Social Innovation and Nonprofit Resource Provision: A Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research adopts a resource dependency approach to support the process of social innovation application within the context of nonprofit resource procurement using a comparative sample of resource-providing organizations ($n = 8$) and nonprofit resource recipients ($n = 10$). An organizational discourse analysis was adopted to explore concepts of power and legitimacy across groups revealing several ways that social innovation is employed and challenged by both resource recipients and providers. Further, a text coverage analysis revealed several discrepancies with the use of terminology between sub-samples. Together, these novel analytical approaches provide a narrative regarding the ways in which social innovation is co-conceptualized within nonprofit resource provision, including examining the role of language and power between stakeholder groups.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche adopte une approche axée sur la dépendance envers les ressources pour examiner l'application de l'innovation sociale dans l'approvisionnement en ressources à but non lucratif. Pour réaliser cet objectif, la recherche recourt à un échantillon comparatif d'organisations fournissant des ressources d'une part ($n = 8$) et de bénéficiaires de ressources à but non lucratif de l'autre ($n = 10$). Par surcroît, une analyse du discours organisationnel a été adoptée pour explorer les concepts de pouvoir et de légitimité au sein de ces groupes, démontrant plusieurs façons dont l'innovation sociale est utilisée et contestée autant par les fournisseurs de ressources que par les bénéficiaires. De plus, une analyse textuelle a révélé plusieurs divergences de terminologie entre les sous-échantillons. Ensemble, ces diverses approches analytiques permettent, par l'examen du rôle du langage et du pouvoir entre groupes de parties prenantes, d'élaborer une narration sur la manière dont l'innovation sociale est co-conceptualisée dans la fourniture de ressources à but non lucratif.

Keywords: social innovation, nonprofit organizations, foundations, resource provision / innovation sociale, organismes sans but lucratif, fondations, fourniture de ressources

INTRODUCTION

Driving the development of new social service programs in the nonprofit sector is an emphasis on social innovation (Shier & Handy, 2019; Bruneel, Clarysse, Staessens, & Weemaes, 2020); however, despite the value of socially innovative efforts in leading a new era of human service delivery, little is known about how human-service organizations and their resource providing partners may contribute to the mutual understanding and implementation of this concept. More research on the implementation of social innovation is needed for organizations to effectively identify opportunities to engage in related activities (do Adro & Fernandes, 2019).

Recently, the term "innovation" has received broad attention by funding bodies (Jaskyte, Amato, & Sperber, 2018) and has been commonly incorporated as evaluation criteria for the distribution of human service resources (Toepler, 2018). Use of the term "social innovation" within this context remains poorly understood, yet it defines which organizations receive vital support as potential recipients attempt to conceptualize social innovation through a method of synthesis (understanding how the term is commonly defined) and re-processing (re-conceptualizing the term within the specific organizational context) (Jansson, Benoit, Casey, Phillips, & Burns, 2010). How dynamics between funders and organizations contribute to the development of social innovation at an organizational level is unknown and occupies an understudied yet vital branch of nonprofit research. The following study addresses this gap by employing an organizational discourse analysis design and collecting qualitative data to address the research question: *How do interactions with funders contribute to the conceptualization of social innovation within nonprofit human service organizations?*

To answer this question, authors conducted semi-structured interviews with nonprofit resource providers (foundations) and resource recipients. Foundations were selected as key actors in the distribution of grant monies in Canada and include both private and public sub-types, both of which are established as a corporation or trust and engage exclusively in charitable activities. Private foundations may engage in their own charitable activities and/or fund other registered charities, while public foundations typically give more than 50 percent of their funding to other registered charities. Board composition also differentiates foundations in Canada; whereas private foundation board members are usually not at arms length and often include major donors, public foundation boards include arms-length members (Lefèvre & Fontan, 2017).

Both sub-samples provided rich data regarding the conceptualization of social innovation within the context of resource distribution. An organizational discourse analysis (which is a type of critical discourse analysis) identified main themes contributing to the meaning-making of social innovation, including ways in which providers and recipients of resources agree and differ on specific terms and ideas. A textual analysis provided another layer of analysis by focusing on terminology use within the dataset.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social innovation

Social innovation has been broadly defined to encapsulate activities that are new and focus on creating social good through addressing unmet needs and expanding the number of options available to a specific social group (Shier & Handy, 2015a; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017). Two general

areas of focus have emerged in conceptualizing social innovation: social innovation as a *process* and social innovation as an *outcome* (Nicholls & Ziegler, 2017). Examples of social innovation as a process include Dawson and Daniel's (2010) conceptualization as a "process of collective idea generation, selection and implementation by people who participate collaboratively to meet social challenges" (p. 16). Conversely, Pol and Ville (2009) focus on the outcomes of social innovation, viewing it as "any new idea with the potential to improve either the macro-quality of life or the quantity of life" (p. 882) for a group of people.

