

# The organisational capacity for social innovation: an experiential exploration in re-ordering institutional practices



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# Abstract

This study is an exploratory attempt to develop theoretical insights into the organisational capacity for social innovation, utilising a qualitative inquiry into the internal and external practices of a socially focussed organisation. By appreciating the lived experiences of engaging in these practices, the research looks to surface elements that contribute to the social sensitivity required to engage the complexity of social systems. Based in the social constructivism of Berger & Luckman (1966), and the associated institutional theory, seeing the structures which “enable and constrain agents” (Cajaiba-santana, 2014), the research contributes to the fields of collaborative experiential surfacing (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013) and resilience within social innovation (Westley, 2013). Through an autoethnographic data collection process, the findings of this study come to witness the different elements of how experiential practises can bring to an organisation a deep connection to social nuances, and challenge traditional structures of authority. The emerging nature of the social innovations developed and the dialogical relationships that support this, are found to be key elements in the context of this study.

# Acknowledgements

To think for a moment about the immense support, conversations, meals, spaces and general inspiration that have come together to make this process possible is both moving and somewhat overwhelming.

Primarily I must thank the organisation I have worked in, and the five other directors who were a sounding board and the open honest space where this study arose from. It continues to be an honour to be involved with such exemplary humans who have such a deep interest in their work. I feel it is your wisdom that speaks through this document more than anything. Without a practical outcome, research is somewhat empty to me, and it is your tireless efforts that make this research have the ability to impact something which contributes to a broader set of people's lives. That made every effort in this study worthwhile, and that level of inspiration I am ever grateful for. Also your understanding in letting me work in the organisation and at the same time spend so much time outside of its primary work in this research, was the only reason such an in-depth exploration was possible.

Beyond the organisation, the communities we've worked in over these years each have contributed leaps and bounds to understanding what it means to be involved in something valuable, and I am ever grateful for each interaction. It is in listening that we have learned everything that makes our work meaningful.

I must make special mention of Emily, one of my closest friends who had so many conversations with me when this research was just beginning to sprout. I truly believe that the spirit of this research was born from those conversations, and your huge heart and caring for each person we've worked with over the years has taught me more than you could know. The empathy I allude to in this research, I was exposed to through your everyday actions, and without that I'm not sure much of value could have come from this work.

To both my supervisors, your roles were significantly different and extremely necessary. Francois, for keeping me on track, catching me when my ideas would have left me in many a deep rabbit hole, and bringing me back to the simple purpose of doing impactful work in

conjunction with this research. That impactful work is the only reason I care to write, so your simple focus has helped me keep true to my intentions in this work.

Warren, I simply cannot begin to impress how exciting and full of life you made this research process. It was a wonder to walk into your office on that first day and express the ideas that had been shifting the focus of my masters and meet someone who I could see so deeply connected to this world of thought and action that I had just been scratching the surface of. It immediately gave me the courage to explore it deeper, and this research blossomed from those early excited interactions. More than anything it is your ability to appreciate, that has amazed and inspired me every time we have interacted. To witness how things build around you through your capacity to see the potential, the dream in something, well beyond changing my research it altered how I see and experience life. As much by your presence as by your words, I see myself and others come into their own experience of passion and excitement in this field, and as a student I could hardly imagine this process without your guidance.

There is nothing better than having a partner in crime, a best friend who is as inspired and intrigued by something as you are. Fergus Turner was that rare blessing, with whom I could converse till the stars began to bore of our excited chatter and let the sun rise. Where do I even begin with this one. From each conversation, your presence, your discipline, your reviews of my work, your interest in all these ideas as they grew, I could hardly capture how grateful I am to you if given a thesis-long document to express it. And most importantly for the good food and company and laughs and music and walks we shared whilst exploring this together. You're my best.

Then to all those friends, families and others who brought smiles and food and quiet and noise where needed, thank you for I know it is all only possible through community.

Lastly I must make special mention of the Sivananda lineage of yoga, through which I have explored awareness and life. In essence all my inspiration comes from the practice of awareness and the value of experience I learnt from this lineage of yoga. Everything I write is but a poorly polished mirror of this essential knowledge. Guru Amma, who is the light on the path, there are few words I know to express my gratitude to you, so I simply bow my head.

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# Introduction

There are obviously an infinite number of ways that someone comes to the point where they wish to engage in research on a specific topic. Sometimes they find themselves situationally positioned to research, and other times there is first the desire to research something and then the active pursuit of an environment appropriate for that research. For me it was the former. Specifically I had a series of experiences and questions associated to those experiences that lead me to want to discover what could make an organisation develop valuable artefacts in the world.

I guess context is most useful, and for this we can go back to the beginning of 2013 for a bit of narrative around the source of this research. I had in the months previous to this point written my honours thesis in mechatronics engineering at the University of Cape Town on the subject of developing a low cost fire detector for informal settlements within South Africa in order to deal with the challenge of shack fires. I had taken on the project because I knew that I wanted to utilise my skills for something that could contribute to people's lives, but like most undergraduate theses, it was more concept than reality to me. That changed when a close friend of mine came back to where we were staying over the New Year period, holding a newspaper article. She was crying as she showed me an article of the shack fire that occurred in Site B, Khayelitsha, Cape Town on New Year's day in which some 6000 people had lost their homes. She demanded that I do something about the situation, pledging her support in doing so. Returning back to Cape Town a few days later I read an e-mail from my honours thesis supervisor, asking whether I wanted to take the project further after the recent fire. Life calls you to something, and you must answer, so we began the process of building up an organisation together which could do.

Over the course of the year we developed a simple version of the technology, a low-cost fire detector, and reached out to a number of sources with no avail to see if we could bring this device to people within the communities affected by shack fires. At the time we had no clear vision of the path to bringing this project to fruition, and were considering registering as a non-profit in order to formalise our project. In truth none of us had much experience in this domain, naïvely attempting to intervene in the situation.

In December 2013 multiple occurrences created a big shift in the momentum behind what we were creating. Firstly we came into contact with an incredible development organisation who have grassroots connections with shack-dwelling communities across South Africa. They were interested in partnering us in furthering our project, saw in our naivety a degree of commitment, and facilitated us engaging a community in one of the largest informal settlements in South Africa, in order to share what we had developed with them. Over the next period of time, this organisation would teach us a huge amount about process, community engagement and structures, and this ultimately was the turning point in our development - the spark of partnership and an on the ground community relationship.

That first meeting with what would become our pilot community, was a galvanising experience that in many ways woke us up to what was required to make this a reality. We asked open ended questions, wanted to hear what the community had as ideas, and in listening, began to see how many nuances we had to interact with in order to develop a system that could work in this environment. Our initial ideas for a simple system which could reduce fires weren't aware enough of the real world context to have any worthwhile impact in the community we spoke with that day. The need to engage a complex system and through this develop something which was socially relevant, brought a new lens into the organisation, which we would delve deeply into over the next few months. Those involved in those early sessions began to develop a strong drive, and commitment was rife in the team.

At the same time, I was reviewing what it was that I really cared to do with my life. I chose to quit my job at the time as an engineer for a solar-and-wind power company in order to apply myself full time to realising this as yet non-descript shack fire project. Three more team members also began to become involved in the project, with backgrounds in product development, engineering, entrepreneurship and finance (this brought the team to a total of 6 members).

It was at this point, deeply engaged in the real work of developing the early parts of an organisation that I coincidentally got recommended to go speak with one of the lecturers of a new course at the University of Cape Town's graduate school of business, in inclusive innovation. He spoke of social systems to me, of shifting practices and engaging cultures to see where the most appropriate intervention was. He wanted to know very little about the technology we had designed and far more about what drove us, how we saw the world. He

was questioning the real value of what we were attempting to do. At the same time, the research being suggested was a highly practical one, with real world outputs. It was so refreshing to speak with someone who would challenge the practices of our development and I knew within fifteen minutes of conversation that it was necessary for me to engage far deeper in order to develop something of real value in the world. This in depth research mixed with the real world practice seemed an appropriate method of developing an organisation inquiring into such a socially rich setting as we were.

Lastly, through UCT's graduate school of business, we entered the student social venture program (SSVP). In doing so we began to conceive of a manner in which we could develop our organisation into a self-sustaining socially-based enterprise. These events drastically altered the course of our organisation, and thus began the process of innovation of our product, business model, community processes and the organisation itself.

In the early phases of the master's, before there was any specific direction to my research, I had taken an interest in a wide range of fields such as systems thinking, causal loop modelling, social innovation and was intrigued by the inclusive business model innovation concepts being shared in our fortnightly sessions with lecturers. At the same time our organisation had begun an in depth process of innovation through engaging with communities around our ideas for a way to better mitigate the loss of life and property caused by fires.

It was at this point that a drastic shift in my ideas of what seemed of value in our growing organisation began to form. There were a few key experiences that defined this shift. The ideas coming out of the organisation both amazed and surprised me – in terms of the sheer regularity and ingenuity with which different ideas were presenting themselves. I was recording these experiences at the time because they intrigued me in how they occurred, the light bulb moments that is. In retrospect I was experiencing something I hadn't before in a committed, engaged group of people exploring a rich social terrain. We seemed to need less input in the methods of discovery of valuable innovative ideas and more a sustenance of a healthy organisational environment from which these could grow. This brought with it the question of what was it about these organisational interactions that were conducive to our ideas forming. Through the engagements in the university setting, I had much introspection on the value of the things we were creating in the broader social structures we were a part of, both with our pilot community, and other stakeholders.

A specific experience was the catalyst for the major direction I wished to take with the research. It was a while later to the above sentiments, and there had been some stagnancy in our organisation, and some struggle with community engagements. It was at this point that I noted a striking similarity between the struggles around trust in our community, and the struggles in our organisation at the time.<sup>1</sup> Something about this intrigued me greatly - by witnessing this mirror I was able to better digest and approach both situations. With this I began to progressively notice more of these links between different spheres of our organisational life. Sharing this with others in the organisation I felt a sense that we were both becoming more attuned to our own state and the state of others around us through this process of reflection. There was something in this that shifted my idea of interacting with systems “out there”, engaging in innovation around some external structure. It had made it personal, our organisation, the way we upheld our structures was all part of the same systemic reality. There was an integrity, an authenticity in this, that we were as much exploring our own internal nature as we were exploring the world around us. It felt more appropriate to be developing in our organisation an approach which was as aware of our internal practices as our external ones.

In that, the question at the centre of this research began to form for me. How does a continuous process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of an organisation effect the organisational capacity for social innovation? I had started out with primarily object-oriented goals, things like new business models, and specific innovations that could shift the social systems we were engaging with. In the formation of this question I had begun to ask the question of whether there was greater value in process. If the organisation, its experiences and engagements, internally and externally was the source of all the objects it formed, then what could we find in reflecting on that space? Was there something that could bring that social sensitivity into the organisation that now seemed paramount to developing valuable artefacts? These were the guides in my exploration, the direction which had arose.

This of course is an abbreviation of these first steps into research, centered on the primary impetus that had arose in the exploration. The rest is a long and in depth story and this research will touch on various aspects of the life of the growing organisation. This study's

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<sup>1</sup> A deeper reflection on this occurs in the findings later in the research

primary purpose is to provide a useful perspective and practical example of how a lived experience of organisational reflection influences the surfacing of social innovations.

## Real World Context

The organisation being researched and developed in this thesis, Lumkani, is a social enterprise which is looking to mitigate the loss of life and property caused by shack/slum fires in South Africa and across the globe. The real world context within which this organisation exists is that between the years 2000 and 2010 over 240 000 people within South Africa lost their homes due to shack fires, when over 70 000 homes were destroyed. In the first 3 months of 2013, when this organisation was first being formed, over 11000 people in the city of Cape Town (the current location of this organisation) lost their homes due to shack fires. This is the impetus and drive behind the social focus of this organisation's development.

## Overview

Based on the above experience, the primary research question is: How does a continuous process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of an organisation effect the organisational capacity for social innovation?

This question in essence looks into how reflective practices effect how socially innovative practices permeate the organisation. In this light the primary purpose of the study is in order to build theory around the organisational practices which effect the capacity for social innovation. Furthermore, beyond providing a theoretical outlook on how organisational elements influence socially innovative moments, the study also intends to provide a lived example of this reflective insight into the socially innovative practices of an organisation. This looks to develop the practical material available on social innovation, specifically in the organisational context.

Due to this purpose behind the study, the study will explore the existing literature on social innovation, with an overarching interest in its practice. The other major area of interest in the literature is in the field of organisational development. It is the organisational practices

behind social innovation that are of specific interest in this study, as the on-going capacity to develop social innovation is seen as of specific value beyond simply the individual instances of social innovation.

Since theory-building is the primary interest of the study, the methodology utilised is grounded theory, which is highly appropriate for an exploratory study. Furthermore due to the rich data required for grounded theory methodologies, as well as the interpretivist basis of grounded theory, an autoethnographic data collection process is utilised to feed into the grounded theory approach. As Suddaby (2006) describes of grounded theory, “the key variables of interest are internal and subjective” (p. 636), expressing the value of the autoethnographic outlook in the context of a grounded approach. Specifically, the data collection of this study is a full member organisational autoethnography. The use of this in a grounded study fits into the social inquiry approach of analytic autoethnography.

# Literature Review

## Introduction

The initial experience (mentioned above) of engaging the communities our organisation wished to serve brought up the need for socially relevant innovations in the complex reality of those community settings. The field of social innovation therefore became a key foundation in this research. When considering this field, its practice was of the most pertinent interest. The primary research question being explored in this study was that of how a continuous process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of an organisation effects the organisational capacity for social innovation. This question naturally points towards a need to reflect on moments of social innovation within the organisation under study, and the variance nuances of these socially innovative moments. Hence the study requires an initial exploration into the various views of social innovation, primarily how it is experienced in practice. This firstly is intended to provide a lens on what valuable social innovation may entail, and secondly in order to provide an insight into what aspects of social innovation could relate to the elements of organisational life that contribute to the capacity there-of.

The other major area of interest within this research is how acts of social innovation practically come to exist through the structure of an organisation. Of specific interest are the elements that may bring it into sustained creation within an organisational setting. This interest in the organisational setting comes from two contexts. Firstly the practical reality of there being an organisation exploring a socially nuanced sphere that sparked the personal interest in this research. Secondly, it is due to the simple point that most innovation is brought into reality through an organisational structure which spreads that innovation to the areas where it can have a valuable impact. The fact that ideas need groups of people to transform them into a level of scale that can reach other people, places a need for an organisational context in social innovation considerations. Within this context an exploration into organisational development from its historical roots, to its modern practice was intended to provide the organisational awareness that could link into the conversation of social innovation. This is intended to frame the wider approach of effecting organisational

capacities and to look into the specific modern organisational practices which currently link into social innovation literature.

## Social Innovation

Developing any organisation which seeks to promote the way in which a social sphere operates, be it in the form of non-profits, social enterprises or any organisational structure, inevitably is an existential process, asking difficult questions around the nature of authentic, valuable social innovation. A somewhat common understanding of social innovation is expressed below:

Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social.  
(Mulgan, 2006, p. 146)

Whilst this may in certain eyes give the broad scope desirable in expressing any concept as necessarily hazy as social innovation, there are deeper investigations into what true social innovation entails. It is argued that the above definition is in fact overly narrow, both leading to misconception and missing the uniqueness of the immaterial nature of social innovation (Cajaiba-santana, 2014), but this will be extrapolated upon through the course of this section. This search is not the traditional one into proper definition in order to discover the correct way to understand a term, but rather through seeing how people express the nature and purpose of social innovation, we can see the different essences and philosophies behind its many forms of practice.

Mulgan (2006) outlines the source of social innovation, namely discontent, dissatisfied humans, “as the great Victorian historian Lord Macauley wrote: ‘There is constant improvement precisely because there is constant discontent’ ” (Mulgan, 2006, p. 148). He continues by describing the necessary co-criteria driving people to socially innovate – empathy, and a vision of a better future. Whilst this idea of empathetic dissatisfaction is expressed here as the source behind the basic urge to create social innovation, counter-arguments in the positive psychology movement suggest the power of discovery and



dreaming as major motivators behind valuable imagination and innovation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

As anyone begins to engage deeply with a situation, attempting to realise the aforementioned vision by endeavouring to shift its state, complexion or culture, they inevitably come face-to-face with the inherent complexity of the social sphere. There are histories, cultures, social norms, personal psychology, beliefs, values and a plethora of other intangible contributors at play, or better put “innumerable extraneous variables” (Kaplan, 2002, p. xiv ). All these inherent aspects of a social sphere are based in some form of practice. Be they conscious or sub-conscious these often unspoken practices, like any habit or routine, have an inertia which we experience when attempting to innovate and shift an established way of operating (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013). These established practices and more importantly that which creates our motive to act in certain ways, is entrenched in institutional theory. Institutions are the norms, beliefs and rules that “constrain choice... and cements social order” (Scott, 2008, p. 428), and in a more nuanced description, that which “guide[s] (without determining) individual and collective action” (Cajaiba-santana, 2014, p. 46). While institutional theory delves deeply into the different institutional frameworks and the nature in which they construct our social reality, most pertinent to this conversation is the simple concept of how our reality is socially constructed, essentially a continuously reproducing system of “coercive, normative and mimetic” social processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 197). These social habits are a natural reality formed by any repetitive actions, which in the case of our daily choices, “free the individual from the burden of ‘all those decisions’, providing a psychological relief” (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 53). This entails that humans have a growing range of interactive norms to ease the psychological strain of dealing with the expanding complexity of a globalised world, rich in diversity. As such institutional theory expresses the true complexity of the social “because it taps taken-for-granted assumptions at the core of social action” (Zucker, 1987, p. 443). This is well expressed by (Westley & Antadze, 2010),

Each social system has its own character or identity, which can be analyzed in terms of its culture – beliefs, values, artifacts, and symbols; its political and economic structure – the pattern by which power and resources are distributed; and its social interactions – the laws, procedures, routines, and habits that govern social interaction and make it predictable. These three

aspects of social systems, in their most established and taken-for-granted forms (political structure, religious or value heritage, economic markets, laws of public conduct) are often referred to as institutions (Giddens, 1976). (Westley & Antadze, 2010, p. 6)

Thus from this perspective of seeing the human as a complex entity being run by the countless institutions that define one's daily habits, comes the following perspective on the task of social innovation:

Social innovation from an institutional perspective, then, is less about the immediate needs met by particular products or processes than about the degree to which those products or processes reorganize fundamental social practices. (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 2)

This is echoed by Mulgan (2006), "...social change depends on many people being persuaded to abandon old habits... plant[ing] the seeds of an idea into many minds" (p. 149). More specifically, rather than simply adding to the range of products and services available, social innovation has the ability to "create new ways of addressing old issues" (Adams & Hess, 2010, p. 139). This focus on shifting institutional patterns then brings up the key point, suggested by Moore & Westley (2011) that a key step in the process of shifting such patterns is the ability to observe them – in other words pattern recognition.

Reflected in a more systemic perspective "since social innovations are oriented toward social practices, we need to reflect on social structures, how they enable and constrain agents while acting upon those practices" (Cajaiba-santana, 2014, p. 43), suggesting an extra nuance of how institutions limit choice, but also enable it. Cajaiba-Santana (2014), continues by critiquing the many social innovation definitions which suggest material outcomes, since it is a process which is more focussed on social practice than the material relationships to it. He also critiques the limiting nature in describing only the individualistic consideration of changing the practice of social agents, when on a systemic level it shifts the context of broader institutional and social frameworks. Finally Cajaiba-Santana (2014) echoes Nilsson & Paddock (2013), in articulating that "what underlies the path of social innovation is not a social problem to be solved, but the social change it brings about" (p. 44).

This conflict between social problem resolution, versus the social change itself as the main outcome of social innovation is shown implicitly in multiple scenarios across the literature, and echoes the earlier difference between the positive psychology movements explanation for the source of social innovation versus Mulgan's (2006) dissatisfaction with reality. A further example in social innovation literature is given by two translations of German writers by Howaldt & Schwarz (2010). In one case social innovation is described by Hochgerner (2009) as "new concepts and measures that are accepted by impacted social groups and are applied to overcome social challenges" (p. 5), whereas the more institutional perspective that social innovations "are elements of social change that create new social facts, namely impacting the behaviour of individual people or certain social groups in a recognizable way" (p. 28) as expressed by Howaldt & Schwarz's (2010) translation of a piece by Leitner & Kesselring (2008). The overarching literary trend with respect to the path of social innovation is often founded in two main concepts, "social innovation through the satisfaction of unsatisfied or alienated human needs; and, innovation in the social relations between individuals and groups in neighbourhoods and the wider territories embedding them" (Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & Gonza, 2005, p. 1973). Linking into the nuances of how this systemic change is effected, Westley & Antadze (2010) suggests perhaps the most well rounded definition.

Social innovation is a complex process of introducing new products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs. (Westley & Antadze, 2010, p. 2)

Another valuable element of understanding social innovation, as suggested again by Westley (2013), is it's continuous emergence.

Social innovation is not a fixed solution either; it is part of a process that builds social resilience and allows complex systems to change while maintaining the continuity we rely on for our personal, organizational, and community integrity and identity. (Westley, 2013, p. 6)

This basic overview of some of the definitions and perspectives on the nature and task of social innovation, gives a sense of how it is intended to be enacted in practice and its potential value to developments in the social sphere. The act of cycling through definitions

does seem to simplify the process of social innovation down into something repeatable and predictable. Allan Kaplan (2002), expresses the true artistry required in engaging the social sphere, beyond the simplistic view of seeing the world as a series of separate describable blocks, he outlines the skilful nature of social process:

The process is the whole within which the individual moments occur. It both underlies and emerges out of the parts, and is invisible. More than simply what is directly seen, it is what is sensed, experienced, understood, intuited from what is seen. To apprehend process, we have to move into a different state of being – one which is simultaneously inside and outside, participant and observer, analyst and artist. (Kaplan, 2002, pg xvii)

This description of process, echoes Westley's (2013) description of its transient nature, and points to the aware, reflective process required in order to maintain a deep engagement with social systems.

### The value of social innovation

Whilst developing these new frameworks for addressing old issues and a shifting of fundamental social practices, undoubtedly have the capacity to bring about change, there is a question as to what the true value is of this continuous change. There are many arguments against innovation, some centred around whether the sheer act of innovating is an end within itself, how positive social change is ascertained, and most critically, whether innovation focus detracts from more stable development processes in resource-scarce social sector organisations, in which incremental development would cede more value over time (Seelos & Mair, 2012). These are but some of numerous critiques of the social innovation movement - one of the more over-arching ones being the lack of defined boundaries behind social innovation itself (Cajaiba-santana, 2014). This is a fundamental consideration, since innovation is a rapidly growing trend. Innovation is the source of all manmade invention in our world, so it has been around forever (Cajaiba-santana, 2014). However the modern ideological fashion of innovation sees examples such as the commonplace over-simplified “steps to innovation” (Seelos & Mair, 2012). Such a common sight in innovation literature, “when the intricacy of sensitive social intervention is contained and packaged as tools and procedures and instruments mechanically applied” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 6), points toward the

need for reflection upon the true value of innovation, critical in assuring that it does not lend itself to superficial outcomes. Seelos and Mair (2012), suggest 3 main problematic themes in modern innovation research that could lead to a limited or negative effect: that it is put as an alternative to consistent incremental development, that its impact is evaluated by its effects on external projects only (not seeing the value in systematic learning through “failed” innovation), and finally that the research ignores the complex organisational dynamics behind valuable innovation, focusing more on the outcomes than the process. This last point is echoed by Allan Kaplan (2002) in his critical response to the outcome focus common within traditional innovation literature, “the world is presented as a gigantic clock, and the process is reducible to a set of simple laws which once again theoretically can be described, predicted and controlled” (p. 7). These major critiques of the social innovation sphere speak directly to some of the most core tenants of its philosophy, namely the social value it actually purports to create. Mulgan, Tucker, Ali & Sanders (2007), express one of the main issues with the movement at present in saying that “there is a remarkable dearth of serious analysis of how social innovation is done and how it can be supported” (p. 7), and that is being matched by the lack of spending by governments or NGO’s to develop such systemically relevant innovations (Ibid.). Within this reality, we find yet another critique of social innovation - that much of the social innovation today is kept to a small or limited scale and therefore not having far reaching impact (Ibid., p. 34). It is this very critique of social innovation that spurs the need for more practical examples of social innovation in action.

Providing a counter argument to Seelos and Mair first problematic theme, Bushe (2013) expresses (in his description of dialogic organisational development) that it is precisely the movement away from incremental development that is of such great value.

This is not about incremental change, which is how to make the current system better at what it already is and does. Transformation changes the very nature of the community to be better at what it aspires to be and do.  
(Ibid., p. 12)

On the other hand, as the world is highly innovation focussed - due to factors of immense poverty and ecological challenges (to name a few) - in an attempt to discover or develop more technology, services, ideas and products, the need to consider its effect on the world has become a standard, even if only in theory. An example is shown by the insistence on

monitoring and evaluation practice in social purpose organisations. This focus on whether our work creates more harm or good, and how it does so, inevitably brings us back to an inherent value within social innovation, as a practice interested in grasping the health within an ecosystem of humans, questioning underlying assumptions. This as such has the potential to bring about a sensitivity to local context (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010), beyond the generic technical, service or product components. This exists as a counter-argument to the critique of social innovation that remains within its context, and not scaling to new borders, suggesting that contextual relevance is a key feature of its innate value. This shift of looking beyond technical components is based in the argument that,

The use of technological measures did not resolve the world's central problems and instead tended to intensify them, that unforeseeable social side effects and new social problems were generally associated with even very useful new technologies and that no technical answers existed whatsoever for the most significant problems in the modern world.  
(Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010, p. 3 - 4)

The value is clear behind expanded engagement in the social sphere beyond the simplification to a set of mere technical components, precisely because “such reduction removes the connection between the parts from our consideration. We remove the parts from their context, and in so doing lose the sense of their coherence, their integrity, and the underlying impulses which give them life” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 6). The level of sensitivity within social innovation does however depend on the variations of its real-world practice. This is well expressed by Dawson and Daniels (2010), who see social innovation’s primary objective as creating collective well-being, showing the potential for how varying intricacies behind the intended purpose of social innovation can affect the nature of its practice and in turn its outcomes. This is critically summarised by Lindhult (2008), in saying that “there is no inherent goodness in social innovation” (p. 44) , or as Howaldt & Schwarz (2010) describe, “as with every other innovation, "new" does not necessarily mean "good" but in this case is "socially desirable" in an extensive and normative sense” (p. 21). This normative sense of what “good” implies has various risks, as expressed by Westley (2013), in his critique of previous seeming social innovations that disregarded the systemic nature of the social sphere in developing innovations, in so doing exacerbating rather than improving problems. Through this Westley (2013) brings into light the need for systems entrepreneurs who are aware of

systemic reality, and develop innovations accordingly. These systems entrepreneurs are suggested as being far better placed to attract resources towards scaling social innovations to have systemic impact (Ibid).

