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Innovative Approaches Supporting Social Change, Improved Quality of Human Life, and Enhanced Planetary Consciousness Across Europe

Innowacyjne projekty wspierające zmiany społeczne, świadomość ekologiczną i transformację w Europie

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Abstract: This research uses a dialogical approach to the theory of social representations to investigate examples of social innovation in volunteer and community projects across Europe. Social representational processes shape public agendas and determine which issues are put forward. One example of this dynamic communicative exchange is the annual Social Innovation Competition of the European Innovation Council, for which an award is given each year. The study looks at a total of 36 projects that won awards over 10 years of the competition in Europe. Our archival research focuses on and discusses the co-construction of the meaning of innovation in relation to ecology. The analysis concentrates on the countries of origin of the projects, as well as the thematic areas, in relation to the themes of social innovation selected by the European Innovation Council. In this process, three crucial voices are examined, including the voice of the European Innovation Council, voice of the innovator in each award-winning project, and voice of the general public. The results indicate that members of volunteer and community sectors propose socially innovative initiatives, especially in the areas of enhancing planetary consciousness and improving the quality of human life.

Keywords: social innovation, planetary consciousness, volunteer sector, social representations, dialogical approach, dialogical communication, environmental consciousness

Streszczenie: Stosując dialogiczne podejście do teorii reprezentacji społecznych, ten artykuł ma na celu zbadanie przykładów innowacji społecznych w ramach projektów wolontariatu i społeczności lokalnych w krajach europejskich. Procesy reprezentacji społecznych kształtują agendę publiczną i determinują, jakie kwestie są przedstawiane poprzez dynamiczną wymianę komunikacyjną, czego przykład stanowi coroczna nagroda Europejskiej Rady ds. Innowacji za projekty wdrażające innowację społeczną. Biorąc pod uwagę dziesięć lat trwania konkursu i łącznie 36 nagrodzonych projektów w zakresie innowacji społecznej w Europie, niniejsze badania skupiają się na współ-konstruowaniu znaczenia innowacji w odniesieniu do ekologii. Analiza koncentruje się na krajach pochodzenia projektów, a także na obszarach tematycznych, w odniesieniu do różnych tematów innowacji społecznej wybranych przez Europejską Radę ds. Innowacji, biorąc pod uwagę trzy kluczowe głosy: Europejską Radę ds. Innowacji, nagrodzone projekty i ogół społeczeństwa. Wyniki wskazują, że sektory wolontariatu i społeczności lokalnych proponują innowacyjne inicjatywy, szczególnie w obszarach świadomości planetarnej i tożsamości.

Słowa kluczowe: innowacja społeczna, świadomość planetarna, wolontariat, reprezentacje społeczne, podejście dialogiczne, wymiana komunikacyjna, świadomość ekologiczna

Introduction

Innovation has become an activity that is valued in many societies today, and there is often an assumption in these societies that successful projects and initiatives will be based on innovative ideas. One must ask, however, whether a single definition of *innovation* has been agreed upon, even though the term is used so freely today. A simple definition proposed by Ridley describes innovation as a “process of constantly discovering ways of rearranging the world into forms that are unlikely to arise by chance” (2020, 2). *Social innovation* has been defined as “a new way of answering needs and bringing changes, particularly within social relations” (Bensliman et al. 2022, 2). Hallonsten (2023) argues that the seemingly inherent value of innovation may be misused to prop up projects that are based on empty phrases and unrealistic expectations, and he lists examples of such initiatives from across the globe. Government officials, executives of private companies, and leaders of higher educational institutions alike often talk about innovation, encourage it, and glorify it, sometimes to the point of producing *empty innovation*, where “there is not much real innovation going on, and not much maintenance of the institutions and infrastructures that can enable people to make it happen anyway” (Hallonsten 2023, 84). For example, the pillars of excellence for community engagement in South Africa’s National Development Plan require evidence that such engagement is impactful and innovative (Van der Westhuizen et al. 2020). Likewise, projects funded by the European Union are often presumed to be innovative or even to have the aim of teaching others how to be innovative, as is the case for the Social Innovation Academy (n.d.). The question remains: If a project is presumed to be innovative does that mean it actually is innovative?

