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Articulating the ‘How’ of Social Return on Investment: Foregrounding the Plural and Pluralizing Character of Its ‘Moments of Judgment’

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ABSTRACT

Social accounting practices attribute value to an organization’s activities beyond traditional economic conceptions of success. In assessing the merit of such practices, we argue that it is helpful to extend our analytical focus beyond questions of *what* is evaluated and *who* evaluates to *how* valuations are performed. Social accounting literature has already explored a crucial aspect of the “how question,” emphasizing the need to widen stakeholder input and engage in agonistic democratic deliberation beyond applying technical expertise. We extend these insights by drawing attention to an important dimension of the how question that remains underexplored, namely, *where* such deliberation can or should be applied and explaining why this matters. In doing so, we disclose the complexity and messiness of social accounting processes, as well as their normative and political significance. We deploy political discourse theory to highlight the virtues of focusing on where value is constructed along the social accounting chain, illustrating our contribution with examples drawn from our experience conducting a Social Return on Investment (SROI) for a not-for-profit organization. We present and unpack key decision-junctures in the SROI process, demonstrating the plural and pluralizing character of these “moments of judgment” by showing how contestability and normativity enter the valuation process, aspects that are often obfuscated by an over-reliance on, and the rhetoric of, the technical aspects of quantification and monetization. By foregrounding the contingency and subjectivity embedded in valuation practices, we argue there is a need to navigate agonistically, deliberatively, and pragmatically their plural and complex character.

1 | Introduction

Social impact accounting incorporates a range of techniques designed to capture the social value produced by organizations beyond economic value (Cooper et al. 2005; Gray, Owen, and Adams 1996; Nicholls 2018). Despite this, social accounting is criticized for failing to challenge the economic *status quo* decisively, even reinforcing existing power relations (Gray 2002;

Spence 2009). Consequently, there are calls to identify alternative social accounting processes that can better toe the critical line (Deegan and Soltys 2007; Hall and O’Dwyer 2017; Hall and Millo 2018), with some literature asking how not-for-profits specifically should be held accountable (Neesham, McCormick, and Greenwood 2017; Ryan et al. 2014; Yates et al. 2021). We explore Social Return on Investment (SROI) as a framework that seeks to measure the impact of initiatives beyond standard

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economic conceptions of value. Alternative valuation frameworks, such as SROI, tap into debates regarding *what* should be counted in (ac)counting and, by encouraging wider stakeholder participation in the evaluation process, also raise questions about *who* decides what counts. Although the “what” and “who” questions point to important reflexive spaces in understanding social accounting, we focus in this article on “how” and “where” such accounting takes place, developing our main contribution by foregrounding moments of decision, and opening them up to critical scrutiny.

In what follows, we review the literature exploring the way social impact accounting practices are understood, noting the distinction, relevant to the “how” question, drawn between expert-based monological forms of accounting and more open dialogical or agonistic forms of accounting (Brown 2009; Dillard and Vinnari 2019). We engage with the “what,” “who,” and “how” issues debated in the literature, drawing on our experience of conducting a SROI for a non-profit organization, before turning to Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) political discourse theory (PDT) and the concept of “articulation” to frame our investigation of social accounting practices. We argue that this framing makes visible the contingency and subjectivity underlying judgment calls at key decision-junctures in the social accounting chain, treating them as sites through which wider power dynamics can find expression in the construction of value. After outlining our research strategy and methodology, we present case-based examples to critically unpack key “moments of judgment” in the valuation process, highlighting the complexity, contingency, and normativity that underlie them.

2 | “What” and “Who” Counts, and “How”: SROI in Context

Accounting tends to focus on “what counts,” and, in traditional cost-benefit accounting, what counts is viewed through the utilitarian lens of “economic decision-usefulness” and shareholder value (Williams and Ravenscroft 2015). In this view, “what counts” includes only those things that can maximize benefits and minimize costs to generate profit and return on investment (Morgan 1988). Social and environmental accounting (SEA) researchers, however, argue that we should expand the scope of what counts by recognizing also social, environmental, and cultural goods (Gray 2002; Hines 1988; Söderbaum and Brown 2010). In addressing the question of “what counts,” Ramus and Vaccaro (2014) suggest we take more seriously *who* establishes what counts, arguing that engaging with stakeholders can help draw out more explicitly the different values and objectives at stake (Chen et al. 2020). Nevertheless, this perspective shift has its limitations, because although stakeholders might be involved in setting the agenda for what should count in an SEA exercise, they typically play a minimal role in the (ac)counting process itself. In part, this may have to do with time and resource constraints, but also with the tendency to see (ac)counting as a technical matter to be conducted by experts. We suggest, therefore, that discussions of stakeholder involvement often take several things for granted. For example, they assume that the way we decide what counts (e.g., through an expanded circle of stakeholders) can be neatly separated from the (ac)counting process (which remains the remit of experts). But they also often assume that processes of

translating what counts into measurable indicators or monetized outcomes do not affect the meaning of what is counted. In making these assumptions explicit, however, we can readily envision alternate scenarios in which stakeholders actively engage in the (ac)counting process itself.

The discussion above suggests that a particular meaning of “who counts” tends to be taken for granted. The “who” are typically confined to those who set the agenda and define what counts. However, other meanings need to be explored that push us to ask more precise questions about “how” (ac)counting takes place. This shift in perspective emerges out of a suspicion that drawing a strict boundary between the “what” and “who” on the one hand, and the “how” on the other, reinforces the view that the accounting process should be left to the technocrats and experts once the questions of “what” and “who” have been settled. However, critical accounting scholars have demonstrated that these assumptions rarely hold and have, instead, argued for a more open and dialogic understanding of the accounting process (Brown 2009; Brown and Dillard 2014, 2015). Brown (2009), for example, advocates increased democratic participation in place of the elite-driven monological practices associated with cost-benefit analysis (CBA), thereby opening up opportunities to question framings associated with dominant ideologies and power relations. Drawing on Söderbaum’s work on economic pluralism, Brown suggests that “positional accounting” can illuminate situations in ways that are “as many-sided as possible rather than providing a ‘solution’ assumed to be optimal for all actors.” In this view, no a priori consensus can be assumed “about the way a problem should be framed, the ‘correct’ principles of valuation, or what counts as a ‘cost’ or ‘benefit’” (Brown 2009, 330).