No matter which way we look at the value of social innovation, this focus on the individual habits and social practices of constituents, shows a stark shift from the common practice of a “technical, reductionist approach to resolving social situations” (Kaplan, 2002, p. xiii), mentioned above. To explain further, traditionally (and even more so what is still common in practice) our approach to the infinite complexity of the social sphere is to reduce its various aspects to something “determinate and bounded... [and in so doing] inputs are planned which will target such parts to achieve a predictable and expected outcome” (Kaplan, 2002, p. xiii). Whilst a seemingly naïve or overly-simplistic approach to the social realm, it is based in one of the main philosophies of our age, a scientific technical approach where inputs and outputs can be classified, quantified and controlled in order to define the way in which a system operates. Within this paradigm, the value of approaching social innovation is described when Howaldt & Schwarz (2010) translate the German theorist Groy’s idea that “it is precisely the social reassessment of values that makes an innovation what it is” (p. 26). What is being suggested by the numerous approaches towards social innovation discussed here is well described in a 1992 article by Czech philosopher Vaclav Havel, signalling a shift of paradigm beyond the modern era:

“We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer in the hope that, sooner or later, it will spit out a universal solution” (Havel, 1992, p. 15)

Havel goes on in a World Economic Forum address that same year to express the naivety of this human approach, denying the key premise behind a reductionist approach - that the world is “a wholly knowable system, governed by a finite system of universal laws that man can grasp and rationally direct for his own benefit” (Nussbaum & Levmore, 2014, p.79 ). This sets the scene for the wide range of opinions, approaches and philosophies around social innovation and points to a common thread of overcoming our reductionist approach to the social sphere, through deeper levels of engagement with complexity. All defined theories may be limited or inherently vague in expressing a clear path to social innovation or the

creation of a socially innovative environment, but this altered paradigm away from the aforementioned modernist perspective may be the main shift required to allow for such innovation to be sourced. This lens is utilised in the research in order to ascertain the extent to which the organisation under study overcomes reductionist approaches and through this develops greater sensitivity to the complexities of the social sphere.

The overall value of these social innovations to society is well expressed by Moore & Westley (2011),

The capacity of any society to create a steady flow of social innovations, therefore, has profound implications on the capacity of a linked social ecological system to both adapt and transform, and is an essential component of its “general” social and ecological resilience. (Moore & Westley, 2011, p. 2)

#### The theories behind various practices of SI

Whilst the traditional approach of dealing with change in the social landscape is the same way as dealing with the construction of a building, “a highly complex and technological operation, one which must be carefully planned down to the last millimetre” (Kaplan, 2002, p. xi), we are progressively seeing more of a trend in literature towards alternate approaches in social innovation practice, that occupy a more fitting theoretical base. Through the lens of various more detailed approaches to understanding the practice of social innovation, we can get an insight into the current real-world experiments occurring in this landscape.

Nilsson & Paddock (2013), in their piece exploring the landscape of social innovation practice in various organisations, outline three main forms of social innovation, two which are seen reflected in multiple literatures, and a third, which epitomises their suggested approach to this work. Namely these are: Programmatic, Inclusive and Experiential social innovation. Primarily programmatic innovations are the most commonly found in practice, dealing with the technical components (products, service etc.) of social change, and often deal with a hybrid of previous attempts to create social change or the bringing together of cross-disciplinary solutions. Inclusive social innovation, focus more on the “who” behind



social innovation, shifting the roles individuals play in order to innovate through breaking the divides of “social identity... power and decision-making” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 6). This fits theoretically into a concept suggested by Mulgan (2006) that “some of the most effective methods for cultivating social innovation start from the presumption that people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of their own problems” (p. 150), therefore introducing a shift in the levels of authority experienced by those within the social sphere being innovated around. Finally the idea of experiential social innovation is explored, through which there is a return to the true essence behind why many people engage in social innovation in the first place – in order “improve the quality of the lived experience of human beings” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 8) - suggesting this as the primary lens through which the innovation is developed. An important distinction in grasping this last more nuanced form is that this experiential form is not simply a shift in lens, but may be the practical subject matter of the innovation itself. Whilst any attempt at social innovation may include a combination of the three forms mentioned above, the difference being suggested is within the main focus of the initiative, and naturally the practice would be a match for this focus.

Another major distinction, put forth by Cajaiba-santana (2014), is relating to the actors being suggested within the theoretical base of different social innovation practices. The three main forms suggested again follow the structure of two that are common in literature, and the third being suggested by the author - in this case the individualistic, structural and unifying/structuration perspectives. The individualistic perspective is what Cajaiba-santana suggests is a common theme described across the literature, “the result of the action of visionary individuals” (Cajaiba-santana, 2014, p. 45), speaking to the power of individual agents in creating valuable social innovation, typical of the social entrepreneurship paradigm, where single organisations are posed as the critical link to creating social change. Cajaiba-santana (2014), raises these 3 forms of social innovation, specifically to deal with this individualistic perspective which in his view misses “the role of social structures and institutions in this process” (Ibid, p. 45). This then leads to the next paradigm, the structural perspective, which is posed as the most lauded in modern social innovation literature, which focuses on social structures and how these affect the development of innovation. This then broadens the view to a contextual analysis, more of an institutional perspective which looks into socio-economic, historical, cultural and other relevant factors rather than simply the characteristics of individuals paving the proverbial way. This second form is criticized for its

disregard of the human aspects present within the overarching social structures, and as such the third approach is the unification of these perspectives, into “a more holistic view of the phenomenon of social innovation in which agentic actions and social structures can be conceived as both dualistic and interdependent” (Ibid, p. 46). This again can be seen as alluding to some of the framing of Nilsson and Paddock’s (2013) experiential social innovation, and their associated practice of “inscaping”, where within the framework of social structures and overarching systems, there is an appreciation for individual experience. These distinctions within the literature again serve to show the variation of modern social innovation practice, from attempting to shift the behaviour of the individuals at the forefront of the practical work, to shifting overarching social order and context, and finally the more nuanced dance of allowing both these focusses to enhance each other through a unified approach, well summarised by Cajaiba-santana (2014) in saying that “the [structuration] theory provides a theoretical framework that highlights how social systems and social structures are iteratively and reciprocally created by agents who are both constrained and empowered by institutions” (p. 46-47).

The notion of iterative action towards an overall social innovation, necessitates briefly mentioning another frame presented by the theory of Praxis, as outlined by Paulo Freire (1968) as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). This theory which suggests the combining of both the worlds of deep research and action, in order to cultivate rich social innovation, is echoed in modern literature (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010) in saying that social innovation is “to be regarded as the interface point between sociological reflection and social action because it requires reflection on societal problems and targeted action” (Leitner & Kesselring, 2008, p. 14). This theory of Praxis is a primary stand-point from which to grasp a vast range of modern approaches to socially-focussed development.

A common paradigm of segregation in the literature, this time primarily more within the programmatic sector outlined by Nilsson & Paddock (2013), is given by Brooks (1982), in which the common fields within which social innovations are enacted are outlined, namely: “market innovations (such as leasing), management innovations (such as new working hour arrangements), political innovations (such as summit meetings) and institutional innovations (such as self-help groups)” (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010, p. 22). This distinction, whilst less philosophically based, does nonetheless show the important difference in the areas chosen to enact social innovation practice. Through a theoretical lens, this may outline

various regions of social space deemed most valuable by those choosing to intervene in modern social order, though more likely it is merely a natural split of the socially innovative exploring ideas within their own field of practice and interest.

Lettice & Parekh (2010), outline 4 main themes within the practice lens of (what can now be described as “programmatic”) social innovation that they have seen to be key theories with which to successfully approach real world applications. Firstly was the suggestion that it is the shift of lens, re-establishing the problem within a new frame, which allows for socially innovative approaches to surface, since it is taken out of its predefined framework. The second theme was the theory that in multi-stakeholder approaches new links can be built to access and grow the market of the intended (programmatic) social innovation. Another fundamental concept was that in approaching new customer bases with disruptive innovation (Christensen, Baumann, Ruggles, & Sadtler, 2006), one opens up the potential for more specified innovation which serve different needs to the mainstream. Finally it is posed that social innovation are best formed within networks of innovators and peer-support structures in order to diversify opinion and increase potential sources of practical support. This is echoed by (Westley, 2013), who speaks of the resilience of seeing problems systemically and thereby including local knowledge, governmental systems and various stakeholders in developing appropriate social innovation. This cross-over of knowledge boundaries Moore & Westley (2011) give as a key capability of social innovators. Within its own right Lettice & Parekh (2010) are proposing a fairly linear approach within the context of simple need-serving programmatic innovations, but are nonetheless including these practical nuances to traditional fields of innovation.

Kaplan (2002) provides a potent theoretical argument to the practice landscape, suggesting that engaging the social process is not a simple addition onto existing practices, but rather that it requires an overhaul of old approaches and patterns to social development, “we cannot just take on the new without creating some space within ourselves by letting go of the old” (Kaplan, 2002, p. ). He poses poignant questions to this extent:

We have learned to reduce; can we learn to enlarge? We have learned to control; can we learn to respect? We have learned to measure; but not entirely to appreciate. We have learned to predict and plan; but do we know how to enable and allow? We cannot simply struggle against the current

status quo from within the paradigms which inform it; we must let go and move beyond. (p. 4)

In this, Kaplan (2002), points to a critical idea, that whilst reductionist Newtonian concepts have become out-dated within the social sciences, psychology, biology and other fields (most obviously through quantum physics itself), it still has not entered the realm of our everyday practice, not affecting our deeper institutions and habitual ways of approaching the world. These approaches are still bound by the Newtonian focus on the individual artefacts of the world, as opposed to seeing the relationship and connection between all occurrences. This fact that we lag in the way we see the world is a key starting point to develop a deeper social process, “one which will allow us to *actually* see – and not simply, and still slightly sceptically, *refer* to – the invisible whole within which the parts are enfolded” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 8). Even the act of writing a literature review is traditionally a Newtonian task quantifying and comparing separate parts, but the true artistry (and even the true reality) lies in the space between, thought previously to be empty, but perhaps the most critical aspect of all form, the invisible “fields that manifest observable reality” (Ibid, p. 8). This gives yet another angle on how social innovation theory is influencing our approach to the practice thereof.

## Organisational Development

“To enact a social innovation, an organization must have a capacity for synthesis – the ability to see and develop non-obvious connections between seemingly separate ideas and cultures.” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 4)

Whilst the traditional framing of social innovation produces a dialect which can apply to any situation, be it individuals, organisations, governments or even unrelated instances of social innovation, most relevant to this research is the understanding of the role of the organisation within the process of social innovation. This focus on organisational development stems from the basis that within any group structure the organisation is the continuous source, the ground from which the tree of social innovation grows and therefore tending to its roots is key. Put another way, the organisation is the ecosystem which either enables or detracts from the ability for a group of humans to socially innovate together (Cajaiba-santana, 2014), and it is this relational aspect that the concluding statements (relating to the works of Kaplan (2002)) of the above section were alluding to. As Kaplan (2002) so succinctly puts it, “the new emerges, it is not created. We can only hope to create suitable conditions from which it may emerge” (p. xix), making the organisation the primary environment where such conditions could arise. The importance of developing this environment for repetitive innovation is described below.

“In most organisations the highest payoff is not in innovating the solution but in innovating how people work together to implement the new possibilities they see amid organisational inertia, bureaucracy and risk aversion”

(Liedtka, King, & Bennett, 2013, p. 203-204 ).

### A brief history of organisational development

The sociological and psychological streams are often recognised as the original theoretical sources of organisational development, in particular in the broad area of the behavioural sciences. The roots of this practice are numerous.

Coming from the dehumanising context of wartime manufacturing structures which were based in scientific management strategies - focussed purely on efficiency - there were multiple contextual shifts which allowed this more humanised approach to the organisation to rise (Garrow, 2009), which originally began by primarily exploring employee satisfaction. One theory is based around the fact post-industrial organisations, founded primarily more on a knowledge basis, required a greater ability to continuously change and innovate, especially in the competitive environment of a progressively globalising world (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). This meant relying on creativity, which led to a desire to create institutional cultures which developed organisational norms of creative innovation (Martins & Terblanche, 2003), and which increased job satisfaction for the talented individuals driving these processes within organisations. This need is well described by Greenwood & Hinings (2010), “the ability to cope with often dramatically altering contextual forces has become a key determinant of competitive advantage and organizational survival” (p. 1022), and to this day organisational development activities are primarily associated with change (Garrow, 2009). This drive for the innovative potential is one of the key elements which has rallied much mainstream support for the endeavour of organisational development for so many years (Wolfe, 1994). Another commonly posed source are the theories of action research in the 1940’s and 1950’s, formulating ideas such as the OD cycle (Kolb & Frohman, 1970) and the dance between the level of focus on the practice or the research, the skill or the study thereof, has swayed toward each extreme since its inception (Borman et al., 2003). Other roots of organisational development are also posed (Garrow(2009), Budai(2011)), namely, Kurt Lewin’s “T-groups” - which focussed on individuals developing themselves by becoming aware of their effect on people around them, and the employee feedback forms first introduced by the Detroit Edison Company in 1947, resulting in a legacy of employee participation in organisational development processes.

A classical understanding of this field, which provides a good historical outlook on the idea, is given in 1969:

An effort [that is] planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization’s processes, using behavioural-science knowledge

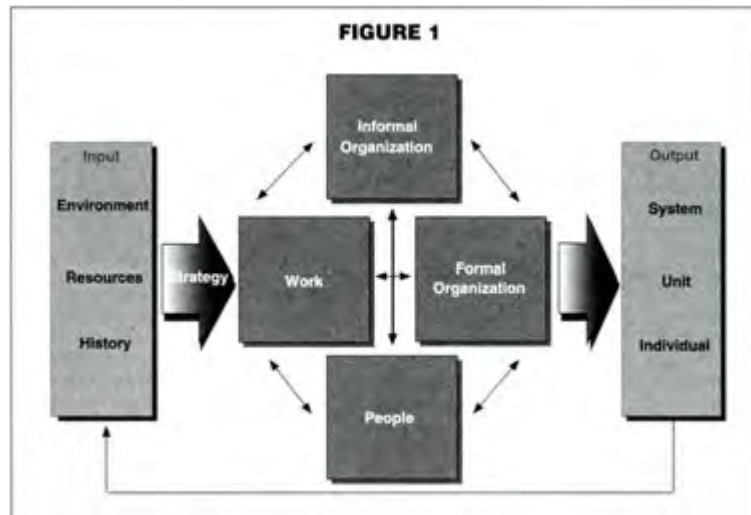
(Beckhard, 1969, p. 9)

This approach of utilising behavioural shifts to enhance company efficiency and employee well-being is a stance developed in the early years of organisational development. More specifically the task of organisational development was originally posed as to enhance the following:

The functions (purposes, aims) and characteristics (qualities, abilities) of the organization's constituent parts, the connections among the parts, the structure of the organization and the methods (techniques, procedures).

(Budai, 2011, p. 88)

Early versions of organisational development focussed on instilling values into the workplace, around work ethic, participation, all relational aspects, as well as personal growth (Borman et al., 2003), and often centred on team building exercises (Harrison, 1970). Whilst the humanistic centre of organisational development has remained constant the focus grew rapidly in the 1980's towards the larger system and environment within which an organisation operates, based primarily in "contingency theory - the notion that organizations are most effective when their design characteristics match their environment" (Nadler & Tushman, 1999, p. 46). The approach of looking at the whole system versus the role of individuals within that system, expresses much the same shift as suggested by Cajaiba-santana (2014), in his critique of the individualistic approach to social innovation. This perspective led to broader concepts of organisation design and strategic organisational architecture (Nadler & Tushman (1999), Borman et al. (2003), Garrow (2009), Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber (2010), Greenwood & Hinings (2010)), resulting in basic diagrams such as the one below, utilised to frame the architecture of operations within an organisation, clearly reminiscent of the "systems thinking" movement. The development of systems thinking, with its concepts of the organisation as a living organism within an ecosystem – a stark difference from the wartime concept of the organisation as a closed machine – are clearly paralleled by the aforementioned shifts in organisational development focus towards the greater context within which organisations fit (Garrow, 2009).



(Nadler & Tushman, 1999)

The shift in the 1980's towards a systems thinking paradigm of organisational development, was emblematic of a global shift towards a more post-modernistic approach, outlined in the above review of social innovation. This shift in philosophy, in which reality is no longer a defined observable entity, but rather a complex altering state, shaped by institutional frameworks, and constructed through social interaction and history, naturally led to many changes in the organisational development framework (Garrow, 2009). These changes came with a new understanding of how social practice, daily interactions and regular dialogue were the key element behind the shifting nature of organisations, meaning that top-down, planned change approaches became progressively outdated (Borman et al., 2003). A few key ideas that arose from the positivist and value-based early developments within organisational development led to a number of the more modern focusses, such as the very common primacy of culture in literature and practice (McClean(2005), Borman et al.(2003), Martins & Terblanche(2003), Suddaby et al.(2010), (Brijball Parumasur, 2012)) as well as continuous organisational learning, themes from positive psychology and the new sciences, a new understanding of leadership and numerous other non-linear approaches (Garrow, 2009).

### The adolescence of OD theories and approaches

It is interesting to go further into the detail of these various developments within the field as they outline a valuable narrative leading to the modern approaches and colour our



overarching perspective of discovering some of the key elements that we experience in authentic innovative organisational systems. Organisational design was developed within the context of ensuring that "there is sufficient flexibility and adaptability to respond to and anticipate the external environment and to ensure internal connectivity to enable knowledge and learning to spread freely" (Garrow, 2009, p. 5). This desire for such an organisational design, lead to the strong movement focusing on organisational culture since it was seen to be the key element behind designing such an organisational system. This concept of organisational culture, commonly and colloquially referred to as "the way we do things around here" (Lundy & Cowling, 1996, p. 168), and inclusive of the institutional theory discussed in the above review of social innovation, has a vast array of literature on the subject, and the goal here is but to outline a few key elements of its conception. What organisational culture brought to the table was a way for dealing with both the proverbial "soft" elements of an organisation as well as the "hard" elements of organisational architecture and structure which had already become prominent in the shift (mentioned previously) of 1980's systems thinking (Garrow, 2009). The literature refers to the purpose of this culture as providing internal integration and coordination (Furnham & Gunter, 1993), and provide a sense of identity and a "shared system of meaning" (Martins & Terblanche, 2003, p. 65). Most interestingly, Martins & Terblanche (2003) go on to state that with regard to the goals and mission of an organisation, the culture "fills the gap between what is formally announced and what actually takes place" (p. 65), expressing the true relevance and value of this awareness within an organisation - going beyond the mechanical Newtonian approach, and grasping how the more fallible human nature actually plays itself out in the world.

Again within the paradigm of culture different attempts have been made to focus on the roles of leadership in creating culture, such as the study of Authentic Leadership (AL) (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Muceldili, Turan, & Erdil, 2013; Warner, 1977; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008), versus the more structural perspective, looking at modelling the whole system of influence relating to organisational culture in order to find key nodes where change can be created (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Furthering on this, "Institutional pressures exist only to the degree that internal and external participants believe in them and engage in the institutional work necessary to perpetuate them" (R. Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 1235), giving us an insight into

how the awareness of these institutional frameworks is the natural first step towards shifting organisational culture towards healthier environments for creative innovation.

One key method of practice around shifting organisational culture and encouraging specific design is creating the organisation as a continuous learning environment. The idea that the rate of change of the environment need be at minimum equal to the rate of learning of an organisation, as presented by Ashby (1956), in their introduction to cybernetics shows the basis for this conception of the organisation as primarily a learning environment in the flux of the modern era. As a basic concept this continuous learning is posed as the process through which an organisation remains flexible, self-reflexive and continuously recreating the nuances of its context (Garrow, 2009). Within this paradigm the concepts around what it is to be in leadership has also developed, away from the heroic pioneer, towards the multi-disciplinary emotionally intelligent servant, who can share, co-create, and remain authentic in multi-stakeholder environments (Garrow, 2009). This sentiment is echoed here by Westley (2013),

Part of building resilience in complex systems is strengthening cultures of innovation. These are cultures that value diversity, because as any bricoleur knows, the more (and more different) the parts, the greater the possibility of new and radical combinations.  
(p. 2)

Another of the multiple approaches that grew in the era of the adolescent development of this range of organisational theories was sourced from the positive psychological movement which too has its roots in the theories of social constructionism expressed in the above review of social innovation (Garrow, 2009). The positive psychology movement resulted in approaches such as strengths based development, positive organisational scholarship (POS) (Cameron, 2003; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Donaldson & Ko, 2010), organisational change, and most notably appreciative inquiry (AI). These approaches are well summed up by Cooperrider & Whitney's (1987) idea that through an appreciative process - specifically a focus on discovery and dreams, instead of critical analysis and negation – innovation and imagination can grow rapidly. This field looks into “unusually virtuous, energizing, and life-enhancing organizational phenomena” (Nilsson, 2015), and from this basis, the positive psychology movement looks into creating support for these pre-existing health-forming elements of the organisation (Garrow, 2009). This is described well by Bushe (2005) in

practical form, “the key data collection innovation of appreciative inquiry is the collection of people’s stories of something at its best” (p. 1). This expresses a wider understanding of the organisational sphere, with interests in concepts such as vitality (Feldman & Khademian, 2003), thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), positive virtues (Cameron, 2003) and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) in the organisational sphere. These adolescent developments in OD, beyond mere shifts in practice, present an overview of OD that brings up the need to explore the philosophical underpinnings behind these shifting practices.

### Overarching philosophies of OD

We have explored a range of OD practices and fields above. What is clear is that while they all fall under the broader title of OD, there is significant differences not only in practice and focus, but in the underlying philosophy of these various forms of OD. Bushe & Marshak (2009) specifically critique the fact that all these forms of OD have been described as off-shoots, mere deviations in form as opposed to a real division in theory.

The original formulation of OD described in the historical overview above, was founded in a classical concept that there was a discernible objective reality in the organisation which could be understood through engagement there-of (G. R. Bushe & Marshak, 2009), this being typified by the interest in having valid data in OD research (Argyris, 1972; Beckhard, 1969). As Bushe & Marshak (2009) describe, the purpose of this data, was in order to diagnose the organisational issues and through this provide a remedy for its improvement (based on some prescriptive concept of what optimal performance is). Furthermore this early OD was based in the reality of an open system (Katz & Kahn, 1966), in which the organisation adapted to its external environment, allowing for diagnosis of the optimal operation for a given environment, hence the description of this philosophically underpinned group as Diagnostic OD (G. R. Bushe & Marshak, 2009).

One of the clear approaches contrasting the above philosophical underpinnings is Appreciative Inquiry, mentioned above as developed in the adolescence of OD. Other examples are Search Conferences (Emery & Purser, 1996), Open Space (Owen, 2008) and Technology of Participation (Spencer, 1989). All these examples, Bushe & Marshak (2009) describe through the term Dialogic OD, primarily because they all place focus on

conversational means to develop contextually better patterns of organising. Dialogic OD, much the same as social innovation, is based in social constructionism, and the institutional theory behind social innovation's intention of shifting social practices, is therefore aligned to Bushe & Marshak's differentiating theme.

Dialogic OD rests on the assumption that change occurs when the day to day thinking of community members has altered their day to day decisions and actions, which leads to a change in the culture of the community that entrenches those new ways of thinking. Their thinking is changed when the language, stories, and narratives the community uses is altered in a profound way (Gervase R Bushe, 2013, p. 12)

In this context of reality being socially constructed, the approach of developing prescriptive models to optimal organisations in specific environments, has limited relevance as it does not place enough value on the meaning making present in each specific organisation. The inquiry into the meaning-making of the specific organisation becomes more important in this context than an external diagnosis, as the theory of change in this context is based in shifting the way in which members think and act. Furthermore the desire to obtain valid objective data (which is usually problem-centric) from which to diagnose, also presents the challenge that such data is flux due to the rate at which organisations change (K. M. Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

Clearly Dialogic OD has a very clear link to the social innovation philosophical underpinning described previously. With a common philosophy, the way in which the organisational dynamics of social innovation could be found in a greater exploration of its link to dialogic OD is of significant interest, and points us in the direction of Seelos & Mair's (2012) point that the organisational dynamics behind social innovation require further research. This is well expressed in (Gervase R Bushe, 2013) suggestion of the use of Dialogic OD.

I advise using Dialogic OD when leaders want to transform a social system, be it group, organization, network of stakeholders, or society. (Ibid., p. 12)

Dialogic OD also is explained as being interested in problems but not problem-focussed, rather exploring possibility than problem (Gervase R Bushe, 2013). This view has a strong link to social innovation as well, since the more nuanced understandings of social innovation

move beyond problem considerations, towards an exploration of systemic social practices rather than a problem-centric outlook.

Beyond the dialogic-diagnostic OD split, we can see a number of over-arching narratives in the progression of organisational development theory explored thus far. There is clearly an interest in the broader system in which an organisation exists, in order to develop a systemic understanding and practice for an organisation, most typified by the development of systems thinking approaches in this field. On what is traditionally seen as the other side of the spectrum, we see the experientially focussed streams of organisational development, such as appreciative inquiry mentioned above. In their interest in the experience of members of the organisation, these experiential streams can be seen as linking back to the early attempts to increase employee satisfaction. However, the link between the modern approaches to the experiential and the adolescent themes of systems thinking, express a shift away from mere employee satisfaction, a shift that is of specific relevance to this research. The social constructivist concept, which expresses the reality that institutions play themselves out in everyday practices, suggests that an engagement with the experiential can surface systemic insights and shifts. This vital link between a systemic perspective and experiential reflection, pertinent in the conversation of the organisational dynamics behind social innovation will be explored further in the following section.

### Personal experience in the organisational setting

From the aforementioned description of appreciative inquiry and the concept of Dialogic OD, comes the most striking shift from the early industrial approaches to organisational management. The suggestion of collecting people's stories shows the valuing of personal experience in the organisational development paradigm. Nilsson (2007) writes of the development of the concept of self-expression in the romantic era, "the unique and subjective flowering of inner exploration, as a central personal, social, and spiritual good" (p. 8). The shift from the traditional suppression of this expression in the workplace (Brown, 2013), to a modern landscape which places value in it, is of great importance in the context of an organisation engaging in acts of observation and reflection into their internal and external practices. The lack of personal expression in an organisational setting is expressed below in Argyris's (1972) book, *Integrating the Individual and the Organisation*.

In a world where the expression of feelings is not valued, the individuals will build personal and organizational defenses to help them suppress their own feelings or inhibit others in such expression. (p. 101)

The approach of an organisational environment integrated with subjective experience, is typified by Nilsson & Paddock's (2013) "Inscaping", which they define as "surfacing the inner experiences of organizational members during the normal course of everyday work" (p. 3). Their interest is in how this practice of experiential surfacing can affect the organisational capacity for social innovation.

Inscaping can take an almost endless variety of forms. It may happen through simple check-ins at the start of meetings, through experiential revelations in informal conversations, or through incorporating experiential questions into planning and evaluation processes. (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 3)

This process of inscaping is shown by Nilsson & Paddock (2013) to have particular value in the organisational capacity for all three aforementioned types of social innovation suggested by them, namely, programmatic, inclusive and experiential. Nilsson & Paddock (2013) suggest that inscaping does so through creating transparency between knowledge boundaries in the organisation, disrupting organisational institutions of social exclusion, and by increasing organisational empathy, which overcomes the cold nature of professional environments (Ibid). Through this they suggest that collaborative experiential surfacing may provide one answer to sustaining social innovation in an organisation (Ibid).

Nilsson (2009) in his doctoral research also covers the value of what he calls "transboundary work" – "*sets of practices that explore, confront, reconfigure, and even transcend organizational and institutional boundaries*" (Ibid, p. 96), and the practice of "expression" (Ibid, p. 177), which describes the sharing of both personal and organisational identity. Both these practices, and the aforementioned inscaping are shown to have great relevance in creating an environment of engagement in organisational life. Nilsson (2009) sees organisational engagement in terms of a communal subjective experience of "attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning" (p. 23). Through this he covers both the personal well-being and desires of the individual, as well as "the individual's participation in a greater whole" (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 203). Here we can see a consideration of both the systemic reality of the organisation and the

personal experience of members of an organisation, which expresses the aforementioned systemic-experiential link.

In the light of the relevance of sharing subjective experience, the high capacity for emotional expression linked with high quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), implies that there is great value in these type of relationships at the basis of an organisation. These “high quality connections” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012) have numerous features which are valuable to the organisational environment, such as the fact that “they are tensile, maintaining resilience under strain or change” (Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 4).