This article examines examples of social innovation in volunteer and community projects across Europe from the theoretical perspective of social representations

(Moscovici 1988) which feature a dialogical approach to communication (Marková 2023). Using various editions of the website of the European Innovation Council with the aim of showcasing 36 award-winning social innovation projects in Europe, this archival research discusses the co-construction of the meaning of innovation in the volunteer and community sectors.

Social psychologists may provide valuable insights into thinking processes, including innovative processes (in addition to addressing their valid concerns about empty innovation). The theory of social representations proposed by Moscovici was aimed at understanding “innovation rather than tradition, a social life in the making rather than a preestablished one” (Moscovici 1988, 219). *Social representations* are “structured sets of ideas, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs shared by a social group about a given object” (Bonetto et al. 2022) and have been used to view innovation and creativity from different perspectives. Their usefulness in meaning-making in relation to innovation has been scrutinized in such diverse fields as renewable energy (Batel and Devine-Wright 2015), sustainable mobility (Metastasio et al. 2024), robotics (Brondi et al. 2021), higher education initiatives (Dryjanska et al. 2022), and healthcare (Bensliman et al. 2022), to name just a few examples.

The theory of social representations has also been applied in community psychology, typically in an effort to understand the resistance to technology (Normann 2021) rather than to elucidate the genuinely innovative processes originating in communities. In addition, in community psychology, innovation can be considered from the point of view of a methodology for knowledge, practice, and training (e.g., by implementing indigenous therapeutic traditions to serve as a form of decolonization) (Gone 2021). However, volunteer and community sectors can be good sources of innovation for implementing solutions to problems that people face. The actors themselves may not necessarily label their actions as innovative, and

one may argue that real innovation (Hallonsten 2023) often occurs without being identified as such when efforts are underway to solve a problem.

Volunteer organizations and communities may face pressing problems and issues that require creative solutions in situations where resources and time are limited. Nonetheless, such scenarios can potentially yield more genuine social innovations than does a structured, interdisciplinary innovation hub or innovation course.

1. Innovation in the Theory of Social Representations as Viewed from a Dialogical Perspective

In his theory of social representations, Moscovici pays considerable attention to social innovation, recognizing it as a “fundamental process of social existence” (Moscovici 2011, 238). Communities play a crucial role in the process of social innovation, defined as the “mutation of representations that occurs through the incorporation of new information by social subjects fully engaged in interaction and immersed in their social, cultural and historical context” (Lozada and Novaes 2021, 380). Such social subjects are very well represented in the volunteer and community sectors, where citizens work together to bring about positive change in their environments. Such change is not the fruit of an individual effort, but, rather, it requires cooperation preceded by communication and a collective refinement of ideas. Volunteers and members of communities need to be flexible and responsive to their circumstances, and this need is reflected very well in the dynamic nature of social representations constructed and transformed through dialogical communication (Marková 2023). Marková has introduced a dialogical approach to social representations, and one of its tenets is that a representation cannot be reduced to how a group perceives a given object (Prost et al. 2022). The approach considers not only the informational content but also the emotional valence of a representation (Piermattéo 2022).

Ciasullo and coauthors (2023, 4) have applied the theory of social representations to the study of social innovation, which “stems from a stable model of interaction (with a previous social representation) and addresses actual social needs and requirements.” They view social innovation from a learning perspective in digital societies, as it results from a dual process of meaning-making, passing from the construction to the institutionalization of a new meaning, or from the disruption (often technological) to construction (Ciasullo et al. 2023). Boager and Castro (2022) note that understanding social change (and, thus, innovation that implies social change) involves considering the consensual meaning systems, or hegemonic representations (Moscovici 1988).

This theoretical framework has been further developed when the theory of social representations has been applied to global efforts to improve the quality of human life and enhance planetary consciousness; this is a considerable number of efforts made by the volunteer and community sectors. Mahendran et al. (2023) propose a post-humanistic agential realist approach rooted in dialogical social representations when considering the two core areas of improving human life around the world and enhancing planetary consciousness. These goals are the basis for much of the volunteer and community activity in many societies today. By becoming participants in the volunteer and community sectors, individuals often seek to bring about change and transformation for the sake of other, usually less fortunate, human beings and/or the planet.