Thus, advocates of a dialogic approach call for greater pluralism to ensure local communities and civil society play a non-trivial role in the performance of accounting, thus pitting itself against monologic approaches to accounting that tend to privilege the role of technocratic expertise (Manetti, Bellucci, and Oliva 2021). However, in suggesting that a wider range of stakeholders take on a more active and ongoing role in accounting, advocates of the dialogical approach acknowledge the necessity to cultivate an appropriate ethos in which participants can engage with one another as adversaries rather than as antagonistic enemies while trying to resolve tensions emerging from their competing visions (Dillard and Brown 2012; Manetti, Bellucci, and Oliva 2021). As we will see later, the SROI framework opens up a space in which such critical reflection and contentious consensus can materialize. Although SROI can in principle bring more voices to the table for dialogue, whether it can escape being captured by the traditional logics of accounting remains debatable, especially because of the emphasis that tends to be placed upon quantification and monetization. In addressing such worries, Kingston et al. (2020, 3–4) appeal to the idea of an “agonistic pluralism” to avoid valuation processes becoming “sham-rituals” and to explore more deeply the transformative potential of social impact accounting. In a similar vein, Manetti, Bellucci, and Oliva (2021) have noted the desire to embed agonistic principles into a dialogic process of accounting. A key step in this process, however, involves the identification and recognition of positional dynamics at stake so that researchers can explore and understand the way power differentials shape social spaces (Brown and Dillard 2013;

Dillard and Brown 2012). Crucially, as Brown (2009, 322) notes, acknowledging the role power plays in accounting should not lead us to consider “how to eliminate power but rather how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values.”

There is much value in the dialogic perspective on accounting. It highlights in a convincing way the risks of remaining overly focused on the questions of “what” we need to count and “who” decides what is worth counting. Instead, advocates of the dialogic approach suggest that what matters is *how* the “who” participate, proposing an agonistic pluralist understanding of the accounting process. Still, however important a focus on the pluralist, deliberative, and agonistic aspects of the valuation practice is, this may not be sufficient to avert the risk that social accounting becomes subsumed by, and indeed ends up concealing, the power structures sustaining the *status quo* (Cooper et al. 2005; Everett and Neu 2000; Puxty 1991; Spence 2009). Critical scholars are especially suspicious of corporate social accounting practices in particular, which often feature rather attenuated forms of stakeholder involvement and deliberation. Spence (2009, 206), for example, argues that “rather than expose conflicts, corporate accounting has been deployed in order to obfuscate these and, in doing so, further legitimizes both corporate activity and the societal structures that such activity depends upon.” The *purpose* of the social account being conducted—the “why”—must, thus, be properly interrogated too (Cooper et al. 2005; Spence 2009). The “why” question, therefore, thematizes the motivation and character of the organization being subjected to a social accounting, as much as the organization requesting the account. This suggests that the deliberative dimension of the “how” must somehow extend in a more sustained and engaged way beyond the social accounting process itself to the way it relates to the broader social and economic context (Cooper et al. 2005, 973). And one way of doing so would entail paying more attention to, and indeed leveraging, the role of the person facilitating the valuation practice (the “facilitator-accountant”). As it happens, critical scholars have already noted the significance of this role when assessing the critical and progressive potential of the social accounting process. For example, Cooper et al. (2005) explicitly acknowledge the role their own politics played in their social accounting of the experiences of Scottish university students, whereas Messner (2009) suggests we also need to be attentive to the power relation between the facilitator-accountant of a social account and the commissioner of a social account.

Still, in order to better appreciate how the political-cum-power element enters the social accounting process and, thus, where in the social accounting process forms of agonistic deliberation ought to be amplified and strengthened, we suggest that it is necessary to locate and characterize more concretely the decision moments that matter in a valuation exercise. Our article therefore builds on existing social accounting research to discharge this task. More specifically, we draw on PDT to highlight the virtues of focusing on where value is constructed along the social accounting chain, illustrating our contribution with examples from our experience as facilitator-accountants conducting a SROI for a not-for-profit organization. But before elaborating on how we propose to accomplish this shift in focus from how to where with the help of PDT, we present an overview of SROI.

2.1 | What is SROI?

Originally developed in the United States, SROI is designed to produce measures of social impact that move beyond traditional economic costs and benefits (NEF 2009). In the United States, social enterprises use SROI to convince philanthropic organizations to invest in projects that bring quantifiable benefits to society and individuals (Gair 2002). “Doing a SROI” entails the production of an outcome expressed as a ratio accompanied by an explanatory report. A SROI ratio of 1:10, for example, would indicate that the project generated 10 units in social value for every 1 unit invested. In 2009, the UK government promoted a version of SROI developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) (Cabinet Office and NEF 2009). The UK version of SROI retained some essential features from its US cousin but was modified to incorporate multi-stakeholder participation (NEF 2009). More specifically, the SROI Network (2012) breaks down the process into six steps:

1. Establishing the scope of activities and identifying key stakeholders;
2. Mapping desired outcomes;
3. Evidencing outcomes via indicators and giving them a value via quantitative and monetary means;
4. Establishing how much of the measured impact is attributable to the initiative itself (involving considerations of deadweight, attribution, displacement, and drop-off);
5. Calculating the SROI in the form of a ratio; and
6. Reporting, qualifying, using, and embedding the result into the organization’s governance structure.

The argument for monetizing outcomes concerns the perceived need to provide a common measure (price, in this case) for comparing changes across different times and outcomes (Pathak and Dattani 2014). Moreover, although the SROI process recognizes that outcomes such as trust or friendship do not come with a price tag, the framework provides flexibility in determining the value of such intangibles using monetary proxies (HACT 2014). Finally, the SROI approach follows seven principles:

1. Involve stakeholders;
2. Understand what changes;
3. Value the things that matter;
4. Only include what is material;
5. Do not overclaim;
6. Be transparent; and
7. Verify the result.

Thus, although SROI does incorporate some important cost-benefit techniques into its framework, it also ascribes a prominent role to stakeholders in determining what counts in the valuation process.

2.2 | From “How” to “Where”

Developers of social-impact valuation frameworks recognize that questions of “what counts” demand careful consideration. As noted, one important way scholars have tried to overcome the problem of excluding important outcomes has been to expand the scope of “who” determines “what counts” (Flockhart 2005; Klemelä 2016). However, as we also saw, an equally important, if less straightforward, challenge concerns *how* the “who” matter—in other words, “how” stakeholders can or should engage in the (ac)counting process, stressing the virtues of dialogic and agonistic forms of democratic decision-making as opposed to more monological forms. However, we suggest that there is another important dimension of the “how” question that deserves attention but which remains underexplored, concerning the sites onto which agonistic forms of collective decision-making should be brought to bear and unpacking how they matter. As we will show in our analysis, a particularly productive way of exploring this dimension of the “how” question involves, first, identifying decision-junctures along the social accounting chain that can lead to different outcome pathways; and, second, making explicit the competing rationales producing those distinct outcomes. In short, the “how” question can be usefully approached also by focusing on *where* in the SROI process key decisions are taking place, because it is only when these decision-junctures are identified and the potential for competing rationales laid bare that the significance of agonistic stakeholder involvement becomes clear.