The value of resilience in the social innovation context, in light of an impermanent social sphere, is well documented by Westley (2013), echoing Liedtka, King, & Bennett's (2013) sentiments of the importance of the capacity within an organisation to socially innovate, rather than innovations themselves.

Resilience theory suggests that for the broader system (the organization, the community, or the broader society) to be resilient, it is not enough to innovate. Society needs to build the capacity for repetition—over and over again, forever. (Westley, 2013, p. 3)

The elements of this resilient system are a self-organizing approach, the ability to withstand disruption and retain organisational identity, and a flexibility tied to continuously growing the learning capacity within the organisation (Moore & Westley, 2011). A highly contextually relevant quotation from Westley (2013), relating to this resilience, covers one primary basis for an organisational capacity for social innovation.

Of course, “managing for emergence” is easier in some cultures than others. Some cultures allow ideas to move freely and quickly, combining with other ideas in the kind of bricolage necessary for innovation. Studies of resilience at the community, organizational, and individual levels suggest that these same qualities characterize organizations and communities that are resilient to crisis and collapse. The characteristics that these organizations and communities share are low hierarchy, adequate diversity, an emphasis on learning over blame, room for experimentation,

and mutual respect. These are all qualities that support general resilience. If they are attended to, the capacity for social innovation will also increase, creating a virtuous cycle that in turn builds the resilience of the entire society. (p. 6)

Nilsson & Paddock (2013) agree with this in valuing the same qualities that occur in an organisation of high quality connections, where the generative nature of the organisation encourages the rapid growth of new ideas. These themes of resilience and personal experience are of particular interest in the organisational development context of social innovation, as they bring to the fore a nuanced social perspective from the constituents of the organisation.

In this section numerous relevant aspects of the experiential and with that elements of Dialogic OD have been covered. In the social constructivist paradigm where broader systemic institutional patterns are expressed in daily interactions, these experiential inquiries are of further primacy in a social innovation context. This provides potential lenses into how the organisational capacity for social innovation may be both generated and sustained.

### Appreciative inquiry (AI)

Before completing the review of OD, the approach of appreciative inquiry will now be reviewed in slightly greater depth than the other approaches mentioned thus far since it is of specific interest within the context of the research topic of this thesis. It is however not central to the thesis so shall only be covered briefly, focussing primarily on the conceptual philosophy behind AI. This follows the origins of AI, in which Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) did not provide a practical approach to AI until thirteen years after their seminal work, as it was the philosophy of AI above the technique that was seen as valuable (G. Bushe, 2011). Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) critique action research to date (of their time) for its “romance with ‘action’ at the expense of ‘theory’” (p. 2), indicative of the age of “simple steps to reach your goal” techniques. The philosophy of AI described below by Cooperrider & Whitney (2005), gives valuable framing to its context in this research.



Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. (p. 3)

This approach of searching for the life-giving elements of an organisation, is of clear importance in the consideration of what could sustain a socially innovative organisational environment. Furthermore, since AI as described above is just as interested in the life-giving elements in the relevant world around the organisation (i.e. the system in which it exists), it touches on the link between how awareness of organisational experience can have systemic effect. This search for the best in the world, stands in strong contrast to the traditional analytical approaches of action research. This is best described by the introduction to Cooperrider & Srivastva's (1987) work, in which they explain their overall position.

For action-research to reach its potential as a vehicle for social innovation it needs to begin advancing theoretical knowledge of consequence... that the discipline's steadfast commitment to a problem-solving view of the world acts as a primary constraint on its imagination and contribution to knowledge; that appreciative inquiry represents a viable complement to conventional forms of action-research; and finally, that through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover (p. 1)

This last point, that what we discover in the process is created by the method we choose, is of vital importance in the context of generating “new ways of addressing old issues” (Adams & Hess, 2010, p. 139), a definition of social innovation. This implies that an appreciative approach is particularly appropriate in that it is a generative method, building on the strengths, utilising the life-giving to further enliven an organisational setting, and in this discovering new ideas. By the logic of the above quotation, by using an appreciative lens, there would arise the discovery of an alive world, where untapped socially innovative aspects of an organisation can be fanned into growth. Counter to this a problem-solving approach is argued by Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) to potentially be counter-productive to the social innovation task, since by the above statement it would generate a problem-centric reality.

This gives great importance to the methodology utilised to observe or intervene in a situation, as this methodology will in itself create a new reality; “inquiry as the engine of change” (Bushe, 2012, p. 9).

The primary basis behind this appreciative attempt is that in changing the approach to look for the positive and grow it, we literally change our awareness and begin to observe new phenomena that were previously not seen, in so doing alter the experience and with that the reality of the organisation (G. Bushe, 2005). In that Bushe (2005) is proposing that less than the telling of stories and the actual act of growing the positive (in other words the technique), what is really required is a

Change in the problem oriented, deficiency focused consciousness of those intervening into the system to an appreciative one that believes that there is an abundance of good people, processes, intentions and interactions, just waiting to be seen and fanned. (Bushe, 2005, p. 7)

Furthermore, since appreciative inquiry is based in the aforementioned theory of the social construction of reality, the language and dialogue utilised within an organisation literally shapes the reality of that environment, lending an intrinsic value to exploring the positive through dialogical relationships. This has the power to alter the “inner dialogue” of an organisation, that which is unspoken in formal settings but is the basis of smaller informal conversations which define organisational opinion (G. Bushe, 2005).

Reality is shaped by the conversations and dialogues that take place between people within [an organisation] and is constantly shifting.  
(Garrow, 2009 p. 5)

Connecting back to what Mulgan (2006) suggested, that one of the key drivers of innovation is the envisioning of a better future, this process of exploration into the positive enhances that key stage of creating positive visions of possibility within the make-up of the organisation. Due to this applicability, and in light of the aforementioned connections to the approach of experiential surfacing, the lens of appreciative inquiry was used in this thesis to assess the organisational elements that allowed for a capacity for social innovation to arise.

To marvel, and in marvelling to embrace, the miracle and mystery of social organization. If we acknowledge Abraham Maslow's (1968) admonition that true science begins and ends in wonder, then we immediately shed light on why action-research has failed to produce innovative theory capable of inspiring the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct. (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 3)

## Motivation for this study

With the overarching theme of shifting social practices, through an aware reflective process of engagement with the complexity of the social sphere, the field of social innovation has at its core the ability to overcome reductionist approaches to social spheres. Through this non-reductionist lens, we can see the linking paradigm behind the various approaches to social innovation in practice. Seelos & Mair (2012) nonetheless make the point that there is still much to be learned about the black box of social innovation, specifically its real world practice and the associated organisational dynamics which allow for it. This gap in the research between social innovation and the organisational dynamics in which it can form, is the main area this research intends to expound. This is of specific importance due to the practical relevance that social innovation can find in understanding the associated functioning of a socially interested organisation. The relevance of this study is in its attempt to provide a lens onto the organisational dynamics that allow for social innovation to arise. While there is available theory into certain elements of this (Nilsson & Paddock, 2013; Moore & Westley, 2011; Westley, 2013), there is a lack of exploration into how this theory plays itself out in organisations over an extended period of time. At the very least further exploration is needed to surface further insights in this burgeoning field.

The research question - of how a continuous process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of an organisation effects the organisational capacity for social innovation - is therefore a highly appropriate question to the aforementioned gap presented by Seelos & Mair. This speaks once again to one of the key concepts that makes this research relevant in the modern exploration of social innovation: “the new emerges, it is

not created. We can only hope to create suitable conditions from which it may emerge” (Kaplan, 2002, p. xix). It is this aspect of how these suitable conditions arise in an organisation that this study exists to explore.

Systemic considerations that arose in the adolescent organisational development, and the experiential consideration that existed in both early and late OD practice, seem to find a link in Dialogic OD - in which whole systems can be experienced in the conversations and experiences of organisational members. In this context the theory of change is centered on shifting organisational narratives and conversations in order to shift organisational culture. The shared philosophical basis of a social constructivist perspective, between Dialogic OD (under which appreciative inquiry is described), and social innovation, points us in a potential direction for the appropriate organisational dynamics that can create a capacity for social innovation. These social constructivist considerations suggest that an analytical diagnostic approach, even when approaching systemic realities, miss out on the context-specific meaning making at the basis of social practice. This therefore points us to the power of an experientially aware organisational practice in developing valuable social innovation.

This study therefore is framed in the tension between the analytical diagnostic approaches to organisational development and the non-reductionist attempts to experience institutions in daily organisational practice. The existing explorations of experiential practices such as inscaping and their value in social innovation by Nilsson & Paddock (2013), further suggest the appropriateness of these practices in the context of a capacity for social innovation.

From this basis the research has the ability to further explore the organisational dynamics behind a capacity for social innovation, valuably adding to existing research and literature.

# Research Methodology

## Position of the Researcher

Whilst this research was conducted I was involved in the daily operations of starting and running the organisation at the centre of this research. I am a co-founder of the organisation and was responsible primarily for product development, including the community engagement around this process. Being of a start-up nature however, the roles of the organisation were fluid, leading to a shared responsibility for all organisational and business developments within the full period of this research. As such I was intimately involved in all business model iterations as well as the core operations and cultural practice being created, and the journey of this research was the main approach I took in digesting, analysing and taking further actions in our organisation.

## Approach

This research is a qualitative study, based in grounded theory, utilising autoethnographic data collection in theory-building context. The autoethnographic data collection was specifically a full member organisational autoethnography within a single organisation, utilising the approach of analytic autoethnography. The research explores through a lens of appreciative inquiry<sup>2</sup> the practices of the organisation being researched. The rationale behind the various elements of the chosen methodology, as well as the structure of the research and data analysis are described in this section.

The main intention behind this research is to build the theory behind how an organisational capacity for social innovation may be realised. The questions that surround this central question, all point towards exploratory research. Instead of an intentional act of applying a known process or organisational development methodology and witnessing results, this study is based in discovering what contributes within the organisation being studied to its capacity for social innovation. Therefore this exploratory study is based in a “theory-building”

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically utilising the appreciative philosophy at the core of the appreciative inquiry methodology, and not any elements of the methodology itself.

context. Strong intellectual rationale has been provided for using qualitative methods in theory-building exercises (Charmaz, 1983), primarily due to its ability to deal with surfacing insights in complex social processes (Kathleen M Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Whilst theories presented by Westley (2013) and Nilsson (2009) exist in similar fields (namely Westley's focus on resilient systems of social innovation, and Nilsson's focus on engagement in social purpose organisations), the specific frame of how to create and maintain an organisational capacity for social innovation is still a field with minimal exploratory study, making such work relevant in the field.

In this exploratory study a grounded theory approach has been seen as the most applicable approach to undertake. The approach of grounded theory starts by merely collecting data, and then allowing the theories of further inquest to emerge from the process (Charmaz, 1983). In comparison, a hypothesis based method, entails having a pre-defined idea of an outcome. A hypothesis based approach would lessen the ability to discover new dynamics in the practices of the organisation which contributed (in this case) to its innovative capacity. This of course is the main intention of the research and therefore, the grounded approach of emerging theory is more appropriate. Suddaby (2006) expresses the need to remain open to emergent themes in theory building, in his critique of those who attempt to use grounded theory for testing concepts.

When a researcher uses grounded theory techniques to “test” preconceived notions of what is likely to be observed, chances are he or she will “see” the intended categories and overlook more emergent ones. (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 637)

Suddaby (2006) also clarifies well the original basis of grounded theory as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967). Specifically he notes that the two key concepts of the theory are,

“Constant comparison,” in which data are collected and analysed simultaneously, and “theoretical sampling,” in which decisions about which data should be collected next are determined by the theory that is being constructed. (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 634)

Grounded theory is specifically suited to interpretive research, which is what the question at the basis of this study requires. Since the rejection of absolute causality and universal

explanations in social systems by Glaser & Strauss (1967), the search for how “actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experience” (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 634) has become far more relevant. This is the case of this study, which looks to witness what the social factors are at the basis of the organisation that contribute to its ability to continuously socially innovate. Specifically grounded theory is context specific, generating understandable theory that relates to the place in which it arises (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is highly appropriate in the framework of social innovation, which places primacy in context specific understanding and learning (Creed et al., 2010), in order to provide context specific approaches. A pre-defined hypothesis-based approach is somewhat counter intuitive to a social innovation landscape in that sense. Furthermore social innovation theory is based in social constructionism, again making a grounded theory approach highly appropriate in light of Suddaby's (2006) description above, which suggests that grounded theory looks to witness the patterns of social interaction creating subjective realities.

The purpose of grounded theory is not to make truth statements about reality, but, rather, to elicit fresh understandings about patterned relationships between social actors and how these relationships and interactions actively construct reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 636)

### Autoethnographic data collection

In order to explore the questions at the foundation of this research, this study records personal subjective experience of occurrences in line with the methodology of an organisational autoethnography. Autoethnography is practiced in numerous forms (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012) and is a contentious methodology especially in its more emotive forms (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The understanding of autoethnography utilised in this research is expressed below.

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno). (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273)

The link expressed above shows the connection between an analysis of personal subjective data, and the broader sphere with which this personal experience interacts. Doloriert & Sambrook (2012) frames three main styles of autoethnography in use today: an emotional interpretivist approach of artful autoethnography, an analytically based autoethnography, and a politicised philosophy of autoethnography. The approach of analytic autoethnography suggested by Anderson (2006) is the approach that this research utilises. He suggests in his study that the common evocative approaches to autoethnography at the time of his writing, had distracted from the value of other forms of autoethnography that fit more into the value of social inquiry traditions.

Put most simply, *analytic autoethnography* refers to ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (Anderson, 2006, p. 375)

Grounded theory requires “solid, rich data” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 110) in order to elicit the thorough analyses behind theory-development. This rich data set of qualitative information on the sociological elements of organisational life, is found in this study through the medium of autoethnography. Specifically the field of organisational autoethnography which considers the subjective experience of the culture of whole organisations, best describes the source of this methodology (e.g. Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012; Herrmann, Barnhill, & Catherine Poole, 2013; Rouleau et al., 2014).

The key issue to remember here is that grounded theory is an interpretive process, not a logico-deductive one... The researcher is considered to be an active element of the research process, and the act of research has a creative component (p. 638)

This shows how the researcher and the data are intimately linked. In the post-modern context where methodologies such as autoethnography are now utilised, the extent to which the researcher and the data interlink has clearly increased. Since grounded theory “was founded as a practical approach to help researchers understand complex social processes” (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 638), the variation of data collection methodology is an appropriate shift in traditional grounded theory approaches. Furthermore in the context of grounded theory



expressed below by (Roy Suddaby, 2006), there is clearly a value placed in the researcher's internal subjective experience.

An "interpretivist" ontology rests on the contrasting assumption that human beings do not passively react to an external reality but, rather, impose their internal perceptions and ideals on the external world and, in so doing, actively create their realities (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). From this perspective, the key variables of interest are internal and subjective. (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 636)

In a more practical sense, the innate involvement of the researcher in grounded theory can also be understood in terms of the manner in which the researcher develops the theory which directs the research and the choices of data collection.

The researcher must make key decisions about which categories to focus on, where to collect the next iteration of data and, perhaps most importantly, the meaning to be ascribed to units of data. (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 638)

The applicability of autoethnographic methodology in this context has relevance also in its ability to maintain the constant level of interaction present in the iterative approach of grounded theory.

Exemplary research using grounded theory also requires considerable exposure to the empirical context or subject area of research. Contradicting prevalent ideals of scientific detachment from context, the constant comparative method implies an intimate and enduring relationship between researcher and site. (Roy Suddaby, 2006, p. 640)

This links strongly to the "complete member researcher" requirement that Anderson (2006), by obvious logic, places on conducting an analytic autoethnography. This entails a deeper level of engagement in the subject matter (Anderson, 2006), than traditional observers. Obviously due to the reality of being a member of the organisation at the time of beginning this research, an approach which utilised the vantage of this role was most appropriate. It was the ability to be so close to the material of the study, the organisational experiences being

considered that made the autoethnographic approach so conducive to a study interested in awareness, observation and reflection in the context of organisational practice. I am aware of the limitations of this subjective approach in theory-building as the contextual reality of this study may differ drastically to others. But this very diversity of context suggests the dangers of writing about the organisational capacity for social innovation from a detached and objective point of view. My approach follows a model of analytical enquiry expressed by Anderson (2006) - and notably attempted by others in conjunction with a grounded theory methodology since (McDonald, 2010; Pace, 2012; Struthers, 2012), which acknowledges the personal nature of the realities these theorists record, but which also does not disregard the insight and relevance of their own lived experience. As Anderson (2006) points out,

The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience, to provide an “insider’s perspective,” or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (p. 386)

While my own personal insights will not describe a theoretical explanation that could apply to all situations, my experience is situated in culture and I hope these experiences and the theory they produce can assist in providing an understanding of how the sustained organisational capacity for social innovation could be realised. Again the reality that the observations were founded within a single organisation, limits the range of inputs from which to ascertain how other contexts could associate with this. The analytical process of developing general theories attempts to acknowledge this in its focus on practices, over specific outcomes within the organisation.

In order to further the understanding behind the placement of this analytical version of a full member organisational autoethnography, a brief overview of autoethnography is provided here, which further explains its appropriateness to this study.

## Overview of autoethnographic research

Hayano (1979) first introduced the term “auto-ethnography” in response to his questions around the issue of how people could create ethnographies of their own cultures, but the extent of its relevance and application only arose in the coming years. This relevance was due

to the shift away from canonical forms of research that were “author evacuated texts” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 22) towards a more personalised approach. This was a direct echo of the post-modern movement burgeoning at the time, which questioned the scientific paradigm that qualitative research was subjected to. Rather autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21).

This approach, which combines aspects of ethnography and autobiography (Ellis et al., 2011), found legitimacy based in the postmodern critique of how the mediums of scientific research - its lexicon and paradigm – constrained the findings of a study (Krizek, 1998; Kuhn, 2012) or as Richardson (2000) puts it “form and content are inseparable” (p. 923). In that way scientific research’s goal of pure objectivity is challenged as unattainable.

Often a paradigm developed for one set of phenomena is ambiguous in its application to other closely related ones. (Kuhn, 2012, p. 29)

This was coupled with a number of factors which inspired the rise of auto-ethnography’s use and relevance. The scientifically sterile forms of research being applied in qualitative considerations were emblematic of a primarily colonialist approach to ethnography (Asad, 1973; Pels & Salemink, 1994). Furthermore the validity of ethnography as objective science was being questioned (Conquergood, 1991), with a “crisis of confidence” (Aunger, 1995, p. 97) arising due to multiple examples surfacing at the time showing “the possibility that different anthropologists could come to opposite conclusions about the same society” (Aunger, 1995, p. 97), showing the ways in which the researcher influences the research (Ellis et al., 2011). Whilst the attempt is to create rigorous tests which remove human bias, the idea of objective stance is commonly no longer seen as plausible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and the ways in which authors have “written themselves into their research accounts” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 22) is well documented (Coffey, 1999; De Vault, 1997). Rather than pretending to be value-free, autoethnography arose as an approach which fully acknowledged the researcher’s influence as part and parcel of research, acknowledging a basis of values and rather remaining self-aware of its influence (Ellis et al., 2011). Furthermore, through using self as a medium of study it is suggested that autoethnography is able to provide more accessible research, which is sensitive to the human condition and the issues of identity

politics (Ellis et al., 2011) – argued to be of greater relevance since it speaks to true experience rather than feigning a level of separateness which humans know not.

Traditional scientific approaches, still very much at play today, require researchers to minimize their selves, viewing self as a contaminant and attempting to transcend and deny it. The researcher ostensibly puts bias and subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity... Ways of inquiry that connect with real people, their lives, and their issues are seen as soft and fluffy and, although nice, not valuable in the scientific community. (Wall, 2006, p. 2)

Scientific research is by no means seen as an enemy to these nuanced qualitative approaches, but its philosophy opposes that which autoethnography regards as relevant – a contextual approach which is considered knowledge, in a paradigm of essentially partial knowledge (Richardson, 2000). Perhaps the primary critique is against a scientific paradigm which disregards the legitimacy of other forms of knowing (Ellis et al., 2011), such as the understanding of research as an inquest of sociological comparison and consideration, rather than one of finding truth (Charmaz, 1983).

Richardson (2000), who engages this exact topic of the forms of knowing, is asking of the human relevance of academic research due to the primary question of whether academia must be a narcissistic process, whereby none but a very select few will ever read the boring (Richardson, 2000) style of academic writing. Within this existential consideration, Richardson (2000) finds autoethnography as a writing style - combining the readable style of autobiography into the ethnographic approach - which may produce something that will make it off the shelf. If relevant research is what is intended to be produced, then its readability must be a primary consideration.

The need to create relevant accessible academic literature is acutely a consideration of an inclusive process, since it is the key factor which allows others to engage the same work. This naturally becomes the basis for the argument towards the use of such a style and methodology within this research process. Furthermore the real world outcomes linked to this research due to its placement in a social innovation context, is well linked to Richardson's (2000) concept of writing as a form of inquiry into the world. More specifically, the study of an organisations culture through the autoethnographic methodology in order to surface

innovation, expresses a direct correlation to the aforementioned methodological intention. This methodology essentially is a type of reflexive ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), allowing for the internal-external mirror (which is the primary imagery of this research) to be repetitively polished.

Writing personal stories thus makes “witnessing” possible (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) – the ability for participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 280)

In this way, personal reflection, insights and associated action - this praxis (Freire, 1968), can be best held by the medium of autoethnographic inquiry in its focus on both culture and the human story within it, key in the framework of social innovation.

Community autoethnographies thus not only facilitate “community-building” research practices but also make opportunities for “cultural and social intervention” possible. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 279)

This again begs a comparison to more traditional sociological approaches, expressed well by Maso (2015). When describing the story of a man approaching a culture anew, much as a sociologist would, “who by profession try to distance themselves from... culture in order to describe it more or less objectively” (Maso, 2015, p. 3), this man “is able to place the culture of the new group competently in an interpretive framework” (p. 3), however is unable to become a participant in that culture, since “his interpretation will hardly ever coincide with the way the members of the group regard that aspect of their culture” (Maso, 2015, p. 4). This illustrative story, expresses the question of the practical value of such research which does not allow for the aforementioned cultural and social intervention to take place, specifically relevant in the contextually concerned approach of social innovation. This mirror between methodology and areas of research is appropriate. At the same time the opportunity of full member research, such as this study, is that the interpretive act of placing a culture can be more congruously done with the members of the broader group being studied.

Even though the researcher’s experience isn’t the main focus, personal reflection adds context and layers to the story being told about participants (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278)

## Organisational autoethnography

“Beyond fieldwork, textwork and headwork, organizational ethnography is also becoming teamwork” (Rouleau et al., 2014, p, 4).

There is an entire field of modern research into the value and applicability of autoethnography in the organisational context (e.g. Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012; Herrmann, Barnhill, & Catherine Poole, 2013; Rouleau et al., 2014). The roots of this application of ethnographic studies go back to the early-to-mid 1900’s where ethnographers of many forms (from sociologists and anthropologists, to managers trying to understand the struggles of their workforce) took to factory floors originally - and eventually larger corporates - to discover the main drivers behind the way employees work (Locke, 2011). These embedded analyses of organisations resulted in “detailed narratives of organizational life and explications of personal experience”(Locke, 2011, p. 617) and were “deeply grounded in self-reflective participation and extensive observation” (Locke, 2011, p. 618), essentially a precursor for the autoethnographic approach. These early studies were an important link in moving a then mechanistic approach to organisations, towards the modern approaches of Human Relations practice (Abbott, 2009).

Doloriert & Sambrook (2012) specify three common forms of organisational autoethnography in modern practice, namely those focussing on higher education institutions (since this is the common domain of the researcher), on past work in an organisation from current researchers in higher education, and finally the full member organisational autoethnography. This last type they admit is rare in the field due to the challenges of both working and researching an organisation at the same time, and that there is much “room for growth” (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012, p. 90) in this area of study. This research falls into that category – a full member organisational autoethnography, and this can be seen to mirror some of the aforementioned early ethnographers’ attempts at organisational study.

In a recent paper Johri (2015), frames well the relevance of organisational ethnographies, especially relevant in the modern age of increasing amounts of knowledge workers.

In any workplace it is essential to understand the basis of workers’ impressions of one another because these impressions impact how the employees work together... most workplace decisions are based largely on

how we perceive others (Hinds et al., 2000; Moore et al., 1999). (Johri, 2015, p. 44)

In the complex sphere of knowledge work, the success of teams is critical in order to leverage multi-disciplinary sources of knowledge (Faraj & Sproull, 2000).

Management and organizational researchers are now ever more aware of the fact that ethnographic works are offering multiple possibilities for theorizing what is going on in organization, and able to develop rich insights related to the lived and cultural experience of organizing. (Rouleau et al., 2014, p. 4)

This is echoed by (Locke, 2011), who argues that the use of ethnography for discovery (as it was originally applied in the forays of early organisational ethnographies) rather than its modern use for validation of theory, is the most powerful application of this approach. This echoes the approach of grounded theory described previously, of theory-building, rather than theory-testing (Kathleen M Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Due to this she argues that:

Ethnographers make their contributions by identifying and analyzing new or unacknowledged behaviors and processes that have important implications for organizational life. Indeed, no single approach to the study of organizations has succeeded as effectively in discovering what has been ignored and taken for granted in the skills, the habits of thought and behavior, and the social arrangements of organizing. (Locke, 2011, p. 614)

## Data collection and analysis

The theory is emergent in the sense that it is situated in and developed by recognizing patterns of relationships among constructs within and across cases and their underlying logical arguments (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 25)

The idea of this emergent theory, specifically links to pattern recognition in data. In order to surface the patterns that contribute to the organisational capacity for social innovation in the organisation under study, I engaged in continuous autoethnographic journaling exercises.

Being a full member of the organisation I was continuously involved in the majority of meetings, daily work scenarios, events, and was as such intimately involved in the practices of the organisation. This led to a continuous process of observation, in which I would record specific moments and my subjective experience of them. These began as a record of numerous daily interactions and events. In order to accommodate a wide lens of organisational patterns, a general approach was undertaken in regular journaling of the aforementioned organisational spheres. These journals were primarily written, but regular usage of voice recorded journals that were transcribed soon after each recording were utilised simultaneously and inputted into the journals in chronological order.

I attempted to avoid an active search for organisational social innovation, and rather let the moments expressing organisational social innovation be found in the data. Nonetheless, organisational conversations, internal to the team and with external stakeholders were the main area where rich information was found, as this expressed the experiences of those involved in the organisation. Patton (1990) describes the idea of “purposeful” sampling, in which one chooses information-rich examples that are of high relevance to the subject of the research.

When observational methods are used in qualitative research they typically make extensive use of field notes or memos. These notes are primarily descriptive and observational but may also include the researcher’s interpretations and reactions, as long as these are clearly labelled as such. (Elliott & Timulak, 2005, p. 150-151)

As part of the journaling process I would review my notes of organisational occurrences for instances of relevance to my research question. I included these reviews with my own experiential observations and reflections in the data, to provide the progression of my personal lens and experience within the journey of the research process, as per the autoethnographic method. Sometimes I would use a descriptive approach to record events and occurrences and then afterwards add the layers of my personal experience, and at times it felt more appropriate to describe a situation essentially from my experience, especially when I was strongly involved in a situation. Both my general recording of events and my reflections of personal observation and experience were included in the data.



There were four phases of journaling, recorded in four separate journals that were conducted over a 12 month long period, each journal spanning 3 months of experiences. The analysing of this data informed further journaling, and this is explained in the following section. The journals were recorded and stored in password protected locations. Since these journals are referenced in the findings section to illustrate and highlight specific theoretical suggestions, small adaptations were made upon inclusion into the findings to protect identities, through changing of names to general positions in the organisation.

