A long and winding road: The hard graft of scaling social change in complex systems

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ABSTRACT

Advice abounds on how to implement large-scale social change, much of which emphasizes a simplistic linear process, led by a heroic central actor. Rigorous case studies have shown that social change is far more complex: it is a reciprocal, iterative, and adaptive process, with multiple stakeholders who work backstage in networked, committed teams. Despite this, the myth of the social entrepreneur as a transformative change maker capable of scaling innovations to a societal level, still holds sway over social innovation support programmes and business school curricula. Using illustrative examples of successful efforts of large-scale social change across three of the most pressing international social challenges: access to medicines, the integration of migrant populations, and reorganizing social care models, we illustrate how conceptualizing social change as driven by iconic individuals is often counter-productive in terms of achieving impact at a societal level. Based on these analyses, we present five insights which illustrate how the mythology of social entrepreneurship and simplistic scaling concepts are often contrary to the practices employed within successful efforts to bring about social impact. Three counteracting principles for those leading, evaluating and funding innovative change efforts within complex systems are discussed and contrasted with the pervasive mythology of social entrepreneurship and linear scaling processes.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the mythical tales of heroism recounted at fireside chats at business schools and founders' events across the globe (Papi-Thornton, 2016) have led to misleading guidance on how to create and scale social change. We present an alternative account to the noble gladiator-type figure who single-handedly tackles and overcomes the world's evils. Instead, problems are multi-faceted, and the future is inherently unpredictable. Scaling social change within complex systems is not about a singular lone hero (Chalmers, 2021), but rather networked solutions, multiple stakeholders, co-construction, and backstage graft. We build on a growing appreciation in the entrepreneurship literature that points to a misplaced focus on the extreme cases to the detriment of the intricate, sometimes mundane experiences of most entrepreneurs (Kim and Kim, 2022a, 2022b). The continued perpetuation of this myth at the expense of providing social entrepreneurs with more holistic, evidence-based supports that have been

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proven effective in practice shackles rather than stimulates social innovation (Aldrich and Ruef, 2018; Kuckertz et al., 2023). It is time to 'get real'.

Over the past decade, there has been a surge in interest in scaling ideas that can fundamentally change the status quo and address social problems (Desa and Koch, 2014; Islam, 2020; Mair et al., 2023). This is a natural response to the ever-increasing complexity and frequency of grand social challenges (Perrini et al., 2010; Voegtlin et al., 2022). Visible taxonomies, most notably the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, provide a macro-level perspective on the breadth of wicked societal problems requiring urgent remediation. Building out from the phenomenon of business 'unicorns', the privately held start-up companies that are valued at more than one billion dollars (Kuckertz et al., 2023), there has been significant growth in guidance, support, and expectations for individuals with innovative ideas to replicate their successful models in the social sphere. In explaining successes, a heroic tale (Brattström and Wennberg, 2022; Kavanagh and O'Leary, 2004) is often attached to this scaling process with a visionary leader at the core inspiring widespread change. Explicit emphasis is placed on the singular, mythical entrepreneurial figure (Dean and Ford, 2017; Mazzucato, 2018; Ogbor, 2000).

Yet, when speaking with those who have been intimately involved in successful cases of scaling complex change, their perceptions of what actually happened seem to differ in key aspects from the popular mythology. Those at the core of the change efforts reveal that the struggle for change was far more complicated and iterative. One activist summarized their discomfort with the heroic, simplistic narrative; "I am very sceptical of the model of social entrepreneurship - it is too much based on the cult of the personality" (LO7). We build on recent work that has critiqued conceptions of heroic entrepreneurship (Kuckertz et al., 2023) and social entrepreneurship (Teasdale et al., 2023), extending this emerging research agenda into the field of social innovation. In particular, we highlight the implications for practice, and how support structures and processes for scaling social innovation could be strengthened as a consequence.

This paper is as follows: we start by challenging the idea that the successful scaling of social change (Glavas and Fitzgerald, 2020) is a linear process led by a focal social entrepreneur. Using myths (Bowles, 1989; Khurana et al., 2023; Palo et al., 2020; Schwartz, 1985; Starbuck, 2007) as a focal lens, we deconstruct some of the myths associated with scaling social innovation by working through the various technical and adaptation challenges that are part and parcel of the scaling process, and pointing out the gap between scaling realities and the mythical journey (Laine and Kibler, 2018) that is regularly promoted. We conclude by outlining three practitioner-focussed guiding principles for those leading, evaluating and funding innovative change.