Another way to appreciate the value of a shift of perspective from “how” to “where” is to note that although some important studies have rightly highlighted the non-trivial role that subjectivity plays in the SROI process (Arvidson et al. 2013; Gibbon and Dey 2011; Maier et al. 2015), there remains a need to show in greater detail *where* subjectivity matters, and how this matters from a normative and political perspective. In other words, a vital part of addressing the “how” question involves not only comparatively assessing different forms of decision-making and modes of subjectivity (some more monological and some more dialogical-agonistic), but, crucially, locating *where* subjectivity becomes relevant in the valuation process and appreciating why this matters. Our argument is that questions of subjectivity are bound up with questions of complexity and contingency; ultimately, with the undecidability that emerges at key moments of the application of a valuation method, which necessitates the exercise of judgment. Using the PDT framework, we thus aim to identify key “moments of judgment” and draw out their significance.

3 | A Discourse-Theoretical Framework

Laclau and Mouffe’s political discourse theory (PDT) furnishes us with a range of concepts that can help elucidate the character and logics of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Insofar as we aim to probe the counter-hegemonic potential of SROI, PDT thus appears promising as a theoretical framework for our analysis. We noted in our introduction the importance of the concept of articulation, but it is worth unpacking this idea more fully by relating it first to one of PDT’s other central categories: “discourse.”

In PDT, discourse represents a way of grasping the meanings constituting a social field, including hegemonic formations and conflicts. PDT is a term often used interchangeably with post-Marxist discourse theory, denoting its emergence as a response to the status attributed to the economy in traditional Marxist thought (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Chapter 2). Here, it is important to stress that Laclau and Mouffe affirm the central role that the mode of production and economic inequality play in the perpetuation of relations of domination. However, they locate the strategic impasses of some strands of Marxism in the foundational ontological status attributed to the economy, as compared to other domains of the social field. It is for this reason that, according to Laclau (2012, 246), “[t]he notion of “hegemonic/discursive formation” should replace the notion of mode of production as the primary ontological terrain of the constitution of the social.” In this view, the concept of discourse stresses the relational and precarious character of any given configuration of social relations, including economic relations.

It is worth noting that Laclau and Mouffe have been subject to considerable critical commentary, some of which has been instrumental in the further development of PDT from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. Some critical commentary, however, has been a product of misunderstandings. For example, many have taken Laclau and Mouffe, and the traditions from which they draw, to deny the importance of the economy, or indeed the existence of a reality external to thought, claiming that the elevation of discourse to an ontological category reduces all to language, rhetoric, and contingency, leading to a bad idealism and relativism in which anything goes (Geras 1987; McKenna 2021, Chapter 3; Anderson 2017, Chapter 8; Rees 1998, Chapter 3). PDT scholars, alongside Laclau and Mouffe themselves, have thus defended the basic tenets of their approach against the more trenchant Marxian critiques (Laclau and Mouffe 1987; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Preface; Howarth 2015; Marchart 2007). In particular, PDT scholars affirm the explanatory significance of a “materialist conception of discourse, which deconstructs the realism/idealism opposition, as well as the traditional dichotomies between thought and reality, linguistic and non-linguistic practices, and mind and matter” (Howarth 2015, 1). In this view, contingency and articulation, which are absolutely central to the explanatory enterprise of PDT, *are* contextually constrained. It is just that PDT scholars accept rather than deny that our understanding of such context cannot but be discursively mediated. From a PDT perspective, therefore, in paying close attention to the way elements of discourse are articulated, one can better grasp the way pathways of meaning and practice are generated or reified and thus better appreciate the strategic and hegemonic potential of new patterns of action, including alternative social accounting practices.

Still, although PDT eschews efforts to ground our explanatory and strategic considerations on ontological presuppositions that are discursively unmediated, it is equally important to note that its understanding of discourse is not reducible to language:

Let us suppose that I am building a wall with another bricklayer. At a certain moment I ask my workmate to pass me a brick and then I add it to the wall. The first act—asking for the brick—is linguistic; the

second—adding the brick to the wall—is extralinguistic... [D]espite their differentiation... the two actions share something that allows them to be compared, namely the fact that they are both part of a total operation which is the building of the wall... This totality which includes within itself the linguistic and the non-linguistic, is what we call discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1987, 82).

Far from denying the existence of a world beyond language, subjects and objects are understood to have no specific identity—as opposed to existence—outside a discourse, their meaning emerging in the way in which they are arranged—alongside other signifying elements—within a discursive structure irreducible to language. In other words, the meaning of an element is a product of a practice of *articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105), as it represents “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified because of the articulatory practice.” Lacking an extra-discursive anchor, however, each configuration of meaning is always precarious and vulnerable to alternative articulations. Drawing inspiration from Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe describe *hegemony* as that form of power that consists in the fixation of meaning—the meaning of practices, relations, or norms, for example—within a terrain characterized by contingency and contestability:

Thus, hegemonic practices presuppose a social field criss-crossed by antagonisms, and the presence of elements that can be articulated by opposed political projects. The major aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilise the nodal points that form the basis of concrete social orders by articulating as many available elements... as possible (Howarth et al. 2000, 15).

Hegemony, in other words, is exercised by concealing contingency and preventing the visibility of alternative possibilities.

Traditional forms of accounting play a significant role in sustaining a hegemonic configuration regarding what should and should not be counted, what makes ways of counting legitimate and illegitimate, and, indeed, what value is. Treating SROI as an alternative social accounting practice, we can thus explore some of the ways in which it gives different meanings to accounting and value. SROI—at least *prima facie*—appears to carry some counter-hegemonic potential as it functions both as evidence of and a reminder that other forms of valuation beyond traditional economic and financial accounting are possible. More specifically, in seeking to incorporate elements that are excluded in the traditional accounting calculus, SROI holds out the promise of registering the impact of an initiative using a more expansive understanding of value.

Some alternative valuation practices, however, have themselves been subjected to strong criticism. William Davies, for example, has argued that alternative valuation practices that rely on quantification and monetization are rooted in the logics of the market and neoliberalism, severely limiting their counter-hegemonic potential (Davies 2014, 21). Nevertheless, the sweeping character

of such a “co-optation charge” (Glynos and Voutyras 2022) leaves several questions unanswered, especially when viewed against the background of valuation practices like SROI that explicitly encourage increased collective deliberation and appreciation of broader notions of value beyond financial value. In promoting SROI, NEF often uses the words of Robert Kennedy: “Our gross national product... measures everything... except that which makes life worthwhile” (Kennedy in NEF consulting n.d.). SROI is thus intended as a remedy to the problems and limitations of conventional ways of counting—a form of “anti-accounting” (Spence 2009)—suggesting the need to present detailed characterizations of SROI performances in order to make sense of, and assess, its counter-hegemonic potential.