2. Improving the Quality of Human Life

Broadly speaking, social innovation in the volunteer and community sectors often occurs because of efforts to improve the lives of human beings. When viewing these efforts from the theoretical standpoint of a dialogical approach to social representations, one can see that communities share and co-create ideas, feelings, and beliefs about relevant social issues through

communication and interactions (Castelo et al. 2023), such as assisting other human beings in their old age. Bensliman and colleagues (2022, 10) consider aging from the perspective of social representations and innovations in healthcare, concluding that “local stakeholders’ social representations tended to recognize only the goal-oriented dimensions in the innovations and ignored process-oriented aspects.” This may have echoed the theoretical considerations of empty innovation proposed by Hallonsten (2023), who found that community members sometimes had a blind spot when it came to recognizing the participation and empowerment of workers in their communities.

Bruno and Barreiro (2023) have also highlighted the relevance of a dialogical exchange when studying social representations of citizenship and civic involvement in terms of innovation. Such involvement may be driven by identification with a minority, such as a group of a certain sexual orientation; such forms of participation have inspired much social representation research over the decades (Ferrari and Mancini 2020). Social innovation in communities may also stem from practical difficulties faced by certain community members, such as the adapting of the built environment (i.e., housing) to the needs of urban residents in Peru (Aranda Dioses and Caldas Torres 2023). Likewise, in relation to housing, Galmarini et al. (2022) discuss the importance of social representations for the acceptance of retro-innovation in an informal settlement in Colombia.

3. Enhancing Planetary Consciousness

Without doubt one can see that there is increasing attention being paid to the condition of the planet, and this drives many innovative initiatives in the volunteer and community sectors across Europe. In this context, we want to note that we share the view that ecology is not the study of the individual in its environment but “rather the study of the local and unique ecosystemic configuration of relationships” (Tateo 2020,

674). Over the years, various lines of studies have focused on the area of planetary consciousness from the theoretical perspective of social representations. Recent research by Lo Monaco and colleagues (2023) has considered food objects in connection with innovation when examining lay thinking about food and beverages. Much innovation has stemmed from an ongoing dialogue on the topic of how communities perceive food beyond its nourishment value, co-constructing the meaning of food and beverage consumption in a creative way. Pindado and Barrena (2021) have also looked at the social innovation related to food, concluding that the regional and local contexts were particularly relevant for social representations.

On the other hand, socioenvironmental conflicts may also motivate communities to propose innovative solutions; members may re-examine their social representations or socially shared knowledge of their environment in the light of communicative processes transmitted over generations (Zárate-Rueda et al. 2022). The planet may also be considered as a landscape, as when a pro-environmental solution was recommended by Vuillot et al. (2020); it consisted of the collective building of a shared representation of the landscape among farmers for the purpose of designing innovative policies.

While some research on social representations from a dialogical perspective features innovation as an object of representation, our project focuses on social innovation as a process that occurs through the co-construction of reality in communicative practices of individuals in the volunteer and community sectors. The research question is How has social innovation occurred in volunteer and community sectors during the process of a dialogical co-construction of social representations, as seen in specific projects judged to be outstanding examples of innovation by the European Innovation Council?

4. Methods

This archival research was conducted in October of 2023. It examined the characteristics of volunteer and community projects submitted over 10 years of the European Social Innovation Competition. Each year since 2013, three to four organizations received a monetary award (currently, up to 50,000 euros) in recognition of their ability to use innovative approaches to address pressing social issues identified by the European Innovation Council (2023).

The data were collected from the archives of the council, posted on its website, for all 10 editions of the competition and included information on the winners' names, countries of origin, and scope of activity in their proposals. The data were then organized chronologically (Table 1) (European Innovation Council 2023). The data were collected by the first author and assessed by both authors. They defined the categories in an inductive manner by assessing the material independently and then discussing it until they reached agreement on the final categorization. To ensure the quality of the data collection and analysis, the researchers consulted with external experts and assessed the inter-rater reliability. Table 1 includes information on the focus of each winning project, as coded by two independent judges, with an inter-rater reliability of plus .90.

