

Collective Bricolage in Social Entrepreneurship: Cooperative Models and Operational Mechanisms

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship operates under persistent resource scarcity, and collective bricolage offers one strategic response. Existing research has left the conceptual boundaries of collective bricolage underspecified, and its collaborative models and operational mechanisms remain underexamined. This paper takes up these issues. It clarifies what collective bricolage is, builds a typology of its models, and traces how each model works. Two dimensions organize the analysis: power symmetry and the mode of cooperative order formation. Along these dimensions, two models emerge as typical—consensus-based and hub-based—while the remaining two combinations are discussed as boundary forms. At its core, collective bricolage is a process in which multiple actors, facing resource scarcity, reconfigure resources at hand and reconstruct their meanings through improvisation and trial-and-error to arrive at novel solutions. The two models do not operate the same way. Consensus-based bricolage moves through three stages—resource aggregation, consensual reconfiguration, and outcome sharing—with trust running through every stage. Hub-based bricolage pools resources across ownership boundaries, assembles heterogeneous resources through improvisation, and anchors the arrangement in formal institutions. This study contributes to process-oriented research on entrepreneurial bricolage and offers practical guidance for social entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Collective Bricolage, Cooperation Model, Operational Mechanism, Social Entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Accompanying the growing prominence of issues such as wealth disparity, envi-

ronmental degradation, and inequitable distribution of educational resources, social entrepreneurship has gradually emerged as a vital force for social progress. In contrast to commercial entrepreneurship, which prioritizes profitability, social entrepreneurship is subject to the pressure of a “double bottom line”—that is, it must simultaneously generate social value and ensure its own viability and growth (Austin et al., 2006). Consequently, social entrepreneurial ventures face more acute resource scarcity constraints (Austin et al., 2006; Wang & Lin, 2021), and entrepreneurial bricolage has become both a critical strategy and an actionable approach for social entrepreneurs to cope with such constraints, as well as a growing research focus in recent years.

Generally, entrepreneurial bricolage can be classified into individual bricolage and collective bricolage based on the actors involved (Garud & Karnøe, 2003; Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010). Individual bricolage refers to entrepreneurs’ creative reconfiguration of resources at hand, with its essence lying in the actor’s initiative and the practical rationality of “making do”, rather than in the standardized, predefined uses of resources. Collective bricolage, by contrast, transcends the individual level and emphasizes the interactive, collaborative processes through which multiple actors jointly pool and integrate their respective resources. Although bricolage theory has significantly advanced our understanding of entrepreneurial agency, research on bricolage in the social entrepreneurship domain has largely remained at the individual level, with scant attention paid to collective bricolage involving multiple stakeholders. Social entrepreneurship requires cross-sector collaboration to establish inter-organizational problem-solving mechanisms (Liu & Chen, 2021) and to address resource scarcity through cross-sectoral resource coordination and integration (Zhang & Mai, 2026). This suggests that a single-actor perspective on resource bricolage is insufficient to adequately respond to the practical demands of cross-sectoral, multi-actor coordination in addressing resource shortages within social entrepreneurship. Hence, it is necessary to explore how multiple actors can collectively identify, integrate, and creatively utilize existing resources to overcome resource constraints.

Moreover, relative to individual bricolage, research on collective bricolage is still in its infancy. Existing studies have predominantly focused on “multi-actor participation” and “shared resource pools” (Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010), while deeper inquiries into its connotations, characteristics, and operational mechanisms remain sparse. For instance, what are the distinctive features of collective bricolage? How do the collaborative relationships shaped by collective bricolage differ from general cooperation? What typical patterns does collective bricolage exhibit in social entrepreneurship practice, and what core mechanisms drive the effective functioning of these patterns? These unanswered questions collectively constitute the focal issues that this study aims to address. Therefore, this paper seeks to systematically unpack the “black box” of collective bricolage in social entrepreneurship, by clarifying its conceptual meaning, identifying its patterns, and dissecting its underlying mechanisms. In doing so, we intend to enrich and extend

entrepreneurial bricolage theory, and to offer social entrepreneurship practitioners an actionable framework to guide them in more effectively mobilizing and organizing diverse stakeholders, thereby generating greater social value through collaborative action in resource-constrained environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Collective Bricolage