2. The 'Myth' of Scaling Social Innovation

Myths are not speculative fiction but rather are part of the social construction of narratives that make sense retrospectively of historical events (Møller, 2017) and that in turn shape how we understand the world around us. Many social entrepreneurs claim to be in the business of scaling proven ideas to address complex social problems (Chalmers, 2021). In some ways, the scaling myth is the bedtime story that social entrepreneurship networks and philanthropic foundations tell themselves. It is presumed that there is a demand for new innovations and that these innovations will be absorbed and shared seamlessly across the eco-system. They focus on funding research and piloting ideas assuming that if the ideas are effective in a pilot setting, they will have wider impact at scale. Yet, there is a gap between the demonstration of effective solutions to social problems in one place and doing the same in many other places. In speaking about school reform initiatives, then-President Bill Clinton clearly articulated this issue: "Nearly every problem has been solved by someone somewhere. [The challenge is] we can't seem to replicate [them] anywhere else". Using the analogy from commercial entrepreneurship of discovery (i.e., demonstrating a high potential solution) and exploitation (i.e., scaling that solution), many social entrepreneurs struggle to move beyond the discovery phase at the local level and do not reach a significant level of scale (Morris et al., 2020; Sud et al., 2009).

There are three questionable principles underpinning the pervasive and counter-productive social innovation scaling myth:

Questionable Principle 1: Iconic, heroic leaders with specific traits single-handedly drive social change

Questionable Principle 2: The development of new technologies and funding mechanisms is the key challenge

Questionable Principle 3: Social systems are receptive to new technologies and the most effective are adopted

The solution to these scaling challenges is often seen as developing the technical skills of the social entrepreneur, providing them with tools to measure and grow the impact of their organizations and/or encouraging the development of appropriate financial instruments (Marshall, 2011; Sastre-Castillo et al., 2015). That is, the challenge of scaling is seen as primarily a technical challenge, which requires the transmission of skills and tools such as Social Return on Investment evaluation methods and/or design of optimum financial instruments, such as social impact bonds. The simplicity of social innovation scaling as a technical challenge to spread new solutions within receptive systems is attractive to funders. They can prioritise the development of new ideas and back heroic individuals without having to worry about complex, contested systems.

A growing body of research has shown how the diffusion of models involves adaptation of the model to different contexts and that the social entrepreneurship literature pertaining to on-going innovation and adaptation is lacking substance (Seelos and Mair, 2013). These works acknowledge that innovation is often conceptualized in stages, progressing from discovery to scaling, but recognize that the process of social innovation is often far more iterative with a blurring of the lines between the stages of discovery. This moves the discussion beyond a technical challenge of 'scaling what works' to seeing social innovation as an on-going process developing implementable solutions in different contexts. Using the literature on technical and adaptive challenges, we can illustrate that the challenges of scaling social innovations are interpreted very differently depending on how scaling is conceptualized (Grint, 2005; Heifetz et al., 2004; Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Table 1 sets out the differences between viewing scaling as a technical versus an adaptive challenge.

Table 1
The different challenges of technical and adaptive problems.

Technical	Adaptive
● Problem is well-defined and can be isolated	● Challenge is complex and problem is enmeshed in other problems
● Answer is known	● Answers are unknown
● Implementation is clear	● Implementations require learning
● Solution can be imposed by a focal actor	● No single organization or actor can provide a workable solution

Adaptive challenges require an on-going process of problem solving and iterations between innovation and scaling (Alexander and van Knippenberg, 2014; Sahay et al., 2013; Slayton and Spinardi, 2016). In the literature on scaling, the primary focus has been on growing or diffusing an intact model whether this is by growing the original social enterprise or diffusing instructions (Chliova and Ringov, 2017; Kayser and Budinich, 2015). This approach interprets the challenges of scaling as a technical problem, which can be addressed by adopting certain skills and practices and designing appropriate financing instruments. This interpretation of scaling is a linear process. Understanding the scaling of social impact through an adaptive lens, however, requires on-going reconfiguring, re-interpretation, and renegotiation of the social innovation amongst stakeholders. Adaptive problems are complex and often wrapped up in a myriad of other problems (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018). Such an understanding of scaling highlights that

Social change is often an interactive process (Bailey, 2021; Dacin et al., 2011; Logue and Grimes, 2022; Perrini and Vurro, 2010), which requires the construction of collective action (Kania & Kramer, 2011) rather than an act of invention or inspiration by a focal actor (Barki et al., 2020; Montgomery et al., 1995).