Because of the archival nature of the research, which used open-access data, this project did not require authorization by the University Ethics Committee.

5. Discussion

This research project aimed to reveal how social innovation occurs in volunteer and community sectors during the dialogical co-construction of social representations. It examined specific projects that had been judged to be outstanding examples of innovation by the European Union's European Innovation Council. This council has been described as a "flagship innovation program to identify, develop and scale up

breakthrough technologies and game changing innovations," and it has a budget of €10.1 billion (European Innovation Council, n.d.). Some of the council's prize-winning projects (for a full list, see Table 1) have an emphasis on the topics of improving the quality of human life and enhancing planetary consciousness:

- Improving the Quality of Human Life: The More Than One Perspective (MTOP) project, a 2019 winner, is a blended learning program that helps young, highly qualified refugees enter the local labor market. Feelif, a 2017 winner, is a multimedia tool for blind and visually impaired people; users can feel shapes on a flat touchscreen.
- Enhancing Planetary Consciousness: Resortecs, a 2020 winner, helps simplify the process of reusing and recycling textiles. SpraySafe, a 2019 winner, is an edible spray that is applied to the surface of a food to preserve it, thus reducing the need for plastic wrap and containers.

The country of origin with the most awards was Spain (with five winning projects), followed by Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK (with three projects each), as shown in Figure 1. We delved deeper to try to find out why certain countries seemed to produce more of the winning innovative ideas and found two possible reasons: (1) People who might be eligible for an award may have been more aware in some countries than others that the European Innovation Council existed and that they could enter its competitions, and (2) local governments in some areas may have promoted the competitions and provided tools to facilitate a successful entry, such as translation services. The question remains of how such a process would impact or shape an innovation.

The dialogical approach to understanding social innovation seemed particularly appropriate for considering whether a competition might be a mechanism that not only would identify an innovation but would

Table 1. Social Innovation Prize Winning Projects

Name	Country	Year	Focus	Scope
ReLearn	Italy	2022	Environment	uses Artificial Intelligence to help companies and municipalities reduce their environmental impact by monitoring the produced waste
Sostre Cívic	Spain	2022	Housing	successfully implements an alternative housing model, fairer and more accessible, non-profit, non-speculative and transformative
Efficient Energy Technology	Austria	2022	Energy storage	provides energy storage (a pressing issue regarding the energy transition to renewables) in urban areas with a great ease of use
Sofia2Go	Bulgaria	2022*	Food	digital platform connecting foodies with good food leftovers
SkillLab	Netherlands	2021	Skills	developing a mobile solution that helps people to identify and express their skills; it also matches skills to occupations and training offerings that address skill-gaps
Snowball Effect	Austria	2021	Employment	school supporting aspiring social entrepreneurs to replicate proven social enterprises in their region
Zekki	Finland	2021	Youth support	a digital service from Finland that matches young people with various support services based on an online wellbeing self-assessment quiz
MycoTEX®	Netherlands	2021*	Environment (waste)	an automated seamless production technology to create custom-fit products out of sustainable, vegan textiles made from mycelium (mushroom roots), replacing plastics and leathers with compostable materials
resortecs®	Belgium	2020	Recycling	helps simplify the process of reusing and recycling textiles
Snake	Croatia	2020	Technology	digital platform that enables users to wear outfits in augmented reality
WhyWeCraft	Romania	2020	Sustainability	a legal support mechanism for craftspeople and designers
Empower	Norway	2020*	Recycling	a new technology to enable circular economy, by allowing the deposit and collection of plastic waste for financial reward
MIWA	Czech Republic	2019	Recycling	financially sustainable circular distribution and sale system for food and non-food products with reusable packaging
SpraySafe	Portugal	2019	Technology	an edible spray to be applied to the surface of foods to preserve them, thus reducing the need for plastic wrapping and containers
VEnvirotech	Spain	2019	Technology	transforms organic waste into biodegradable polyhydroxyalkanoate (PHA) bioplastics using bacteria
MTOP	Austria	2019*	Refugees	blended learning program that helps young, highly qualified refugees enter the local labor market
Ulisse	Italy	2018	Persons with disabilities	a digital travel platform for deaf people
HeritageLab	Slovenia	2018	Youth support	an incubation program for young people in small towns who want to set up a business
CareerBus	Romania	2018	Youth support	a career orientation venture for young people from small urban and rural areas
Mouse4All	Spain	2018*	Persons with disabilities	enables people with severe physical disabilities to access an Android tablet or smartphone without touching the screen
Buildx	UK	2017	Housing	a collaborative platform that offers the tools and knowledge to design and build sustainable homes and neighborhoods
Feelif	Slovenia	2017	Persons with disabilities	a multimedia tool for blind and visually-impaired people, with which users can feel shapes on a flat touch screen