Existing research on the conceptualization of collective bricolage primarily centers on core dimensions such as multi-actor participation, shared resource pools, and interactive creation. From the perspective of distributed agency in technology entrepreneurship, [Garud and Karnøe \(2003\)](#) define collective bricolage as a co-shaping process, emphasizing that diverse actors—including producers, users, evaluators, and regulators—drive the evolution of technological trajectories through gradual, trial-and-error learning, as they continuously accumulate knowledge, tools, and practices. [Duymedjian and Rüling \(2010\)](#) contend that collective bricolage highlights the sharing of resource pools and action modalities among multiple bricoleurs. [Kwong et al. \(2017\)](#), in turn, conceptualize collective bricolage as the process of leveraging external partners' resources to co-create joint initiatives. In this study, we define collective bricolage as an action process in which multiple actors, in response to resource scarcity, engage in improvisational interactions and iterative experimentation to reconfigure existing resources and reconstruct their meanings, thereby generating novel solutions.

Collective bricolage differs fundamentally from general cooperative relationships. Grounded in contexts of resource scarcity, collective bricolage treats scarcity as a critical force that facilitates collective innovation, improvising new value and meanings for resources in action ([Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010](#)). In contrast, general cooperation typically presupposes resource abundance or pre-allocable endowments, aiming to enhance efficiency and reduce uncertainty in pursuit of predefined objectives. From a cooperative perspective, collective bricolage requires diverse and continuously evolving collaborative networks, with a strong emphasis on process emergence and relational symbiosis ([Carstensen & Röper, 2024](#)). Through ongoing interactions, the involved parties mutually influence and co-construct, gradually giving rise to generative relationships. General cooperation, by contrast, tends to specify clear roles, rules, and outcome targets, and the relationships formed are generally instrumental and contractual in nature ([Gulati, 1995](#); [Poppo & Zenger, 2002](#)). It should be noted that the distinction drawn above represents a theoretical comparison at the level of ideal types rather than a binary opposition in practice. In actual processes of collective bricolage, trust, formal contracts, and hierarchy are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist in varying proportions. Consensus-based bricolage may incorporate formalized arrangements such as qualification reviews and deliberative rules, just as hub-based bricolage may rely on long-term trust between the core actor and participating actors. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the dominant logic gov-

erning the cooperative order: collective bricolage is driven primarily by improvisational creation and meaning reconstruction under conditions of resource scarcity, whereas general cooperation is oriented toward achieving predefined goals and optimizing efficiency.

2.2. Typologies of Collective Bricolage

Given that collective bricolage involves the participation of multiple actors, [Duy-medjian and Rüling \(2010\)](#) distinguish between two types: familiar bricolage and convention-based bricolage. The former typically emerges within small groups that have worked together extensively over time and are characterized by mutual familiarity and trust—such as research teams or communities of practice—where collaboration relies largely on experiential exchange, tacit knowledge, and shared understandings among peers. The latter, in contrast, addresses broader collectives, such as cross-sectoral working groups, where cooperative ties are more loosely coupled and participants may not be familiar with one another, yet can still coordinate action by negotiating localized rules and conventions. [Kwong et al. \(2017\)](#) propose a typology of partnerships in social enterprises' collective bricolage, based on two dimensions: resource dependence between partners (symmetric vs. asymmetric) and cooperation modes (transactional vs. integrative). This yields four partnership types: dormant, complementary, collaborative, and dominant. Drawing on the notion of “bricolage-based cooperation” to analyze grassroots collaborative governance, [Xu and Song \(2024\)](#) identify two distinct patterns of collective bricolage in the public governance context: commensalistic symbiosis and mutualistic symbiosis. Commensalistic symbiosis refers to a pattern in which governance resources flow unidirectionally from a single actor to others, without forming extensive resource exchanges. Mutualistic symbiosis, by contrast, is characterized by complementary resource sharing and cyclical interactions among diverse actors, resulting in an interdependent and stable circular structure.