This adaptive approach to scaling also shifts the image of the social entrepreneur from one of a social engineer towards one of a bricoleur who learns what is needed to influence and has the networks to engage with the system (Smith and Stevens, 2010). It sees the social entrepreneur as continually encountering new challenges and seeking to use available resources and networks to address them (Phillips et al., 2015). The adaptive approach to scaling is a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of how the role of the social entrepreneur is conceptualized and raises the important, practical question of whether the approaches promoted by social innovation support networks and funding organizations are appropriate. For example, if one were to interpret innovation on anti-retroviral HIV medication in developing countries as a technical issue, the focus would be on improving the efficacy of the medication. Under such a conceptualization, social entrepreneurs would assume a receptive system for the innovation and that they could lead the development and scaling of the innovation. Conversely, interpreting the same issue as an adaptive challenge would focus more on the need to navigate the complexity and contestation of the existing public health system. It would bring into clearer focus the need to work with and gain buy-in from a diverse range of actors such as community health clinics, national public health systems, civil society, etc. to adjust and adapt scaling strategies. Similarly, if one were to interpret climate change as a technical challenge, one would focus on the development of new, cleaner technologies rather than the complex, adaptive challenges of scaling existing solutions by changing behaviour, engaging with communities, and countering the powerful interests that sustain the use of fossil fuels.

2. Insights from successful cases of scaling social change

How then does social innovation get scaled up successfully? We have looked across successful cases of scaling social change and found patterns repeated throughout each of the three cases (see Table 2). In total, 21 interviews were conducted with leaders from these organizations (LO) and leaders from the systems (LS) in which they operate. The common features across the cases are:

- They are attempting to introduce innovative ways of achieving social objectives that are radically different from the status quo
- They are led by people who have been recognized in the field of social innovation (two of the three organizations were led by Ashoka fellows, who are widely acknowledged as the world's leading social entrepreneurs)
- They have achieved substantial, independently evaluated successes in social justice fields

An inductive approach based on analyses grounded in the interpretations of the interviewees and supplemented with secondary data pertaining to other studies and evaluations of the work of these organizations resulted in the emergence of five key insights:

2.1. The organizations' members are linked by a deeply shared interpretative framework

Actors within the change-implementing organizations share a common ideology or interpretative structure and view the current status quo as unacceptable and in need of reform.

This shared sense of injustice and common worldview within the organizations enabled them to operate with relative speed and autonomy. Staff were able to clearly articulate what needed

To change and why, and spend time engaging with newcomers to ensure that they become inducted into the culture. There were certainly internal disagreements, sometimes heated about tactical choices, but there was a shared fundamental analysis of the problem and the need often to adapt and pivot as opportunities and challenges arose. For example, one organization did not

Recruit from the public sector and preferred instead to hire more inexperienced staff (referred to as 'blank sheets of paper') that could be indoctrinated into the beliefs and practices of the organization. As an interviewee stated:

"We are always changing. The foundation program officer always asks if we have got the evaluation framework in place. We do have it in place, but it is just not written down - the cake is being baked as we speak but we don't have the time to write it down in an orderly fashion" (LO3).

Table 2
Overview of the three cases.