### Analysing data

In light of my aim of developing theory relating to the effect of awareness, observation and reflection (on the internal and external organisational practices) on the organisational capacity for social innovation, I was interested in the underlying meaning within the data. Specifically the consideration was in terms of the underlying practices and approaches that influenced this organisational capacity, and therefore an interpretive approach was an appropriate lens to surface this from the data, as opposed to merely being interested in the data as data. The interpretation of this data is where the underlying patterns could be recognised to develop an appropriate theory. Since the coding of data is essentially interpretive (Stokes & Urquhart, 2013), and the generation of categories in the first place “is an interpretive process on the part of the researcher” (Elliott & Timulak, 2005, p. 154), it is a logical approach for theory building.

The process of recording and analysing data will be described below. It outlines the process developed over time within the research period for a regular, repeatable approach to recording and analysing data. It is based in the coding approach of grounded theory, specifically the usage of field notes and memos, associated with observational qualitative research (Elliott & Timulak, 2005).

For the period of the first journal, when the process of the research was not fully formed, the practice described below was not entirely in use. I saw it fit to begin exploring organisational experiences and my own reflections on these from the outset, before there was a concrete nature to the process of accumulating and analysing data. The recordings of information were much more general, the experiences more raw. This period lent itself to the formation of potential departure points to understanding how the research would progress. The regular recording of journals in an autoethnographic style, along with general descriptive

observations, were both already being used as methodology, but the analysis of this lagged. Open-coding - and the associated substantive codes (Kelle, 2005) - was very useful if a tad cumbersome during this period. They resulted in a wide range of outputs<sup>3</sup>, which were then integrated into the first theoretical outputs. After this period, arose the following process that lasted the duration of the study, utilising the approach of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) intertwined iterations of collecting, coding and analysing data, “theoretical sampling is the process of data collection whereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes and analyses the data in order to decide what data to collect next” (Coyne, 1997, p. 625).

1. I carried a notebook with me throughout the research period, and during meetings, and other organisational situations, I would briefly record field notes on experiences, and events that occurred. Specifically things that were of interest to me, or expressing a nuanced organisational pattern. These sometimes included links to literature I had read, past experiences I had seen in the organisation, or approaches that were unexpected or particularly creative.
2. At the end of my work session in the organisation or when a break presented itself, I would record more of the specific descriptive notes on an event I had taken these types of general notes on. I would also record more personal elements of the experience, and also the reflections I had during this writing period.
3. Using the transcribed voice recordings, and journal notes, I would begin iteratively coding the notes, noticing repeated codes and recording them. I would also locate general themes in the data and record these in relation to the codes I had generated. As new codes were generated I would go back and compare my previous data points to see if there were cross-sections where this code arose. Like this I developed a general sense of patterns as they formed.
4. At the end of each journal (each one lasting three months) I would review the codes, and using the themes that arose, write conceptual memos and utilise various data points to notice any congruence or divergence from the themes. I would also look to

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of these early broad codes included: systemic approach, dealing with complexity, collaboration, alive to context, trust, reflective approach, inspiration, connected communities, collective action, diversity, unity, conversational solution, process oriented, flexibility, relationship building, social impact consideration, abnormal work spaces, mirror between internal and external, scale consideration, human engagement, informal interactions, authenticity, social sensitivity, context specific etc. – this is but an excerpt of the early lists of substantive codes developed from the open-coding process, specifically showing some of the early formations of the eventual theories built.

see if there were codes that related strongly to one another, and if there were core codes which could encapsulate a set of codes into one over-arching theme.

5. These themes would then inform what codes became more relevant for subsequent iterations of the data analysis. It was very clear from my personal reflections on recorded experiences when these codes became more concrete. Firstly theoretical memos developed into more formal concept pieces for the research. Also noticed in this sense was that early journal entries had little to no theoretical context, and expressed a broad outlook of reflective content. With time, due to the theory development, the reflections on data scenarios were more coloured with themes of theoretical relevance.
6. Iteratively I would take the themes and try to abstract the theory through which these phenomena arose, asking the questions of why certain practices and styles of interaction were particularly effective in encouraging socially innovative approaches. This is when I would often share insights with members of the organisation and see how they landed, to get a sense of whether it resonated with their experience.
7. By the end of the second journal, six months into data collection, some of the more prominent themes had surfaced in memos. There were still various outlier codes, and a much broader narrative of various codes that hadn't been selectively narrowed down. In the following period coding became more direct, with much more congruence to the data and experiences. Here the nuances of the various phenomenon were explored in greater depth, expressed in the findings of this research with the different aspects noticed under each broader heading. In the final journal, the themes in my personal reflections are clearly present and a new outlook on organisational process behind socially innovative moments has developed into theoretical form.

An illustrative example will best describe this process. I have at random chosen the below passage from one of the earlier field notes that describes one of the more important organisational innovations:

After breakfast we were all sitting on the balcony, and the conversation was brought up of how uncomfortable he (the director who invited us around for breakfast) felt about our current solution, how he had been feeling this sense that we were missing something and wanted to share this with the team. The idea that a customer had no agency to buy protection for

themselves and their neighbours seemed very problematic and we all agreed with this. He was about to go present at an international social entrepreneurship challenge and he had felt that he wanted to have a casual chat about his concerns. We all had the feeling that a solution where we were the gatekeepers to the community-wide alert system was very problematic, but none of us had expressed it yet. It was like witnessing kernels of popcorn pop as everyone began to bounce off each other's ideas, like we had all been waiting for the opportunity to brainstorm another solution together. Every idea we had the next person would take and expand upon. There was something about the fact that we were all just hanging out on the balcony together on a Sunday morning, without this being a formal session, that seemed to relax the often critical mind-sets used to dissect potential solutions.

My initial coding of this specific passage yielded the following:

- Casual conversation led to ideas generated – informal interactions
- Sense of discomfort with current solutions – continual development
- Ideas develop through everyone adding to others ideas – appreciative engagement
- Wanting to not be gatekeepers to solution – self-sustaining solutions
- Sharing concerns with team – communal development, authenticity
- Excitement in building new ideas

My later review of this resulted in the following iterative theorising and coding around this:

*Experiential reflection* – can see that here. The reason for calling this session was a sense that we had “missed something”.

*Non-judgemental engagement* – no critique of current solution and its deficits, merely an exploration of new ideas. The appreciative inquiry philosophy seems strongly linked to this style of engagement where new ideas are built upon rather than critically analysed. Note how because it was shared as a feeling that we'd missed something that there wasn't a critique at the centre of the inquiry in the first place, that there was something wrong with the other solution, but rather a focus on what was still possible.

*Dialogical interaction* – idea developed through conversation, an appreciation for the power of conversation and communal dialogue was the other reason this session was called. It was through this dialogue that new ideas were able to permeate existing organisational constructs. Also allows for collaboration between diverse sources of ideas and perspectives.

*Continual innovation* – The comfort with continuing to explore and shift existing innovation allowed for more nuanced appropriate solutions to form.

As I developed these codes I would contrast them with other codes found in the data and continuously use this to find a more appropriate over-arching theme in the data. From this basis once a code seemed to have congruence with enough data I would explore a concept piece on this to see how it would develop into a major theme of the research.

To extend the above example to see how the data turned into the findings, one of the major themes formed in the findings contains the concept of *continual innovation* mentioned as one of the themes in the data above. The secondary iteration of coding saw the theme of *continual innovation* be witnessed in the data point. This theme had formed as an overarching theme inclusive of various codes from the first round of open-coding such as *continual development*, *dissatisfaction with existing reality*, *flexibility* etc. Seeing a link between this major theme in the second round of coding, and another theme, *contextual relevance*, which arose in the third round of coding, a number of data points were grouped together to see if there was some underlying thread which could inform a major theme in the overall data. From this the findings section *The emergent context of socially relevant innovations* eventually formed. This section of findings refers to a number of data points which contained the earlier coding attempts, and speaks to the need to continually innovate when developing contextually relevant solutions due to the ever-changing social sphere. In this everything from the first open codes (such as *flexibility*), to the secondary codes and so on, combined into a theme which could be repetitively witnessed across the data.

The links between the literatures I was reading and the nature of the observations, expressed how my own personal involvement in the research shaped and created the reality I witnessed. This research process which is intrigued with the researcher's personal reflections on the reality of the organisation, essentially acknowledges the influence of the researcher. The theoretical nature of the outcomes nonetheless provide a contextually relevant account of social innovation in an organisational setting. The rare feature in the ability to be both

researcher and full member of an organisation means that this research was “deeply grounded in self-reflective participation and extensive observation”, the value suggested by Locke (2011, p. 618).

One key point to note in understanding how the research question informed the witnessing of data in the methodology is to understand the possible ways in which an organisational capacity could be witnessed in the organisation. This concept of organisational capacity would be a layer within the data analysis process to see where in the findings associated trends could be linked. Preconceived considerations for evidence of this capacity were:

- An increase in the frequency of socially innovative acts within the organisation
- A broader distribution of people socially innovating within the organisation
- An increase in the depth or impactful quality of the social innovations being formed
- An increase in the sources of bricolage being used in forming such innovations (i.e. a broadening of the sources of inspiring material from which innovation springs)

By the end of the study, five overarching themes arose from the theoretical sampling process, which covered a range of related codes. These were linked with certain key exemplars within the data that typified the sentiments of specific themes, and then corroborated with by other data points throughout the research.

### Research Ethics

Since the primary data being collected in this research is of the experience of the researcher, there is a limited ethical impact of such data in contrast to other forms of data collection. This study took place with full cognisance and signed consent from all the directors and members of the organisation that was being researched. While all data collection was of personal experience (autoethnographic) and as such no interviews nor other materials that could expose specific opinions of other organisational members were taken, full consent and awareness of the process was present. In order to hide identity of members in personal reflections all identities were hidden in generic terms, such as “a director of the organisation”, in order to avoid identification. Furthermore since the process of organisational reflections undertaken in the organisational autoethnographic data collection were of relevance to the organisation, preliminary findings of the research was given to the members of the organisation after they had arose and been observed for a period of time. These feedback

sessions also served to ensure that all members were content with the information being shared in the research process.

Other measures were to keep the communities the organisation engaged with nameless, to avoid any identification of these communities. There were numerous pilot communities that the organisation worked with over this period, and no discernible information was shared about these communities in the research.

All the field notes and associated data, were kept in a password secure digital location to ensure the security of the data being utilised for the study. Beyond this the University's ethical department considered and cleared the research based on the various considerations expressed above.

There were certain considerations into some of the quandaries of this fully expressed understanding of the research process in the organisation being researched, and how this would influence the research process. The primary concern exists in the organisation's members not being fully open, being aware of the recording process and hence only sharing certain aspects that seem appropriate. This pre-conceived notion which was to be dealt with as such a sentiment arose, never came to fruition. The main experience here was that since the researcher was involved in all the working aspects of the daily organisation (and hence was a full member of the organisation), there was no real notice taken of the field note taking as it occurred in the stream of other activities, rather than coming from an external observer. Since the jotted field notes were analysed outside of office hours, these notes were only visible during the original recording of them, and hence were fairly unnoticeable to the members of the organisation. This allowed for a natural engagement to occur. The main cognisance of the research occurred when preliminary findings were shared, or in reflective conversation around specific experiences that the research placed as of key importance.

# Findings

In the midst of one of our many design sessions, a member of the team expresses how he's feeling the sense that he's "in this alone", that he doesn't feel any support from the team. With that a stark shift is felt in the room, both in the way the conversation and the concept under scrutiny is being approached by everyone at the table – away from pure analytical reductionism towards an appreciative approach of discovering the possibility beyond the potential issues, the basis for innovation in all respects. His personal experience awoke us to good practice.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 12 May 2015)

Organisational development heralds from the industrial era, and was primarily focussed on efficiency in working roles, as well as the effective communications for the supply chain to function smoothly (Beckhard, 1969; Garrow, 2009). In that landscape the realms of personal life and personal experience were determined as mere distractions from the work at hand. What is being alluded to in the above excerpt (which is explained further below) is the power of subjective experience in the modern context of organisations. In the modern context the simplicity of the industrial era's inputs and outputs, the role-based formulas for successful operations are commonly challenged (Martins & Terblanche, 2003; Nadler & Tushman, 1999; W. O. Nilsson, 2009). This is especially true in a creative economy, where innovation is in the limelight, and new models are being called for to overcome the inefficient systems of the past (Wolfe, 1994).

When a dialogical basis in an organisation is the founding environment where innovation is born, the nature of those engagements is key in regards to the extent of which that organisation can innovate and create in continuum. The ingredients of social interactions, as with the nature of an organisational style of engaging with each other, are infinitely numerous. What can be said about this intangible nature of an organisation's engagements, is that it is made up of a collective set of individual experiences, which form patterns or



habitual interaction. This experiential<sup>4</sup> area is suggested in these findings as a critical area to be aware of and observe in order to affect the organisational elements or patterns, which either feed or detract from its members' ability to work together, or in this case more pertinently, to create together.

To give some colour to this idea, the above excerpt will be expanded. The member of the team mentioned above was, at this point in time, trying to pioneer new concepts in the team; in order to come up with a way in which this organisation could be profitable and with that sustain itself going forward. As to date the financial success of all the previous business models were questionable making this a very relevant endeavour. The member was pushing a new product concept in order to build on the organisation's business model. This concept was being questioned by the rest of the team in this particular meeting. Primarily there was a fear around the product's unintended consequences, and how without a proper design process being undertaken, this product could create more harm than good. There were other fears around the impact it would have on the current fire detection product being sold, and the use of resources within the organisation. These fears had put the new concept under extreme scrutiny, and what was initially a pioneering initiative that was meant to take the organisation forward, had been rung dry of possibility and creativity. It is at this point that he shared the sense of feeling alone in developing this business; that his initiative wasn't really heard. Specifically, that he "will have to do all the work to convince the rest of the team that this idea is worthwhile" (Petousis, Journal 4, 12 May 2015). Everyone at the table - who had previously been so focussed on the rights and wrongs of the idea; engaging purely with the concept, analysing it critically; had a moment of realising that they are talking to a person as much as to an idea. The mood shifted drastically, and following this realisation, every person at the table agreed that there was potential in the concept and that it would be interesting to take further; committing to delve into research in their own capacity.

The aforementioned excerpt of my notes is of a simple everyday occurrence, one that has probably passed me by numerous times. As my awareness of this pattern has developed I was able to witness in the above instance the starkness of the shift from the closed, analytical attitude of our team, towards an appreciative, inquiring one. The idea of the subjective

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<sup>4</sup> The experiential refers to the description in the previous sentence of the collective subjective experiences of the individuals within the organisation. This is the lived knowledge at the basis of everyday experience (Berger & Luckman, 1966)

experience of everyone at the table (and its importance in developing an appreciative approach), was ripened by this, and numerous other experiences in my dataset.

The aforementioned value of an appreciative approach has been a key experience in the research period, specifically as a cornerstone of the organisational capacity for social innovation. This will be touched on briefly here to give greater context to the reader at the beginning of the findings section. It is typified in the following example from the data. The occurrence described below happened directly after a meeting in which those present had chosen to develop an appreciative approach for our organisational engagements. This meeting had followed the event described in the opening excerpt of this section.

After the meeting, one of the directors (who was from a non-technical background) asked me how the new software for our “last gasp”<sup>5</sup> functionality worked. After explaining this to him, he asked whether we could use the last gasp function to be the catalyst for sending normal transmissions, rather than the rate-of-rise of temperature. His idea was for our units to only alert a community if direct flames were touching the device, which would be a more reliable confirmation of fire than the rate-of-rise of temperature. The flaws in this were obvious<sup>6</sup>, but instead of shutting the idea down, we didn’t explore the issues first, we explored the potential positives. Eventually the issues arose but we’d given the idea enough time in existence for a new idea to birth from it, and so a new technological solution was found – instead of taking the last gasp as a transmission catalyst, we used the last gasp as something which increased the radius of alert – this means a confirmed sizable fire would increase the extent of alert in a community, since once it reaches that size, the fire would become dangerous for a greater portion of the community. This awareness of allowing an exploration of the potential, and how that would offer greater value, gave the space for innovation to arise. In that we

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<sup>5</sup> The “last gasp” feature was a new fail-safe development on the fire detection unit. Using the existing circuit to sense for direct contact of flames on the device, this feature would then instantly send out a transmission alert to neighbouring devices.

<sup>6</sup> The main flaw being referred to here was that the system would no longer be an “early-warning” system if it only sent out an alert to the community when the fire had grown enough to be engulfing the detector.

discovered an idea far better than the original, but one which only grew from allowing a “not-so-good-at-the-outset” idea, an appreciative chance.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 17 May 2015)

The experience described above typifies Cooperrider & Whitney's (1987) idea that through an appreciative process - specifically a focus on discovery and dreams, instead of critical analysis and negation – innovation and imagination can grow rapidly. Cooperrider & Whitney's (1987) reference to the sudden democratic mobilisation of innovation through a collective appreciative approach (within an organisation) is one of the key lenses through which a socially innovative environment was assessed during the period of research. In this light, signs of organisational appreciative inquiry are linked to a capacity for social innovation.

When we humanise<sup>7</sup> a work engagement, and bring it back to an experiential level we are breaking a long-standing style of workplace engagement held since those early industrial years. Specifically, what it creates is the subject of this section. Essentially I am looking into how the organisational capacity for social innovation is affected by the workplace becoming conscious of the subjective experiences of people within the organisation. As Nilsson (2009) shared in his thesis, “if organization members are unaware of each other’s subjective experiences – if those experiences aren’t part of the ongoing conversation that produces sustained patterns – they can’t be institutionalized” (p. 148). Without the awareness of each other’s experiences informing the nature of organisational interactions, there seems to be a missing link in the capacity of the organisation to socially innovate - as the environment for communal creativity has limited access to that individual experience. This section looks into how the awareness, observation, and reflection upon individual experience<sup>8</sup> has played out during the research period, as well as the various patterns that have arisen.

The key findings focus on the following main areas:

- The democratising effect of the experiential
- The experiential as the basis for organisational reflection
- The reminder of the humanity in the room

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<sup>7</sup> By this I mean that we bring awareness to the humanity of those present within the interaction. One of the upcoming sections deals with this in greater detail.

<sup>8</sup> Often described as the “experiential” in this section.

- The emergent context of socially relevant innovations
- Deep dialogical relationships as the basis of an innovative environment

### The democratising nature of the experiential

The nature of organisational interactions, especially within more traditional forms of modern organisations, has a planned hierarchy. Even in a more flat structure such as the one present in the organisation being studied (where six directors are making all the major decisions about the future of the organisation), the organisation has its own power dynamic. In the case of our organisation those more involved in the daily operations and directing of the organisation tend to hold more weight in making organisational choices. Beyond that simplistic lens, the “innumerable extraneous variables” (Kaplan, 2002) of social interaction (as explained earlier in this dissertation in describing the impact of institutional frameworks on daily interactions), all lead to a dynamic in which certain voices are more powerful than others in an organisational setting.

One of the key forms or aspects of social innovation presented by W. Nilsson & Paddock (2013) is inclusive social innovation, which brings into light the question of “who”, in particular looking at shifting the fundamental elements of “social identity... power and decision-making” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013). The effect of bringing subjective experience into the organisational conversation was found in this study to be of specific potency in allowing for a shift in the preconditioned institutional roles at play in the dialogue of the organisation; creating the space for voices to be both spoken and heard. This democratising effect - brought about by the shift towards a humanised experiential tone - was at the base of numerous moments of traversing organisational conflict and unease.

Before the idea of bringing the experiential into the room had subtly begun to be institutionalised in our conversations, there was a particular experience which began my awareness of its democratising effect. The six of us who were leading the organisation forward, had a meeting we had been putting off, in order to decide on shareholdings. It was an uncomfortable conversation in that we were trying to divide the ownership of our company between six deeply entwined people, best friends, and close colleagues. Purely coming from a space of being unsure how to actually divvy up the ownership of our organisation, the conversation between us continuously returned to the experience of having the conversation,

...how we felt uncomfortable, how the act of choosing numbers felt awkward, especially in contrast to what we were a part of this organisation essentially for. It felt cold to quantify, to express ownership over something which we all were developing in order to make people's lives safer.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 10 October 2014)

The conversation had begun with us considering theories of how we could split up ownership, based on particular ideas of criteria. Then the questions arose of the future, what it was that we wanted as shareholders; and how could we ensure this. The conversation was fruitless until we simply all started talking about the strangeness of the experience, and how we were all here for something far more than shareholdings. As soon as we all connected to each other, after speaking of the experience of the conversation and in that seeing each other's humanity, the momentum of the meeting changed. Almost flippantly we came up with a set of percentages, asked everyone continuously how they felt about it, and everyone simply agreed. The shift in the room - moving away from our highly practical discussion, towards one conscious of the experience of everyone in the room - stood out for me. In reflecting on how quickly we'd moved from an awkward impasse to a solution which we had chosen together, and all felt happy with, inspired a journal recording (from which the excerpt above is derived), that at the time I didn't have the lens to reflect on completely. When reflecting over this piece of data during the early assessment of the findings of this study, I noticed how we had been able to make a communal choice with minimum fuss. There was an ease in an objectively tough choice that interested me and sparked further reflection. My later journal reflection on the event centred on the idea that the space in which we were speaking of experience gave everyone a more equalised voice, both in people's willingness to express their true experience and the quality of listening they received for their sentiment. It shifted a critical outlook in the conversation - dissecting concepts - towards one interested in how everyone felt about the situation and in that, there was a natural reduction of the judgemental filter used to consider what was said. This gave greater freedom in speaking honestly and in listening to people without having to intellectually analyse each piece of content. The fact that this led to greater ease and speed in making a tough organisational decision was the next element that came under reflection.

A period of time later another recorded experience epitomised the above sentiment which I had been seeing more regularly within our organisation. Over a period the regularity increased greatly with which we returned to the experiential question at the end of a meeting to assess the path forward or to make an organisational choice. One of the more tense and complicated choices came in the form of a new revision of our technology – namely the addition of a panic button to our early warning fire detection system, which would leverage the community-wide alert feature of our detector network to create panic warnings. As mentioned earlier in this chapter there had been significant tension around the choice of whether to take the idea forward or not and meetings about it tended to lead to either raising of voices or defensive conversations about people's attitudes to growing the organisation. At the end of one of these conversations one of the directors asked the simple question:

“How is everyone feeling about this?”, and there was that tangible shift that had become common to this experiential question as everyone took a quiet moment to reflect, and get a sense introspectively of where they were at. With the freedom that is given by feelings not being judged, where thoughts tend to be analysed, the answers that came were strikingly honest. That honesty did what an hour of conversation had not, by finally giving the simple clear answer which put the matter at hand to bed. It was so efficient in its ability to clarify a situation (that we had been stuck on for quite a period of time) which I noticed as something that traditionally isn't attributed to taking time for the sharing of personal experience. In particular, every voice was given equal footing as we expressed our feelings about the situation, which cleared the complexity of power out of the conversation. By the end of going around the table the way forward was obvious.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2015)

This example had become one of a myriad of examples that arose over this period of making tough organisational decisions. What made it specifically powerful was the recognition (in the journal recording) of the way the democratic nature the experiential had brought to the conversation had simplified the act of choosing. With everyone expressing their experience, their sense of the situation rather than just their ideas, the voices were all heard equally

without the lens of power that normally attributes certain opinions as more valuable than others. This layer of witnessing subjective experience's democratic effect clarified one of the trends in the data - the surprising effectiveness of sharing subjective experience in organisational decision-making, especially as a way to clarify a lot of rich conversation around a topic.

One of the key things to differentiate in this first findings section is the idea of the "sharing of experiences". What the researcher refers to here is not the sharing of ideas, but specifically the sharing of personal subjective experiences about a situation. This element of sharing how one feels, or the personal observations of the current dialogue or organisational situation, is specifically what was observed in the data. The nature of such observations, in contrast to the sharing of ideas on a situation, takes those listening away from the analytical approach to processing what is being said (since personal experiences are inherently subjective), and rather towards the empathetic perspective of hearing how another person has been experiencing a situation. This is key to understanding the link between all the data points where the sharing of experiences occurred.

One way in which this style of interaction (the sharing of subjective experiences to clarify a lot of rich dialogue) became institutionalised in the organisation was that at the end of a meeting with any external stakeholder, organisation or in a more specific case in the data, at the end of meeting a new potential employee. To give the space for honest reflection without judgement, the question was commonly posed of how we felt about or experienced the interaction we just had. This became the space where every voice got heard which was a critical element of engendering a sense of value in each person's involvement in the organisation.

A data point late in the study showed the following progression in organisational process:

One of our most experientially based meetings to date, expressing struggles and inspiration through our own recent experiences of engaging with the team. The team galvanises, but mainly really hears each other. The meeting centred around developing an appreciative approach to new ideas rather than shutting them down, which was in response to a recent situation where one of the directors had felt like the team had first tried to pick apart a new technological idea rather than see any of its potential value. Through the

conversation the resolution is made to a practice of appreciation to suggested organisational ideas. Specifically the idea is agreed that we'd like to encourage a space where innovations can grow and flourish through our collective dreaming. Again all voices become equal in a conversation of our own experiences, and in this we listen to each other in order to amalgamate our collective visions.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 10 June 2015)

The democratising element that the sharing of personal experience allowed for in the organisation, was clearly of specific use in dealing with areas of potential conflict. It led us to recognise the humanity in everyone around the table and in doing so reduce our critical lens to allow each voice a more equal footing. This played a role in the notoriously tricky space of organisational directing and decision-making. For further discussion on this, refer to the discussion section [\*The experiential in transcending organisational tensions\*](#).

Beyond improving the efficiency of these interactions however, the data actually showed the increased levels of reflection, honesty, and clarity with which we approached complex situations under discussion. This aspect - of overcoming a reductionist approach by allowing the subjective experience of those present to inform the outlook upon a complex situation – was of particular interest since it was coupled with the aforementioned efficiency and ease of decision making. This combination challenges classical critiques of the inefficiency of non-reductionist processes. The democratising effect of the experiential, with the authenticity it afforded those in the engagement, was a clear link in the data between the straddling of complexity and the efficiency of decision-making. This is further discussed in the discussion section [\*Inclusivity through experiential engagement\*](#).

### **The experiential as the basis for organisational reflection**

One of the key elements of a developing organisation is to manage the continuously changing structures and varying environments in which it operates. This is of particular relevance in the context of the organisation under study - which at the time of study was in the early stages of business model iteration, innovation, and development. This situation requires a flexibility to the changing needs and challenges the organisation faces, and with that comes regular decision-making around the direction of the organisation. This is nonetheless the reality of



any working environment where in order for learnings to be internalised by an organisation, and distilled to improve the functioning of that organisation, the current approaches being utilised need to be considered regularly. This act of studying current patterns is at the heart of the social innovation landscape, in its primary concern with the ability to “create new ways of addressing old issues” (Adams & Hess, 2010). In this context of social innovation as “reorganiz(ing) fundamental social practices” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013), the ability for an organisation to be aware of its current patterns and practices, as well as observe these and reflect upon them, is a precursor to shifting those patterns.

The “what” of social innovation (whether they be products, services, models, the dynamics of social power or individual’s experience) is painted in the context of the above shifting of preconditioned ways of being or doing. In this study the frame of internal and external practice is the lens through which the organisation’s capacity for social innovation is viewed. This materialises in numerous forms, from business model innovation, technological developments, organisational practice, community engagements, to the more nuanced levels of individual interactions. To transcend pre-existing models requires the capacity to see these daily situations (mentioned above) through fresh eyes. Becoming aware of the subjective experiences of the organisation, has been shown in numerous data points in this study, to promote a space of organisational reflection and with that an increase in the organisational capacity for social innovation. This section looks at instances of the aforementioned and the material outcomes thereof.