It is for this reason that we find the concept of articulation an effective framing device for understanding the performance of valuation and helping us open up SROI’s “black boxes” to see “how” and “where” accounting takes place, as a function of subjectivity and normative judgment. A crucial aspect of articulation consists in the production of “nodal points”: privileged positions that organize meaning by partially fixing elements around them while excluding others, thus restricting the play of meaning by concealing contingency (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113) or moments of undecidability:

[U]ndecidability is the very condition of hegemony. If social objectivity, through its internal laws, determined whatever structural arrangement exists... there would be no room for contingent hegemonic rearticulations - nor, indeed, for politics... In order to have hegemony, the requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an... articulating practice. The visibility of the acts of originary institution - in their specific contingency - is, in this respect, the requirement of any hegemonic formation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xii).

“Undecidable” moments are key junctures where the character of a given articulation is in doubt, where there is more than one single answer that can be claimed as appropriate or legitimate, and *yet, a decision is required* to achieve closure. Accounting is punctuated by these moments, for example, in the determination of appropriate accounting standards or measurement protocols (Hines 1988). Undecidable moments are thus quintessentially *political* moments, because they require—but also make visible—the intervention of subjects who bring (contestable) assumptions, ideals, as well as normative and ethical commitments to bear on a decision.

We claim that “undecidability” and “decision” are suitable ways of charactering “evaluative dilemmas” in the application of SROI. These moments call for context-dependent judgments on behalf of practitioners, which operate as—or, rather, produce—new organizing principles, that is, nodal points. Our contribution, therefore, rests in recasting the performance of SROI as one that is animated by subjects who must confront complexity, undecidability, and contingency across the social accounting chain, from

deciding to conduct an SROI in the first place, identifying relevant outcomes, evidencing impact, and quantifying and monetizing it—that is, a series of value-based reasonings that can produce a web of distinct potential trajectories. “Articulation,” as a framing device, facilitates a nuanced examination of SROI, and the role accountants *qua* facilitators play in the (ac)counting process, enabling us to foreground the plural and pluralizing character of a series of “moments of judgment.” Our contribution therefore complements existing attempts to extend the democratic and dialogic reach into accounting, by foregrounding how the political significance embedded in the SROI process attaches to key subject-mediated decision-junctures. In doing so, the perspective we propose seeks to demystify the valuation process, preventing its performance from becoming the simple conduit of a “hidden power” (Hines 1988, 257), and in this way highlighting the risks and the missed opportunities in the performance of an SROI.

4 | Research Strategy and Method

We adopt an illustrative case-based research strategy, informed by auto-ethnographic observations and reflections (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991; Flyvbjerg 2001) drawing on and presenting detailed examples from work we conducted with a UK volunteer charity as SROI facilitator-accountants.

Many not-for-profit entities seek ways to better represent their social impact, not least because funding agencies demand this. SROI is one of these methods. In this context, we were approached in 2015 to conduct and facilitate a SROI for a UK charity. Following our SROI training, we began gathering data on the organization and its activities. We subsequently produced a SROI report in 2016, centered on the organization’s flagship volunteering projects. To bring stakeholders into the SROI process, we facilitated four regional workshops, attended by volunteers, beneficiaries, and organizational staff members. These were stakeholders who had been involved in the program for a while and could thus voluntarily opt-in to the workshops. The goal of each workshop was to offer an overview of the SROI approach and to gather views on the project’s philosophy, as well as stakeholders’ needs, motivations, values, challenges, successes, and desired outcomes. We facilitated the workshops through open-ended discussions.

In addition, we gathered information from the charity about the volunteering project and the demographic characteristics of participants, supplementing this with information gathered through individual discussions with stakeholders and surveys about activities and motivations. Finally, the charity provided us with 76 overview descriptions of activities, which offered further quantitative and qualitative detail about the volunteering project.

The SROI was based on these data sets and conducted on behalf of the charity to demonstrate to its funders the value of its volunteer activities. The first stage involved inviting participants to identify stakeholders and to engage them in establishing relevant outcomes and indicators. The second stage involved evidencing outcomes and assigning value through indicators and proxies. Additionally, there were Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) defined in advance by funders to consider. Outside of this,

we were given considerable autonomy in making decisions about indicators and proxies. Moreover, given resource constraints, apart from the workshops, our interactions with stakeholders tended to be mediated through regular consultations with organizational staff members leading the project. These interactions were more than sufficient to enable us to identify key decision-junctures that, resources permitting, could have attracted greater stakeholder input and deliberation.

In performing the SROI we found that there were often multiple indicators relevant to an outcome, prompting us to research competing rationales, which we used to inform our approach to, and demonstration of, contingency and undecidability. We surveyed previous SROI reports on similar volunteer initiatives and gathered several different activity-price conversion tables, including those produced by the Housing Associations’ Charitable Trust (HACT), New Economy Manchester (NEM), the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), and Global Value Exchange (GVE). Finally, it is worth noting that our intervention does not aim to affirm or reject SROI. Instead, we aim to subject to detailed scrutiny key decision-junctures embedded in the SROI process, which we identified collectively through continuous and iterative reflection and discussion on points of tension and judgment during the SROI process and in its aftermath. In making competing rationales explicit and presenting them as such in our analysis, we seek to foreground the complex and contingent character of the SROI process and thus the plural and pluralizing character of its moments of judgment.

5 | Articulation as “Moments of Judgment”

To explore SROI as a practice of articulation, we relied on our experience as facilitator-accountants to identify key decision-making junctures, aiming to show how, through a process of articulation, elements become sedimented into nodal points that privilege one choice over another. In making explicit this process, we expose its underlying complexity and contingency, offering contrasting normative pathways up for inspection, and in this way foregrounding the political import of these moments. By identifying these junctures as undecidable moments of value judgment, we also make it possible to thematize wider considerations of power and hegemony, inviting us to consider under what conditions these moments should become sites of agonistic forms of stakeholder–democratic engagement. In what follows, we identify six such “moments of judgment” corresponding to six questions: Why SROI? What outcomes? What suboutcomes? How to quantify? How to monetize? And how to choose a financial proxy?

5.1 | Why SROI?

The choice to go with SROI was made after discussion with the organization leading the volunteering initiative, and consultation with funders who were aware of SROI and prepared to try it on account of its *prima facie* inclusive character. The two elements at stake here are “value” and “valuation process.” The more traditional, hegemonic understanding of “valuation process” is one that reduces it to CBA modeled narrowly to privilege economic

Stakeholder	Outcome categories	Outcome subcategories
Government and local authorities	Community resilience	Increased individual independence or self-reliance
		Increased individual interdependence by multiplying links among individuals and between individuals and organizations.
	Community cohesion	Integration of marginal or vulnerable individuals
		Feeling part of the community

EXTRACT 1 | Community resilience and community cohesion as outcomes. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

value or the funder’s interest. In this view, “value” comprises a nodal point, and its meaning is sedimented as “funder-defined value.” SROI, however, explicitly calls for a broader range of stakeholders to be involved in outcome definitions, particularly those affected by the services provided. Thus, rearticulating value with a wider group of stakeholders modifies the hegemonic understanding of it. As facilitator-accountants, we wanted to explore the way that SROI could push these boundaries by challenging funder views with reference to outcomes valued by other stakeholders. As facilitator-accountants, we found that the funders’ willingness to move forward with SROI, opened up the possibility of pluralizing the range of relevant outcomes beyond funder-defined ones.

