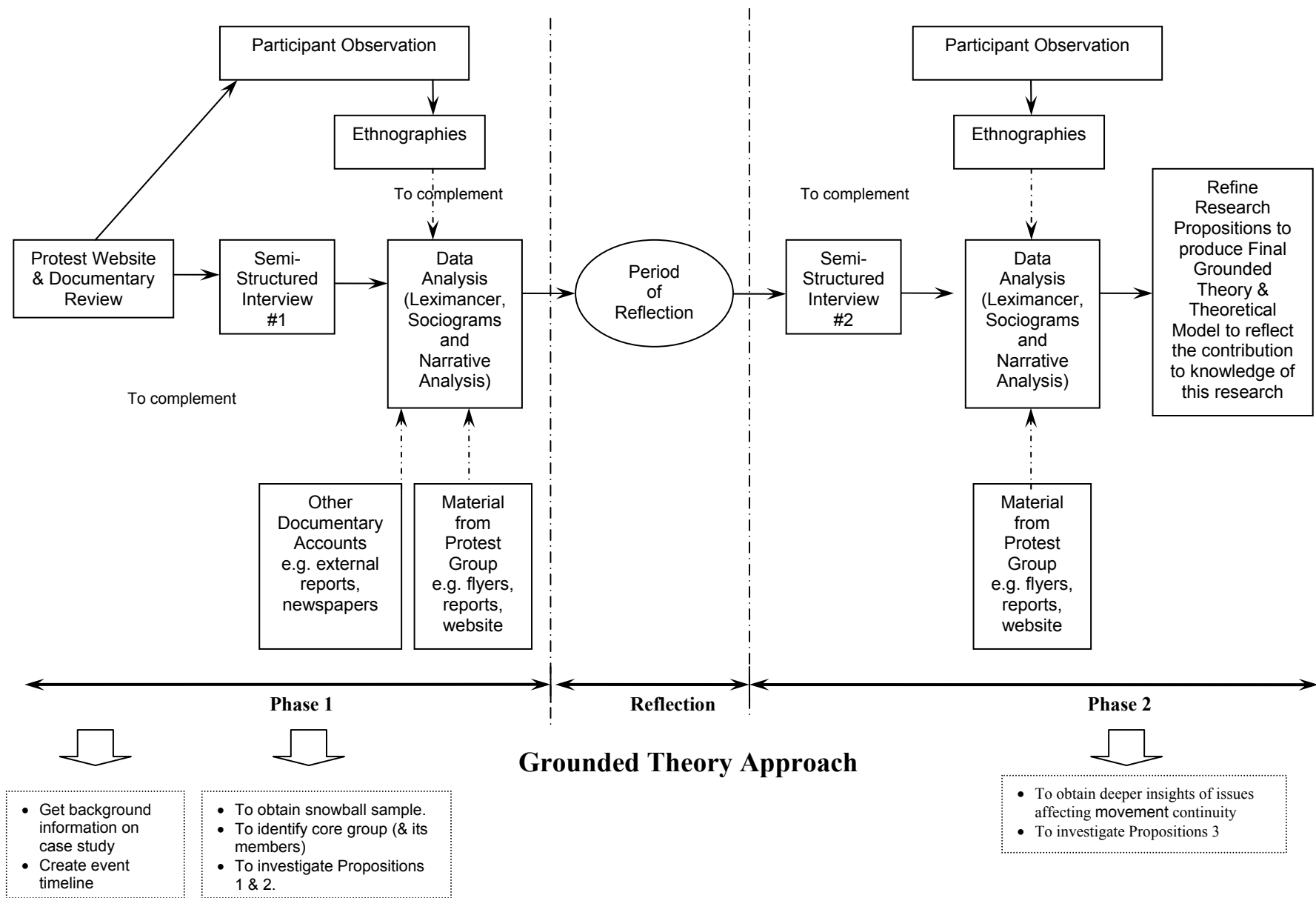


Figure 1 Conceptual representation of research method

Another important finding was the importance of hidden networks in sustaining movement continuity. By obscuring the identity of participating individuals, relationships and groups within the movement, the protest became extremely difficult to communicate with for the developer. Not only did this cause confusion and frustration for the developer in having to communicate with many different groups but it also made legal action against individuals difficult to pursue. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this was a deliberate strategy but one which emerged as an important protection mechanism over time. Weak and multiple ties between activists, poor internal communications and an anarchic leadership structure all contributed to a sense of ambiguity for the protestors themselves, as well as for outsiders who had to interact with them.

This brings us to the issue of activist turnover where we found that participation varies over time in response to movement needs in response to the evolving protest environment, activists experiencing exhaustion and feelings of hopelessness, internal conflict, activists managing their protest-life balance and changes in demographics in the local community. We also found that while it was necessary for network membership to change in response to issues in the protest environment that the loss of knowledge and expertise and commitment from core activists was hard for a movement group to replace.

Finally, the symbolic importance of physical artifacts like the picket and Aboriginal tent embassy should not be underestimated. This played a crucial role in communicating the continued existence of the protest to the wider community, and as a critical recruitment mechanism and meeting point for active and less active protestors.

Proposition 2 - Networks of social relations are sustained by the contagion effect, which is driven by network structure and social cohesion

The aim of this proposition was to investigate the role of social contagion in sustaining movement continuity against construction and engineering projects and in particular, the role of network structure and social cohesion in this process. Our findings indicate that a lack of formal structure has an important role to play in sustaining community action over time. This enabled rapid mobilisation of resources in response to unexpected situations and a culture of collective responsibility and contribution which would have been difficult to achieve in a hierarchical structure. Finally, it ensured that ideas and perceptions of risk spread rapidly and uncontrollably through the protest network and that out-groups such as the developer are left frustrated by the lack of identifiable leadership to communicate with. Our findings indicate that the contagion effect is primarily driven through the informal networks that are brought to a protest by activists, reinforcing the importance of social networks in sustaining movement continuity over time.