3. Defining Collaborators and Motivations in Social Entrepreneurial Collective Bricolage

3.1. Defining Collaborators

The collaborative networks formed through social entrepreneurial collective bricolage effectively interconnect social entrepreneurs, beneficiaries, resource providers, and supporting institutions. These parties engage in communication, negotiation, and cooperation driven by shared social value objectives ([Wang et al., 2014](#)). Social entrepreneurs/entrepreneurial teams serve as the primary initiators and drivers of bricolage, acting as discoverers of social entrepreneurial opportunities. Although they frequently confront resource constraints, their strong sense of social responsibility, contextual embeddedness, and innovative capacity enable them to play a pivotal role in bricolage activities by identifying, connecting, mobilizing, and recombining disparate and scattered resources ([Glasbeek, 2025](#); [Ghalwash & Ismail, 2024](#)). Beneficiary groups constitute the core value proposi-

tion of bricolage and function as co-creators. As the most directly affected stakeholders and service recipients of social problems, their needs, knowledge, experiences, and labor represent critical resources within the bricolage process. The active participation of beneficiaries enhances the purposiveness and sustainability of problem-solving solutions (Di Domenico et al., 2010). Resource providers supply material and social capital for bricolage efforts. They include community members, local businesses, and non-profit organizations possessing idle materials, underutilized space, skills, and social connections. These actors are not necessarily professional philanthropists; rather, the resources they contribute are typically characterized as “at hand”, “non-specialized”, and “contextualized”. Supporting institutions confer limited legitimacy endorsement, modest financial support, or permissive policy space to bricolage activities, though they generally do not assume a leading role (Desa & Basu, 2013; Peng et al., 2018)—examples include foundations providing small grants or government agencies piloting demonstration projects.

3.2. Motivational Analysis of Collaboration

The essence of social entrepreneurial collective bricolage lies in the creative development and utilization of resources at hand through multi-stakeholder collaboration under conditions of resource scarcity. Distinct from conventional transactional or contractual relationships, it is predominantly grounded in shared meaning-making, social trust, and improvisational cooperation, thereby forming a temporary network designed to respond rapidly to social needs.

1) Social entrepreneurs. As catalysts of collective bricolage, social entrepreneurs are driven by the initial mission to address a particular category of social problems. When standardized resources are unavailable or the costs of resource acquisition are prohibitively high, they proactively seek collaboration with external actors. By constructing bricolage networks, they identify, connect, and mobilize decentralized resources (Glasbeek, 2025), subsequently integrating them into problem-solving configurations to overcome resource shortages.

2) Beneficiaries. The primary motivation for beneficiary groups to participate in bricolage lies in fulfilling their urgent and immediate needs. When formal services are absent or malfunctioning, engagement in bricolage represents a vital avenue for accessing support and transforming their circumstances. Moreover, through active participation in bricolage, beneficiaries undergo a role shift from passive recipients to active contributors, wherein their localized knowledge, experiences, and skills are recognized, validated, and incorporated as integral components of solutions (Di Domenico et al., 2010). This co-creation process not only yields outputs more closely aligned with their needs but also strengthens their sense of community belonging, self-efficacy, and social capital, thereby facilitating an intrinsic transition from “being helped” to “self-help” and even to “helping others”.

3) Resource providers. The motivations of resource providers—such as com-

munity residents, local enterprises, and volunteers—in engaging in collective bricolage extend beyond pure market exchange. Rather, they derive distinctive psychological and social rewards through the value reconstruction of idle or underutilized resources. These rewards include fulfilling social responsibilities toward their communities, establishing favorable local reputations, and expanding meaningful social networks. Furthermore, the low entry barriers and high flexibility inherent in bricolage mitigate the risks they assume, rendering it feasible for them to contribute within constrained conditions.

4) Supporting institutions. The motivation for supporting institutions to participate in collective bricolage is not the pursuit of large-scale social investment or direct performance outputs, but rather the exploration of viable pathways for addressing social problems at low cost while maintaining risk control. By providing limited legitimacy endorsement, modest seed funding, or relatively flexible policy space, supporting institutions are able to observe and screen promising social entrepreneurial teams, accumulate practical knowledge, and build an evidence base for subsequent policy scaling or project replication—all without assuming disproportionately high decision-making risks.