Organization (Location)	Social Issue Addressed	Process to Scale	Evidence of Success
Case 1: *Health for All (Africa)*	Refusal by government and drug companies to provide medication for people with HIV available as a right	-Produce and disseminate evidence on the efficacy of antiretroviral treatments -Lobbying -Popular mobilization -Litigation -Employment of a treatment literacy model	-Treatment literacy activists provided information to approx. 100,000 people per month -Succeeded in five notable legal rulings -Approximately 500,000 people were receiving life-saving antiretroviral treatment within a short period
Case 2: *Community Power (Europe)*	Migrants' experience of social services and support services	-Utilize revenue generating enterprises for funding -Provide support and advice to the local community re entitlements to social supports -Input into policy work -Combination of community organizing, advocacy and litigation strategies	-Influenced how employment rights, benefits and housing services are applied by social services -Helped shape the provision of services in ways which met the particular needs of these communities
Case 3: *Lifewell (Europe)*	Social care and health services reformation	-Work closely with government and philanthropic organizations -Support organizations at the local level to implement government policy -Allocate funding on a competitive basis to service provider organizations -Support leadership and organizational capacity-building	-Work has been rigorously and independently evaluated by leading international experts -Demonstrated significant improvements in the quality of the lives of service users -Evidenced reductions in the cost of provision -Profiled by the government as an exemplar of impactful work

2.2. Successful scaling is a process of bricolage rather than implementation of a blueprint

The innovations that change makers promote emerge from a process of engaging with actors and drawing on available resources and networks rather than the implementation of a fully developed plan. Even though proposals are often costed, and evidence frequently used, the process of scaling social change is an iterative one. This resembles more a process of garnering resources that are available at a point in time and reshaping them rather than seeking to implement a fully designed plan. In the cases studied this often involved working with partner organizations and funders who sought unrealistic degrees of clarity whilst the organizations looked to retain more flexibility:

"I am going to write an essay in praise of bank robbing … Some funders are very painful … In terms of planning tools, you need to have flexibility. It is not possible to have one which suits all organizations" (LO11).

2.3. Scaling social change features periods of contestation to overcome progression barriers

Successful scaling is not without disagreement. There will be a need to frame and reframe the work when vested parties seek to block or inhibit the scaling of the social change. The contestation may be passive-aggressive; in other situations, it may be public and played out in the media or in the courts. It is almost certain that there will be the need to clearly articulate and make sense of the value of the work as part of this contestation in a compelling way that can galvanize followers and successfully trump the opposition. The organizations sought to understand their opponents and to engage in this process of contestation using influencing strategies that were effective in terms of winning. Often it required the ability to understand that the contestation was in pursuit of specific goals and not an end in and of itself:

"The easiest thing was to engage in this disobedience. The hardest thing and the most difficult form of leadership was to cut the deal … There is a downside to civil disobedience and staff being motivated but people don't understand the limitations. If they think that the only tactic is to throw stones, it is a huge problem" (LO7).

2.4. Scaling requires persistent, oftentimes unseen, hard graft by a team

There is not a promised land of 'achieving scale' where the new practices and beliefs are adopted and mainstreamed; rather, the innovations need to be adapted, the system needs to be influenced to accept the innovation, and the change needs to be advocated for on an on-going basis. The shifting of institutionalized beliefs and practices takes concerted efforts and often those who benefit under the old regime actively resist change and adhere to the historical ways of working. This process, whilst having key moments, resembled more of an on-going struggle rather than a specific breakthrough period where scale was achieved and institutionalized:

"The big lever is being pulled and the big glossy document has been launched. The change has been at best superficial … It's about changing mindsets and changing attitudes" (LS9).

Even in organizations that have iconic leaders, much of the graft of spreading innovative practice requires a wider team of key individuals who are central to the success achieved. The focal leaders who attract the most public attention should be acknowledged for their ability to 'make sense' of their issues in compelling ways both inside and outside the organizations, but there are also sets of skills required to administer the organizations. This less glamorous work is centrally important to the scaling of the impact:

"An organization like ours needs a variety of leadership styles to deal with the internal politics and dynamics, the logistics, and political leadership. These three elements are all needed" (LO11).

2.5. Successful scaling requires co-construction with influential individuals and organizations

Organizations that engage in social change are relatively small compared to the scale of the systems they seek to influence. Success requires the building of networks both inside these systems and beyond. All of the organizations studied sought to build linkages and alliances with people and other organizations that could provide insights into the prevailing beliefs and practices and how to influence or disrupt these. One interviewee highlighted that it is important:

"… to have people involved who understand the existing culture and so if you want, you have to understand, know your enemy, who understand how the culture, the dysfunctional culture works in order to be able to work out how to change it and how to bring people along" (LS9).