While we could identify a core group of activists driving the protest, we could not identify any specific leadership position. This was a deliberate strategy to avoid legal action etc and instead we found a rotating leadership structure where activists would informally adopt leadership roles as their skills and ideas became relevant to emerging issues. This temporal issue-specific leadership structure was important in avoiding burnout and in maintaining momentum and movement continuity over time, particularly during periods of disillusionment. Finally, we found that movement continuity and social contagion was also strongly dependent on concerted and deliberate efforts of activists to build social cohesion within the network through

shared protest actions, social events and experiences of success and failure over time. In particular we found that cohesion was affected by ability of activists to interact frequency via meetings places such as the picket of communications. The picket was also an important symbolic artefact which provided a sense of collective identity to the activists as were initiation processes which activists would go through to gain acceptance into the protest. Finally, we found that the democratic values which underpinned goal setting and decision-making frameworks had both a positive and negative effect social contagion and protest continuity. While this resulted in the lack of prescribed group goals and strategies which would have enhanced collective identity, on the other hand, it helped to diffuse potentially damaging internal conflicts by enabling a healthy expression of alternative views and opinions. It also enabled enabling ideas to be spread widely and evenly throughout the group, resulting in the emergence of shared values, opinions and perceptions of out-groups and emerging issues and challenges. These findings expose the inherent tensions which face protest groups between maintaining social cohesion and acting decisively and collectively in response to constantly evolving issues.

Proposition 3 - The contagion effect shapes the cultural experience of activism and promotes movement continuity via the creation and retention of: Collective identity, social capital, emotional dynamics and symbolic artifacts.

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The aim of this proposition was to investigate the social networks and relational ties that underpin movement continuity against construction projects and how cultural experiences of activism promote movement continuity. Our research indicates that this occurs primarily through the development of a collective identity, the growth of social capital, the use of symbolic artifacts and the effective management of emotional dynamics associated with protest.

In terms of collective identity, we found that movement continuity was determined by whether the evaluation of the collective identity was positive or negative.

Furthermore, the strength of collective identity was also found to be related to the implicit importance of the protest objectives eg. Saving Aboriginal cultural heritage and one of the last remnants of coastal flood plain. This acted to sustain involvement by promoting a sense of loyalty, obligation and of belonging to something worthwhile which could have much wider benefits to the community. Finally, we found that the strength of collective identity was shaped by the level of social imbeddedness and behavioural involvement in the campaign. Social imbeddedness is reflected by the multiplicity of ties between activists (friendship, social, work, protest, leisure etc) and behavioural involvement is related to the level of personal participation in protest activities and events such as picket duty, writing letters, attending rallies etc.

Another factor found to strongly drive movement continuity was the social capital built up by the protest in the community and through links with other activists groups and respected organisations such as political parties and unions in the region which acted as a hidden source of intellectual, financial, physical and human capital to sustain collective action over time. Related to the importance of social capital in sustaining action over time, our findings also emphasised the importance of symbolic artifacts such as the picket as communal spaces and meeting points which connect

normally disconnected parts of the local community and also act as a physical, visual and aesthetic reminder and evidence of the protest's continued existence.

Finally, we discovered a rich array of emotions experienced by activists over time and that anger, frustration and a sense of injustice were the primal emotions which underpinned continuity. Potentially destructive, these emotions were effectively channelled against the developer, legitimised by the protest group and consciously used to build trusting, cooperative and cohesive internal relationships which sustained activist commitment to the protest.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that protest networks are deliberately complex and dynamic as a self-preservation strategy. They are dynamic to counter the cyclical nature of protest which requires transient membership and fluid participation and they are complex to grant anonymity to activists and ambiguity to out-groups which may threaten movement continuity. Movement continuity is also driven by high degrees of interconnectivity and relational multiplicity which are built, reinforced and expanded through the act of protest participation. Relational and social imbeddedness and overlapping group memberships facilitates a transferability of protest issues and interests across different network domains, thus maintaining the saliency of the protest over time. Social participation in particular helps to sustain the quality of social relationships and levels of loyalty and commitment between activists and helps to maintain participation over time.

While the anarchic and unstructured nature of protest did not inhibit the contagious effect of protest networks, it did ensure a lack of designated pathway through which perceptions spread and a reliance on informal networks for this to occur. In the absence of formalised leadership and roles, transient role specific leadership positions must be voluntarily taken in response to challenges and issues as they emerge, helping to overcome inertia and burnout, thereby sustaining protest continuity. A core group of activists are also important drivers of contagion since they functioned as central and relatively consistent links overcoming many of the potential problems of an anarchic structure. We also found that although social cohesion is important to movement continuity, it is difficult to maintain over time and it can reduce continuity by obstructing decision-making processes.

Finally, we found that the cultural experience of activism and its relationship to movement continuity is mediated by the quality of social relationships amongst activists within a protest network and the extent to which it promotes: the positive internalisation of collective identity; the strategic use of social capital; an awareness of balancing emotional dynamics and; the temporal significance of symbolic artefacts. Where the quality of social relationships is high and positively oriented, they create conditions that are conducive to a positive cultural experience of activism which acts to sustain movement continuity over time.

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