4. Collaborative Models of Collective Bricolage in Social Entrepreneurship

To acquire the resources they need, social entrepreneurial ventures continually attract and integrate diverse stakeholders, sharing and utilising resources through collaborative models (Zhang & Mai, 2026). Drawing on the work of Duymedjian and Rüling (2010) and Kwong et al. (2017), this paper develops a typology of collective bricolage through theoretical construction and case illustration, identifying two distinct models of collective bricolage along two dimensions: power symmetry and mode of cooperative order formation. Power symmetry reflects the degree of balance in resource dependence among the various actors within a bricolage network. The mode of cooperative order formation refers to the primary pathway through which multiple actors develop stable rules and structured relationships during collaboration, which can be either endogenous or exogenous. Endogenous order formation means that cooperation among actors is grounded in internalised shared values and trust, whereas exogenous order formation indicates that the cooperative order emerges from externally imposed contracts, standards, or regulations.

These two dimensions are assessed according to specific criteria. For power symmetry, judgment focuses on two aspects: first, the locus of final decision-making authority—whether major decisions are reached through collective deliberation or made unilaterally by the core actor; and second, the unidirectionality of resource dependence—whether all parties possess viable exit options or whether clear one-sided dependency exists. For the mode of cooperative order formation, the criteria also fall into two categories: first, the carrier of rules—whether cooperative rules are primarily embodied in internalized conventions, trust, and con-

sensus, or in external contracts, charters, and standardized procedures; and second, the sanctioning mechanism—whether the consequences of rule deviation stem mainly from social pressure and relational sanctions, or from institutional penalties and contractual constraints.

4.1. Consensus-Based Collective Bricolage

Consensus-based collective bricolage refers to a collaborative approach in which the distribution of power among the multiple participants in social entrepreneurial collective bricolage is relatively balanced. On the basis of trust, affective identification, and local knowledge developed through long-term interaction, these actors identify, reconfigure, and utilise resources at hand to address resource scarcity. This model is characterised by a high degree of power symmetry and an endogenous cooperative order—that is, the emergence and maintenance of the cooperative order do not depend on external institutional constraints or formal contracts, but are instead shaped by the shared values that participants have cultivated through prolonged prior interaction. In this model, the relationships among social entrepreneurs, beneficiaries, resource providers, and supporting institutions are free from significant unilateral domination or dependency. The social entrepreneur's role is primarily one of initiation, connection, and coordination—not top-down resource control. Decisions are typically reached through collective deliberation, and resource allocation and use follow customary norms shared by all participants.

4.2. Hub-Based Collective Bricolage

Hub-based collective bricolage refers to a collaborative approach in which a single core actor occupies a dominant position, and various participants pool their available resources into a unified operational framework according to institutionalised rules, contracts, and procedural arrangements, so as to jointly address a given social problem. This model is characterised by a low degree of power symmetry and an exogenous cooperative order—that is, the emergence and maintenance of the cooperative order rely on the contracts, regulations, or standardised processes established by the core actor. In this model, the core actor typically functions as a “resource coordination centre” and carries out resource reconfiguration on the basis of identifying complementary resource relationships among the participants.

4.3. Boundary Discussion of Other Combinations

4.3.1. High Power Symmetry with Exogenous Order: Contractual Collaboration (Boundary Form)

This combination features relatively balanced power among participants, yet its cooperative order relies primarily on external contracts, standards, and procedures. Roles, rights, and responsibilities are predefined by contracts, resource allocation follows standardized procedures, and the resource recombination

scheme is specified through contracts at the outset. Actors' room for improvisation is greatly reduced by formal rules, and the possibility of meaning reconstruction declines as well. Its operational logic thus approximates general contractual cooperation or strategic alliances (Gulati, 1995). This combination typically arises in settings where resources are relatively abundant, tasks are highly standardized, and demands for efficiency and predictability are high. When improvisational creation and meaning reconstruction—the constitutive features of collective bricolage—are displaced by formal contracts, this combination falls outside the conceptual boundaries of collective bricolage. It is better understood as a transitional form between collective bricolage and general cooperation, rather than an independent typical mode of collective bricolage.