The lens described above, of the reflection of the internal and external practice of the organisation, first arose through a direct experience of the relevance and value of this mirror<sup>9</sup>. During an extended period of community engagement with our first pilot community, we had a build-up of tension during a period of regular meetings with the community. An excerpt from the reflection on a particularly tense meeting is described below:

It wasn’t just a tension between the Khusela (now Lumkani) leadership and the community leaders, it seemed to be a tension between the leaders themselves. The fact that we were running system tests in the community and that the leadership’s internal process hadn’t been fully followed had led

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<sup>9</sup> This mirror refers to the aforementioned reflection between the internal and external practices of the organisation

to this tension. There was discussion around all the people that need to approve our activities in the community, before we begin them. More than a lack of unity in how to deal with the issue, there seemed to be a lack of trust in the leadership, like everyone was trying to prove something about their value and importance in this process to each other and to us.

(Petousis, Journal 1, 6 August 2014)

When writing the above, my very next section showed the first inkling of the value of this mirror to our organisation.

That lack of trust, or the struggle around proving oneself in the community setting is actually a striking reflection of the tensions in our organisation at present. The six of us who have taken on the responsibility of the organisation have been in a continuous dance around ownership and being of value to the organisation. Originally when the idea of this team of six people arose, after the original three people had been working on it for a year, there was definitely a question of whether the organisation would be truly shared. I remember being asked something along the lines of, ‘This is your project. Will you really feel comfortable letting all of us direct how it grows?’. With this basis the whole team has been trying to prove that they could contribute enough and be of enough value to deserve to be part of this leadership body. Recently as we come closer to formalising our organisation and registering as a company - due to our limited resources and the basic reality of having to declare shareholdings - the culture within our organisation has become one of mistrust or more specifically, a desire to show “my” value to the team. With that comes the desire to not expose weakness and constantly the pressure of proving the value I add to the team, to justify my involvement in this organisation and to justify the future of me being a director or shareholder. It feels like everyone is walking around on tip toes trying to show a certain side, and it’s been a stifling time without that comfort, support and an all-round trust in the team.

(Petousis, Journal 1, 6 August 2014)

This reflection had brought cognisance to one of the tensions that had been at play in the organisation, however, had not been discussed since its early inception when the team of six leaders behind the organisation had first formed. Afterwards this reflection was shared with the team, we proceeded to have many individual conversations trying to break apart this tension in the team. The relative ease with which the aforementioned shareholders' agreement conversation had been realised, was an outcome of this process.

This experience of seeing the mirror between our community and our organisation, sparked a series of reflections exploring how we could use this medium of the mirror in order to reflect and digest our organisational experience, and with this deepen our organisational process.

This is broadened upon in the discussion section [\*Reflection as primary to social engagement\*](#).

This also was utilised in the reverse, though originally only recognised upon reflection. After having experienced the simplicity and unity restored in the organisation after our shareholders' agreement, we had discovered a solution to the challenge of dealing with the tension in the community around remuneration for assisting in our testing and distribution work. This link was not a conscious link made in order to deal with the challenge in the community, but the solution was found within the week following our shareholders discussion.

The challenge of remunerating specific members of the community leadership had caused numerous political tensions in the leadership body, exacerbating the aforementioned lack of unity and trust that was experienced. The solution arose through conversation with our development partners, to instead provide remuneration to the community bank account. This would then be used on general community activities, rather than given to individuals. Whilst there was some concern with this approach when presented to the community, after agreeing to it, there was that same simplicity and unity restored to our engagements.

It had taken out the individualistic element and once again everyone was working for collective gain. Upon recognising the similarity in outcomes between our shareholders agreement and the community remuneration conversations, that link of how our organisational experience had influenced our community engagement began to form. This link between the internal and external practice of the organisation (in both directions) developed into one of the key lenses both of this research and of the organisation.

One of the early and highly formative moments of the development of our organisation was the first properly formulated iteration of our business model, which was inspired on numerous levels by a slightly different angle of the experiential as organisational reflection. This occurred three months before our first roll out of our early warning system in a community.

We held a meeting to discuss recent experiences in our communities and how we as directors wanted to move forward as an organisation. There had been some concern over how our first pilot community was experiencing Lumkani as a development organisation, which had led to a mismatch of expectations on both sides. After the period of tense community meetings which eventually surfaced an expectation of paid positions for community leaders in the organisation, the situation had escalated to the point where Lumkani had been asked to leave the community. Finally the complexities of this situation had been resolved, as mentioned above and had returned to a warm welcoming engagement with community leaders.

“This organisation started with us talking about how this is a development challenge and so needed a grass-roots development solution. The way we understood the situation, meant we positioned ourselves as a development organisation. The way I’m understanding this organisation is as a basket of mixed goods, which needs to balance between business practice and development practice. I feel now we either need to position as a purely development project, handing this over to communities to run for themselves, or we need to adopt a radical straight business strategy and approach the big corporates to gain massive traction. For me, I see extreme effort and not getting anywhere with the development model. My feeling is that post-pilot we should just be approaching corporates.” This was shared with me by one of our directors, which was quite a new angle to hear from her. I can see this as a limited dichotomy, but there’s obviously a need to find a more scalable approach to reaching our market so I’m very open to exploring those models. I can see how the recent struggles in our pilot community have rang warning bells of how we’ll ever reach enough people to have a significant impact. It’s good to ask these questions. I nonetheless think that a complete shift away from in-depth community engagement will

take away all our ability to be relevant and connected to the people who we are trying to serve.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 6 October 2014)

A few days after the above excerpt, the particular question came to a meeting of the directors as to what the future model of the organisation should be. After sharing all of our recent experiences - in particular from the perspective of the director tasked with holding the community relationship (as described above) - ideas on the future manner in which Lumkani rolled out were suggested. Based on these recent challenges, as well as the level of effort required to walk the balancing act of the socio-political community engagement, the idea was posed that a non-community centric approach be the primary way forward. The majority of the team supported this route and from my own personal notes on the experience (below), this concrete decision to make our organisation purely focussed on scale through corporate structures, was particularly shocking.

It felt cowardly. Like we had come up against a big challenge, the dynamics of engaging with community leadership, and now we were going to waste the opportunity of being an organisation which can add deep value to communities in exchange for an efficient business model. I thought we were going into a meeting to see how we could overcome these challenges not to avoid them altogether. To hear the majority agree with a corporate sales model as the main model post-pilot, above a community based one really astounded me. Originally I had raised my voice in shock and after this I was pretty dejected for the rest of the meeting. Even afterwards when we were just sitting around talking about other things, I just sat there with a disbelieving quiet. I struggled to sleep afterwards.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 9 October 2014)

In the above brief reflection after the meeting I had lost a fair amount of faith in the team running the organisation. The shift from dealing with a struggle in our community, to a complete shift in organisational approach had caused a great deal of concern for me. However three days later, I sat down with the two directors currently employed by the organisation, and they explained how witnessing my dejected experience had caused them to

go and reflect together on what it was that had so shocked me. In so doing they arrived at one of our first concrete iterations of our business model.

The tension faced in the team was between scale and deep social impact (a classic tension of this realm of work). In the aforementioned meeting the value of scale had been given primacy. After seeing my strong response to the idea of reaching scale through corporate structures alone they had taken some time to explore options around this. In so doing they arrived at a hybrid model. This model employed the value and strengths from both the scale model and the deep engagement model in such a way that they could serve one another. The model was a rich one which we developed further in conversation, however, the main focus of my reflection after this session was on how the witnessing of my personal experience in the organisational context had allowed for a deeper reflection to occur.

The process behind this development is so powerful. After moving beyond the cycle of the tension, the value in it is so clear. The tension that arose allowed us to access our authentic individual experience, and have these be shared with the team. In getting the chance to experience each other's way of perceiving the world through this situation, we were able to access a deeper, richer set of inputs into how we approached our business model. Through our experiences being expressed we expanded our view of the situation, including in it varying and contrasting experiences, which encouraged a reflection in the team. To witness that as the catalyst to one of our most defining developments to date in our business model is striking.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 12 October 2014)

For a fuller understanding of the insights associated with the above set of datapoints, refer to the discussion section [\*The experiential as the medium and content of reflective practice\*](#).

For the sake of expressing the concrete outcome of this reflective process within the organisation, that model is described in brief below:

This first model had three wings: a direct community sales approach to whole communities through community leadership, an NGO partnership to roll out to their communities, and a corporate partnership to gain funding as well as for them to purchase for their employees. The

corporate wing of course had a large basis for reaching many people and with that a considerably valuable scale. This also allowed for previously inaccessible CSI funds to move through our NGO partner in order to service their communities. There was a fairly new local fund made available by our NGO partner to co-finance development projects that communities wanted to run. In order to give greater awareness of this fund and increase their reach to various communities, our NGO partner saw greater value in rolling out our system, as a simpler project (in comparison with the classic development projects they undertook) that still serviced a great need. Finally our direct community engagement would allow feedback on the development of our system to further service the challenge we faced. This would also support both the NGO and corporate wings by providing the direct marketing collateral of data on our system as well as stories of those using it. These three legs all supported each other in the model; such that each benefitted from the other's existence. This model would be expanded numerous times over the coming months, but this version was the one drawn up between myself and the two executive directors, on that day.

The above was one of the earlier experiences that specifically recorded the space that the experiential gave for reflection within the organisation. Numerous data points corroborate this recurring finding. To show the various levels at which this occurred, the following example is given below.

Along with major formative moments as described above, many cases of smaller daily interactions arose as the research period progressed. An example thereof in the data was at the end of a tense team meeting. After returning to our desks I turned around and expressed how it felt to have my concerns shutdown so quickly, simply because the topic at hand had been covered in a previous conversation by all the other members of the meeting. As everyone recognised my experience and could relate to it, the previously tense mood softened. Everyone was able to step out of their own conceptual considerations and reflect on how the frustration in the meeting had limited genuine conversation on the matter - a key basis for a socially innovative environment. The mere fact that the sharing of an experience had led to the team taking a moment, to listen and reflect, was an example of the basis for shifting our internal organisational patterns and behaviours.

Again expressing the diversity, while these organisational reflections have been shown in the internal sense as affecting the preconditioned social habits and patterns of the daily

operations of the organisation, further mirrors were shown in the data for the external operations of the organisation. The director in charge of our community relationships had once explained to me as we left our first pilot community how she felt better after community visits, and that she had a concern that perhaps she was missing important events, because it was “so nice and grounding to engage with the community” (Petousis, Journal 2, 15 December 2014). Upon reflection and conversation during the car drive home, we came to the observation that this feeling after community engagements was not a continuous reality, as when there had been friction in the relationship in the community the feeling after meetings was starkly different. This would become one of the key litmus tests for community engagements; observing and reflecting on our experience, the feeling we got from the meeting to get an authentic insight on where our relationship stood. This experiential litmus test was recorded to on occasion show a need for further engagement and a change in strategy, or as confirmation to continue with a current approach to dealing with the situation at hand. In both cases it provided the space to apply lived experience into the learnings on current community process. An example of the latter arose after the first instance when we received an alert on our database from our pilot community without there being a reported fire. We met with leadership to discuss our concerns and to see whether it was appropriate to mute the system until any problematic nodes in the network were found. Upon leaving the meeting, the four directors present spoke on the drive home about the feeling of trust we got from the leaders, and the overwhelming sense that the mood in the community was very supportive of the system’s functionality. We chose to allow the system to continue without muting, and found out that evening that someone had come forward to report the fire that had started in their home. In this way the richness of lived experiences filtered into the approach to handling the complexities of community engagements and the operation of our early warning detection system.

One of the key developments in the organisation under study was the concept of a network of fire detectors to create community wide alerts. The record in the data set on this event is primarily analysed in the upcoming section on deep dialogical relationships, but has specific relevance to the experiential inspiring space for reflection within the organisation.

A Sunday morning chat was called for by one of the directors, to discuss the functionality of the system before a social enterprise competition that coming week in London, in which Lumkani had earned a place. The system currently had individual fire detector units alerting



individual homes, and the potential for a central alarm to spread the alarm further. He began by saying that the reason he asked for this informal chat was because of a feeling he had that this wasn't the right solution. He said that he had a sense that he couldn't shake off that there we were missing something. With this as the basis, we began a conversation which would eventually lead to the aforementioned solution of a network of interconnected fire detectors in homes to create community wide alerts in the event of fire. In analysing the data this appeared as an interesting example where a personal experience was given as the main reason for reflecting on the technology, to try and develop a more appropriate and potent technological solution to the challenge the organisation had at its centre. This re-iterated the value of observing and responding to subjective experience as a medium to develop all elements of the functioning of an organisation, be they internal operations, external process, or in this case regarding the design of technological products.

One of the most powerful examples of how the experiential could transcend all the boundaries of an organisation in order to provide a fresh innovative outlook on a challenge, was the manner in which one of the major technological challenges of the fire detector was overcome during the late development stage of the unit. This data point will be expanded upon in greater detail in the upcoming section, "The emergent context of socially relevant innovations", but will be touched on here briefly due to its clear relevance to this section. The experience of how an approach of resilience<sup>10</sup> (rather than trying to find perfect solutions to a situation) that was being practiced on numerous levels within the organisation at the time, had inspired a journal recording of this pattern. Following this reflection on the observed phenomena of this resilient approach within the organisation, a cognisant effort was made to apply this approach in a software solution to a circuitry issue that the fire detector under development was experiencing. This solution reduced a massive challenge to a negligible one in the development of the fire detector, and had shown the power of how appropriating the reflections and experience from other organisational spheres could provide valuable shifts in the lens through which situations were approached.

In this section, the broad landscape has been laid out of how the experiential played a role during the period of research in organisational reflection. It has been laid out in the organic fashion in which it was experienced and developed, and will be explained in further structure

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<sup>10</sup> In this case referring to an approach of developing numerous pathways to an end outcome and keeping aware of what the situation required at the time, in order to discover which path to follow.

below in some of the categories that were surfaced. Primarily this section covered the different sources of experience, and the different applications or outcomes of the reflections associated with those experiences.

The data showed that both internal organisational conversation (through meetings, casual interactions, etc.) as well as external engagements with stakeholders (communities, clients, partner organisations, funders) both gave an experiential source through which the organisation could reflect. Also mentioned is how personal experience, outside of the direct activities of the business was a source for this organisational reflection.

The outcomes of the space that was created for organisational reflection were numerous, both impacting the internal functioning of the organisation (e.g. altering patterns of interaction within the organisation, making key decisions such as shareholdings) and the external activities of the organisation (e.g. the development of business models, dealing with the complexities of community engagement, the development of technological solutions). These developments are some of the material outcomes of the increased capacity developed in the organisation for social innovation through the medium of the experiential.

### The reminder of the humanity in the room

Whilst analysing the data above, the question arose of why the sharing of subjective experience had a democratic effect, of why the mood in a tense room would soften when someone spoke from their own lived experience rather than intellectual concepts. The same question arose when looking into the authentic, honest reflections that arose from an experiential basis, as in the aforementioned examples. This section takes the conversation of the experiential and its effects specifically to some of the external practices of the organisation. In the context of the mirror between internal and external practices, this section demonstrates how an internal appreciation for the power of the experiential translated into a similar external practice during the period of research. The effects of this practice is the subject of this section, with the phenomena described below as the lens which emerged, and was formulated from the data.

The phenomena described here is that in recognising the humanity of those present in the room, the members of a discussion or situation are no longer confronting concepts, which can be analysed critically. They are rather engaging people, which encourages a more empathetic approach. The capacity for social innovation in an organisation comes from its ability to

authentically look upon a situation through numerous eyes, which necessitates an empathetic filter. This is suggested here as one of the key links between the experiential and the organisational capacity for social innovation.

One of the early examples in the data, of the power of lived experience being practiced in the external interactions of the organisation, was in the face of a manufacturing delay before the pilot run of the Lumkani fire detection devices in its first community. The delay in manufacturing came from the plastic casing manufacturing who belatedly alerted the organisation to a six week delay in delivery, due largely to seeming mismanagement. This was of specific importance due to the imminent December holiday period after the intended roll out date. A great portion of the pilot community would return back to the Eastern Cape (A province on the opposite side of South Africa, from which large portions of the urbanised informal settlement communities of Cape Town originate) over this period, making a full roll out impossible. Furthermore, the end of year holiday period had shown to be the highest fire risk period in the City of Cape Town, furthering the level of importance of meeting the required timeframe. This critically would also have an impact on the relationships with the community, which had expressed on numerous occasions that they were well acquainted with non-delivery of promises, a common feature of the South African Development environment (Alexander, 2010; Pillay, Tomlinson, & Du Toit, 2006). In this worrying context, the director in charge of community relationships boldly organised for the leaders of the community to go meet the plastics manufacturer who was responsible for the delay. This example of crossing traditional borders of interaction and social power was a powerful example of utilising lived experience to engender a more compassionate understanding from the various stakeholders involved in this situation.

The feedback from the meeting was particularly interesting. In the first place, the community leaders being shown around the manufacturing factory, and the manufacturers meeting the people who their products would actually reach were completely new experiences for both of the groups. The community leaders explained the issue of fires that faced them during the holiday period and the need for these fire detectors to be delivered before then, and apparently this had a real effect on the managers at the factory. At the same time the manufacturers explained that their head production manager had fallen and gotten a spinal injury, only just having

returned from 8 weeks off work. This was not information which had previously been shared with Lumkani. Upon hearing this, the director in charge of community relationship present, got the contact information of the production manager. She proceeded to contact him a number of times to check on his spinal injury, imparting some of the knowledge she had gained from previous experience with spinal injury. Whilst no commitments had yet to be received from the manufacturers there seems to be some renewed impetus. The community leaders were very supportive and happy to have been involved in the process of making the final devices arrive.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 2 November 2014)

The director that is mentioned in the excerpt above, gave major credit to both the visit as well as the continued communication with the production manager around his injury as the main reason the casings were delivered on time - a week and a half later. Specific credit was given to the deeper connection between the production manager and the Lumkani director managing the situation, as to the willingness and effort from the manufacturers in meeting the deadline. This is further discussed in the discussion section [\*The experiential fostering an empathetic approach\*](#). This example had a number of illuminating aspects for the findings of this research.

Firstly the example was one of the early instances where the observation of the mirror between internal and external practices had a marked effect on the organisational capacity for social innovation. The aforementioned director took the experiential practice, that was being nurtured within the organisation, and applying a similar approach (one where the experience of the stakeholders involved was paramount) surfaced an interaction which shifted traditional roles and positions of power - classic aspects of an inclusive social innovation (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013).

Traditionally these groups are institutionally excluded from interacting with each other (the manufacturer and beneficiary) and in that way this exemplifies “the inclusive aspect of an innovation... bridging social identity boundaries” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2014). This gave the community a chance to be involved in realising the project’s completion, through being given the space to go to those responsible for the delay, engage them on the issue, and to see

it improved. This of course sits in contrast to the traditional complaints of simply waiting for service delivery (Alexander, 2010; Pillay et al., 2006). In the data is a journal record describing one of the early reactions from one of the community leaders when the units were first rolled out:

She said to me that this is just the beginning. She said that I'm going to see what comes next from this community. I remember her smile when she said "we are on the rise".

(Petousis, Journal 2, 24 November 2014)

This community leader had been part of the visit to the manufacturer, and was deeply involved in the long process of engagement with Lumkani, throughout the design and roll-out phase. She clearly had an experience of a greater sense of possibility in realising a project which she and her community had been very involved in. This shift of experience touches on the Experiential Social Innovation described by Nilsson & Paddock (2013), in the overarching goal of any social innovation to improve the lived experience of those involved.

Furthermore this point in the data suggests an unexpected aspect of the value of the experiential in the workspace with regards to improved efficiency; traditionally characterised by the reductionist automated approach of the industrial era (Garrow, 2009; Kolb & Frohman, 1970). It was an example of allowing lived experience to be the basis of a more empathetic response on all sides – the manufacturer's greater empathy, which was attributed as the reason for their improved manufacturing time, and the community's greater empathy to Lumkani in understanding the complex set of realities which led to the delayed delivery of units. The link shown again here is that increased empathy had led to greater efficiency in production. Whilst this is not a causal link, it is nonetheless an example of how empathetic non-reductionist approaches can, in particular scenarios, improve efficiency.

Another simple everyday example in the data of bringing the experiential into the manner in which the organisation engaged its various stakeholders, is of our interaction with our graphic designer - who created all of Lumkani's branding and product information. The question was posed to him (by the director in charge of organisational relations) when he first started doing work for Lumkani of how he would like to undertake work with us. Given the space he expressed his experience of pain in operating as an "object in the design world" (Petousis,

Journal 3, 3 February 2015), and that he had found it stifling to only be engaged on a work outcome basis. We found out that this “dehumanised role” (Petousis, Journal 3, 3 February 2015) as he had put it, was the reason he had quit his previous job, and that he had considered stopping design work entirely because of this experience.

This led to the process of creating, with him, his ideal working relationship. Simple things such as phone calls, one-on-one meetings rather than e-mails were some of the resolutions that arose, for what would become a healthy working relationship for him. It was this level of care and consideration of his humanity that was attributed to providing the space for sustained successful work to be completed. The data then records that these practices were considered internally within the team, and this was the inspiration to move into a shared work space rather than working as individuals on different sites; to accommodate more human-to-human communication.

This approach of valuing the more complete aspect of a human in the work place, is mirrored in Lumkani’s internal operations. One of these examples is the accommodation of the various passions and life interests of the organisation’s employees. The three directors that were employed midway through this research period, had at the beginning of their employment each proposed specific activities which they would like to accommodate into their work week. These activities ranged from a recovery based yoga training, to acting and script writing. Time was allocated for each to follow and fulfil these passions within their week, allowing for a greater sense of life satisfaction to be present in their experience of working within the organisation.

A great organisational step that we just started the year with, is to accommodate each other’s entire lives and allow for the space for those lives to have as much legitimacy as the work of the organisation... This allowing of passions and interests to be accepted as legitimate within the organisation’s framework and practice really allows for the full life expression of everyone within the organisation – this comes from the culture and value of seeing people as whole complex individuals who are not simply employees or customers or stakeholders.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 24 January 2014)

One of the reflections in the data describes best how the experiential was the basis for a web of inspiration around the project, and how this was used as a way of maintaining morale within the team.

This afternoon I had an interview with some young entrepreneurs from the Raymond Ackerman Academy. In questioning how the growth of our organisation had been made possible, they were amazed at how much support and human commitment had been garnered around the organisation and wanted to know how this had happened. The context of that question was one where not only had I worked for the last 2 years for no pay in developing this organisation, our head engineer had done the same, that week one of our directors had just quit his highly creative engineering job to start working for the team fulltime, another director had promised 2 hours of unpaid work to our team each day (taking time out of his product development job), Our head technical advisor had just suggested putting in a request for a year's sabbatical from his engineering lecturing position at UCT in order to work for our organisation, we had a free day workshop from a high-end management consultant that weekend, and we were operating out of an office space (in a trendy building) which had been offered to us at no cost. The people interviewing wanted to know the history of how this happened and upon reflecting on it with them, what became clear was that experience had been the source of all this support. My original response was to consider the natural value of our project, how it aimed to provide social impact in the context of a country so unequal, and that people naturally would offer support.

However upon reflection in the conversation I remembered what originally galvanised the team around this organisation - it was the first experience of meeting with a community who were interested in the possibility of this early warning system. Those first meetings had led to a wave of commitment, where everyone who attended would end up offering their services (in one case, an owner of a local industrial design company, offered us all of his workforce to build the 50 units the community had asked for in that meeting), and this had been the formative period when the

concept became an organisation of committed people. It was that engagement with actual people, the personal experience, not just the idea of the horror of shack fires that galvanised the team and the support around it. I explained to the interviewers, that throughout that first year of development I had always had this as a guiding practice: that whenever the team was feeling low, whenever we were struggling with support, it was time to re-engage the community and remind ourselves of why we were doing this. To engage with the people who actually needed our work was vital; it would re-energise everyone with purpose. Obviously there was value in understanding the context of our work, but at the same time an unexpected value of continuously engaging with the community was how the human experience of seeing another's situation and connecting to those humans - that bond was inspiration enough for all involved.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 8 February 2015)

The above data record, shows how empathy was engendered in people by having direct experience of engaging with the communities in need of this system, and in turn how this personal experience lead to a commitment to be involved in this work. This buy-in or commitment is the basis for deep engagement with a situation, primary to the capacity for a socially innovative environment. The various elements around this are discussed in greater detail in the discussion section [\*Empathy and the sustained commitment to deep engagement\*](#).

Giving a more practical example of the value of the experiential in the development of social innovations (in particular in the programmatic sense described by Nilsson & Paddock (2013)), is a data record of going onto the scene of the first fire to which the Lumkani system created early warning, in December 2014.

We learnt so much more than we ever could have from a distance by being on the ground right after the fire had happened. In truth it was a dangerous place to be for various reasons, but experiencing the sheer reality gave a far richer picture of what was going on, from the scrap stealers, to the exact detail with which everyone knew the story of what happened (compared to the regularity with which news broadcasts on shack fires report that the cause is unknown). There was a significant relationship built through this



recent period with our community and the trust was developed further by us being there on the site of the fire, and talking with everyone there.

Being there, talking to people, seeing the reality of what it must be like to fight a fire –it all led to such insight in how much extra information we needed to give people so they could get to the site of the fire quicker. There were the children collecting buckets, the bucket line from the local tap, which was a distance away, the stories of the woman who found the fire and ran to everyone nearby to spread the word. It inspired ideas around getting the location down to the exact house and through this we've begun to conceptualise and build an area specific SMS system (to alert everyone in an area), and the further innovations from this are just burgeoning as we consider other applications of our system. Experiencing the extent of the individual struggle caused by shack fires (in a community we've developed such a strong relationship with over a long period of time), brought the whole team into serious consideration of how we could re-invent our system to provide better warning in the event of fire. It was a wake-up call away from the operations of our organisation back to the essential aim of how we can best serve people in giving them as much likelihood to deal with a fire as possible... the trust established with the community will be so valuable in what is possible for us to learn from everyone who experienced this fire.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 12 December 2014)

This example again expresses how the empathy generated from personal experience was the motivation for further innovation. Furthermore the content itself, to input into our thinking and imagining to develop that innovation, arose from that direct experience of being in the most real version of our context – in a community at the time of a fire. At the same time the link to how this strengthened our relationship with the community, as they saw us arrive to engage and talk with people and offer support in the event of a fire, showed another aspect of the value of connecting with our stakeholders on a deeper level. Finally how this trusting relationship allowed for further engagement with those who were part of fighting the fire gave even deeper insights over the next period to inform how to improve the functioning of

the system. These findings show a picture of the multiple levels through which the experiential is able to enhance the organisational capacity for social innovation.

The overarching theme of this section is the empathetic being a powerful force in a socially innovative environment. In order to approach the level of social awareness required to develop socially impactful innovations, the value of being able to stand in another shoes is paramount. The data around this lens given above, shows the breaking of social power boundaries, increased efficiency through empathetic means, new product innovations/improvements, and an overall commitment engendered in stakeholders to be fully engaged in organisationally relevant scenarios. These aspects all show how the experiential element of bringing an awareness to the “humanity in the room”, provides an environment where the likelihood of valuable social innovation is increased.

### The emergent context of socially relevant innovations

The concept of emergence has applications over a wide range of fields, from philosophy, science, and in this case, organisational development. The economist J Goldstein describes this phenomena as “the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems” (Goldstein, 1999). Beyond simply “the appearance of novelty, or something previously absent or unprecedented” (Lawson, 2012), it is specifically its dynamic nature (expressed in the continuous tone used above in Goldstein’s description), the fact that it is an evolving reality, that is of specific relevance to this section.