Table 1 – cont.

Name	Country	Year	Focus	Scope
SAGA	Netherlands	2017	Youth support	helps learners get a flexible education and learn in-demand skills from industry experts
The Bike Project	UK	2017*	Refugees	refurbishes second hand bikes to donate to refugees and asylum-seekers
CUCULA	Germany	2016	Refugees	a practical workshop and an educational program for refugees that designs, manufactures, produces and sells products
Project Virtuous Triangle	Turkey	2016	Refugees	matching primary school children from Syria with young Turkish students, alongside a university age 'coach student' for tutoring, mentoring and language sharing
The Machine to be Another	Spain	2016	Refugees	a virtual reality experience sharing designed to recreate, replicate, and share experiences so that people can see themselves in the body and experience of a refugee
Apiform	Bosnia	2015	Persons with disabilities; environment	allowing people in wheelchairs, older people, those with back pain or arthritis to take part in beekeeping
Freebird Club	Ireland	2015	Older adults	peer-to-peer social travel and homestay platform specifically designed for over 50s
Wheeliz	France	2015	Persons with disabilities	car-sharing platform of adapted cars available for rent to wheelchair users
QUID	Italy	2014	Recycle	recycling of this first quality high fashion waste into limited collections, while providing jobs to disadvantaged women
Urban Farm Lease	Belgium	2014	Employment	providing training, connection and consultancy to the unemployed people take advantage of the large surfaces available for agriculture in the city of Brussels
Voidstarter	Ireland	2014	Housing	refurbishing of the voids by training unemployed people
Community Catalysts	UK	2013	Employment	connecting talents in business and communities to create jobs for social benefit by helping people to use their creativity to set up sustainable, small-scale social care and health services that people can afford
Economy App	Germany	2013	Technology	an app collecting information from users on what they could offer in a local economy and what their economic needs are, without using money
MITWIN.NET	Spain	2013	Youth support	intergenerational professional network conceived to facilitate contact between people to share a job post and knowledge

also shape an innovation in this process of co-construction.

5.1. Voices of the Dialogical Exchange

First, when calls for innovative proposals are issued for a competition by an institution such as the European Innovation Council, the calls must stipulate the focus of the proposals. Every year since 2014 the European Innovation Council competition has had a specific theme, as shown in Table 2. Initially, as a response to the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the focus was on increasing employment opportunities. Subsequently, the challenge of offering equal opportunities to disadvantaged groups was the dominant theme, with a special emphasis on refugees. In more recent years, starting in 2019, the focus shifted to saving the planet and enhancing sustainable living, especially in terms of reducing plastic waste, using technology to recycle textiles, and constructing ecologically appropriate housing. When one considers the council from a theoretical standpoint, the institution can be seen as an example of *empty innovation* (Hallonsten 2023), as it is not, in and of itself, innovative. Although the European Union defines it as an “innovation program” (European Innovation Council, n.d.), one can argue that there is not much evidence of truly innovative work being done by this council. It seems to be yet another institution with a certain administrative structure and work program that is intended to serve as a forum for discussing innovation and also has the task of formally recognizing the most successful innovation initiatives. Therefore, we have to note that although the European Innovation Council plays an active part in the dialogue that shapes innovation, in and of itself it does not constitute an example of innovation. It does have a voice in the discussion of innovation, and it likely shapes consensual meaning systems, or hegemonic representations (Moscovici 1988), because it represents the institutional, top-down perspective of innovation. The dialogue begins with an “invitation”

from the council to submit proposals for innovative projects in a specific area. In 2024 this invitation read, in part, “This year the European Social Innovation Competition 2024 will focus on social innovation in ‘Digital Democracy’” (European Innovation Council 2024).