4.3.2. Low Power Symmetry with Endogenous Order: Authority-Trust (Boundary Form)

This combination features a core actor occupying a dominant position in the cooperative network, holding authority over resource allocation and strategic direction, while the cooperative order is maintained not through formal institutions but primarily through trust, emotional identification, and interpersonal consensus among participants. In this mode, the core actor's authority derives not from institutionalized position or contractual mandate but from personal prestige, social capital, and trust accumulated through prior collaboration; participants' compliance with the core actor's decisions likewise rests not on contractual obligations but on trust in the actor's competence and character. In the early stage or at a small scale, this "authority plus trust" combination offers clear advantages: short decision chains, low coordination costs, rapid resource mobilization by the core actor, and reduced need for monitoring and negotiation because of trust among participants. Such stability, however, depends heavily on the limited scale of cooperation and the homogeneity of participants. As cooperation expands, the number of participants grows, and benefit distribution becomes more complex, asset specificity and transaction frequency increase, raising the risks of bounded rationality and opportunism. Interpersonal trust and consensus alone cannot provide adequate governance, and the core actor's personal authority lacks institutionalized constraints and accountability mechanisms, leaving the relationship prone to friction or even dissolution. This combination is therefore not unstable from the outset; rather, it becomes difficult to sustain over time under conditions of scaling and growing complexity of interests.

5. Operational Mechanisms of Collective Bricolage in Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurial collective bricolage is a process through which social entrepreneurs, together with other collaborative actors, discover, mobilise, and reconfigure resources at hand to address social needs and create social value. Given the varying positions and resource endowments of different participants, the power relations, resource flows, and interaction patterns within the collaborative net-

work inevitably differ.

The essence of social entrepreneurship lies in pursuing social value creation as the primary goal while generating economic value through market-oriented operations to achieve financial sustainability (Dees, 1998). Social entrepreneurial ventures, however, differ in how they acquire resources, and these differences directly shape the operational mechanisms of their collective bricolage. This paper distinguishes two types of social entrepreneurial ventures: community-based and general. Community-based social enterprises are rooted in specific communities and driven by reciprocal interests. Their resources are deeply embedded in local social networks, and resource scarcity typically manifests as the fragmentation of community-internal resources. Their bricolage behavior therefore tends to rest on trust and consensus. General social entrepreneurial ventures, by contrast, are driven by general-interest logics, and their bricolage usually relies on institutional design and formal contracts to aggregate resources. Drawing on this distinction, the study follows the principles of typicality and differentiation in selecting two cases: Xiangshan Shanlin Community Service Co., Ltd. in Jiangmen, Guangdong, as a representative community-based social enterprise, and Muyang Zhijia Laundry Technology Co., Ltd. in Anqing, Anhui, as a representative general social entrepreneurial venture. Both cases display clear multi-actor resource bricolage and differ in power distribution and the formation of cooperative order, which makes them well suited to illustrating the operational mechanisms of the two collective bricolage models. Case materials come primarily from public enterprise information, media reports, government public records, and operational data provided by the enterprises. The materials cover the full development trajectory of both firms since their founding—January 2025 through late 2025 for Xiangshan Shanlin, and March 2017 through 2024 for Muyang Zhijia.

5.1. Operational Mechanisms of Consensus-Based Collective Bricolage

Typically, consensus-based collective bricolage operates by designing a participatory structure of “shared risks and shared benefits”, thereby establishing an incentive framework in which each participant can obtain corresponding returns, and converging dispersed resources into a shared resource pool. Consensus-based collective bricolage collaboration generally proceeds through three stages: initial resource aggregation, consensual reallocation and reconfiguration, and outcome sharing alongside trust reinforcement.

Specifically, in the initial resource aggregation stage, the primary role of social entrepreneurs is to identify resources—such as residents’ spare time, underutilised public spaces, and neighbourly trust relationships—and to transform dispersed ownership relations of resources into a blurred collective bricolage community relationship. Beneficiaries, in turn, contribute their lived experience, local knowledge, and self-identified needs as essential components of the problem-solving solutions, ensuring that the bricolage arrangements are well matched to their

demands.