Importantly, most definitions of social innovation incorporate an element of "change in social relationships, systems, or structures" (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016, p. 1932), highlighting the *social* in social innovation. Social innovation has also been organized into factors and characteristics describing associated activities within human-service organizations. Based on interviews with executive directors of nonprofits in the province of Alberta, Canada, Shier and Handy (2015a) identify three types of social innovations: socially transformative social innovations, product-based social innovations, and process-based social innovations. Socially transformative social innovations primarily generate public awareness on an issue or influence policy directions, whereas product-based social innovations are focused on creating new programs or new organizations, or adapting existing programming to meet emerging social needs, and process-based social innovations adapt organizational processes, practices, and structures to support social change (Shier & Handy, 2015a, 2016b). Nicholls and Ziegler (2017) also identify three categories of social innovation along a spectrum, which are incremental innovations, institutional innovations, and radical innovations. Incremental innovations seek to promote more efficient use of goods and services, whereas institutional innovations may adapt existing structures, and radical innovations create new products and services, or generate new groups or movements to change social relations for the benefit of marginalized communities (Nicholls & Ziegler, 2017).

Resource dependency theory in human service nonprofits

Resource dependency theory focuses on the importance of resources to the organization and the extent to which required resources are controlled by other organizations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Thompson, 1967). "Resources" are defined as anything an organization may need to mobilize effort and pursue its goals (McCarthy & Zald, 1973). Types of resources may include *moral* (support, validation, and external endorsement), *informational* (knowledge relevant to conducting services), *material* (money and other items needed to carry out services), and *human* (labour or leadership) resources (Cress & Snow, 1996). These resources are handled and exchanged in a variety of ways within an organizational environment, and organizations measure the importance of a given resource by assessing how much it can be accounted for in the outcome/service it produces (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Resource dependency asserts that resources are fundamental aspects of organizational survival (Cress & Snow, 1996), and that predictable, consistent inflows of resources are key in the quest for program sustainability (Benson, 1975; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). However, problems can occur when the environment is not dependable, leading to unforeseen changes in resource availability (Nienhuser, 2008). Financial resources are crucial components supporting the adoption and sustainability of social innovations in nonprofits (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Stefani et al., 2020), with a lack of funds often contributing to a delay in adopting related programs (Akuffo &

Soop, 2020; Martins et al., 2020). Nonprofit direct-service organizations are generally understood as "resource receiving" and rely on consistent inflows of financial and other resources to sustain programming and to engage in social impact (Clayton et al., 2016).

Through the lens of resource dependency theory, the role of social innovation is both a contingency for resource procurement, and a vehicle for organizational legitimacy. Organizational legitimacy is closely tied to power as an important determinizing factor of resource distribution. Power itself can be distributed through influence, politics, and socialization (Burns, 1978) within an organizational environment in the form of control over resources and, by extension, other organizations (Benson, 1975; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Relatedly, organizations with power can attempt to change their environments by exerting control over other organizations who may depend on particular resources, forcing them to conform to specific structures, such as social innovation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Benson, 1975; Nienhuser, 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Nonprofits achieve legitimacy by aligning their goals and operations with the environment, which is determined by social norms and values (Maurer, 1971). When an environment shifts, organizations change accordingly to remain legitimate and generate and/or sustain social support (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Recently, social innovation has become a primary requirement for resource distribution in the nonprofit environment, as dictated by those who hold resources and power (Bruneel et al., 2020). Though several options for funding social innovations exist, procurement of grants provided by foundations is a primary source for many human service nonprofits (Cecere et al., 2018; Dinnie & Holstead, 2018). These actors can be described as "resource-providing" organizations. In Canada, foundations can be registered as either private, public, or charitable, and all share a commitment to redistributing resources to social causes, be it within their own programming, or that of other nonprofit organizations. Foundations often provide the parameters by which nonprofits achieve and maintain legitimacy through conforming to or co-developing conceptualizations of social innovation.

Political dimensions

Research has also focused on the political dimensions of social innovation, highlighting how related terminology communicates a set of underlying values that are latent in the operationalization of the concept. Studies have focused on the inherent tension between the use of social innovation as both an extension of neoliberal capitalist discourse and as a possible emancipatory pathway for human-service organizations to escape oppressive resourcing frameworks (Lachapelle, 2021; Montgomery, 2016). In the latter, social innovation is framed as a catalyst for social change that follows other widespread social movements that challenge dominant structures (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019). For example, in a case study by Tello-Rozas (2016), innovative social organizing between a group of local residents and organizations in La Victoria, Peru, successfully responded to and alleviated a waste management issue perpetrated by varying levels of government. In contrast, Lachapelle (2021) proposes social innovation is applied as a performative concept in human-service organizations, where use of the term is meant to signal specific value-laden orientations, such as responding to grand challenges or contributing to organizational efficiency. Though each paradigm has been nested within the concept of social innovation, it has been argued that further research focusing on contextualized applications of this term will provide clarity regarding its real-world manifestations (Montgomery, 2016).