This concept is translated into one of the major perspectives held within the organisation under study, described as seeing the world as an emergent reality. The basic premise that was used in organisational discussions was recorded in the data after a meeting focussed on the roll-out plan for the first community-wide pilot of devices.

The world is in continuous flux and therefore solutions/approaches must mimic that. In this context appropriate approaches are emerging rather than definite and final.

(Petousis, Journal 1, 28 September 2014)

This perspective was later recorded in the data as being a defining aspect to how the organisation approached various spheres of its existence. It specifically explains the link of how being aware of the experiential, and reflecting upon it, keeps a continuous process of social innovation alive within the organisation. This aspect of the evolving nature of relevant innovations in the social realm, which by definition must be aware of context, necessitates a philosophy of emergence, where there is not a definite or final nature to a social innovation.

[The perspective of seeing the world as an emergent reality] translated into how we saw each other as a team (not as finished products but as emerging people, who could learn and adapt), into how we approached our business model (as something which we would discover as we gained further experience in getting the system out there, through an iterative exploratory approach, rather than a pre-defined answer), into how we approached our community engagements (instead of coming with a well-laid out plan we placed greater value in being highly aware of what was going on at the time in our community to define our steps forward). This perspective of seeing things as an emerging context, created the need for continuous awareness, observation, and reflection on our experiences, into what was occurring at present. Experience was therefore used to continuously surface the next steps we should take as an organisation.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 14 March 2015)

The aforementioned meeting held before our first community roll-out was one of the early organisational experiences of how an approach of accepting an emerging context was necessary in order to properly deal with the complexity of the social realm. This was a lesson learnt directly through our community engagement partner, an organisation with a long history of grass-roots engagement, who rebuffed our original approach of trying to accurately plan out how the first roll-out of units would occur. This organisation had connected us with the pilot community and had partnered us in handling all our community engagements thus far.

We had repetitively attempted to organise meetings with them to plan out the exact nature of how the day of distribution would occur, how the collection of money in advance would be handled, and to structure the events of the day. The feedback we received, which we

originally struggled to accept, was that the day would be worked out based on what was happening on the day when we got there. Obviously the community knew what the day was about, but the structure of it and how the roll-out would occur, we were advised, was best dealt with when we were there, and not in advance.

This acceptance of uncertainty was a process which encouraged two approaches from the organisation. Firstly, in order to deal with uncertainty, there was a great deal of awareness required on the day in order to best figure out the way forward. Secondly, the team approached the situation from a resilient standpoint. As opposed to having a single plan, we developed a number of different ways in which our main goals of the day could be reached, and were open and flexible on the day for any approach to be used. These two experiences were key learnings which began to shift the approach of the organisation on multiple levels.

Originally it was very confronting to have no plan for the day but we had to grow accustomed to being a mirror for the environment of the informal settlement, which meant not having our own perfectly structured planned operation. That's what worked in this setting, and in order to function here we had to follow suit, and be willing to be aware, not in control, and rather let the process arise in each moment. That did not entail being inactive, but rather a deep level of awareness and resilience, where change is accepted, and how we move with change is our greatest resource. Whilst we were still grappling with this we attempted having infinite back-up plans.

However this also meant having that overarching perspective to see what was of greatest importance in each step of the process of rolling out devices in to communities. That is what we had to learn in the lead up to our first roll-out day. Sure enough as soon as we arrived we were present to the fact that the day wouldn't go according to plan. However since we didn't have that expectation, it didn't bother us, and we let what was showing up define what was the best way forward... When we left, we all felt emotional from having realised this first example of our system after such a long period of work. When reflecting on the way home we realised that all the objectives we had originally set out had been reached.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 24 November 2014)

This experience was a defining one in our community process, learning the need for having planned sufficiently for a number of different pathways to a specific outcome, and for remaining aware of what arose in order to surface the appropriate path forward. This discussion around this finding is elaborated on in the discussion section *[The impermanent nature of the social realm](#)*.

An emerging context essentially allows for iteration; for experience to inform the next approach. Another data point showing this, was the innovation of the main distribution approach for managing community roll-outs. The director tasked with holding community relationships had been experiencing frustration with some of the community leadership structures in rolling out fire detection devices into communities. There had been a lethargic approach from the community leadership of one of our communities to the distribution of units. The conception of these relationships as emerging, encouraged a willingness to try innovative approaches to discover better practice. On this occasion the unreliability of the broader community leader group, meant that different members would be present at each meeting. This created the struggle of having continuity, and with that, experiencing progress.

In order to deal with this challenge the director managing this relationship suggested a change in the pre-defined community process that was given to us by our community development partners. Instead of engaging the whole community leadership body in each session, a task team was suggested. This separate body which could include both community leaders and general members would allow for greater focus, commitment and accountability in performing specific tasks such as roll-outs. The success of this model, entrenched the approach into the both the business and distribution models.

The response to the change in model has been dramatic. It seems as though the significant change is from people feeling more personal responsibility in a smaller group tasked with rolling out the units. Firstly a consistent contact person for this small task team has become the norm, which has also allowed for leadership to emerge in ensuring activities are being performed. Within a few days almost fifty percent of the total units have been rolled out. It also removes us from engaging with all the politics of the community leadership structure directly, and the community leaders who are part of the task team can report back to the broader body. I can also see

how the main correspondent is feeling a sense of pride in being the main person involved in organising the roll-out.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 22 March 2015)

Soon after this members of these task teams began approaching other community leaders of neighbouring communities of their own accord to discuss the potential of having the early warning system in their community. This renewed motivation and sense of ownership in getting the system out there, led to a new outlook on how these task teams could operate. From this experience the impetus was about bringing this into the business model so as to sustain the structure in the organisation. In this revision of the business model, members of the task team would be paid to do roll-out activities, as well as for finding new communities, encouraging a more organic spread of the system to neighbouring regions. This new model would be adapted and revised for the remainder of the research period, but its essential structure was born of this shift in approach suggested by the aforementioned director. This was a further experience of how being present to what arises, both challenges and successes, can allow for the growth of novel approaches within the organisation.

Another reflection of how this perspective of emergence had instigated a shift in the overall approach of the organisation had been in response to the challenges of developing a profitable business model. At the point when this data point was recorded, the lexicon of the organisation had absorbed the term “emerging” and “emergent reality” into regular use, which were previously foreign concepts in the organisation. This shift allowed for a new frame through which to experience the challenge of developing an appropriate business model.

I’ve been speaking regularly with the director who is primarily focussed on business development, and his frustration with management consulting and its approach for dealing with business model development has been eye opening. He sees their canvassing approaches and removed conceptualising as being completely detached from what is actually required – a development of the model through direct engagement. He places so much value on the action of approaching organisations who could be clients and discovering potential models with them, rather than conceiving of models

from a distance. Conceiving of the business model as an emerging reality is the very nature of the iterative exploratory approach that he is suggesting.

In an uncertain world, the business model is not a simple defined thing, but rather something which we need to uncover. This process has led to so many innovative approaches, purely because as the tension of a model which doesn't produce a great result continues so we look further afield for ways of making this work. The most recent outcome of this was the City of Johannesburg suggesting a model where it could partner another insurance company to create a sustainable model of providing both fire safety and the fall back of insurance to those living in informal settlements. It is only because the model is expressly uncertain that this sort of input from other stakeholders can arise.

This process requires a trust in the emergent nature of the things. We've had numerous business model development sessions with the directors recently trying to conceive sustainable models for rolling out our system at scale. In these sessions which never lead to a simple clear solution, I can see a growing comfort with the uncertain, and a valuing of this uncertainty in how it inspires further creativity and innovation.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 10 April 2015)

There is a vitality in the approach described above within the business model, in which we are continually exploring potential models. This model is always viewed in its ability to serve both our aim of providing people with a safer place to live, and of doing so sustainably with a profit-based organisation. In the context of business model innovation, the potential tension mentioned in the previous sentence, as well as the comfort with uncertainty – which the concept of the emergent nature of reality affords - combine to provide a sustainable impetus to discover a more appropriate model. This combination is one of the noted aspects which arose during the research period, and which contributed to the organisational capacity for social innovation.

One of the approaches mentioned previously in this section, was that in order to deal with the eternal flux of an emergent world, an approach of resilience had been adopted within the

organisation. A set of data points around this approach shows the intersection of numerous findings within the research. This clearly expresses the specific value of the process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of the organisation on the organisational capacity for social innovation. The extended reflection below occurred around the same period as the experience of the uncertainty of the first roll out day described at the beginning of this section.

There is a strong theme in the organisation that I realised today. Instead of trying to create a single perfect solution or approach, we are always endeavouring to create resilience to deal with a reality of eternal change. The spark to this reflection was our strategy for the roll-out day with our pilot community, which our development partner has explained is best handled on the day, leading us to have a session to imagine potential scenarios and find different pathways to all the main objectives of the day being completed... As opposed to trying to control an essentially changing and unpredictable world, we would rather attempt to be in a state of deep awareness of it, and through that continuously discover the best approach. This philosophy is specifically applicable in the community forum, due to the informal nature of the communities we were working in, but it was a surprise to see it reflected in so many other spheres of our organisation.

Seeing this then gave me new insight into our business model approach which was slowly coming to life. Instead of trying to find the perfect business model solution, we saw that an ecosystem of approaches would give us far more resilience to change. Perhaps the NGO landscape would become too complicated a market, or financial crisis would limit available funds, so we had a corporate model, a direct sales model, a government side of the business focus. After this reflection we had a conversation in the office and began to elaborate on each sector in both an individual and collective sense (i.e. how they could support one another).

This was then reflected by me as being the way our technology intended to deal with the challenge of shack fires. We were not finding the problem, the cause of the fire, but rather, accepting the change, the appearance of fire,



and rather sense for any fire, no matter its source, and alert people to it. In alerting people to it, again there was not a given solution, a planned response, but rather relying on the natural resilience of a community working together to deal with the fire. In that way this object, this detector was there to increase community resilience to fire, not to prevent fire or to avoid it all together, just increasing resilience in that system.

In our own organisation at this time, we have all begun to really jump into each other's work-streams. The technology is understood in its minutia by the whole team and our main technical developer has handed over development to the two other engineering focussed directors... The community development models have become far more of a communal process of conversation. That spread of responsibility and communal thinking around these, give us another type of resilience, both to members of the team being unavailable, as well as to being stuck on a specific challenge. It is no longer purely an individual's sole task, and the flat structure of our organisation is allowing for cross-disciplinary thinking. That type of resilience, which is born of community is clearly a theme of our organisation and its intended creation in the world.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 16 October 2014)

This extended reflection from the data is included here as a clear example of the numerous mirrors within the organisation. The expression of these mirrors in conversation that day had inspired the business model conversation mentioned in the data record above, clearly showing the value of how the observation and reflection can inspire an alternative lens through which to view this aspect of the organisation. What adds to the value in this is that the conversation around the business model had been thoroughly engaged in by the team in the weeks leading up to this point, and this new perspective of resilience had shifted a single solution focus, towards developing a multi-pronged resilient model.

The remaining two reflections – of how resilience was the overarching aim of the technology in communities, as well as the current approach of the organisation - arose during the written reflection process. The day following this data point I had been inspired by a recent experience of appreciative process to attempt an appreciative approach to a technological

development. The theme of resilience in the multiple levels of the organisation, and the cognisance of this, was clearly another inspiration to this solution. This development overcame one of the major challenges being faced in the late revisions of the technology being done before final production.

I was trying to fix one of the major bugs in our software today, a noise issue in the circuitry, which caused an increase in false alarms from the heat sensor. We had been struggling to solve this issue for quite some time and couldn't find the source of the problem. To give context, engineering is based in seeing the world through a critical problem solving lens – we find issues and we solve for them. As I was wracking my brains and running tests to try and find what was wrong with the circuit that had this noise within it, I noticed that my latest software change had slightly decreased the false alarming issue. With the experience of our recent approach of having looked for what was working in our community to figure out how we were going to undertake our community roll-out, I decided to stop the “what’s not working” approach to the device, and begin an appreciative process of adding more of what had worked. That’s not at all how I’d ever been taught in an engineering context, but with minor coding changes where I looped through cycles of the software which had decreased the code, one of our greatest device challenges was reduced to a problem which we would only see in a quarter of a percent of devices. It was a very liberating approach in the development of the device, to not be looking for what is wrong but for what is working in the device, in order to address a challenge within it.

What was clear to me once I had made the first appreciative addition to the code, was that I was mimicking the resilient theme in the software that I expressed yesterday in my reflections. The software is trying to cancel out noise. As opposed to expecting the circuit to behave better (i.e. produce less noise), we are using the software to find more ways of being resilient to the noise in the circuitry. More specifically we are listening to multiple readings and comparing them to see how we can filter out noise, rather than setting predefined conditions of successful sensing.

Whilst the end of this reflection may require technical knowledge to understand, the idea being expressed still has significant potency in the context of this masters. Both the experience gained from the use of appreciative approaches within community engagement, as well as the recent reflection on the theme of resilience within numerous aspects of the organisation, had been utilised in a completely different sphere, to innovate in the technological functioning of the fire detection system. This cross-disciplinary permeability of ideas is a clear example of how the basis of social innovation - namely seeing “non-obvious connections between seemingly separate ideas and cultures” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013) - can result of both an appreciation of the experiential, and of the process of awareness, observation and reflection into the internal and external practices of the organisation. This is discussed in further detail in the discussion section [\*Experiential discovery of pathways\*](#).

### Deep dialogical relationships as the basis of an innovative environment

This section deals with another element of the experiential in relation to the capacity for a socially innovative approach within an organisation. It specifically focusses on the data around the major developments of the organisation under research. From the study of these data points, there were two major themes surfaced as central to the aforementioned organisational capacity for social innovation. These were the power of deep dialogical relationships at the basis of the organisation, as well as diverse spaces and diverse actors in these dialogues.

The diversity of people and spaces of dialogue is suggested in this section to allow for a breaking of social identity and power roles. The power of a democratised environment is that people who normally are not given a space to voice their experiences and ideas, are now able to share their inputs.

Socially innovative concepts are likely to be born of diverse groups of people, especially those looking on a known (or similar) situation with different eyes, since as mentioned above they are able “to see and develop non-obvious connections between seemingly separate ideas and cultures” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013). When describing the democratising nature of the experiential in a previous section, the primary context was that of formal or semi-formal

group discussions. What is spoken about here is the power of informal interactions and the space they give for individuals to have their voice in organisational decision-making and input. This, coupled with the lack of segregation between the different roles played within the organisation under study, allowed for deep dialogical interaction to occur around diverse elements of the organisation. This is posed here as a key finding in the data, present within organisational moments of social innovation. These deep dialogical relationships - that are at the basis of the organisation - have been shown in the data to be the key platform where the experiential gets shared on a continuous basis, and in turn where the major innovations of the organisation were surfaced.

Most of these major moments of innovation, where new solutions and approaches were formed, did not arise in formal meetings. They came in casual conversations and spur of the moment inputs. These “light bulb” moments are of obvious interest in the field of innovation and relate to the field of meta-creativity.

When going through the relevant data recorded of the major developments of the organisation, the thread of casual realisations, and inter-personal conversation is striking. A professor of mine, Dr Alireza Baghai Wadji who was giving a course on meta-creativity spoke of one of his greatest innovations, one that shifted the future of cell-phone technology at Motorola in its earlier years. He said he was sitting before a beautiful view, listening to Vivaldi and reading poetry when it just came to him. In this he was pointing to the idea that diverse inputs are the basis of seeing non-obvious connections. He used to say that one can never specialise in only one thing, as specialisation requires multiple approaches and view-points to deal with the same thing. This idea supports the theory that diversifying the people, the places and the style of interactions within an organisation deepens the ability to develop fresh approaches to dealing with stale challenges.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 6 July 2015)

The first example of this is the main innovation of the organisation under study – the idea of a network of fire detectors in order to create community wide alerts in the event of fire. This

innovative concept was born after months of community engagement with our first pilot community. During this period the extent of community process and the reality of the challenge of shack fires being a community issue had become clear to our team.

At this stage we had developed fire detectors that were all linked to a central node to sound a community wide alarm. This original idea had come from our very first community engagement when we had asked the community leaders about how they would deal with the shack fire challenge. They had heard our original device ring and said that more people needed to be alerted when there was a fire, and through this we had developed the central alarm solution. This model had been a cause for concern, as it meant that the organisation would have to install a central unit in every area in order for that community to have access to a community wide alert system. One of the directors of the organisation asked three of the other directors around to his apartment for breakfast one Sunday to chat about this.

After breakfast we were all sitting on the balcony, and the conversation was brought up of how uncomfortable he (the director who invited us around for breakfast) felt about our current solution. How he had been feeling this sense that we were missing something and wanted to share this with the team. The idea that a customer had no agency to buy protection for themselves and their neighbours seemed very problematic and we all agreed with this. He was about to go present at an international social entrepreneurship challenge and he had felt that he wanted to have a casual chat about his concerns. We all had the feeling that a solution where we were the gatekeepers to the community-wide alert system was very problematic, but none of us had expressed it yet. It was like witnessing kernels of popcorn pop as everyone began to bounce off each other's ideas, like we had all been waiting for the opportunity to brainstorm another solution together. Every idea we had the next person would take and expand upon. There was something about the fact that we were all just hanging out on the balcony together on a Sunday morning, without this being a formal session, that seemed to relax the often critical mind-sets used to dissect potential solutions. Within fifteen minutes we had come up with a system where each device had a transceiver so they could communicate with each other. On top of this we had ideas of people

signing up to an SMS system so they could get a text message in the event of fire and how they could notify the community of fire through this text message system.

(Petousis, Journal 1, 12 June 2014)

All these ideas would become the major innovations behind the organisation, and each one would eventually become part of a system which leveraged existing community bonds to create a community-based response to fires. These ideas - which came after months of witnessing the community in its daily life - had taken the best elements, the strengths of the communal reality of informal settlements, and made that the basis of the solution to dealing with fires.

The classic explanation of our early warning system always involved the idea that all we did was give the community that vital extra time to come together to deal with fires. This process, of a director casually sharing his experience and personal concerns, had given the space for the rest of the team to reflect together. In that space outside of a formal meeting there was a sense mentioned in the journal record above of “relax(ing) the often critical mind-sets used to dissect potential solutions”. This aspect was also mentioned previously in the section on how empathy for others brought a different consciousness to a conversation which often led to appreciative approaches, rather than analytical ones. In the above journal record the sentiment that everyone was building on each other’s ideas was clear. This non-traditional space for having a discussion on the technological developments of the organisation, seemed to have engendered an ease with which everyone was interacting, since the engagement was more casual and friendly. When the communal supportive sentiment arose, there had been a spark of excitement in looking at the challenge we were dealing with through fresh eyes. Much of the future success of the organisation could be pinned on the nature of this conversation, as the innovation of these ideas were the foundations upon which the organisation would mitigate the loss of life and property caused by shack/slum fires in the coming years.

Another data point which mimicked the above was the innovation of a monitoring system which leveraged the existing technology of our early warning system to creating regular monitoring of the health of the network of fire detectors.

Outside of the work space, whilst driving home from dinner the other night, myself and another director were chatting about how exciting our latest meeting was about the long term future of our organisation. We had been dreaming together in our previous meeting and had discussed the possibility of a combination of three organisational functions: a vast distribution system for low-income high density housing environments, an R&D side of the company, and a sales side which includes an on the ground community-connected conversation-based interaction with key communities. Through this we could continue to surface how we could utilise technology and other systems to create collective action, be it in the many spheres of safety and security, our original mission, or any other frame that related to action through the basis of the power of community. Whilst chatting about this and the more imminent steps of rolling out through a government tender process across the City of Cape Town, the idea of a silent system test just came to me. This dream space of imagining our system at scale had sparked the beginning of an idea in me about monitoring our system at scale. It was something I would have ignored as a passing idea, but because I was in the car with another director and we had been talking of exciting things I began to share with them this highly technical idea. This was one of our strengths as an organisation that we've realised recently. That I could engage with our director focussing on community engagement about highly technical concepts, brought such a different way of approaching things. Firstly in the way I have to re-imagine it in order to describe it in a way that is understandable and that they would be able to add onto that idea from a perspective that wasn't limited by technical plausibility. This new silent system test idea would allow for regular monitoring of the entire network of individual detectors. This both could function firstly as a way of ensuring our system is working in the long run, and as a part of our maintenance contract with government or another organisation.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 27 March 2015)

Here again a casual space of conversation whilst driving home from dinner had become a space where innovation could occur around aspects of the organisation. The relationship held between these two directors had fostered an environment where this could occur. The flat-structure of the organisation means that our community-engagement focussed director has a full understanding of all the technical aspects of the system and this of course allows for diversity of perspectives in conversations such as the one described above. The discussion on this is furthered in the discussion section *[Dialogical diversity's contribution to social innovation capacity](#)*.

Once consciousness was brought to these early experiences of the organisational moments of social innovation, and the value of their diversity, the practice of diversifying styles, places, and people engaging in all organisational conversations became a standard within the organisation. This was never formalised, nor made as a decision within the organisation, but the practice became institutionalised of breaking out of traditional spaces for innovative conversations, and including various (often unexpected) stakeholders to garner more widespread perspective on situations. A clear example of this from later on in the data occurs when assessing the value of the panic-button addition to the fire sensor network.

We had lunches about it, casual chats, email interactions, formal meetings, bringing it up in sessions with various mentors, the whole range of different styles of engagement which inevitably, due to the many iterations of exchange helped us to digest ideas and see the ideas in new light and explore them in more depth. This isn't formalised practice, but it is very much at the centre of our practice. This cycle also allows different voices to surface in different spaces, some in private conversation, some in a group, some aggressively, some quietly, some formally.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 17 May 2015)

Another element of these deep dialogical relationships is described in the journal record below which covers how the cycle of explaining situations, ideas, issues, dreams amongst the team in all these different formats, allows for an alive process of reflection on the various elements of the organisation.



The regular human interaction of the directors all spending time together as friends is providing a continuous stream of conversation. This dialogue means that ideas get spread around the group in numerous iterations. In each iteration there is a repeating and reconceiving of the way in which we express them to someone else. The fact that so much conversation both formal and casual goes into these things, means that this organisation and our innovations have become strongly linked with our daily lives, and in so the space for innovation has moved into spheres where traditionally it wouldn't. This can be linked with the recent string of innovations that the team is currently manifesting at a high pace. They have coincided with a vast array of different environments we have recently shared as directors (work, meetings, holiday, living together, as friends going out together, from dinners to hikes to parties and many other spheres). Due to this we are always able to bounce an idea off someone, or play with a general concept of our organisation together. We are all invested so deeply in it and this is very visible recently in how people are speaking about the organisation, with passion and a long term vision. This also allows us to bring it into the casual conversation sphere without it being within the frame of "work", because it is what we live.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 20 April 2014)

Journals around this period also speak of a self-generating mood of excitement within the office and my personal struggle to leave the office to work on other things. This is due to a general spirit within the organisation, and the continuous energy within the space. This style of diverse engagement, present at this stage of development of the organisation, which tends to lead to awareness, observation, and reflection as a practice, was clearly linked in the data to a period of increased social innovation in the organisation.

This re-imagining of the organisation through regular conversation, is a defining feature of a reflective organisation. Some of the most valuable elements of this process of re-imagining an organisation, is to approach the more sensitive nuanced levels of its existence, which may be areas of tension within the organisation. In order for areas of tension to be raised within a framework of regular dialogue, a level of trust is required. The aforementioned democratising

nature of the experiential is part of what allows for this trust to grow in the organisation. By regularly sharing our personal and subjective experience, there is the opportunity to build the fabric of trust within the organisational sphere. Through this we get the chance to test out organisational responses to the sharing of sensitive topics that are not common in organisational settings. This trust was recorded in various data points as being the reason for conversations around topics of tension in the organisation to arise and be dealt with, rather than left to fester. An example in the data comes with the director who is colloquially dubbed the “chief reality check officer”, for his regular questioning of some of the basic premises of the technology and the organisation as a whole. Right after the first roll-out of units there is a question raised within the team around the imbalance of prosperity coming to the directors of the organisation and the community who originally helped in the development process.

Our latest session as a team was questioning the distribution of wealth success and prosperity that would result of us growing the organisation over time, in comparison to that received by our first pilot community. At present it seems fairly even in that the community now have an early warning system for fire, which they are very much in need of due to the devastating effects of fire. The recent prize money we won in a local entrepreneurship competition has awoken us to the reality however that over time, even though our primary reason for existing as an organisation is to mitigate the loss of life and property caused by fire, we will nonetheless accrue wealth and success from developing this organisation at a large scale. This discrepancy between what we will receive and what our first partners in development will receive over time seems very problematic. This lead to conversations of what it would look like to pass the entire organisation over to the communities who benefit from it, and make it a self-organised community project. These hard conversations don't lead us to a simple answer of a way forward yet, but it is very healthy to be engaging in these uncomfortable conversations of privilege and distribution of prosperity in the context of our country, which has the greatest wealth gap in the world. We at least feel the simplest next steps would be to have members of the community become employees of the organisation so that they can share in its growth and success.

(Petousis, Journal 2, 18 December 2014)

The conversation outlined above touches on issues that sit at the philosophical core of the organisation and this type of conversation necessitates a depth of relationship between all those involved in order to confront these important subjects. After this highly reflective period at the end of the first two roll-outs of the system the following reflection is recorded in the data.

As an organisation we have always placed great value in the team, both in its unity and diversity. It seems like “the team” is always the first answer to appear in any interview of how we’ve succeeded thus far. The extent of our relationships has allowed us to tackle some very hard conversational material recently, such as our interpersonal engagements (which have been tense as of late), the technological tensions (of whether the technology is of a high enough quality for the task at hand), the expression of great unease with organisational trajectories (such as the considerations of a more corporate centric approach to spreading the technology), and the tension of how we are engaging with the people we are looking to serve. These conversations that deal with both the practicalities of our work as well as the subtleties of developing a socially aware, responsible and well-balanced organisation require a trusting environment. The relationships developed and upheld in this organisation allow for that.

(Petousis, Journal 3, 28 March 2015)

Another vital aspect in the context of social innovation, is the effect of trust on the ability for people within the organisation to explore areas of their own interest. People feeling the free will to develop and explore is the basis for a number of innovations within the organisation under study. An example of this is the main technical developer designing, out of his own impetus, a centralised internet gateway that could sit in a community to record information about the system and send this information to fire department and the community. This idea was presented to the team as something which was already in development. This expressed a degree of trust in the organisation in order to have begun developing without having discussed the concept with the team. A period later in the data, this same designer designed a database which records and stores all the information on the installed fire detection systems,

as a holiday project, under a similar approach of simply arriving with a developed invention. An environment which encourages the creativity of individuals to be expressed and shared, thrives on trust based relationships.

A data point late in the research period shows another level of how this trust and the strength of inter-personal relationships provides a resilience to times of organisational struggle. In the upcoming example (which requires a fair amount of background to express properly), the nature of the organisational relationships demanded the issue at hand to be dealt with in a more humanised way, which leads us from a potential crisis towards a powerful appreciative solution.

This summarised reflection is on the solution we reached yesterday, when one of our directors decided to no longer be an employee of the organisation. Inter-personal issues between two of the directors (who were both employees) had reached an unmanageable level and we had a team discussion to try and deal with the concerns of both and discover a way forward for both the individual directors and the organisation. The one director had a clear desire to leave after an extended period of not being able to find a manner in which they could work with the aforementioned director. The patterns that had brought about this struggle to work together were developed over years of friendship before the organisation had been formed. The conversation was obviously highly personal and was a sensitive topic for both involved.