Second, the dialogical relationship must include at least two players. Social representations are flexible and dynamic because they include communication (Marková 2023). In this case, the exchange occurs between the European Innovation Council and the innovators who have worked on specific projects that are genuine examples of social innovation. The prize-winning projects listed in Table 1 offer creative solutions to societal problems in the volunteer and community sectors, and Hallonsten (2023) would most likely classify them as innovative. Certainly, one could argue about the level and degree of innovation, questioning the standards that evaluators used to identify the winners. Nonetheless, designating one project as the prize-winner implies that a dialogical relationship caused that project (and not others) to be deserving of space and recognition. Volunteer and community sectors across Europe address a myriad of problems beyond those highlighted by the council in its annual themes, but for a competition, only projects that fit the current agenda can be submitted. A dialogical relationship requires attention to a “conversation” that is happening through a stable interaction of social representations (Ciasullo et al. 2024). In a way, the developers of specific social innovation projects enter the conversation or dialogical relationship by first becoming aware of and then responding to the call for proposals. There is a necessary level of self-awareness in terms of owning the quality of innovation. Many projects may be innovative but for various reasons are not deemed as such by their designers (Hallonsten 2023) and therefore do not become direct participants in this dialogical exchange with the council. Furthermore, some innovative

Table 2. European Social Innovation Competition Editions

Year	Theme	Prize (each) [in euros]	Goal
2013	New Forms of Work	20,000	creating new opportunities for work, and for better work
2014	The Job Challenge	30,000	creating new types of work and addressing social needs
2015	New Ways to Grow	50,000	promoting sustainable models of growth that create an inclusive society where nobody is left behind
2016	Integrated Futures	50,000	building inclusive communities and realizing the potential contribution of refugees and migrants
2017	Equality Rebooted	50,000	equipping people with the skills they need to be able to compete in a changing economy, embracing technological progress and creating business models that allow everyone to equally seize the opportunities available
2018	Re:think Local	50,000	empowering young people to participate fully in a changing economy, up-skilling them for new employment opportunities
2019	Challenging Plastic Waste	50,000	tackling the problem of raising plastic waste levels across the world
2020	Reimagine Fashion	50,000	improving the environmental and social impact of the European fashion market
2021	Skills for Tomorrow	50,000	shaping a green and digital future
2022	The Future of Living	50,000	tackling the challenge linked to the current architecture and sustainable solutions of European housing districts