Foundations play a key role in accelerating innovations by filling gaps in government services (Mosley & Galaskiewicz, 2015; Finchum-Mason, Husted, & Suárez, 2020;), but have been found to be more apt to support programs that provide incremental improvements to social problems rather than funding social innovations that disrupt existing structures and challenge systemic issues (Giloth, 2017; Leslie, Khayatzadeh-Mahani, Birdsell, Forest, Henderson, Gray et al., 2020). One possible explanation for this trend may be how foundations define innovation (or more precisely, how funders' definition of social innovation differs from more widely held conceptions adopted by direct-service nonprofits). Supporting this notion, Jaskyte, Amato, and Sperber (2018) found that foundations in the United States often failed to provide a clear definition for innovation, and could benefit by meeting as a group to reach a mutually agreed interpretation of the term, including its breadth and scope for enacting social change. The funding of incremental innovations also contrasts with the perceived role of foundations as change agents and risk takers (Toepler, 2018). There is an observed need for foundations to shift their funding priorities to achieve their mandates of supporting innovation and promoting new initiatives (Aggarwala & Frasch, 2017; Clifford, 2017). The openness and willingness to invest in new ideas and innovation often require funders to place their trust in community partners (Svensson & Hambrick, 2019), and research has found that funders willing to work directly with grantees to better understand impacted communities and recognize the most important needs are more successful in supporting social impact (Bettis & Pepin, 2019).

The following study seeks to clarify and bolster the funding of social innovations by examining ways in which foundations and resource recipients perceive and define associated concepts. This includes identifying discrepancies in how social innovation is applied, while seeking opportunities to enhance mutual understanding of the concept within the context of resource allocation.

METHODS

Procedure

This study follows a pragmatic qualitative design utilizing organizational discourse analysis, which is a sub-branch of critical discourse analysis (Leitch & Palmer, 2010). Two main samples were developed for a comparative analysis: management staff in nonprofit human-service organizations that work directly with funding and resource acquisition (i.e., resource recipients) and staff of foundations that provide resources to nonprofits (i.e., resource providers). Data were collected from both groups utilizing semi-structured interviews that concentrated on processes of discourse and meaning making surrounding the term "social innovation," focusing on how dynamics between organizations that provide and exchange resources contribute to this process. This follows a resource dependency perspective, where key guidelines (i.e., social innovation) provided by resource providers contribute to actions adopted by resource recipients as they conform to these guidelines and seek legitimacy. A thematic analysis of qualitative data identified general and specific aspects of how organizations interpret and conceptualize social innovation through ongoing processes of engagement between resource providers and recipients. Prior to data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Toronto Human Research Ethics Board.

Sample and recruitment

There are two main respondent groups in this study, including managerial staff of direct-service nonprofits who are responsible for attracting funding and related resources (such as fundraising coordinators, project managers, executive directors, and funding account managers), and respondents representing foundations (public and private) that provide funding and resources to nonprofit human services. Respondents occupying these positions have unique insight of the relationships developed between resource providing and resource-recipient organizations. A main tenet of their work is focused on engaging in discursive correspondence, either written, verbally, or both, with the expressed purpose of resource distribution. As such, respondents can reflect on the exchange of language, power, and coded meaning, which is laden in the relationship between resource provider and resource recipient in nonprofit human services. Respondents also occupy positions that allow them to uniquely reflect on organizational dynamics impacting resource distribution or procurement, and therefore justify the organization as a unit of analysis. Capturing this dynamic from both angles, including those making decisions regarding resource provision as well as those vying for said resources, supports an analysis of discursive dynamics.

Respondents were recruited from a purposive sample generated from the United Way list of affiliated nonprofit organizations in Canada, which provides one of the most comprehensive national databases of registered human service organizations. This ensured that authors were sampling from a diverse set of stakeholders. Authors reviewed this list for organizations that were providing services directly to a community, and reviewed website content to select nonprofits that described their programs as "innovative," or used related terms (such as "socially entrepreneurial" or "transformational"). Then, contact information for an executive staff working directly with resource procurement were gleaned. For resource-providing organizations, authors sought foundations that utilized similar language on organizational websites and supported local human service nonprofits. Emails stating the purpose of the study and a brief introduction of the authors, as well as the ethics protocol, were sent to prospective respondents, and a follow-up email was distributed two weeks after initial contact. The final sample consisted of resource providers ($n = 8$) and resource recipients ($n = 12$).

Data collection

After agreeing to be interviewed and providing informed consent, respondents participated in open ended one-to-one interviews conducted over phone or video call by the primary author. Semi-structured interview guides were created for each respondent group. For members of nonprofit human-service organizations receiving resources, a set of specific questions was generated following a review of the literature. Questions began by asking the respondent to explain the nature of their engagement with organizations currently or potentially providing resources, before guiding them to discuss social innovation within this context. The interview guide identified the process of developing proposals specifically, following research on this topic (Haddad, Ayala, Uriona Maldonado, Forcellini, & Lezana, 2016; Hammond, Lê, Novotny, Caligiuri, Pierce, & Wade, 2017). Further, some questions sought a rough definition of social innovation from respondents while identifying characteristics associated with the term that can be embedded in organizational practice. This strategy follows other studies conducting critical discourse analysis in nonprofit settings (Gonsalves & McGannon, 2020; Nairn & Guinibert, 2020). The guide concluded by asking the respondent to com-

pare this definition with the organizational mission, further embedding the term in its organizational context and reflecting similar strategies from Khadka (2014).