In the first place we had come a long way since the original fall out between these two directors. I had many concerns with the director leaving their executive roll in the organisation as they had a grounded perspective in the reality of the communities we worked in and a sensitivity to this, which retained a nuanced social awareness in the organisation at all times. At the same time I could see that they struggled with the operational tasks given, and the management of their work streams. Due to my deep personal relationship with this director, they had engaged my concerns and through much reflection had realised that they couldn't just leave. Not only did they have a responsibility, but they had a sense of commitment to what we had

created and the future of this organisation, something which had been forgotten in this period of turmoil.

Our communal discussion started off with quite a lot of discomfort and tension, but this dissipated as everyone felt their specific story being heard with open consideration from the team. The eventual solution we arrived at really surprised me, as it had not been a consideration by any of us beforehand. There was agreement on the immense value of the director to the organisation, as we discussed their strengths – a deep understanding of community settings, their knowledge of how to traverse this nuanced landscape (various other valuable additions they brought to the team were discussed). At the same time the struggles with maintaining daily operational work were shared. Instead of trying to overcome the inter-personal struggles so that this operational work could continue (which had always been my intention), the idea was raised of whether they could work on a contractual basis, specifically advising on community related matters, and other areas where their expertise would be able to contribute to the organisation - so that the value they brought could be maintained in the organisation.

There was a palpable sense in the room that everyone was both relieved and intrigued by this new idea. Specifically what was discussed was that this idea would strengthen the organisation, rather than being a compromise to deal with a tricky situation, and there was almost an excitement after this realisation. It was a typical example of an appreciative outcome, where the strengths of this director would be at the centre of her role, and their operational struggles (which was an area this director never had enjoyed, rather experiencing a great pressure from it) could be circumvented. The ideas of how this role could add value to the organisation began to flow and a whole new perspective on the struggle appeared.

Without the deep relationships of the organisation, we wouldn't have had the clout on which to engage beyond our surface tensions, beyond the discomfort and find this profound solution. This solution essentially was

one of moving beyond our institutional patterning of how an organisation should run in a daily sense, and allowed for a new role to emerge of a strategic person less involved in implementation.

(Petousis, Journal 4, 18 July 2015)

The manner in which one of the great tensions of the organisation for a long period had been resolved was of particular relevance to the research topic. This ability to deal with moments of great divergence and through this discover a valuable new path forward for the organisation, expressed the resilience that the deep relationships of the organisation brought. Firstly the ability to interact with the nuanced personal sensitivities at play was vital in the aforementioned process. Secondly the relationships were able to draw people back towards the sense of commitment and purpose at the basis of the organisation. This allowed for an approach centred in finding a solution which combined the personal and organisational realities – this in contrast to either an approach which disregarded personal desires in the organisational context, or one which disregarded organisational dreams for personal advancement. This inclusion of the subjective is vital in bringing about a solution centred in the wholeness of reality – specifically inclusive in this case of all inter-personal elements in the organisation. Transcending the tensions to find an appreciative solution expressed the value of strong relationships in the organisational setting.

The value of deep dialogical relationships on the organisational capacity for social innovation has been covered in this section through a number of different overarching lenses. Firstly, the value of diverse spaces and actors, inspired by deep relationships, which were directly linked to the major innovations of the organisation. The effect of regular cycling of ideas through these relationships was covered to show the re-imagining of ideas and the organisation as a whole that occurred through this continuous dialogue. Lastly the importance of deep dialogical relationships in tackling areas of tension, as well as to engage the subtleties of a socially aware organisation, was recorded through the research period. These aspects all contribute to specific elements which are argued here as being pivotal to the organisational capacity for social innovation. The various findings in this section are discussed in greater detail in the discussion section [\*The relevance of the range of dialogical findings in the broader sphere of organisational literature.\*](#)

# Discussion

According to the philosophy behind Appreciative Inquiry, the findings of this research were primarily found through a generative approach in order to “affirm, and thereby illuminate, the factors and forces involved in organizing that serve to nourish the human spirit.”

(Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 3). Specifically the findings centered on the effect of the continuous process of awareness, observation and reflection on the elements of the organisation that nourished the organisational capacity for social innovation. The findings of this study are most directly connected to (as described previously in the literature) collaborative experiential surfacing (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013) and resilient systems of social innovation (Westley, 2013).

As Westley (2013) expresses: “Social innovations must take into account the complexity of social problems and foster solutions resilient enough to adapt and survive” (p. 1). This view of the necessity to develop a resilient system sensitive to social nuances, meant that the sharing of subjective experiences in the organisational space became a key component of the findings. This aspect of experiential surfacing is best expressed by Nilsson & Paddock (2013) below:

Building from institutional theory in sociology, we argue that because systemic social patterns are embedded in everyday interactions, an experiential approach to organizing offers rich possibilities for understanding and ultimately transforming deep-seated institutional patterns. (p. 2)

The findings around this centered on three main themes of how the experiential influenced the organisational capacity for social innovation within the research period. Primarily considered is the democratising effects of the experiential, how the experiential provided both a reason and the content for organisational reflection, and the engendering of an empathetic approach to organisational scenarios.

A particularly powerful quotation (below) from Westley (2013) covers a foundation for an organisational capacity for social innovation. It frames the context within which the other

major findings of the research reside - namely the emergent context of socially relevant innovations, and deep dialogical relationships as the foundation of continuous innovation.

Of course, “managing for emergence” is easier in some cultures than others. Some cultures allow ideas to move freely and quickly, combining with other ideas in the kind of bricolage necessary for innovation. Studies of resilience at the community, organizational, and individual levels suggest that these same qualities characterize organizations and communities that are resilient to crisis and collapse. The characteristics that these organizations and communities share are low hierarchy, adequate diversity, an emphasis on learning over blame, room for experimentation, and mutual respect. These are all qualities that support general resilience. If they are attended to, the capacity for social innovation will also increase, creating a virtuous cycle that in turn builds the resilience of the entire society. (p. 6)

The above statement corroborates with several of the underlying findings within this study. Firstly it supports the idea that a democratising nature - which is documented in this research to create a level of equality of voice - is a characteristic of a socially innovative environment. The agreement lies in the similarity to that of the low hierarchy and mutual respect suggested by Westley (2013). This is of course strongly linked with the phenomena of deep dialogical relationships that was also a key finding of this research. These findings place great importance on the continual interaction of various stakeholders and directors of the organisation in creating a socially aware, innovative environment. In particular it agrees with the above suggestions of the organisational resilience - created by the mutual respect, acceptance of diversity and low hierarchical structure – which allows the organisation to easily amalgamate separate ideas in the context of innovation. This previous research supports the links established between the aforementioned organisational elements and the capacity for social innovation.

One of the powerful elements of the findings in this research, however, is the link made of how<sup>11</sup> the organisation under study developed characteristics similar to that mentioned above by Westley (2013). It is this link within the findings, strongly tied to Nilsson & Paddock's

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<sup>11</sup> Not in the sense of a technique, but rather the philosophy, or held approach of the organisation.



(2013) “inscaping”, of how the experiential (in particular) both develops an organisational environment which fosters social innovation, and provides the content from which to socially innovate with, that is of particular relevance.

This link of the practical organisational elements – a democratising experiential practice, which utilises the experiential for organisational reflection; an empathetic engagement within the context of an emergent social reality to develop social innovation; and a basis of deep dialogical relationships within that organisation – gives the functional layer to how an organisational environment can sustain socially innovative practice.

It is important to note that these findings were reflections on what worked within the organisation, and were not an intentional practice in order to develop a socially innovative environment. These were interpretations of naturally arising phenomena, rather than specific interventions. Nonetheless through awareness, observation, and reflection on these practices they were either taken up and institutionalised within the organisation, or not actively pursued, depending on organisational interest and resonance with these reflections. This mirrors Nilsson & Paddock's (2013) description of the transparent culture at one of the organisations they studied, where “new initiatives typically arise due to personal curiosities and interests. They grow, morph, or die based on how much energy they can draw to themselves and how aligned they end up being with the Roulant’s purpose and culture.” (p. 3). This expresses a natural contextual relevance based in experiential engagement. The findings therefore point not to specific approaches of the organisation under study as of primary relevance, but rather places value in a practice of engaging with the specific contextual and experiential material available within the organisation. This is in stark contrast with the early forms of organisational approaches expressed by Beckhard (1969)

“An effort [that is] planned, organization-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization’s processes, using behavioural-science knowledge” (p. 9)

Ultimately the three themes of how the experiential influenced the organisational capacity for social innovation, as well as the theoretical lens of seeing social innovation as an emerging process, rely on the foundations of the deep dialogical relationships at the basis of the organisation. These relationships make up the organisational environment where the

experiential is shared, where communal reflection occurs, and where the approach of a continuous re-imagining of social innovations (keeping them contextually alive) is practically founded.

This expresses the overall context that the research considers in how the organisational capacity for social innovation is both conceptually founded and is continually practised. The discussion around this outlines how the experiential themes and the dialogical relationships behind them, interact with the current literary conversation.

### Democratisation and the inclusivity of social innovation

This section looks into how the inclusive nature of social innovation - both in the inclusivity of breaking social norms and boundaries of power and influence, as well as the practical inclusivity of engaging the social realm which requires including others in conversations of innovation – means that there is value in a democratised environment in which such social innovation can arise. This is then linked to the findings of this research where the experiential was found to contribute to the creation of a democratised environment.

To clarify the term democratised is best expressed in terms of the sense of it from one of the findings of this research – “every voice was given equal footing as we expressed our feelings about the situation, which cleared the complexity of power out of the conversation” (Petousis, Journal 4, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2015). This space lends itself to an appreciative framework, since only in voices being heard can their inputs be built upon. I strongly connect to Nilsson's (2009) definition of the appreciative in the sense I intend it above.

As he originally formulated Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider drew the ‘appreciative’ metaphor from the art world. Note that art appreciation is not about *liking* a work of art. It is about *seeing* it – fully and precisely. It is about taking it in intellectually, emotionally, viscerally. It is about understanding both how the work connects to various traditions and what about it is unique. Through appreciation, we often come to admire and enjoy something, to take pleasure in its qualities, but an act of appreciation, in this sense, is not a search for pleasure, it is a search for essence. Appreciative attention, then, is the practice of focusing consciousness on

the unique, essential, life-giving aspects of something (in this case members of the organization, including oneself). (p.160)

In this sense of appreciation there is a full engagement in what is occurring before you, whether a scenario or; more relevantly in this context; a human. This awareness and engagement would struggle to exist in deep hierarchical environments where social power precludes the consistent listening of others “below” you, nor encourages self-expression. As Argyris (1972) expresses in his book, *Integrating the Individual and the Organisation*.

In a world where the expression of feelings is not valued, the individuals will build personal and organizational defenses to help them suppress their own feelings or inhibit others in such expression.

(p. 101)

This suppression is the greatest threat to “the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 3). This frames the value of a democratised environment where self-expression is encouraged, and the voices of others are heard. The findings of this research seek to add to this conversation in suggesting that experiential engagements - where subjective experience is valued - create the democratic space in which an equivalence of voice can encourage more authentic, creative, and deeply reflective approaches to complex social scenarios. Furthermore, through this equivalence of voice one aspect of the inclusivity of socially innovative environments can be realised.

Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) reference the sudden democratic mobilisation of innovation through a collective appreciative approach. The link between the appreciative and acts of social innovation has been made previously in this research. In this case it is the democratic mobilisation being suggested by Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) that allows for a collaborative act of appreciation, which is of specific interest. The above corroborates strongly with this area of findings in the research. Coming not from the literature of social innovation and rather from the field of appreciative inquiry, the focus on the social sensitivity and nuance that a democratic outlook offers is implicit in the act of appreciation as described previously by Nilsson (2009). Cooperrider & Whitney (2005), in suggesting the sudden nature of the mobilisation, are pointing towards that mysterious element when a light bulb

moment occurs, that social cohesion arising from acts of appreciation begin to rapidly feed off one another. The element of a democratic environment, is seemingly necessary (or at least highly conducive) for this social cohesion to occur, where people feel a sense of equality of voice, and with this a deep listening for the inputs of others.

#### The experiential in transcending organisational tensions

The findings in this research around the democratising effect of the experiential, centered largely on the ability for these experiential interactions to assist in dealing with areas of potential conflict or tension. The areas of tension in an organisation are both a space for potential collapse and if transcended, the space from where valuable innovation can grow. The research showed that not only were these areas of tension eased by the aforementioned democratic effect of the experiential, but further created a space where more authentic, honest and creative reflections occurred. In the context of the link between resilience and social innovation, Moore & Westley (2011) refer to the following.

The resilience of a system is defined by three important characteristics: the capacity of the system to experience a disturbance or change and still retain its basic function, structure, and identity; the ability to self-organize; and the ability to increase its capacity to learn and adapt (Gunderson and Holling 2002, Walker and Salt 2006, Jansen et al. 2007).

(p. 2)

For the organisation under study, in times of disturbance when areas of conflict arose, the democratic effects of the experiential can be seen to have created a more resilient response to the disturbance, in the sense described above.

Firstly, in returning the members of an interaction to a conversation not primarily of conflict but rather connected to the purpose of the organisation (as per the examples given in the findings section), there is the retention of function and organisational identity. Secondly, in the collaborative nature with which these areas of tension were then approached, there is a sense of the kind of self-organisation that is suggested above, and a link to social inclusivity.

Finally the ability to increase the learning capacity of the organisation is in those moments linked to both the increased levels of appreciation for the points made by others<sup>12</sup>, and for the increased authenticity and creative input of those involved. In this microcosm, we can see how the conversation of resilient organisational patterns can be added to by the approach of experiential engagement.

### Inclusivity through experiential engagement

Beyond these moments of conflict, the democratising effect of the experiential links strongly to Nilsson & Paddock's (2013) description of inclusive social innovation, which brings into light the question of “who”, in particular looking at overcoming pre-existing social identity boundaries in order to “reimagine structures of power and decision-making” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 6). This is well expressed in one of the examples Nilsson & Paddock (2013) give.

Institutionalized strands of class, race, education, and collective vs. individual cultural norms were all tacitly embedded in the conversation, carried consciously or unconsciously by all the people in the room. There is nothing remarkable about that. That is how institutions work. What is remarkable is that by just a brief moment of experiential surfacing, those deep-seated institutional patterns began to shift. (p. 7)

This concept linked directly with social constructionism and institutional theory, shows the power of inclusive social innovation - how a re-ordering of social practice, beyond shifting patterns present in the group involved, can have larger ramifications to the broader field of influence of these institutions. In the example alluded to in the quotation, the communal sharing allowed for all voices to be heard in the meeting and with that an ease of engagement followed which quickly resolved the tension at hand. This follows much the same pattern as what was recorded in the findings of this research. The space formed in allowing all the voices to be both shared and considered, resulted in a clarity, simplicity and honesty which quickly made the steps forward apparent.

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<sup>12</sup> In that sense creating a communal organisational learning founded in listening to one another.

Within this context Nilsson & Paddock (2013) go on to express how the version of experiential engagement they describe, “inscaping”, creates both internal and external capacity for inclusion.

Inscaping is a powerful way to disrupt institutionalized exclusion of certain groups within organizations. It also increases the organization’s capacity to effect inclusion within the wider social system as the organization interacts with other constituencies. (p. 6)

This concept of the mirrored effects on internal and external practice links closely to the reflective medium of this research. In much the same manner, the democratising effects of the experiential have an impact on the organisational inclusivity in its internal and external engagements. This aspect will be further explored in the upcoming section “An empathetic engagement with social nuances”.

The manner in which institutions pervade all levels of life, entail that the internal shifts in practice have a direct impact on how the organisation will engage with other groups, for it shifts a base social outlook and experience. This broad level of impact expresses the power of the democratising effect of the experiential in the developing the necessitous inclusivity of social innovation, corroborating with the research of Nilsson & Paddock (2013).

### The reflective nature of experiential organisation

One of the primary pre-requisites to an organisation engaging the complexity of the social sphere, in the face of the institutional inertia of social structures, is the ability to witness the various nuances of that social sphere. The basic premise of social innovation rests largely upon the overcoming of a reductionist outlook on social systems and this is placed as primary from numerous literary sources (Havel, 1992; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Kaplan, 2002; Nussbaum & Levmore, 2014). This entails the ability to be aware, observe and reflect upon engagements with people and situations in order to filter the necessary content with which to innovate, be that through an appreciative or problem-centric approach. In the context of the systemic lens of Cajaiba-Santana (2014), “since social innovations are oriented toward social practices, we need to reflect on social structures, how they enable and constrain agents while acting upon those practices” (p. 43) This reflective process which is re-iterated in the

literature in various forms of social innovation practice, therefore demands the question of how such reflective practice can be institutionalised within a socially innovative organisation.

This section shows how the findings of this study look to add to this literary conversation. Specifically the contribution is of the example of the engagement with the subjective experiences of stakeholders<sup>13</sup> as a valuable reflective practice that can lend to this institutionalisation, enabling a socially innovative environment. Both the content of these reflections as well as the process of personal reflection that occurs in expressing one's own experience, were shown in the research to contribute to the value of this practice in increasing the organisational capacity for social innovation.

### Reflection as primary to social engagement

The importance for reflection into the institutional patterns at play in a social sphere, is expressed in numerous forms throughout the literature. As Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer, & Zilber (2010) point out,

“Institutional pressures exist only to the degree that internal and external participants believe in them and engage in the institutional work necessary to perpetuate them” (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 1235)

This acknowledgement of the work required to perpetuate institutional patterns suggests the value of the awareness of these institutional frameworks, as a first step to shifting them. This is echoed by Moore & Westley (2011) by defining a key step in the process of social innovation as pattern recognition. Specifically they outline its value in breaking through rigid social practices that do not enable environments conducive to social innovation. This aspect of overcoming institutional inertia is again echoed by Nilsson & Paddock,(2013) as an obstacle in the pathway of developing new practices that enhance the life-giving aspects of a specific group, organisation, culture or other entity.

The necessity for pattern recognition in the journey of social innovation, therefore places great value in the development of this skill. This corroborates the research in its usage of the practice of awareness, observation and reflection as the medium through which to effect

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<sup>13</sup> Referring here both to members of the organisation, as well as all actors the organisation interacts with. The value of fringe stakeholders in this process (Hart & Sharma, 2004), whilst not the primary subject of this section, is shown in the literature to provide the diversity through which radical solutions tend to form (Westley, 2013).

change in the organisational capacity for social innovation. This practice is reflected in the findings, which place great value in moments when awareness, observation and reflection occur, as they are shown on numerous occasions to be either the catalyst or the content behind organisational social innovation. Essentially this is the basis of the theory of Praxis, as outlined by Paulo Freire (1968), “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”.

This approach’s relevance in the capacity to continuously create social innovation, is well expressed by Garrow (2009), who in her description of the organisation as a continuous learning environment, poses that this continuous learning is the process through which an organisation remains flexible, self-reflexive and continuously recreating the nuances of its context. This insight from organisational development theory is a direct link to the contextual relevance demanded of socially innovative environments. The idea of the organisation as a learning environment that continuously recreates the nuances of its context, entails the engagement with that context directly. This is where Nilsson & Paddock's (2013) “inscaping”, and the findings of this research come into play. Nilsson (2009) describes the reflective process as “the kind of experiential, iterative meaning-making necessary for engagement” (p. 147). Now that the link between reflective practice and social innovation has been established, the findings of this research have specific relevance.

#### The experiential as the medium and content of reflective practice

Cajaiba-santana's (2014) idea of the need to reflect on social structures corroborates with the organisational focus of the findings, which place primacy on the social structures of the organisation as the medium to reflect and discover the mirror of the external social structures at play. This aspect shows how the content utilised in developing social innovation can arise through the process of experiential reflections, be they upon internal or external elements of organisational life. The findings showed this link in both directions – the organisational reflections assisting in dealing with external scenarios (e.g. with community engagement), and experiences in the community informing perspectives on how to deal with organisational situations.

Cajaiba-santana (2014) describes “a more holistic view of the phenomenon of social innovation in which agentic actions and social structures can be conceived as both dualistic and interdependent” (p. 46). This interdependence between social structures and agentic



actions in the context of social innovation, shows further material in the literary conversation corroborating with the relevance of the findings of this research<sup>14</sup>. This allows the agent to both reflect on the aspects of the organisation which enable and constrain actions, and to apply this same practice to the social structures they are engaging with in their external work.

Lettice & Parekh (2010) add to this conversation in their description of the four main enabling themes that allow for social innovation to arise. One of these, the idea that re-imagining a problematic scenario (Lettice & Parekh primarily operate from a needs-based approach to social innovation), and in the re-framing seeing it through a different lens, was a commonality amongst all the socially innovative organisations they engaged. This witnessing of a standard scenario through a different lens, was shown in the findings of this research to be inspired on a number of occasions by personal experience. The manner in which a personal experience, more so than a concept, can alter the way we perceive and witness the world, is an important reflection in this context. The value of the subjective in its capacity to shift the ways individuals/agents witness a situation, implies that the awareness and reflection on subjective experience provides a continuous fresh source of these new lenses to apply to various scenarios. The data points of the software bug that was solved through a combination of an organisational experience of resilience and of appreciative process<sup>15</sup> is testament to that in this research.

A practical example of the content surfaced from reflections upon personal experience informing further innovation is relevant at this point. This is given in the data<sup>16</sup> in the instance of arriving on the scene of a fire that occurred in the first pilot community which our organisation had implemented the early warning fire detection network. This example showed how being on the ground and gaining first-hand experience of the community in the time of fire, then provided us with both the impetus to develop further innovations to give people better information in the event of fire, and the content for that innovation. This content was primarily based in witnessing how the community came together to fight the fire, how children were called to get buckets to begin a line of buckets from the local tap to the home being burnt, how the next door neighbours had discovered the fire, and then ran around

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<sup>14</sup> Specifically referring to how the reflective nature of experiential organisational settings is vital in the context of the interdependence described Cajaiba-santana (2014)

<sup>15</sup> See findings section “The emergent context of socially relevant innovation” - (Petousis, Journal 2, 17 October 2014)

<sup>16</sup> See findings section “The reminder of the humanity in the room” – (Petousis, Journal 2, 12 December 2014)

alerting different people. All this had informed how an innovation could best leverage the existing processes in the community to dealing with fire, as well as to ease some of the struggles there-of.

There is a natural tendency towards acts of awareness, observation and reflection as a practice in an organisation that tend towards the subjective experience of those involved in it. The value of this is clear in the landscape of a social innovation; a context interested in the complexity of the institutional frameworks at the heart of social structures. This is an act of seeing “the invisible whole within which the parts are enfolded” (p. 8) as Kaplan (2002) so aptly expresses it. Witnessing this invisible whole provides a new lens through which to discover both the content and the reflective process - both of which have the capacity to bring life to the organisational capacity for social innovation.

### **An empathetic engagement with social nuances**

Social innovation demands a social sensitivity, which in essence entails a sensitivity to the reality of others. The ability to step out of one’s own shoes and stand in another’s reality is the obvious manner in which one can develop a deep social engagement. This puts primacy in developing practices of breaking the barrier between oneself and others, in order to understand the nuances of another person’s life experience. This empathetic engagement is expressed in past literature as a primary motive to the act of social innovation (Mulgan, 2006). How this translates beyond motive, into a practice at the core of social innovation was the subject of a section of the findings of this research.

The spiritual endeavour of removing boundaries between oneself and others, was shown in the research to be assisted by continuous engagement in the subjective experience of others. This experiential practice engendered a state of empathy, which in turn encouraged authentically looking upon a situation through numerous eyes, a basis of social innovation. Finally this section also discusses the relevance of empathy in creating and sustaining commitment to social innovation.

### **The empathy required to engage social scenarios**

The combination of empathy and a vision of a better future are the two aspects which Mulgan (2006) ascribes to the motivation for social innovation. Empathy, “the feeling that one sees,

understands and resonates with the inner subjective experience of another” (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 153), is linked here to a driver of motivation, but not the act itself of social innovation. Hart & Sharma (2004) on the other hand, who describe empathy by saying that it “depends upon deep listening and complex interactions with those possessing divergent perspectives” (Hart & Sharma, 2004, p. 8), link empathy directly to the discovery of disruptive innovations in business strategy.

By creating mechanisms for complex interaction and empathy with those on the fringe, firms fan in to integrate and reconcile this knowledge with existing know-how to design and execute disruptive new business strategies. (Hart & Sharma, 2004, p. 1)

The value of empathy expressed above by Hart & Sharma (2004), is in the ability to appreciate the reality of fringe stakeholders, and through this awareness and engagement with them, amalgamate that into more diverse, radical forms of innovation. This applied to the field of social innovation is equally applicable. The question in the social innovation landscape is one of how to engender a practice of deep engagement with the people or structure one is innovating within, and clearly the link to the empathic has a role to play in this. (Hart & Sharma, 2004) specifically see the value in this empathy in developing “rich, context-sensitive, dialogic relationships” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 3) with the aforementioned stakeholders. This again points towards the ability to glean a sense of a social structure, to attaining a social sensitivity to the reality before you. This therefore is an important aspect of the capacity to socially innovate.

This complexity also increases a person’s *empathic richness* by offering a greater number of possible points of connection and a more nuanced ability to express oneself. Increased contact, understanding, and empathy then create a higher degree of integration with others and with the system as a whole. (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 215)

The above excerpt from Nilsson’s doctoral research, expresses the aforementioned depth of engagement resulting from an empathetic relationship, specifically focussing on the ability to integrate with the whole system. This further shows the value of empathy in developing deep social engagement, as the surfacing of the nuances of a whole system are embedded in being able to witness the subjective experience of others.

### The experiential fostering an empathetic approach

Now that this link between empathy, deeper social engagement and social innovation has been made, the findings of this research are better placed in the literary conversation. The next important link to establish is between an experiential engagement and a developed empathy. This is expressed well by (W. O. Nilsson, 2009).

Empathy is fostered in the organizations in a particularly dramatic way when people who have been heretofore seen as ‘other’ reveal enough about themselves that one can begin to identify with them. (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 175)

Beyond these first engagements of empathy, a deeper tissue of empathy can be developed with the continued practice of experiential engagements.

“Inscaping seems to increase the organizational capacity for empathy. As people reveal themselves more fully to each other, the points of empathic contact increase. Underneath the surface of stark cultural, professional, and temperamental differences, people discover unexpected connections. These connections in turn help people to feel more appreciated and less judged. They feel freer to look for support when they are struggling.” (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013, p. 9)

The findings of this research corroborate with the above literary context. The manner in which the experiential was able to cut through the institutional frameworks of professionalism, and of highly analytical engagements to engender a sense of empathy was documented in numerous data points. One of the powerful examples given express how this experiential practice filtered into our approach in dealing with manufacturing and community relationships. In this instance, the solution to dealing with a delay in manufacturing time, highlighted how the experiential engendering of empathy could serve social innovation ends. By creating a space for community members to engage one of the manufacturers of the product allowed for an empathy to be engendered in all partners. This saw the manufacturers produce work at a much faster rate than originally suggested, and the community to understand the delay first hand. Furthermore the community had the experience of shifting the reason for the delay, which broke traditional social and power boundaries. These acts of

inclusive social innovation, where the experience of the traditionally excluded are considered, suggest the need for a degree of empathy.

Further that just dealing with the aforementioned problematic scenarios in socially innovative manners, and developing better working relationships, the empathic also assisted in further inspiring new impetus to discover better solutions to the main areas of organisational focus. This empathetic response that first-hand experience engenders, gives both content and motivation to develop more appropriate innovations to those effected by social challenges. In this case the continuous redesign of the early warning fire network, and its various means of better informing those on the ground in the moment of dealing with fire, was a function of the empathetic engagement with those effected by fire. This provides a practical example in the findings between deep social engagement and the contextually relevant innovations that this can produce. Again the source of rich personal engagement with another is expressed by Nilsson (2009) below.