However, although SROI does encourage a multi-stakeholder approach to valuation, it also encourages the use of quantitative and monetizing techniques as part of this process, which sits uneasily with many who believe important values linked to human relationships, such as care and mutual recognition, can be represented in this way only at the cost of distorting those ideals. Some worry further that making funding contingent on the production of SROI reports puts leaders of volunteer non-profit organizations who share this skepticism toward quantification and monetization in a compromising position. We therefore see the discussion and negotiation of whether to adopt SROI in the first place to be part of the broader hegemonic-agonistic struggle over the future character of valuation practices.

5.2 | What Outcomes?

SROI evaluation starts by engaging stakeholders in identifying valuable outcomes. Our initial workshops highlighted the outcomes reported by stakeholders, particularly those running the project and those volunteering—often reflecting different demographic, rural, or urban contexts. We used this expanded set of outcomes as the SROI foundation.

Prior to selecting our evaluation approach, a preliminary set of desired outcomes had been specified by the funders reflecting a hegemonic “starting point,” such as “reduced demand on public services.” On the one hand, these “privileged” outcomes did not

necessarily overlap with outcomes expressed in the workshops, but on the other hand, there were funder-specified outcomes such as “increased community resilience” and “cohesion” that did resonate with outcomes expressed in stakeholder workshops. This demonstrates how particular stakeholder “whos” lie behind particular outcome “whats” and the way that the facilitator-accountant needs to think carefully about what and who they are including or excluding as part of the valuation process.

Moving a step further, there were challenges in defining certain outcomes. For example, “resilience” and “cohesion” are vague, contestable, and hard to describe. When volunteer-stakeholders used the terms “resilience” and “cohesion,” they meant something different to other stakeholders. This presented us with an opportunity to liaise with the organization’s staff members to jointly articulate alternative outcomes. Resilience was thus conceptualized in terms of (a) increased independence or self-reliance and (b) increased interdependence. And community cohesion was articulated in terms of (a) integration of marginal or vulnerable individuals and (b) feeling part of the community. This articulatory moment impacts the way these outcomes are defined and ultimately on the final SROI ratio, shaping the extent to which one might qualify a decision as more or less (counter) hegemonic. Extract 1 from the value map demonstrates this:

In this view, charity activities of identifying, registering, and matching needs and skills available at a local level could contribute to enhanced community resilience. Similarly, volunteer interactions can create feelings of community belonging and increase community involvement for isolated individuals, which would enhance community cohesion.

What this exercise reveals is how definitions of outcomes are a product of an articulatory process that involves judgment-making, which could have been different had the funders stipulated a more rigid definition of these terms, or indeed if other stakeholders had been present. By making explicit the often-undecidable character of outcome specifications, the contestable—and thus political—dimension that penetrates the valuation process becomes evident, pointing to the relevance of stakeholder involvement and power differentials.

Stakeholder		Outcomes and outcome subcategories	
Volunteers	Satisfaction of General needs and desires	opportunities to volunteer	
		Enhanced employability	Employed
			Work ready
			Made progress
		Enhanced mental health and wellbeing	Confidence
			Relief from Anxiety or Depression
Feeling in control of one's life			

EXTRACT 2 | Outcomes and suboutcomes for volunteers. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5.3 | What sub-outcomes?

A third challenge emerged in the more “technical” stages. Relevant decision-junctures here concerned how outcomes could be quantified and monetized, how outcomes are translated into countable indicators, and how indicators can be given monetary values. A first step on the way to establishing indicators and proxies involves trying to specify in greater detail the meaning of an outcome through the elaboration of suboutcomes. Thus, although processes of quantification and monetization might sound like they involve a simple application of rules and techniques, in practice, we quickly reached judgment-making junctures that revealed the undecidable and thus articulatory character of the “how” process. These decision moments in the technical stages of the evaluation process emerged across all outcomes, but for simplicity we will present one specific example, concerning the outcome “satisfaction of general needs and desires.” Here, we used the qualifier “general” deliberately to distinguish this outcome from another outcome, “satisfaction of *specific* needs and desires.” Take, for example, the case of a volunteer helping someone with their gardening or computing. The person receiving help derives satisfaction through the fulfillment of their *particular* need (for gardening or computing). However, the volunteer also derived *general* satisfaction either from the positive feeling of helping someone else, producing increased mental well-being, or by enhancing their employability. The qualification “general” was thus meant to capture second-order needs and desires independent of the specific first-order content, breaking them down into a series of suboutcomes, as in value map extract 2:

Establishing these outcomes and suboutcomes emerged out of messy back-and-forth processes that involved referring to the different information sources collated from stakeholder workshops and making collective judgments about their definitions. Complicating this picture further was the fact that volunteer services staff members and volunteers also provided us with insights when data was absent or insufficient. This process therefore brings in some elements and excludes others as we articulate a conception of one or another outcome or suboutcome,

consolidating their status as nodal points. Engaging in this process of outcome definition therefore is to participate in a hegemonic struggle over the character of this particular SROI. This is because each outcome judgment is a nodal point that (tendentally) fixes the meaning of the social impact of the activity being evaluated and undecidability emerges in the decision-junctures around how decision-makers articulate a rhetorical representation of this outcome.

With these outcomes and suboutcomes in mind, understood as answers to the “what” question, we proceed now to unpack the decision-junctures in the “how” processes of quantification and monetization.

5.4 | How to Quantify?

The effort to evidence outcomes reveals the contingent relation to their indicators. Consider, for instance, the outcome of enhanced mental health and well-being. A behavioral indicator for this particular outcome might be the frequency of mental health service use, such as the number of visits to a counselor. A decline in the number of visits could thus serve as an indicator of mental well-being. However, SROI practitioners can also use scale-based surveys about mental health, answered by service users (e.g., the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale). This self-reported indicator would track change over time in the responses. Alternatively, practitioners could survey people close to mental health users, asking about observed changes in their mental well-being. This would be a third-party indicator.

These three options make visible the role judgment and articulation play in performing SROI. Should behavioral or survey indicators be privileged in ascertaining the achievement of outcomes? One might assume that behavioral indicators guard against subjective bias, but choosing those indicators might also exclude aspects that many consider central to the very meaning of mental health and well-being. In addition, surveys can be expensive.