A second interview guide was developed for respondents representing foundations that provide resources to nonprofit human services after consulting previous research. Similarly, respondents were asked to describe the nature of their engagement with nonprofits before exploring how social innovation is defined and integrated within this context. Questions were designed to elicit information about the use and application of this term, and how the respondents perceive dynamics of power as influencing this process. This approach is directly borrowed from similar studies (Clayton et al., 2015; Bakko, 2019). The final questions were intended to elicit examples from respondents of demonstrations of social innovation; these data provided rich accounts of the how texts are transformed into practice through discourse—a critical aspect of critical discourse analysis studies (Fairclough, 1995).

Analysis

Guiding the process of data collection and analysis was the implementation of organizational discourse analysis, which follows an adapted version of critical discourse analysis for organizational research, created by Leitch and Palmer (2010) and further honed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010). Generally, critical discourse analysis focuses on social problems and related power dynamics (Mumby & Clair, 1997), with an emphasis on how text (including subjects and knowledge) is produced and reproduced through discourse, then operationalized in practice (Fairclough, 1995). Texts are therefore manifestations of discourse and are provided meaning through processes of power and influence (Fairclough, 1995). A focus on discourse reveals the effects of resource dependency from the perspective of power-holding resource providers and resource-dependent stakeholders. To achieve this analytical procedure, authors completed the thematic analysis as well as a content analysis of text coverage and identified commonly used terminology within the dataset. Analysis was supported by Nvivo12 qualitative data analysis software (2020).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to text files for analysis. Transcribed qualitative interviews were analysed utilizing a thematic qualitative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2009). The generation of themes began first with authors independently identifying "micro-discourse" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) within the data, which involves a selection of detailed language followed by application to a specific context (i.e., the conceptualization of social innovation between resourcing-providing and resource-receiving organizations). These micro-discourses reflected ways in which respondents understood the role of social innovation within their specific job domains, as well as how it was then applied to the practice of resource distribution. Authors searched for "systematic patterns" (Budd, Kelsey, Mueller, & Whittle, 2018) in the conceptualization of social innovation to frame findings, seeking common discourse shared between respondents to qualify a micro-discourse. Findings were treated as unique to each sub-sample for the purpose of highlighting the idiosyncrasies of resource-providing and resource-receiving organizations. Once micro-discourses were identified independently by authors, findings were compared and discrepancies were addressed by revisiting corresponding data and discussing its interpretation, which reflects a "constant comparison" approach (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). This resulted in a final list of micro-discourses, which author 1 (AT) then transformed into themes by refining terminology to reflect concepts that were espoused in the data. Author 2 (MS) then reviewed

these themes to ensure they adequately represented the systematic patterns identified at the beginning of the analytical process. This approach borrows from Gee's (1999) recommendations for discourse analysis, and studies adopting similar methodology (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2022).

FINDINGS
Thematic analysis

Resource recipients
Four emergent themes were identified capturing the application of social innovation within the context of nonprofit resource procurement for direct-service organizations: *newness bias*, *emphasis on growth*, *communicating impact*, and *evidence paradox*. Each theme is further described in the following sections.

A general bias toward new projects was identified by resource-recipient respondents to be of critical importance when considering successful resource procurement for social innovations. Organizations were found to highlight the novelty of services in various ways, including providing data or research about the broader service environment. Respondents commented on the uniqueness of specific interventions, and how it contributed to descriptions of innovativeness to potential funders. One respondent identified the use of environmental scans to illustrate newness within the service environment. Other respondents emphasized continuous improvement within granting proposals as a reflection of fostering new and innovative approaches to service delivery. Conversely, several respondents criticized what was perceived to be an overall bias for newness displayed by resource providers. Respondents feared that a newness bias might ignore community needs by concentrating solely on projects that were deemed novel. For example, one respondent stated, "The program itself is the same as it was six months ago, and they [funders] need it to be … brand new … the newest and best thing, but their definition of 'best' mismatches with community need" (NP-03). Similarly, some respondents cautioned that the focus on novelty by resource providers was often too strong and eliminated the potential for other programs to receive resource supports.

Respondents representing resource-receiving organizations discussed how they characterized social innovations to resource providers by emphasizing programmatic and organizational growth. An *emphasis on growth* included diverse ways in which resource recipients described the development of organizational programming, including the contributions of social innovations to growth across services. For example, two respondents discussed positive resourcing support for piloting innovative programs as a way of facilitating growth: "We actually do have a clear understanding of what our innovation process is … So we're able to tell people 'this is where we are in the cycle and this idea. We're at the rapid and iterative very small pilot stage'" (NP-07). Two other respondents commented on the role of partnership development as a highly effective method of demonstrating organizational growth to resource providers.

Respondents identified several ways in which they *communicated social innovation impact* to resource providers as a strategy for resource procurement. One important focus for respondents was the articulation of localized innovation by demonstrating how a specific project provides a new option for a specific community, despite it possibly being widely integrated elsewhere. This was bolstered by emphasizing strong community connections and relationship building with stakeholders. Two re-

spondents focused specifically on the role of community consultation as a method of generating social innovations, which can then be communicated to resource providers. Related activities supported the measurement of change within a service provider group or community, leading to more formalized monitoring and evaluation frameworks. One respondent captured this theme: "I think that's the kind of thing that funders want to see. They want to see change, they want to see people experiencing opportunities that they didn't have before, helping them to learn skills" (NP-07).