Mutuality involves an empathic expansion of the self in which one feels attentive and connected to others. (p. 203)

#### Empathy and the sustained commitment to deep engagement

Another area of the findings expressed a different element of the effect of empathy in people's relationship to the organisation. This relates back to Mulgan (2006) expression of empathy as motivation for social innovation. In this instance the findings point towards the commitment and inspiration of the organisation as based in empathetic engagements. This had resulted in a large amount of support and resources made available by those involved in the first-hand experiences of the organisation, and the records in the data present my own recognition of how community engagement reconnected the team to its purpose whenever there were dips in personal motivation. Developing commitment in those involved in the project, thereby realises a more in depth engagement in the scenarios before them. This level of commitment is a vital element in delving into the intricacy of a sphere in order to surface valuable innovations. The manner in which empathy is born is therefore a vital question for a growing organisation, in order to maintain a continuous inspired space from which social innovation can spring.

The process of social innovation, particularly at the point of trying to cross scales, can take considerable time and be emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting for all actors in the network involved (Moore & Westley, 2011, p. 8)

This further expresses an experience garnered in growing organisations by Moore & Westley (2011), of both the commitment required and the need for continued inspiration in organisations attending to situations of great social relevance.

When (Kahn, 1990) describes the state when someone is personally engaged in their work he suggests that they are “empathically connected to others in the service of the work they are doing in ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values, and their personal connections to others.” (p. 700). This points again to the value of a self-expressed space, where the subjective is shared openly as practice. W. O. Nilsson (2009) in his doctoral research speaks at length about the power of empathy, specifically due to his interest in how the experiential practice of “inscaping” contributes to the high quality connections present in positive examples of organisational life. This interest in what causes people to engage deeply in the space of their organisational work, was represented by the four main dynamics of engagement – attunement, growth, mutuality and meaning, which describe both the personal well-being and desires of the individual, as well as “the individual’s participation in a greater whole” (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 203). Within this context comes the following description of empathy as directly connected to lived experience.

Inscaping clearly provides more scope for empathy. Empathy involves sharing in, caring for, and even identifying with another person’s inner experiences and therefore requires that one have access to those inner experiences. Empathy serves as an information carrier (Batson, Turk et al., 1995) and is heightened by exposure to the perspectives of others (Parker and Axtell, 2001). (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 174)

### Social innovation as an emerging process

The major theory being expounded upon in this section, is the idea of social process - a continual stream of adaption and flexibility – being an enabler of relevant social innovation. The idea of social innovation as finite or complete, removes its essential basis as being context sensitive, which is one of the core reasons for its relevance. Instead, an iterative

approach that is constantly explorative in its nature is more suited to remaining contextually relevant. Westley (2013) expresses this well.

Social innovation is not a fixed solution either; it is part of a process that builds social resilience and allows complex systems to change while maintaining the continuity we rely on for our personal, organizational, and community integrity and identity. (p. 6)

This section discusses the acceptance of social innovation as an emerging process, which continually shifts and arises anew and suggests this as a key outlook of a sustained level of social innovation in an organisation. As such, this research places the role of the practice of awareness, observation and reflection as central to the organisational capacity for social innovation, since it allows one to be in the stream of the emergent social realm. Through this experience can be used to continually inform the path of the organisation.

#### The impermanent nature of the social realm

Again this area of consideration necessitates mentioning Freire's (1968) description of Praxis, a continual process of reflection and action in order to transform the world. (Westley, 2013) speaks of “Innovation for a complex world [in] which social systems adapt or are transformed” (p. 5), again pointing to the continuously evolving nature of social systems. This changing nature necessitates either adaptive solutions, or continual adaptive processes to witness these shifts. It is within the context of this alive nature of social innovation - where agentic actions are in dialogue with solutions produced - that Westley & Antadze (2010) describe the following reality.

For institutions and social systems to remain resilient, therefore, a continuous integration of novelty is necessary... How that novelty enters our social systems and transforms them, as well as how human agency plays a role, is key to understanding social innovation. (p. 6)

The idea expressed of the need to integrate novelty continuously into a social system in order to truly shift the institutional patterns present, again suggests that social innovation is a living system. Even in the field of organisational development there is an acceptance of the impermanent nature of the external world. Organisational design for example is expressed in terms of their being “sufficient flexibility and adaptability to respond to and anticipate the

external environment and to ensure internal connectivity to enable knowledge and learning to spread freely” (Garrow, 2009). Echoing this, one of Seelos and Mair’s (2012) main critiques of social innovation literature is that the research ignores the complex organisational dynamics behind valuable innovation, focusing more on the outcomes than the process.

Westley (2013) places great value in the link between resilience and social innovation and how the two are able to enhance each other. This value of resilient systems, suggests much the same philosophy of emergence, where the need to develop resilient rather than absolute systems is in cognisance of the impermanence of social settings. This understanding of the world to not be fixed, therefore requires a foundation of support, rather than a single solution.

### Experiential discovery of pathways

The findings of this research are based on the above context. It is the emergent nature of social innovation that demands a watchful awareness upon the various aspects and spheres the organisation is interacting with in order to remain flexible and adaptive to those changes. This was the basis for various approaches within the organisation under research, including the processes behind community engagement, business model innovation, engagement of people within the organisation, and technological developments. These approaches were in part about developing resilience, such as having multiple pathways to an eventual dream or outcome, or about retaining an aware state to figure out what the best way forward was in terms of what was unfolding. This filtering of the experiential into the daily practices of the organisation is suggested here as a function of demanding social process above fixed objects as the outputs of the organisation. The most striking reflection of this is the nature in which the early warning fire detection network (which is the primary physical offering to the world of this organisation) does not create specific action, but rather relies on the resilience of community response, in the adapted, flexible forms it arises in each scenario, to deal with the event of fire.

“The process is the whole within which the individual moments occur. It both underlies and emerges out of the parts, and is invisible. More than simply what is directly seen, it is what is sensed, experienced, understood, intuited from what is seen. To apprehend process, we have to move into a different state of being – one which is simultaneously inside and outside, participant and observer, analyst and artist.”



## Deep dialogical relationships as the layer which combines, the foundation upon which the theory can be practised

All the above aspects of the experiential influence on organisational life, on a functional level rely on the foundation of the deep dialogical relationships of the organisation in order to become institutionalised. Without the capacity to integrate reflections into daily practice and to spread this into the fabric of the organisation, the above elements can have little impact on the capacity for sustained social innovation.

It is the link of how the deep dialogical relationships of the organisation allow for the experiential to be made tangible, that places it as one of the key findings of this research. The research found that these dialogical relationships and the various dynamics around this were at the heart of many of the major developments of the organisation under study. The observation of this phenomenon opened the door onto numerous manners in which the dialogical relationships of the organisation assisted in the capacity for social innovation. This section discusses how the phenomena surfaced within the research period, link to the current conversation in literature around the place of these relationships in social innovation.

### Dialogical diversity's contribution to social innovation capacity

Deep dialogical relationships foster a diversity of inputs into topics of organisational relevance. The cycling of ideas through conversational realms that are both diverse in space and in actors, provides various valuable elements to the process of social innovation.

Firstly numerous eyes look upon the same scenario, and every time this scenario is cycled in conversation it is reframed, applying the new lens of the actor expressing it. This both links into the value of reframing scenarios (Lettice & Parekh, 2010) and of having different lenses on the same scenario in order to witness non-obvious connections (W. Nilsson & Paddock, 2013). Furthermore, Lettice & Parekh (2010) corroborate with the value of diversity in social innovation as they suggest that social innovations are best formed within networks of innovators and peer-support structures in order to diversify opinion and increase potential sources of practical support.

The variety and range of interactions behind an idea pushes it into multiple phases of growth and re-imagination. Beyond just innovations, the organisation itself as a whole, goes through these cycles of re-imagination in through these dialogical relationships. This relates directly to the aforementioned process of continual social innovation. In the organisational setting deep dialogical relationships are a powerful manner through which to institutionalise the practice of awareness, observation and reflection, the continuity of re-imagining social process, within the theoretical framework presented of emerging social innovations, not static ones.

“Part of building resilience in complex systems is strengthening cultures of innovation. These are cultures that value diversity, because as any bricoleur knows, the more (and more different) the parts, the greater the possibility of new and radical combinations. But these cultures also need to encourage the kind of communication and engagement that allows disparate elements to meet and mingle, and that allows for experimentation and support rather than blame. Such cultures support social innovation, and social innovation in turn builds resilience.” (Westley, 2013, p. 2)

The above excerpt from Westley (2013) beautifully encapsulates the sense of a culture within an organisation that promotes continual communal dialogue. This cycling as mentioned before is the space where such radical combinations are likely (and were found) to occur. This internal practice of conversation naturally spreads to various stakeholders<sup>17</sup> engaging the organisation, as this is at the tip of conversational matter. This openness to diverse inputs is part of what keeps the outlooks of the organisation from stagnating. To corroborate with the above from the lens of experiential engagements, Nilsson (2009) says the following.

One reason that expressive practices associated with dialogue are generative and innovative is that they include voices that might otherwise be marginalized due to their differences from mainstream voices. Innovation in general is often driven by such marginal perspectives (Christensen, 2000; Christensen, 2003) and new institutional practices are

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<sup>17</sup> Partner organisations, friends, mentors, community members and corporate clients were all recorded to be involved in conversations around various organisational matters

also often first introduced at the margins (Leblebici and Salancik, 1991). (p. 229)

This frames the connection between the experiential practices expressed in the discussion thus far - and their inclusive nature - with the organisational capacity for engaging diverse voices on a regular basis.

The links between internal practices of the experiential, and the manner in which in transferred to interactions with other stakeholders was noted in the findings. This permeability of practice is key to understanding the holistic nature of an organisational environment. The value in an ability to share ideas across a broad spectrum of people, and with this continuously altering the lens and manner of expression, is once again expressed below.

Yet, progress from recognition [of the need for a radical change in human relationships to themselves and the environment] to action is often stalled by a lack of capacity to transfer innovations and knowledge between disciplines, “thought worlds”, and contexts, and an inability to mobilize action across the boundaries and scales that define a social system. (pg1, Moore & Westley, 2011)

This shows another side to the conversation of the power of dialogical relationships and networks of diverse support in the context of bridging knowledge boundaries in social systems, in order to mobilise greater action.

The relevance of the range of dialogical findings in the broader sphere of organisational literature

The wide range of fields and associated literature on organisational development mean that an exhaustive coverage of its relation to the themes that arose in the findings of this research are impractical. This section will cover some of the relevant broader fields into which these findings can contribute.

There were a number of other elements surfaced relating the value of dialogical relationships that can be seen to link to the aforementioned range of organisational development fields. Casual and informal spaces of idea creation were shown in the findings to be linked to more appreciative approaches, where the casual environment allowed for the critical lenses of

formal meeting spaces to be relaxed. The value of an appreciative approach in the generative nature of social innovation has already been established in the research. Other important findings which tie together the overall sense of the importance of dialogical relationships were around the ability for the organisation to tackle areas of great social sensitivity through these relationships - both in terms of moments of internal organisational struggle, and in terms of engaging the nuances of being a socially involved organisation. This links to the conversation of the resilience that dialogical relationships provide an organisation.

The nature of dialogical interactions is a field explored by Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton (2012) in their research into high quality connections. This research into the quality of connections, is based on the idea of interactions as either being “life-giving or life-depleting” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 264). The structural aspects of a life-giving interaction have three main features.

First, higher connection quality implies greater emotional carrying capacity, which is evidenced by both the expression of more emotion when in the connection... The tensility of the connection captures the connection’s capacity to bend and withstand strain and to function in a variety of circumstances. It is the feature of the connection that indicates its resilience or the capacity to bounce back after setbacks. The third characteristic of a connection’s quality is its connectivity. Connectivity describes a connection’s level of openness to new ideas and influences. The three structural features help specify why connections of higher quality between two people foster beneficial outcomes. (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 390)

The findings of this research, can both add to and be linked to the above in three main ways. In suggesting that dialogical relationships are the space where expression of personal experience can occur; the value of the resilient nature of dialogical relationships; and finally that it is the space where moments of social innovation arise, due to the openness these relationships foster. Clearly the description of deep dialogical relationships suggested in this research are referring to life-giving connections. This is fitting in the light of the appreciative perspective of this research which, specifically was suggested as a search for the life-giving elements of the organisation.

Another broad area of relevance comes in the form of the historical shifts in the growth of organisational development theory and practice, which echo the valuing of regular dialogue and interaction. Borman et al. (2003) describe a period of change in organisational development theory of a new understanding of how social practice, daily interactions and regular dialogue were the key element behind the shifting nature of organisations. This entailed a move away from top-down, planned organisational approaches. Organisational design in the same theoretical framework placed great value in “sufficient flexibility and adaptability to respond to and anticipate the external environment and to ensure internal connectivity to enable knowledge and learning to spread freely” (Garrow, 2009). This suggests a contextual engagement and the need for dialogical relationships to turn those engagements into meaningful adaptations in the manner in which the organisation operates. This alternative frame shows the relevance of this research in organisational development literature.

One of the most relevant inputs into this conversation, is the search for what it takes to create an organisational environment which maintains deep states of engagement, beyond the surface of dialogical relationships. This is covered in depth by Nilsson (2009) in his doctoral exploration of engagement and the practices that sustain this in the organisational setting. This relates directly to the question at the foundation of this research. He describes organisational engagement as “a resilient, intersubjective experience of attunement, growth, mutuality, and meaning” (Ibid, p. ii), and finds that three main practices are vital to its sustenance, namely transboundary work, inscaping, and expression.

The aforementioned practices, and Nilsson’s associated research, are explorations that link strongly to the findings of this research, and therefore necessitate further description. The idea of transboundary work, defined by Nilsson (2009) as “practices that challenge role, task, group, and purpose boundaries, making those boundaries more pliable and permeable.” (p. ii) is linked to the value the findings of this research place in diverse cross-disciplinary interactions between members of the organisation, and with external stakeholders. The practice of inscaping in organisational settings, has been covered in previous sections of this discussion, with its links to the various effects of the experiential. Lastly, the idea of expression, “practices that simultaneously express the needs, perspectives, and experiences of individual organization members *and* the identity of the organization as a whole” (W. O. Nilsson, 2009, p. 178), has perhaps the most important lens through which to view the value of the deep dialogical relationships suggested in this research. The great value that this research places in a continuous

cycling of ideas through varying dialogical settings, are the space where acts of “expression” can occur.

In conclusive remarks, this conversation on dialogical relationships which links various fields - such as organisational development, experiential surfacing, and resilience in social innovations – grounds the various theories and practices into the reality of organisational dynamics, and the importance of tending to the relationships at the basis of the organisation. The practices developed in these relationships are the continuous learning space through which the organisation can develop its approach to the world. In this context, the diversification of spaces and actors and the value placed in the deep dialogical relationships as a foundation of organisational existence, have primary relevance in the organisational capacity for social innovation.

### A few core principles for practitioners

The challenge in distilling the above discussion into actionable outcomes for the fields of social innovation and organisational development, is the tendency towards creating reductionist approaches to organisational engagement. Already mentioned in the literature review, are the typical “steps to innovation”, which this research squarely sits in contrast to, demanding a process of awareness and observation of unique context and the social sphere to determine the right courses of innovation, the right approach to the reality before you.

Nonetheless the attempt is made to distil the above findings into a set of principles which can assist practitioners in deepening practices towards increasing the organisational capacity for social innovation. Ultimately these exist to further the practices of awareness, observation, and reflection into the over-arching context of an organisation:

- In key organisational decision making processes, share personal subjective experiences both on the subject matter at hand, as well as the process of making the decision itself. This will engender a more empathetic environment were diverse voices can be heard, which in turn allows contextual richness to surface into organisational awareness.
- Continue to engage in the sphere of impact or reality in which you are working. Management, technical resources, and various other sectors of organisational

structures tend to be removed from the actual environment in which their work is done, or impacts. By regularly allowing members across the organisation to have direct experience of these environments, an empathy for this reality is engendered, which allows for a contextual sensitivity for innovations, as well as a deep motivation for sustained commitment.

- When engaging areas of social relevance, (such as the spheres of impact mentioned above) reflect together afterwards on each individuals personal experience of those engagements. This provides both the medium and the content to reflect on social nuances. These social nuances inform thinking around new innovations. The greater the variety of people reflecting on these experiences, the better.
- Vary the spaces, styles and actors involved in daily organisational discussions. By diversifying how organisational interactions look, we allow for organisational ideas to move through various cycles of growth and re-imagination. More people conversing about organisational matters in different spaces opens us up to seeing the matters at hand through new eyes, key to allowing innovation to flourish. This may include creating more casual and informal engagements on organisational matters or including subjective personal experience into these conversations –this is where the nuances of your organisation must filter in. Perhaps this is the first innovation to explore together – how to diversify organisational interactions. These diverse spaces tend to be where new innovations arise, and they allow for an aliveness to be bred into the social innovations being formed. In this, the changing realities of the social realm are allowed to filter into the fabric of organisational engagements, and in turn into organisational innovations.
- Very closely linked to the above: become comfortable with an impermanent reality. Whilst this is a large spiritual undertaking, there are at the same time very practical aspects to this. One of the most basic yet critical ones is how we approach business models, people, organisational work, engagements with the people we are hoping to impact – by seeing these all as emerging continuously rather than being fixed, we therefore need to continuously be aware, observe and reflect on what is going on in front of us. Create the space for this, encourage an attitude of there being space to input into how things are done across the organisation – we do not create the new, we simply create suitable conditions for it to emerge. Allowing this flexibility in

perspective to filter into the organisational consciousness, gives the space for everyone to contribute to the sparking of new innovations in how we do things.



# Conclusion

## Contribution

This study contributes to theory and gives a practical example for the emerging field of experiential social innovation in an organisational setting. It synthesises various aspects of social innovation literature with organisational development literature, and through the adoption of a practice based lens, surfaces new themes in the organisational dynamics behind social innovation. It further provides a practical example exploring these dynamics, which uses nuanced experiential data to show the organisational capacity for social innovation in action. Through a lens of institutional theory, this leads to the formation of a theoretical basis to the practical development of both a nuanced social sensitivity in an organisation setting, and an associated innovative output. Below I describe these in further detail.

## An organisational capacity for social innovation

The capacity for social innovation was primarily witnessed in the findings in the organisation's greater sensitivity to its contextual reality, both internally and externally. This resulted in an increase in actors who were involved in social innovations (both within and without the organisation itself), a broader set of inspirations for social innovations (drawing on insights from a wider range of experiences to influence organisational innovations), and a more impactful output of the innovations formed. Over time the shift in organisational approach to challenging dialogical matters saw the institutional basis laid for regular opportunities within which social innovation could arise. This in turn allowed for a flexibility in dealing with the ever changing reality of the social sphere - a capacity which was key in developing contextually relevant innovations.

This study found that experiential practices (that engaged the subjective experiences of the organisation) contribute to the social sensitivity necessary to develop valuable attempts at social innovation. In particular the democratising effect of this experiential engagement, its reflective nature and the empathy it generates, all contribute to the organisational capacity for social innovation. The dialogical basis through which these subjective experiences are shared,

place dialogical practices as a means for an organisation to be congruent with the social constructionist approach of social innovation, and through this to shift institutional patterns.

These concepts are already being explored in various forms in literature, in particular in Nilsson & Paddock's (2013) "inscaping", a practice of engaging subjective experiences which they describe in terms of its value to various forms of social innovation. These concepts nonetheless are based in new fields with minimal exploration, and this study provides a significant addition to the available literature exploring this emerging field.

This research, in expressing an organisational practice established in the awareness of subjective experience, exposes the value inherent in a system aware of its contextual elements. In this valuing of an experiential awareness of context, we see a departure in the outcomes of this research from a set of specific organisational dynamics that contribute to a capacity for social innovation. This is appropriate since such an approach (of a set of defined organisational dynamics) is essentially founded in the diagnostic OD idea that the world is an open system and that organisations in specific environments can be made optimal based on the characteristics of that environment. This misses out on the vast array of complexity in the social sphere, expressed by institutional theory which "taps taken-for-granted assumptions at the core of social action" (Zucker, 1987, p. 443). This outlook is especially valuable because of the social constructionist foundations of social innovation as a field.

In the context of a social innovation practice intended to re-order social practices, this study expresses the multi-fold value of experiential engagements. The link is clear between an organisational social sensitivity and the need to engage the complexity of the social sphere in social innovation's contextually relevant outputs. Primarily in providing a reflective space for social practices to become part of the organisation's awareness, the experiential creates the baseline potential to develop a nuanced social sensitivity in an organisation. This nuanced social sensitivity, which can be seen to be based in an empathetic outlook on the world, has been shown in this study to be benefitted by experiential practices which give the space for social nuances to come to the fore in everyday organisational interactions.

Beyond developing the aforementioned social sensitivity, the experiential also has the capacity to shift broader institutional patterns, which is expressive of the systemic effect of experiential practices. One of the interesting links in this research is between the internal and external organisational practices being explored in the organisation under study. Institutional

theory frames well the potential for the strong link between these two spheres of organisational life. The idea that the institutions which an organisation perpetuates is expressed in its daily habits, patterns and practices, therefore entails that a shift in such daily habits and practices has the power to shift the over-arching institutional approach. In this light, the various experiences recorded in the research between how an internal organisational experience translated into a shift in external practice, are expressive of the systemic effect of experiential practices. We can conclude that grasping the experiences of the members of the organisation and placing value in the sharing of those subjective experiences, in turn has the power to shift the nature in which the organisation engages the socially relevant elements of its practical work in the broader world.

The mirrored reality being suggested here, is also a practical example expressing the link discovered in this study's review of the literature behind the experiential and systemic schools of organisational development. In the organisational development context, while usually the navel-gazing of internal organisational experience is placed into a value sphere primarily based in employee satisfaction, this study explores the value that such an organisational awareness could have on the systemic levels with which it engages. There is potency in the idea that an experience of systems, through the institutional elements being expressed in daily practices and subjective engagements of an organisation, could provide profound insights into the broader spheres of work the organisation involves itself in. This therefore goes beyond the systems thinking paradigm in OD literature to explore the value of systems experiencing in grasping the impact of an organisation in its greater sphere of influence. Beyond the ability to surface insights however, institutional theory suggests that such daily habits and practices aren't just expressive of institutional realities, they are formative there-of. This provides further backing and credibility to the theory of how a lived experience of organisational social innovation could inspire a similar capacity in the over-arching work of the organisation.

The above shows how the systemic and experiential schools of OD thought can be linked, primarily through the means of Dialogic OD. In a context which places primacy in the social practices of the organisation, the dialogical relationships within that organisation become a vital area for awareness, observation and reflection. In the institutional paradigm, through these dialogic engagements both expressive and formative shifts can occur. Multiple of the practical levels to which innovation arose in the organisation under study, were directly linked to the dialogical relationships within the organisation. The manner in which experiential approaches contributed to a space of more equalised voice in the organisation

contributed in numerous manners to the inclusive nature of the social innovation being generated in the organisation. On a broader theoretical level, the commonality discovered in this study's literature review between social innovation's and dialogic OD's foundation of institutional theory, gives a clear insight into how the awareness of dialogic interactions can contribute to the capacity to socially innovate. The idea that reality is socially constructed shows how dialogic organisational practices can be the founding space for a social innovation capacity which explores a socially constructed world.

The notion of an emerging context to social innovation, another key feature of this study's findings, also provides legitimacy to the value of experiential engagements and the realm of the dialogic in the organisation. The implicit feature of accepting an emerging context is the need to maintain awareness of it. In this case, the research shows that the lens for this awareness can be founded in organisational experiences, and suggests the various advantageous elements of such a basis. The awareness of a living, shifting reality such as the dialogical relationships at the basis of the organisation, inherently allows for the shifting nature of social practices to be held in the organisation's sight as it develops.

This study therefore has both given theoretical insights into how organisational practices can contribute to a social innovation capacity and practical insights into a more nuanced exploration of a specific contextual example of the organisation under study. The study doesn't suggest specific interventions into the organisation, but rather suggests a shift of awareness and in that an experiential practice which, based on context, will surface different dynamics and insights. This context relevant organisational approach is an appropriate mirror for the context relevant approach of social innovation.

## Limitations

This study has multiple limitations. One of the primary limitations of this study is the fact that it is based upon an in depth exploration of a single organisation, which has a specific mission, size and various other features. This of course limits the generalizability of the findings. In this context the findings of this research are both tentative and in need of further exploration in a wider set of organisations, to better triangulate findings.

Secondly this study utilises an interpretive method for analysing the social patterns and practices of the organisation under study which brings up the question of reliability in the study. Efforts were put into checking validity through organisational conversations,

attempting to logically assess the relevant themes in relation to social innovation and the organisational ability to engage in this, and by referring to other literary sources for congruency after the findings were established. In the same light the interpretive nature of the study is based in the same interpretive nature as social constructionism, a founding feature of the field of social innovation being explored. This provides a level of legitimacy to this approach.

The other major limitation of this study is that institutional frameworks were mainly looked at through the lens of the organisation itself, therefore the systemic effects social innovation aspires to, are beyond the boundaries of this study. Special attention was placed in both internal and external aspects of organisational work as this provided a broader view of the institutional elements playing themselves out in multiple spheres of the organisation, but nonetheless a greater view of the impact of the organisation would provide better grasping of the institutional realities at the heart of this study. It is therefore hard to assess the validity of the shifts in institutional patterns in the systemic context alluded to in this research. For this a wider view would be required.

### Further research recommendations

The above limitations as well as other features of the study suggest the need for further research into multiple areas of the domain of this study. One of the key outcomes of this study was not a set of defined dynamics required for organisational social innovation. It alluded more to where organisational awareness can be placed, and how associated practise to that awareness can benefit the capacity for social innovation. This theme is seen as a valuable trend to extend into further realms of research, rather than an attempt to develop set organisational dynamics in a diagnostic OD style. From this basis the following areas of further research are most immediately valuable to this field.

- Now that the in-depth exploration of a single organisation has surfaced various nuances in the organisational capacity for social innovation, a larger study which would allow for triangulation of results would be a logical next step. This study could deal with similar organisations in terms of size and stage of development in order to use a fairly similar set of organisational conditions, and then compare these with larger organisations at different stages of growth. Within this the diversification of fields of work, structures of organisations, geographical placement would all assist in

developing a more generalizable theory behind the organisational capacity for social innovation.

- The implicit question in the above differentiation of size of organisations and stage of development is around the scaling of social innovation, which is a prominent field of social innovation literature. The scaling of a contextually relevant approach such as social innovation has numerous question marks surrounding it, and the organisational focus of this study may provide certain answers in its focus on retaining a capacity rather than the development of specific instances of social innovation. Since the organisational dynamics are the focus behind this study, the ability to see the organisational dynamics of the smaller organisation and how those differ to larger organisational dynamics, would provide insight into how such dynamics could assist in scaling social innovation across both organisations and broader systems of impact.
- A further research field which would provide greater insight into this field would be to understand the broader impacts of institutional shifts occurring in the organisation under study. To further the concept suggested in the conclusive remarks of this study around the potential systemic effects of becoming aware of organisational practices due the formative nature of these daily patterns on broader institutional approaches, a study exploring the various interconnected elements of the broader system of an organisation in order to map the effect of institutional shifts across the boundaries of the organisation would be of significant value. This also links to the above question of scaling social innovations, as insights into the systemic effects of institutional shifts could provide a valuable shift in paradigm for organisations wishing to create systemic impacts, potentially pointing to a mirrored approach to internal organisational patterns in relation to the “external” systemic ones.

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