Different sorts of indicators privilege different perspectives and because there is no easy way to commensurate these perspectives, non-trivial judgments must be made about which to opt for. On balance, we opted for self-reported indicators to evidence the outcome of mental health and well-being. The key elements at stake here are the outcome and the indicator, of course, so that once the self-reported indicator is chosen, it “articulates” the meaning of mental health and well-being as a nodal point. Once this is adopted and repeated, it becomes sedimented and ultimately hegemonic when widely accepted. But our effort here has been to expose the undecidable character of this decision, posing the question of power and thus the question of whose interests should be incorporated into the judgment-making process. Similar considerations apply in relation to other outcomes and suboutcomes, such as “opportunities to be part of a community” and “employability”.

The example of decision-junctures demonstrates the central role that articulation and judgment played for us in the quantification processes. However, articulation and judgment also play an important role in monetization processes.

5.5 | How to Monetize?

Some worry that monetization springs from a problematic impulse to instrumentalize human relations and life more generally (Dowling and Harvie 2014). Others, however, SROI advocates among them, worry that not monetizing social impact risks marginalizing valuable parts of our social experience because it ends up not being counted at all (Kingston et al. 2020). Keeping this in mind, we sought to include those aspects of social impact often not counted, or which do not carry a readily ascertainable price, and thus tend not to be valued in practice (Cabinet Office and NEF 2009, 8). Think, for instance, of friendship or pride in one’s local area, which have value in the eyes of stakeholders who experience and/or desire them. Part of the SROI valuation challenge involves trying to express these values in the form of a price (The SROI Network 2012, 45–52). From a PDT point of view, because these things do not have a readily available price tag, we are called on to introduce a range of new elements into our articulatory practice, as part of a commensuration exercise.

Some cases of monetization are straightforward, whereas others are less so. Ultimately, it depends on the indicator used for measurement and whether this indicator refers to a good or service with a price (if available through the market) or a fixed cost (if delivered by a public body). Where monetary value is not readily available, however, the facilitator-accountant uses financial proxies (i.e., “substitute” prices attributable to an indicator) to articulate the value of the outcome. Financial proxies derive from the value of existing market-traded goods or services through which the individual would achieve the same outcomes (Cabinet Office and NEF 2009, 45–52). For instance, the value of experiencing improvements from a moderate mental health condition, expressed in monetary terms, can be seen as more or less equivalent to the price one would pay for counseling sessions that could lead to similar outcomes. Or the value of the support provided to older people by volunteers (e.g., cooking or shopping) can be seen as equivalent to the cost of the same number of hours of home care provided by a local authority.

There are at least two “moments of judgment” linked to the decisions about financial proxies. The first moment concerns the “meta” question of *where* a financial proxy should apply, for example, to which aspect of an activity should the proxy attach? This leads to a second moment, which is the focus of the next section, and asks *which* financial proxy should attach to the element of a volunteer practice that we have decided is worth monetizing. Regarding the first moment of judgment, there are several options available to us, often grounded in different rationales and techniques. For example, for the outcomes linked to the activity of volunteering, we can point to three dominant approaches to determining that aspect of this activity we should consider monetizing (Foster 2013, 3):

- The opportunity cost approach suggests that the value of the time volunteered is equivalent to the volunteer’s day-job wage for the same amount of time. The rationale is that the volunteer effectively gives up the wage they would have earned had they not volunteered. This method focuses on the volunteer offering the service (their profession and their wage or salary).
- The replacement cost approach suggests that the value of the time volunteered is equivalent to the amount of money someone would have to pay to secure an equivalent type of service. This method focuses on the service recipient.
- The well-being approach focuses on the volunteer again but is based on research that links the volunteering activity to increases in well-being for the volunteer. The value of volunteering is understood to be equivalent to an income differential corresponding to an increase in well-being.

Although ultimately a question of (contestable) judgment, we followed the argument in favor of the well-being approach as developed by Fujiwara, Oroyemi, and McKinnon (2013). Because volunteering impacts on the well-being of volunteers, we collectively decided that this should not be excluded from the SROI. The rationale behind the well-being approach resonated with the outcomes that those taking part valued, such as “opportunities to give,” which emerged during our stakeholder workshops. Our decision to use a proxy produced by the well-being approach from the HACT value calculator was based on our judgment that it captured a valuable impact on stakeholders that would otherwise be excluded.

Another moment of articulation in the monetization process is illustrated with reference to the outcome of improved mental health. The state monetizes mental health by estimating the cost of mental health treatments via clinical costs, such as staff wages. We followed this approach to monetize the value of outcomes benefitting the state through a reduction in the demand for public services, as this was explicitly required by the funders. We drew on the unit cost database compiled by NEM. However, with respect to service users and improvement in their mental health, the process of selecting a financial proxy was complicated. Ultimately, we used figures provided by HACT’s (2016) subjective well-being value calculator.¹ We opted for this approach over the QALY (quality-adjusted life-year) approach, which is a hypothetical preference-based approach recommended by NICE. QALY is often used in SROIs. However, we were cognizant of Fujiwara and Dolan’s (2014, 4) criticism of the

QALY approach because it relies heavily on the cognitive capacity of respondents to imagine themselves in different hypothetical health states. In comparing responses collected through QALY and individuals who have actually experienced the specific health conditions, the differences are considerable in the mental health context. It seems that people tend to underestimate the extent and scope of the impact of mental health conditions. Thus, we chose proxies deriving from HACT's subjective well-being approach rather than QALY because we believed that the estimate of the magnitude and value of improvements in mental health should reflect as closely as possible the actual lived experience, and this estimation should include the impact on others who live near the individual suffering from the condition.² By means of this articulation, which focuses on lived experience, we thus draw into the valuation elements that would not normally be included, modifying the way that social value is seen.

5.6 | How to Choose a Financial Proxy?

In enacting the calculative practices of SROI, we collected available SROI reports and consulted value databases (including HACT and NEM) of survey indicators (for quantifying outcomes) and financial proxies (for monetizing outcomes).³ The purpose of indicators is to measure the extent to which outcomes have been achieved, whereas proxies attach an appropriate monetary value to these outcomes. However, these steps involve decisions that do not have any obvious “right” answers, and thus, beyond method, technique, and interpretation, they demand normative and strategic judgment that would have a potentially non-trivial impact upon the final SROI ratio. Good mental health and community cohesion are cases in point.

Resolving mental health into suboutcomes involves a range of contestable judgments concerning the autonomy and overlap among, for example, confidence, anxiety, depression, or feeling in control of one's life. Furthermore, there are several decisions concerning what indicators measure changes in these outcomes, and there are questions as to whether it is possible to find and, if so, decide between, suitable financial proxies. When looking for proxies that would allow us to estimate the value of improvements in mental health as reported by beneficiaries, we noticed considerable variety in available proxies and realized that this was not simply a matter of taking a standard proxy and multiplying it by the number of individuals reporting the relevant improvements. In trying to understand the differences between these proxies, we came to recognize that they result from substantial differences in epistemological and methodological assumptions and that these differences also entail the adoption of different normative perspectives, whether explicit or not. As facilitator-accountants, the difference in monetary values attributed to the same outcome in different reports and databases can be disconcerting because this comes with consequences regarding the articulatory process itself, including the final SROI ratio. For example, on average, HACT's financial proxies are greater in monetary value than those in other financial proxy banks. To better inform our judgment as to which proxy to use, we spent time studying the rationales behind different financial proxies. It was through this process that we understood Fujiwara, Oroyemi, and McKinnon (2013) contribution with respect to the “well-being approach” and its relationship to the HACT database.