Finally, respondents described an *evidence paradox* characterized by contradictory guidelines provided by resource providers that emphasized innovation and evidence concurrently. These were not perceived to be synonymous by resource recipients, who struggled to articulate the innovativeness of a project while also providing an evidence-base for its effectiveness. For example, one respondent stated, "it's kind of interesting, because there is also a huge desire to make everything evidence-based, so that kind of contradicts being innovative" (NP-01). Many respondents commented on the need for resource providers to support transformative and disruptive social innovations, which reflect widespread change. However, these same providers were also requesting that organizations show proof-of-concept. This was sometimes accomplished by adopting an approach or program that had been successfully implemented within a different geographical context or service user group and showing evidence of impact.

Resource providers
Data from providers of resources to nonprofits were analyzed and generated four main themes: *conceptual clarity*, *project differentiation*, *proof of sustainability*, and *supporting multidisciplinarity*. Themes are described in the following sections.

Respondents representing foundations indicated difficulty in developing *conceptual clarity* regarding social innovation, despite many actively using this terminology to set requirements for resource provision. Many respondents encountered difficulty in identifying a clear definition of the term, and openly discussed its ambiguous use and application within the context of resource provision. The need for a universal definition of social innovation that is understandable and clear was emphasized by many respondents. Several respondents, such as the one quoted above, identified challenges associated with employing social innovation as a metric for distributing resources when the term is not widely understood or defined. This included poor alignment between resource providers and recipients, use of language that may distract from building strong resourcing partnerships, and the arbitrary use of terminology that may have conflicting definitions. Still, respondents struggled to meaningfully describe social innovation; one respondent commented, "I sometimes feel like I recognize it when I see it, but I'm not sure that I would be able to give you my own definition" (RP-06). Such an approach to applying social innovation in practice may not be helpful to organizations seeking to assess whether their own programming efforts fit the parameters (however vague) outlined by those in charge of distributing resources.

Discussion on the importance of *project differentiation* as a fundamental aspect of social innovation was also a common theme provided by resource providers. Respondents described how successful resource recipients were able to clearly demonstrate their comparative uniqueness within the overall service environment. Similar data reveals how project differentiation was often treated as a re-

placement for determining the innovativeness of resource recipients. Resource providers were therefore more likely to fund early-stage projects that incorporated a new idea or adapting an existing program for a new community. However, respondents also engaged in some debate regarding the role of novelty and its necessity to innovation. For example, one respondent stated, "I also get confused myself over whether something can be innovative if a lot of people are doing it, right? Does it kind of counteract the definition of innovation?" (RP-03). Deliberation within the respondent subsample reinforces how language related to social innovation is fluent and often ungrounded, leading to perplexation by resource providers when seeking to formulate definitional parameters.

Respondents also highlighted the need for *proof of sustainability*, where potential resource recipients could determine how social innovations contribute to long-term impact and success at a service-delivery level. Further, it was incumbent that social innovations could be scaled and integrated as core components of an organization. Resource providers summarized related activities as supporting service delivery efficiency. For example, one respondent stated, "[resource recipients] are making everything more efficient, they are saving money, they are giving more work and opportunity to be creative ... to me it is an innovation" (RP-05). Some respondents commented on the adoption of specific implementation methodologies to guide sustainability. For example, one respondent cited design thinking as an important component sought in grant applications. Conversely, other respondents commented on the misalignment between program sustainability and social innovation, noting that once a project achieved sustainability, it may no longer be considered social innovation as it is no longer new.

The final theme, *supporting multidisciplinarity*, reflects ways in which resource providers support social innovations that include collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders of varying backgrounds. This included the blending of different knowledge bases by combining diverse professional skillsets on a single project or program. One respondent commented, "they are asked to describe their project in a whole bunch of terms, you know, risk-taking, does it demonstrate collaboration and partnership? Is it innovative? It is provocative?" (RP-05). This was supported by resource providing organizations that actively fostered multidisciplinary networks across sectors and providers to create opportunities for blending approaches.

Table 1: Data coverage of themes

Group	Theme	Coverage n (%)
Resource Recipients		65 (59.6)
	Newness Bias	23 (35.4)
	Emphasis on Growth	20 (30.1)
	Communicating Impact	12 (18.5)
	Evidence Paradox	10 (15.4)
Resource Providers		44 (40.4)
	Conceptual Clarity	21 (47.7)
	Project Differentiation	9 (20.4)
	Proof of Sustainability	8 (18.9)
	Supporting Multidisciplinarity	6 (13.6)

While seeking partnership-based projects was not new for resource-providing organizations, the integration of social innovation within this scope was a recent and ongoing development. Table 1 provides a summary of data coverage across all themes from each sub-sample.