In the consensus-based reconfiguration and allocation stage, beneficiaries select resources based on their own needs, and social entrepreneurs coordinate and orchestrate these resources within a framework of collective consensus to form a bricolage solution. This reallocation is not governed by formal contracts or administrative mandates. Rather, it unfolds through regular collective dialogue that reinforces the norm of resource sharing. Supporting institutions reduce transaction costs for other actors by removing institutional barriers, conferring legitimacy, and providing small seed funding—interventions that lower the barriers to launching and sustaining collective bricolage. Resource recombination unlocks the latent value of idle resources previously held by different participants. Accordingly, in the outcome-sharing and trust-reinforcement stage, the economic and social value generated is shared equitably among bricolage participants, creating an incentive for continued engagement. Mutual trust among participants permeates the entire consensus-based bricolage process. It lowers initial cooperation costs and reduces the need for monitoring during resource reallocation.

Xiangshan Shanlin Community Service Co., Ltd. in Jiangmen, Guangdong is a representative community-based social enterprise whose bricolage practice aligns with the conditions that give rise to the consensus-based model. As Jiangmen's first community social enterprise, it was established by Xiangshan Community in January 2025. In the initial resource aggregation stage, the company operated under a governance framework of "coordination by the community Party committee, market-oriented enterprise operation, and resident supervision and participation," offering elderly care, housekeeping, medical care, and other everyday services to older residents in the community. In its collective bricolage process, the company first designed a "community partner" participation mechanism, whereby community residents join the company as partners. This arrangement makes every resident a direct beneficiary of improvements in community service quality, while simultaneously enhancing their sense of community belonging through participation in decision-making and oversight, which in turn incentivises more residents to contribute resources. Under this mechanism, 17 community residents (including electricians, maintenance workers, and hairdressers) were incorporated into a "convenience service talent pool" after qualification reviews, providing community services at below-market rates. Concurrently, 25 external organisations—including medical institutions, housekeeping firms, and supermarkets—also participated as "community partners", thereby enriching the service offerings. In terms of consensual reallocation and resource deployment, the company does not exercise unilateral pricing power; service directions, fee standards, and profit distribution are all determined through collective deliberation by resident representative assemblies and the Red Council, while volunteer building captains are responsible for day-to-day coordination, with resource allocation following rules jointly formulated by all parties. In the outcome sharing and trust reinforcement stage, after one year of operation, the company achieved a turnover of nearly

410,000 yuan and generated approximately 50,000 yuan in profit, all of which was reinvested in community micro-renewal projects, cumulatively benefiting over 5000 residents. These tangible outcomes not only validated residents' expectation that "participation brings returns", but also reinforced their continued engagement in the initiative.

This case illustrates the defining features of consensus-based collective bricolage along both dimensions. On power symmetry, final authority over major decisions rests with the Residents' Representative Assembly and the Red Council; the core actor holds no unilateral decision-making power. Participants may opt in or out voluntarily, with no one-sided dependency between the parties. Power is therefore relatively symmetric. On the formation of cooperative order, rules take shape primarily through neighborhood trust, community consensus, and deliberative conventions. Formal arrangements such as qualification reviews serve only as auxiliary entry requirements rather than governing constraints, and deviations from consensus are met mainly with community opinion and relational pressure rather than contractual penalties. The resulting order is endogenous. These features align with the consensus-based model defined in this paper and confirm the fit between the resource base of community-based social enterprises and consensus-based bricolage.