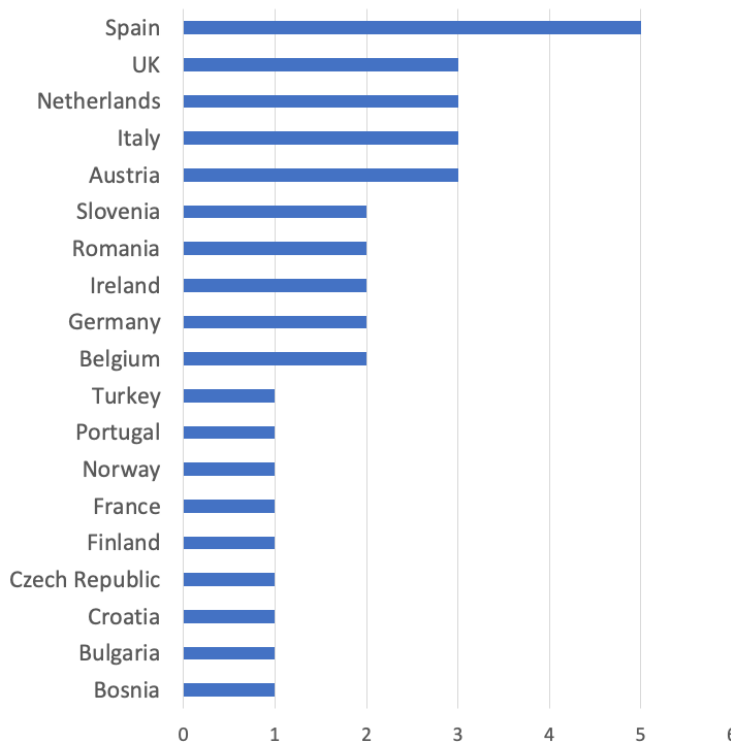


Figure 1. Countries of Origin of the Social Innovation Award-Winning Projects

projects may not address the annual theme at the particular time of submission, and for this reason they cannot enter the dialogical relationship. In other words, the winning projects fit the hegemonic representations (Moscovici 1988) of social innovation proposed by the European Innovation Council, and this causes the innovators to engage in a dialogue on the topic chosen on the institutional level but shaped in the dynamic exchange.

The third side of the dialogue is taken by the general public. The meaning of social innovation is co-constructed in a dialogical relationship, and this process does not occur in a vacuum. Prize-winning innovative projects benefit people and are proposed and executed by people. They have an impact on the environment in which communities exist and function, in a certain country, within European borders. The negotiation of the meaning of social innovation that occurs through social representations (Moscovici 2011) extends beyond the European Innovation Council and those involved in its projects. The theory of social representations is known as a theory that recognizes the value of the voice of popular wisdom, often transmitted through generations (Zárata-Rueda et al. 2022), and the voice of common sense, based on the notion that everyone is a naïve scientist (Galli and Fasanelli 2020). In line with the theory of social representations, the general public is not just passively receiving the meaning of social innovation co-constructed by the agents directly involved in shaping it, but it has a voice in the dialogical exchange. For example, the general public may include key stakeholders, such as refugees, impacted by a prize-winning project. They can voice their support for some projects and criticize others. In the end, it is the general public that eventually expresses a consensus (or not) and has an important voice in generating consensual meaning systems, or hegemonic representations (Moscovici 1988). Because communication is so convenient today, when posting comments on social media

takes only seconds, the general public has a plethora of tools available with which it can express its voice (Marková 2023). On the other hand, when a project in a certain country wins the European Innovation Council prize, the national and local news media are likely to pick up the story quickly, and this shapes the meaning of innovation in those contexts. It may be interesting to consider the countries of origin of the award-winning projects shown in Figure 1. It is likely, and in line with the theory of social representations, that innovators in those countries had an opportunity to engage in shaping the discourse around social innovation and understood it in terms of the characteristics and orientation of the prize-winning projects featured in the national media. According to Prost et al. (2022), the dialogical nature of social representations also implies that attention be paid to silence. In this context, this may be seen through the absence of several European countries in Table 1. What, if any, reaction may this absence provoke among the general public? How is this absence interpreted and incorporated into the construction of the social representations of innovation? While these questions are beyond the scope of this analysis, the possible significance of silence or absence should be recognized in the dialogical perspective (Marková 2023).

5.2. Process of the Dialogical Exchange

In the effort to shape and define social innovation from the dialogical perspective of the study of social representations, it may be worthwhile to consider the formal parts of the process under scrutiny.

Each year since 2014, the European Commission has launched a call for proposals for social innovation projects with a specific theme. By posting the contextualized meaning of social innovation in the volunteer and community sectors in line with that theme, the institutional player, since 2018 the European Innovation Council, shapes the understanding of it in the light of a specific challenge. For example, the 2022 challenge

of “The Future of Living” directed attention to the “current architecture and sustainable solutions of European housing districts” (European Innovation Council 2023). Considering this action from the standpoint of the dialogical approach of the theory of social representations, communication about social innovation was prompted, focusing on this challenge (Marková 2023).