Text coverage

To assess frequency of terms within data, a text coverage analysis was conducted for both sub-samples, including the number of occurrences for each word (*n*), as well as overall coverage (%), measured by the appearance of the term across multiple respondents. The top fifteen terms (including stemmed words) are summarized in Table 2. There are several discrepancies when comparing data from within and between sub-samples. For example, while "new/newness" had the highest total occurrences within both resource recipients and providers, it was concentrated to fewer respondents, as indicated by a lower relative coverage for each group. While a smaller number of respondents mentioned newness as an important aspect of social innovation, they tended to emphasize this concept strongly by repeating the term more often. Conversely, the terms with the highest coverage also tended to have high overall occurrences. For example, the terms "program(s)/ programming" and "different/differently" had the highest coverage within resource recipients at 52 percent (*n* = 25) and 51 percent (*n* = 21), respectively. Over half of resource recipients mentioned these terms when discussing social innovation, while the terms "different(ly)" (22%) and "project(s)" (21%), were highest among resource providers. While both groups emphasized differentiation as a key component of social innovation, resource providers tended to also discuss project-based work, while resource recipients used the terms "program(s)/programming." Other notable

Table 2: Text coverage

Term	Resource recipients *n* (%)	Resource providers *n* (%)
New/ness	27 (23)	23 (18)
Program/s/ming	25 (52)	8 (15)
Different/ly	21 (51)	9 (22)
Community/ies	20 (49)	2 (5)
Approach	16 (34)	1 (2)
Interesting/ed	12 (32)	5 (14)
Project/s	12 (23)	11 (21)
Evidence/-based/-informed	9 (19)	1 (2)
Process/ed/es	9 (18)	4 (9)
Impact/ed/s	9 (15)	3 (5)
Relationship/s	8 (27)	0 (0)
Research/er	7 (15)	1 (2)
Consultation	6 (19)	1 (2)
Opportunity/ies	6 (19)	1 (2)
Population/s	6 (17)	4 (11)

discrepancies included the term "community(ies)," which was mentioned by almost half (49%) of resource recipients, but only 5 percent of resource providers. In other words, resource recipients included the scope of community at a significantly higher rate compared with resource providers, where the term was virtually absent in their data. Similar findings appeared for the terms "approach," "evidence/evidence-based/evidence-informed," and "relationship(s)," which were all more prevalent within the resource-recipient sub-sample. Overall, distribution of terms across respondents was higher in the resource-recipient sub-sample.

To visually represent term frequency, word clouds were created for resource recipients (Figure 1) and resource providers (Figure 2). Terms that appear larger and closer to the center of the cloud have higher frequencies within the sub-sample, while terms that appear smaller and on the periphery of the word cloud have lower frequencies.

Figure 1: Word cloud for resource recipients

Figure 2: Word cloud for resource providers

DISCUSSION

Social innovation has received considerable empirical attention over the past 10 years (do Adro & Fernandes, 2019; Bayuo, Chaminade, & Göransson, 2020); however, examinations of how the term is operationalized at a practice level, especially within the context of nonprofit resource procurement and dependency, remains sparse. This research adopted an organizational discourse analysis approach to develop a better understanding of the ways in which nonprofit resource recipients and resource providers of foundations apply and define social innovation as a key factor influencing the way in which resources are distributed. A resource dependency perspective was applied to guide the study approach and analysis. In thematic analysis, resource recipients conceptualized social innovation as including a *newness bias* and *emphasis on growth*, while highlighting the role of *communicating impact* and an *evidence paradox*. Resource providers focused on *conceptual clarity*, *project differentiation*, *proof of sustainability*, and *supporting multidisciplinarity*. Similar text coverage between sub-samples was found for *new/newness*, *different(ly), project(s), program(s)/programming*, *interesting/interested*, and *population(s)*, while discrepancies (i.e., higher occurrences within resource recipients) were found for *community(ies)*, *approach*, *evidence/evidence-based/evidence-informed*, *process(ed)(es)*, *impact(ed)(s)*, *relationship(s)*, *research(er)*, *consultation*, and *opportunity(ies)*. Findings have several repercussions for the practical use of social innovation, alignment between foundations and resource recipients, and the resource provision process.

Similarities in findings between resource providers and recipients identified core concepts and values shared across both groups. For example, both sub-samples applied a future-oriented perspective when discussing social innovation. Resource recipients emphasized the role of demonstrating growth within programs as a tactic for procuring resources, while resource providers commented on similar factors related to project sustainability. Related findings align with specific perspectives regarding the utility of social innovation within the context of implementation; namely, leading scholars argue that innovations are not possible until they have been meaningfully incorporated and adequately diffused into organizations (Zucker, 1987; Rogers, 2003). Respondents in this study largely agree that any social innovation must prove longevity before deemed successful, and this was an important part of the resource procurement process.

Another similarity between sub-samples was the contested role of novelty in supporting social innovation. For resource recipients, *newness bias* reflected the perceived tendency for resource providers to favour projects that were contemporary and had not been done before. Similarly, a strong theme for resource providers included *project differentiation*, which was discussed as ways in which direct-service nonprofits articulate socially innovative activities by highlighting originality when compared with similar organizations within the same environment. While resource recipients focused on overall novelty, resource providers adopted a comparative perspective as a method of ascertaining the distinctness of social innovations. A concentration on novelty is also common in research seeking to conceptualize social innovation (Shier & Handy, 2015a, 2015b; Solis-Navarrete, Bucio-Mendoza, & Paneque-Gálvez, 2021), and is often cited as a necessity for this work (Hunt & Ortiz-Hunt, 2017; Portales, 2019). While novelty cannot be disentangled from the core conceptualization of social innovation, respondents from both sub-samples in this study debated the extent to which an activity required exclusivity to be deemed socially innovative. This included questioning what makes something "new," while considering factors such as service user group and geograph-

ical location. This has repercussions on the relationships between resource providers and recipients, as an emphasis on new projects may limit and organization's ability to capture long-term funding. It may be incumbent upon resource receiving organizations to consistently frame their programs as "new" to meet related qualifications. This may distract from ensuring longevity of interventions addressing social inequities by shifting organizational focus to new programs or new adaptations to pre-existing programs, which may or may not be needed.