5.2. Operational Mechanisms of Hub-Based Collective Bricolage

Hub-based collective bricolage proceeds through three stages: cross-ownership resource aggregation, improvisational assembly of heterogeneous resources, and institutional anchoring and constraint. In the cross-ownership resource aggregation stage, the core actor establishes institutional arrangements—such as incorporating a company, setting up subsidiaries, or promulgating supportive policies—to provide a unified access framework for resources dispersed across different participants, thereby enabling them to be legitimately incorporated into a single operational system. In the improvisational assembly of heterogeneous resources stage, the core actor, operating within the institutionalised framework, combines and assembles resources of various types and origins through continuous trial-and-error adjustments. The specific reconfiguration plans are not pre-designed but gradually take shape through the practices of the participating actors. In the institutional anchoring and constraint stage, the core actor uses explicit institutional constraints—such as profit-reinvestment ratios, non-profit charters, or financial feedback mechanisms—to anchor the economic returns generated by bricolage to the sustained realisation of the social mission, thereby preventing resource diversion. Measurable performance outcomes, in turn, further reinforce the legitimacy of the hub actor, enabling it to continue mobilising and utilising new resources. This model typically emerges in contexts where resources are highly differentiated and there is a clear need for supply-demand matching—for example, industry chain integration led by social enterprises to facilitate employment for disadvantaged groups, or community service platforms operated by hub-based social enterprises within the framework of

government-purchased services.

A representative example is Anhui Anqing Muyangzhijia Laundry Technology Co., Ltd., founded in March 2017. It is a social enterprise established by the Muyangzhijia Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children—a private non-profit organisation founded in 2012 by parents of children with disabilities. In the cross-ownership resource aggregation stage of collective bricolage, the rehabilitation centre's greatest challenge was to secure a stable source of income without increasing its reliance on external donations, while also addressing the employment needs of persons with disabilities. At the time, however, the centre did not directly possess labour, market channels, or production equipment. Its solution was to register the laundry technology company as an institutional arrangement, legally transforming parents from "caregivers" into "laundry workers", thereby converting family caregiving time into productive resources that could be channelled into the market. In the improvisational assembly of heterogeneous resources stage, the company faced the challenge of matching parents' limited work capacity, the rehabilitation centre's non-standardised physical facilities, and sporadically secured hospital laundry orders obtained through social networks. Through its operations, the company gradually developed service standards, training procedures, and market expansion strategies, with the assembly plan being iteratively adjusted and eventually consolidated through practice. In the institutional anchoring and constraint stage, the company's articles of incorporation explicitly stipulate that "70% of annual profits must be returned to the rehabilitation centre", thereby legally binding the economic returns generated by commercial operations to the rehabilitation centre's mission of serving children with disabilities.

The operational process outlined above shows that Muyang Zhijia's bricolage practice is clearly hub-based. In terms of power relations, the rehabilitation center dominates by virtue of its authority to create institutions and orchestrate resources. Participating actors enter the enterprise system as labor providers whose employment and income depend on the operational platform built by the core actor, and the resulting power structure is asymmetric. Regarding order formation, every dimension of the cooperative relationship—from company registration to charter provisions to the mandated profit-return ratio—is embedded in formal institutions. Resource allocation follows standardized enterprise procedures, and non-compliance is sanctioned through institutional obligations rather than interpersonal pressure. The cooperative order is thus exogenous in nature. This coupling of core-actor dominance with formal-institutional anchoring allows Muyang Zhijia to integrate heterogeneous resources into a unified operational framework and to bind commercial returns durably to its social mission of rehabilitating children with disabilities.

6. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

6.1. Research Conclusions

Focusing on collective bricolage in social entrepreneurial ventures, this paper sys-

tematically examines its conceptual nature, typical cooperative modes, and operational mechanisms. The paper proposes that collective bricolage is, in essence, a collective action process in which multiple actors jointly respond to social problems by sharing, recombining, and co-creating resources at hand under conditions of severe resource constraints. Two dimensions—power symmetry and the formation of cooperative order—serve as the basis for identifying two modes of collective bricolage: consensus-based and hub-based. Their distinct operational mechanisms are then examined. The consensus-based mode follows a three-stage sequence of resource aggregation, consensus-based reconfiguration, and outcome-sharing with trust reinforcement. Mutual trust forged through long-term interaction leads participants to engage in collective bricolage as a joint response to resource scarcity. Within this mode, social entrepreneurs act primarily as initiators, connectors, and coordinators rather than exercising top-down resource control. The hub-based mode follows a sequence of cross-ownership resource pooling, improvisational assembly of heterogeneous resources, and institutional anchoring and constraint. Formal institutions play an enabling role here, and the core actor functions as a hub for resource orchestration and institutional design.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this paper are primarily threefold. First, prior studies have largely examined the effectiveness of resource bricolage for social entrepreneurial ventures in coping with resource scarcity from an individual or intra-organisational perspective, while overlooking the action strategies through which social entrepreneurial ventures deliberately coordinate and integrate resources across sectors to address resource constraints. This paper extends the analytical lens to the level of multi-actor collaborative networks, revealing the distinctive logic that sets collective bricolage apart from general cooperation, and thereby offering a novel analytical framework for understanding value creation in social entrepreneurship under resource-constrained conditions.