Choosing, for instance, proxies derived through a subjective well-being approach, rather than an expressed preference approach, involves a normative judgment about authority and voice—about who should be defining the value of mental health outcomes. In the end, we opted for mental health proxies reflecting the value of experienced (rather than hypothetical) mental health-related outcomes. The criticisms by Fujiwara and Dolan (2014) of hypothetical preference-based measures of outcomes do not suggest that HACT's subjective well-being approach is “correct,” only that they were based on “lived experience.”

If decisions regarding mental health proxies emphasized the interpretive-normative dimension of judgment-making, other decisions were informed by more strategic considerations. For example, in the case of the “community cohesion” outcome and the “feeling of belonging to the community,” which we saw as one of its key components (see Extract 1 above) and sticking with the subjective well-being approach and looking into the HACT database, we identified two relevant proxies:

- HACT SOC1601—Member of Social Group. Outside of London—unknown age: £1850/year
- HACT ENV1609—Feel Belonging to Neighborhood. Outside of London—unknown age: £3919/year (HACT 2016)

Both proxies appeared suitable for capturing the value of “feeling of belonging to the community.” Ultimately, we chose the lowest of the two figures. This decision was driven by a different consideration to the case of mental health, namely, to avoid overclaiming. Quite apart from it being a SROI principle, avoiding overclaiming was also seen by us as something we had to demonstrate to readers of the SROI report. This was based on our understanding of the SROI, not merely as a neutral or detached calculation, but as a complex evidence-based narrative aimed at persuading stakeholders. This understanding is grounded in the context in which the SROI took place, including the funders' specific request for calculations of return on investment. From this perspective, the SROI also functions as a rhetorical device offering a plausible and reasonable narrative about impact and value. It does so by dissolving or pre-empting skepticism linked to the possible charge of overclaiming. Additionally, we decided to reference both options in the report and make explicit that we erred on the conservative side in our estimation of impact. Similar choices and rationales were presented on other occasions during the compilation of our “calculation spreadsheet” and while writing the report.

These two examples of judgment-making demonstrate what we mean by articulation as a key feature of the valuation process. They involve judgments that belong to different orders: the former is about moral-normative judgment, whereas the latter is about rhetorical-strategic judgment. Thus, SROI can be understood as a practice of articulation, or indeed as a performance, as it links (“articulates”) elements from the field of normativity, rhetoric, and strategy with elements linked to the techniques and methods typically associated with valuation and accounting. Reducing the practice of valuation to technique alone, therefore, misses crucial aspects of the SROI process. The heterodox nature of the facilitation role (“how” the (ac)counting is conducted) emerges from the constraints of the measurement approach and

operates at multiple levels. SROI thus requires different “values” to be thematized and navigated at key decision-junctures, involving both rhetorical-strategic and complex moral-normative issues. And we have tried to show how the concept of articulation helps to make visible this complexity and contingency of judgment-making in the (ac)counting process.

6 | Discussion

Previous research exploring social accounting practices has noted the limitations of focusing on “what” such practices seek to value and, indeed, “who” establishes what is supposed to count. Although it is important that accounting practices be reshaped in a way that no longer privileges only economic outcomes and stakeholders, a focus on the “what” and “who” takes us only so far. Instead, critical scholars emphasize the question of “how” stakeholders should engage in deliberations linked to valuation processes generally, and the SROI process in particular (Flockhart 2005; Klemelä 2016; Kingston et al. 2020; Nicholls 2018). They suggest that one should promote a dialogic, rather than monologic, mode of engagement (Brown 2009; Brown and Dillard 2013). Although we entirely embrace these arguments, we have sought to contribute to this research by drawing out an aspect of the “how” question that is under-emphasized in this literature and that we believe is crucial to further advance the more open and agonistic dialogical aspects of social accounting processes. This concerns the question of “where”: *where* the “how” comes to matter; in other words, *where* stakeholders can and should play a role in the deliberation process, and to identify what is at stake.

Drawing out the “where” dimension adds complexity and nuance to our understanding of the accounting performance, including its critical and transformative role. Although directly involving stakeholders remains a desirable goal, contextual factors of a practical and material sort impose limitations on the number of stakeholders involved, the scope of their involvement, and so on. In addition, there are wider power constraints to consider. The KPIs that were imposed from the outset by the funders of the social initiative are one example of how this power constraint appears in practice. In our case, this meant that certain outcomes had to be included in the SROI outside and in advance of wider stakeholder involvement. Broader power dynamics therefore have an important role to play in shaping what and how information is incorporated and recognized, including who plays a role in generating and disseminating the valuation account (Brown 2009; Brown and Dillard 2013; Dillard and Brown 2012).

The fact that wider power configurations are both influential and unavoidable means that organizations and practitioners who aspire to practice accounting in pluralistic and democratic ways must take these seriously and find ways of navigating them pragmatically and strategically. This observation resonates with the views of scholars who stress the importance of focusing on the “why” and “how” questions, in addition to the “what” and the “who” questions posed to accounting processes. However, one of the key implications of reading our SROI case study against the backdrop of PDT’s theory of hegemony is that, even if we accept that the accounting process is structured by wider power configurations, there is still a lot that remains open when dealing

with cases of undecidability. More than that, however, we suggest that it is often precisely in those moments of judgment that we can come to better appreciate the way those wider power dynamics come to matter in practice. In focusing on such moments of judgment, we have thus sought to highlight the distinctiveness and significance of the “where” dimension within the question of “how.”

A key step to achieving this was by making more explicit the competing normative judgments and pathways that key decision-junctures in the valuation chain open up, and thus, the distinct power interests that each may advance. We argued that decision-making at such junctures should be best understood in terms of the articulation of heterogeneous considerations, ranging from the normative and epistemological to the rhetorical and strategic. Moreover, even if not all relevant stakeholders are able to engage at all relevant sites of the valuation chain, we share the view—expressed by scholars who promote a more open agonistic participatory approach to “how” the accounting process should be performed—that the default aim to amplify dialogic engagement with stakeholders will tend to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the process, if not also improve the robustness of its results. It is in this way that the progressive potential of SROI is wrapped up in how SROI is performed that, in turn, can be unpacked by identifying where exactly critical “moments of judgment” take place and by showing how they confront subjects with the need to make decisions under conditions of undecidability. Posing the “where” question therefore helps us identify those junctures that may—and perhaps, even, *should*—attract greater stakeholder interest and participation from a strategic point of view, rather than assume all decision-making junctures are equally important.