Despite some agreement regarding factors associated with social innovation, both respondent groups struggled with locating a meaningful definition. This may be unsurprising for resource recipients, given that research has shown how resource providers often fail to adequately define key factors related to funding decisions (Carcedo, Davis, Folkerth, Grubstein, & Kabel, 2020; Piatak & Pettijohn, 2021). However, this finding is particularly problematic for resource providers representing foundations, which are often tasked with providing sets of parameters and requirements for funding. According to resource dependency theory, organizations with resource control often hold power over establishing the parameters for distribution. However, in this study, while resource providers agreed that social innovation was an important aspect of funding decisions (some even used this language as evaluation criteria), they also found it difficult to elaborate on this concept meaningfully. Similar conceptual underdevelopment may lead to arbitrary use of the term (given how subjective its definition may be) and would explain why resource recipients were so challenged by its ambiguity. It is important to note that resource providers normally hold power when defining related concepts, which then dictates the ways in which resource recipients can respond in the form of funding proposals and fit their own programs and organization within the given parameters. Therefore, poor definitional constructs can place undue burden on resource recipients to fill in knowledge gaps. This may lead to a dilemma in identifying the party responsible for establishing a clear and accessible definition of social innovation: is it incumbent that resource providers set firm guidelines, given they adopt similar language, or should resource recipients champion their own interpretation as the organization serving community? Regardless, it was clear from the data that poor conceptual understanding contributed to a loss in meaningfulness and "innovation fatigue" experienced by resource recipients. These findings highlight a serious theory-practice gap as related research (which has adequately defined social innovation) is clearly not being employed within the context of nonprofit resource provision.

Supporting thematic analysis were several divergent findings from text coverage analysis. Overall, variance in term use was higher in resource recipients (even after considering differences in sample size), indicating that more respondents from this group used similar terms compared with resource providers, where terms were more isolated to a smaller number of individuals. This could indicate that language pertaining to social innovation resource provision is highly localized and differentiated among resource providers, whereas resource recipients are in greater agreement about what social innovation is. Other discrepancies pertaining to specific terminology were found when comparing sub-samples. Words such as "community(ies)," "impact(ed)(s)," "consultation," and "relationship(s)" were more common in the resource-recipient group, reflecting an emphasis on localization and human-centredness that was not found in resource-provider data. The absence of related terms in resource provider data is concerning and indicates potential neglect of a community-focused lens.

Integrating community and human factors is critical when considering equity-based outcomes associated with social innovation and must be a substantial component of how foundations select projects to support. Similarly, words such as "approach" and "process(ed)(es)" were also largely missing from resource provider data, despite appearing across many responses from resource recipients. This may reflect a focus on implementation and integration of social innovations adopted by resource recipients that is not equally harnessed by resource providers.

The theme "evidence paradox" offers insight regarding how resource recipients can struggle to achieve legitimacy when funding parameters are unclear. Resource recipients were quick to voice frustrations regarding what was described as incongruent funding guidelines when asked by resource providers and foundations to demonstrate innovativeness and an evidence base concurrently. An emphasis on evidence use was also prevalent for resource recipients in text coverage analysis; however, a similar frequency was not prevalent within resource providers, who neglected to identify this factor in any meaningful way. A comparison of data between respondent groups shows a gap between what is deemed important by resource recipients and resource providers. It could be that resource providers perceive the use of evidence as ancillary to social innovations, while resource recipients interpret this factor as a key aspect of how resources are distributed, thereby being a necessity to achieve organizational legitimacy. Further, providing evidence may be a factor common across all decisions made by foundations (regardless as to whether it involves a social innovation or not), and is therefore not a unique aspect of their interpretations of social innovations, resulting in low prevalence within the data. Conversely, use of evidence may not be as important to resource providers as resource recipients believe. However, this explanation is less likely to be the case as it does not align with previous literature, which tends to highlight the importance of evidence use in funding decisions (Lambert, Carter, Burgess, & Haji Ali Afzali, 2018; Greenhalgh & Montgomery, 2020). Overall, the discrepancy of evidence-related language between groups offers another way in which resource providers use their power as decision-makers. In this case, guidelines for funding were interpreted as paradoxical, where resource recipients pointed to the challenges of proposing a program that was both innovative and evidence based. However, resource providers can continue to offer unclear requirements because they hold power in their authority to distribute vital funding.