Second, although existing research has highlighted core behavioural features of collective bricolage such as “multi-actor participation” and “shared resource pools” (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Zhang & Mai, 2026), most studies have remained at the descriptive level of behavioural attributes, with limited attention to how these behaviours give rise to cooperative order within collective bricolage. By examining the operational mechanisms of both consensus-based and hub-based collective bricolage, and drawing on real-world social entrepreneurial case analyses, this paper integrates the fragmented behavioural descriptions found in prior research into coherent, stage-based processes. It thus elucidates a complete logical chain—from “how resources are aggregated”, to “how resources are allocated”, and ultimately to “how collaboration is sustained”—thereby enriching process-oriented research on entrepreneurial bricolage.

6.3. Practical Implications

This study offers practical implications for social entrepreneurs. First, they should

select a bricolage mode that fits their specific context. In settings with deep trust and rich social capital, consensus-based collective bricolage holds natural advantages, and social entrepreneurs should focus their efforts on resource identification, consensus mobilization, and relationship maintenance. As consensus-based bricolage scales up, however, it encounters formalization pressure: when interpersonal trust can no longer cover increasingly complex coordination demands, social entrepreneurs should introduce formal rules cautiously while keeping consensus as the dominant logic, to prevent the cooperative order from shifting from “trust-consensus” to “contractual rules” and losing the improvisational creativity that defines collective bricolage. In fields with highly heterogeneous resources and a need for rapid scaling, hub-based bricolage is more feasible. In such settings, if the core actor seeks to mobilize other participants to address resource scarcity through collective bricolage, it should prioritize institutional design—bringing dispersed resources into a unified operational framework and anchoring bricolage outcomes in the social mission through hard constraints such as profit reinvestment.

Second, social enterprises engaged in hub-based collective bricolage should be alert to the institutional drivers of mission drift. Unlike consensus-based bricolage, where the social mission is embedded in trust relationships, the core actor in hub-based bricolage generates economic returns through market-oriented operations, and the allocation of these returns does not automatically align with mission fulfillment. The efficiency advantage of hub-based bricolage stems from institutionalized standardized procedures and contractual arrangements, yet this same advantage is also a source of mission-drift risk. When the core actor prioritizes the performance requirements of funders or purchasers to maintain resource inflows, it may gradually lose sight of the deeper needs of the ultimate beneficiaries. Social enterprises should therefore deliberately build hard constraints for mission protection into their institutional design and establish feedback mechanisms through which beneficiaries participate in oversight.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study carries certain theoretical and practical significance, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study primarily draws on cases of community-based social enterprises and mutual-aid elderly care initiatives for analysis. While these organisations fall within the scope of social entrepreneurship, the organisational forms of social entrepreneurship are diverse—including benefit corporations, community cooperatives, and transformed non-profit organisations—and the operational mechanisms of collective bricolage may vary across these different forms. Future research could therefore select a wider range of social entrepreneurial cases for comparative investigation, thereby extending the generalisability of the findings. Second, this study focuses exclusively on the social entrepreneurship context in China. Existing research has demonstrated that the operational modes of social entrepreneurship are profoundly shaped by insti-

tutional environments and cultural contexts (Kerlin, 2013). Accordingly, future studies could conduct comparative analyses using social entrepreneurial cases from countries with different institutional environments and cultural characteristics, exploring how varying institutional contexts influence the bricolage models and operational mechanisms of social entrepreneurial ventures.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, Yanan Wang; conceptualization, resources, writing—review and editing, supervision, project administration, Yi Zhang. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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