In response, 28 applications were received, out of which 21 were deemed finalists; their developers were then invited to apply to the second phase of the process. The sending in of applications that described the social innovation projects caused the dialogue to continue, and each project provided a voice in the dialogical exchange. Due to the nature of the competition, the voices were not equal. The power imbalance situated the European Innovation Council as the dominant decision maker because it had the power to amplify some voices (by selecting finalists) and silence others (by not inviting them to continue). This illustrates the asymmetrical dynamics of institutional power, in which the theory of social representations has been recognized as a relevant analytical framework (Negura et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the competition continued with an invitation from the council to the finalists to attend a 2-day Social Innovation Academy. According to the European Innovation Council (2023), the Academy would “offer business acceleration services (i.e., coaching with a neuroscientific and creative approach) to help the finalists in developing and scaling up their applications.” In other words, the council intervenes *indirectly* each year in the designing of the social innovation projects and also directs or shapes the actions of the proponents. How does that impact the understanding of social innovation? Does it become broader? Or is it standardized and watered down to fit the pre-established criteria and agenda decided by the European Commission? While both scenarios are possible, especially in the light of empty innovation (Hallonsten

2023), there seems not to be sufficient insight to have enough arguments for one side over the other. The Social Innovation Academy is an arena in which a dialogical exchange can occur with the participants physically present, not virtually mediated, so that interactions can take place among the institutional voices and the applicants. It may be a time in which the attention of the actors is purposefully directed toward one another and toward the understanding of social innovation, as they co-construct and shape its meaning through stories, examples, voices and challenges (Ciasullo et al. 2023).

All throughout this process, the general public is watching and sometimes also participating by reporting, praising or criticizing the choices made. The applicants are free to share their impressions and thoughts on social media and other platforms, thus engaging with individuals beyond the European Innovation Council and the Academy, likely in their countries of origin and through their mother tongues. In today’s society, communication permeates any event and, especially through social media, brings in an emotional component while constructing meanings through social representations (Piermattéo 2022).

Conclusions

This analysis of the 10-year European Social Innovation Competition has featured the dialogical negotiation of meaning of social innovation in the volunteer and community sectors. The theory of social representations, historically rooted in dealing with novelty (Moscovici 2011), has provided a theoretical framework that recognizes the importance of an ongoing process of shaping the understanding of social innovation in the light of the important theme of planetary consciousness. In this process, three crucial voices were examined: the voice of the European Innovation Council as institution, the voice of the developer of the award-winning project, and the voice of the general public. Their dialogical interaction (Marková 2023) was recognized as

a process consisting of several stages and was largely orchestrated, facilitated and directed by the institutional body. As such, social innovation was viewed with some skepticism and may have been deemed an example of the concept of empty innovation introduced by Hallonsten (2023). In other words, while all the aforementioned actors negotiated the meaning of social innovation through their dialogical exchange, only some of them (most likely those who won an award) could actually be characterized as innovative. On the other hand, much social innovation actually occurring in Europe may go unnoticed and unrecognized, especially when it does not define itself as innovative or when it does not fit the standards established by the European Innovation Council. For example, a very innovative project could be in place in a local community to address a pressing need through creative means, but its proponents may not be aware of the council's competition, do not see themselves as innovative, do not have the time or means to engage in the application process, or do not speak English well enough to enter the level of dialogue required in the process. An effort to explore existing projects from a bottom-up perspective (e.g., by leaving the invitation for projects more open rather than including only projects with a specific focus each year) could contribute to transforming the council into an example of innovation.

One of the limitations of this archival research was the lack of access to further information on projects that were not selected and also on the rationales of the judges who each year defined and delimited social innovation for the purpose of the competition. Only some elements of the process could be systematically retrieved and analyzed. A further extension of this research could consist of interviews with the competitions' participants and judges with the aim of examining what shaped their understanding of social innovation.

In addition, further research could consider the impact of the most pressing societal and environmental challenges on the dialogical exchange concerning innovation, including the voices of the general public available in big data on social media (e.g., scrutinizing Twitter posts on innovation or websites featuring it). Other possible future perspectives could focus on analyzing the content of all of the proposed projects in order to delve into the elements of innovation in the winning and losing projects, as well as any methods of bottom-up involvement of the communities (i.e., the general public). One could also go beyond Europe, comparing social innovation projects worldwide or in specific countries; obviously, our research was limited to one continent. In a similar vein, more of a community approach focusing on local competitions and prizes for innovative efforts could be compared with the European approach. Given the presence of innovation hubs in higher educational institutions (e.g., see Dryjanska et al. 2022), technological organizations (e.g., see Brondi et al. 2021), or healthcare entities (e.g., see Bensliman et al. 2022), a future study could compare these sectors.

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