Given the relevance to practice-based development of social innovation within the context of nonprofit resource provision between foundations and direct-service organizations, suggestions for both resource providers and recipients may be offered because of this study. Firstly, it is important for resource providers to couple the use of complex terminology with clear, concrete, and understandable definitions that are widely recognized and rooted in practice and research. Findings from this study show how poor conceptual development can cause major barriers to both resource providers and recipients when engaging in the process of funding and granting distribution. To avoid confusion, social innovation must be given well-developed guidelines and boundaries that are co-developed by foundations and community stakeholders, such as potential grant-receiving organizations and their service users. Such guidelines can then be articulated to resource recipients in a way that can be easily followed in granting applications. In this way, foundations can function as "organizational field" builders, where the selection of resource recipients can serve to shape or restructure a particular domain (i.e., social innovation) in a way that most benefits community (Bartley, 2007).

To promote the use of social innovation as an autonomous and practical concept, the term must be used by all groups purposively to avoid employing it as a catch-all phrase to describe supported programs. One way of achieving this may include enhanced co-operation between resource providers and recipients to develop a mutual understanding of social innovation that is both rooted in evidence and reflective of community work. This may include the implementation of specific collaborative bodies, such as community advisory boards or governance tables, that include representation from human-service organizations, community members, and funding institutions. Such interdisciplinary models may transgress the power imbalance between resource providers and recipients by providing opportunities for community voices to be positioned at the centre of the social innovation discussion. This may lead to more equitable funding structures, such as the development of social innovation-focused grants and funds, which can direct resources into specialized activities considered innovative. Related approaches reflect a "trust-based" philanthropy approach, where resource recipients are provided with increased ability to use funding dollars in a way that is most responsive to unique community-based needs (Taddy-Sandino, Ammann Howard, & Nascimento, 2023), and can include streamlining processes, reducing reporting imperatives, incorporating on-going feedback loops, and enhancing implementation supports (Powell, Evans, Bednar, Oladipupo, & Sidibe, 2023).

Likewise, resource-recipient organizations should consider their own autonomy in the process of resource provision for social innovations. It is imperative to incorporate intentionality when seeking resources, such as funding and grants, to support socially innovative programs and projects. For example, resource recipients may be selective by limiting grant-seeking activities to funds that reflect community voices by creating their own definition of social innovation that reflects evidence but also incorporates community needs, and using this definition as a compass when selecting which funds they may submit to. Supporting this process, resource recipients may leverage pre-existing interorganizational networks (such as professional societies, service frameworks, and partnerships) to advocate for more transparent granting practices, including the incorporation of a community lens and a clear definition of social innovation. However, it must also be acknowledged that resource-constrained organizations may lack the opportunity to engage in related activities due to the urgency of resource needs. Such resource precarity can make organizations more vulnerable to the sometimes strict or unclear guidelines espoused by foundations (Power, Hall, Kaley, & Macpherson, 2021). Consequently, human-service organizations may commit "mission drift," where to capture funding to keep programs running, activities within that organization stray from the organization's fundamental vision and values in order to fit into stringent funding requirements (Simatele & Dlamini, 2020). Changes to the way in which foundations approach distribution, including the suggestions above, may help prevent this. Finally, findings from this study support the adoption of specific methods when seeking resources for social innovations. This includes focusing on project differentiation (i.e., the articulation of uniqueness and community need within the service environment) rather than solely describing newness. Further, resource recipients should ensure that social innovations are both sustainable over long-term service periods and include a multidisciplinary approach.

Sampling and methodological procedures contribute to some limitations for the current study. Difficulty in recruitment due to the small number of personnel occupying resource-provision roles, as well as restrictions to availability for respondents (who are typically coping with high workload demands), contributed to an overall sample size (n = 20) that was average when compared with similar studies (e.g., Reid, 2018; Bergfeld, Plagmann, & Lutz, 2020). Demographic information of respondents was not collected to protect confidentiality. The qualitative nature of this research also limits the generalizability of findings, and the absence of quantitative inferential analysis precludes the identification of any causal relationships in the data. Finally, due to sample size and study scope, an analysis across foundation sub-types (i.e., private vs public) was not possible for this research. While there are similarities across the types of activities engaged in by all foundations, operational and programmatic differences may have produced different findings between types. This study was unable to capture potential differences.

CONCLUSION

The current study offers insight regarding relationships between nonprofit resource providers and recipients in a way that is rarely reflected in research on human services. Specifically, the study sought to generate a deeper understanding of how the term "social innovation" informs how resources are distributed to direct service nonprofits by foundations in an era where related language occupies popular rhetoric within the sector. Resource dependency theory informed an organizational discourse analysis approach to evaluating definitions and contestations between and within sub-samples (of resource providers of foundations and recipients). Outcomes from this study can be used to inform foundation resource provision practices that are attuned to community needs while contributing to partnerships with resource recipients that are founded on common values and perceptions of the social innovation process. Specific practices aimed at achieving these outcomes should be sought, such as collaborations between resource providers and recipients to co-conceive conceptualizations regarding social innovation that are community informed and accessible to direct-service organizations. Judicial use of a broad social innovation evidence base should also be consulted when seeking common conceptual grounds. Future research can support this process by identifying models of engagement supporting effective collaborations between foundations and human-service nonprofits, while also aiming to measure the impact of these activities on community groups receiving services.

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