Another important implication of focusing on the “where” dimension is that it helps us further draw out the role subjectivity plays, including its impact on the accounting process and results. The moments from the SROI exercise we presented highlight that significant power and responsibility reside in the role of SROI facilitator-accountants—a responsibility that we feel should be acknowledged more fully by facilitators themselves, by participants within SROI exercises, and by commissioners of SROI reports. Arguably, this responsibility should be better shared by involving relevant stakeholders whenever resources allow, not least because the results produced are highly input-sensitive on account of the overdetermined character of the moments of judgment. In principle, therefore, we would be in favor of making such a reflexive component an essential and transparently acknowledged part of any type of report. Acknowledging this input-sensitivity will help better establish both the virtues and limitations of SROI reports and, crucially, the SROI ratio. Otherwise, there is a very real risk—already realized in practice—that the SROI ratio becomes “reified” due to the ease with which it can be detached from the process that produced it when making quick summary comparisons among different projects. Although SROI creators suggest that SROI ratios should not be used for comparative evaluation in such truncated ways, we feel that we must take more seriously a social, political, and economic environment that imbues numbers with an attraction that makes the detachment of the ratio from its context likely. Of course, any report, conclusion, or summary will acquire a (reified) life of its own, whether it takes the form of a number or not. However, there appears to be something specific about the use

of numbers and the impact of a SROI ratio in this environment that demands extra care.

All of this leads us to consider the bigger question about whether the labor involved in conducting an SROI is worth it, or indeed whether we should be measuring and monetizing social impact at all. Part of our argument is that this question cannot be answered in any meaningful way when pitched at such a high level of abstraction. It can only be answered from the bottom up, by addressing cases “on the ground,” involving an in-depth characterization of specific valuation practices, concerning the “what,” “who,” and most importantly, the “how” aspects of such processes. We have argued that a focus on the “how” question, specifically its *where* dimension, suggests that valuation techniques can be performed in plural ways, and the decisions internal to the quantification and monetization process can be understood as non-algorithmic and contestable. More importantly, an articulatory approach makes visible the contestability of key decision moments. The implication of this, however, is not the rejection of its results as such, but the acknowledgment of its inherent contingency and contestability.

We thus believe that our reflexive description and analysis of our performance of SROI and its reading through the PDT lens has brought to the fore a set of important points related to the “where” dimension. Nevertheless, ours remains not only a very particular case-study, but also a very particular exercise in reflexivity and self-interpretation on our own role as facilitator-accountants. We contend that more expansive research can help better establish the conditions under which the counter-hegemonic potential of social accounting practices can be realized in the form of “anti-accounts” (Spence 2009), including the role that the facilitator-accountant plays in this process. More specifically, what would be valuable would be more insight from practitioners of SROI—and maybe other forms of social accounting more broadly—in terms of how they identify and tackle evaluative dilemmas and instances of undecidability, how they foster deliberation and overcome limitations to it, how they practice judgment, and whether they acknowledge—or underplay and even conceal—their own role in the accounting process and results. This could be a step toward a more robust critical and comparative study of how social accounting is performed, which seems particularly important if we accept that valuation is not reducible to a mere application of a framework, method, or technique but is instead marked by subjective—albeit also often collective—judgment. Indeed, what emerged in our case analysis is that significant power resides in the role of the facilitator-accountant and that an articulatory approach to understanding this “hidden power” is an important development in social accounting and accounting literature (Hines 1988; Cooper et al. 2005).

7 | Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to contribute to the social accounting literature through a PDT-informed case-based analysis of SROI. As a social accounting practice, SROI promises increased public accountability and positive social transformation by attributing value to impacts overlooked by traditional accounting processes that privilege narrow economic outcomes. Drawing on PDT, we sought to make sense of our experience of

conducting such valuations for a charitable organization and, in doing so, contextualize, locate, and assess the progressive potential embedded within the SROI process. In particular, beyond important discussions in the literature revolving around “what” to value and “who” values, we drew attention to an important dimension of the “how” question that remains underexplored, namely, *where* agonistic forms of democratic contestation and deliberation can or should enter the valuation process.

Although the PDT framework can appear rather abstract with its theoretical concepts of discourse and articulation, its steadfast elevation of contingency paradoxically forces the analyst to pay close attention to the concrete context and detail of a case. This has enabled us to unpack the often-considerable complexity underpinning key junctures and “moments of judgment” along the chain of the SROI process, involving six basic questions: Why SROI? What outcomes? What suboutcomes? How to quantify? How to monetize? And how to choose a financial proxy? In doing so, we were able to thematize the way such judgments contribute to the articulation of value, to reveal the contested character of those judgments, whether moral-normative or rhetorical-strategic in character, and to point to the wider power dynamics that influence such judgments, whether implicitly or explicitly. We argued that without making transparent these aspects of the valuation process to enable collective reflection, the *opportunities for deliberation about value* risk are being occluded by *calculations of value*.

Our analysis demonstrated, in particular, the way that processes of quantification and monetization comprise overdetermined moments, sequences, and assemblages of articulated judgment-making that—except by social artifice—cannot but yield unstable and non-reproducible results. The phrase, the “butterfly effect” from the science of complex adaptive systems captures the idea of extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. The analogy to our case study is that a small revision in any assumption in the valuation process would yield profound system effects. The implication of this observation, however, is not necessarily to abandon such techniques of quantification and monetization, but to question the capacity of any valuation process to produce reproducible results, and to ensure that facilitators of such valuation exercises encourage a more open-ended, inclusive collective decision-making approach, while also seeking to identify salient junctures that demand this sort of input into its “moments of judgment.” As Carter, Warren, and Steinhoff (2023) argue, one of the impacts of the counting process is to conceal the “primary politics” around what is permissible in the accounting process, but at the same time, conceal the terrain of what is impermissible. This points to the “hidden power” of the role of a facilitator-accountant (Hines 1988, 257), among others. In other words, questions of contestable value judgment appear not only when we establish a SROI’s overarching objectives and outcomes but throughout the entire valuation chain, even if one cannot tell in advance how politically or ideologically significant any one such moment is in advance. It is a mistake therefore to treat SROI as a device that can generate quantitatively and extra-discursively “right answers” about the value of an initiative. Rather than seeing it simply as a counting device, it should be deployed—at most—as a useful thinking device—what William Connolly terms a “thinking technique” (2002)—that helps us identify factors that could or should be taken into account in our judgments of worth.

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Conflicts of Interest

The organization involved contributed consultancy funding for the Social Return on Investment to take place.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹The Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT) developed social value methodologies, frameworks, and evaluation tools. They derive these proxies from official data from large-scale longitudinal surveys.

²A subjective well-being approach, such as the one developed by HACT, can account for many aspects of welfare, whether health-related or not. For more on the relationship between SROI and HACT, see HACT and the SROI Network (2015).

³Noting that this indicated what was counted but not necessarily how or why.

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