The 'skin' of the organization became stretched around the parts of the systems that they sought to influence. This feeling of co-creation, which the network feels over the organizations, is purposefully and consciously promoted by the leadership of these organizations and is seen as central to the ability to achieve a significant scale of reform:

"We were all social activists, and we were all elbows. There was also a reconfiguration of us. We had to reconstruct our own identities. And see ourselves as a group. We knew how to affect power … By networking and resource sharing" (LO3).

3. Discussion

Exploring the actual practices that social entrepreneurs engage in to scale their ideas highlights that it is an iterative process involving teams of people within social enterprises and co-creation with others who are inside the systems that the entrepreneurs are trying to influence. Many of the supports offered by the key social entrepreneurship networks are, however, still rooted in a paradigm that emphasizes entrepreneurs as exceptional individuals with specific traits who can scale innovative ideas through combining the force of their personalities with the tools of business practice. Our findings show that social change is quite different. We extend work focussed on clarifying the process of scaling in a business setting (Bohan et al., 2024) by offering a grounded understanding of scaling within a social innovation context. The actual process of scaling social change pursues a winding, non-linear path that resembles a process of bricolage where the entrepreneur adapts their idea and leverages available resources and networks to effect changes to a system (Alexander and van Knippenberg, 2014; Sahay et al., 2013; Slayton and Spinardi, 2016). Fig. 1 presents a new model of social change that reflects this reality. The trajectory of the process shifts as opportunities are created and challenges are encountered. Persistent across the process model is the graft of the diverse spectrum of contributing practitioners and groups of practitioners. We conclude that there are three counteracting principles (Gamble and Muñoz, 2021) which contrast with the central principles of the standard social innovation scaling myth outlined above:

3.1. Counteracting principle 1: embody shared leadership

The main implication for the leadership of scaling is that leadership becomes less about supporting transformational individuals and more about supporting adaptive leadership within systems (Heifetz et al., 2004). Adaptive leadership means that leaders constructively influence systems by creating pressure for change. To do this, they gain insights and understanding of the wider systems within which they are operating. Rather than relying on their positions within a hierarchy or the force of their personalities, they work interactively within systems with others who share their perspective to build, promulgate and promote new ways of working.
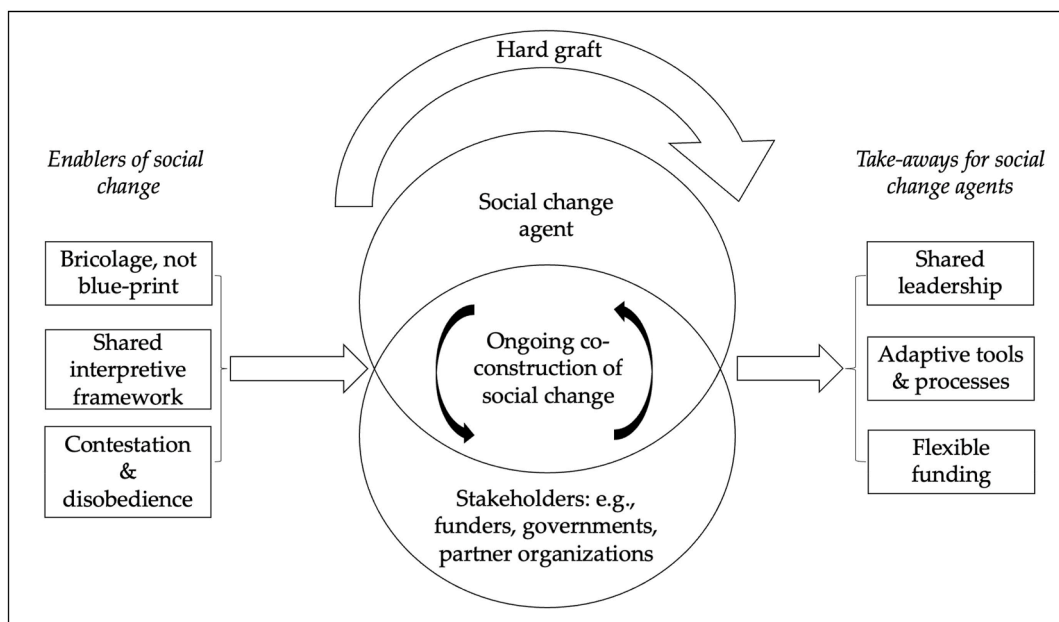

Fig. 1. The process of adaptively scaling social change.

This work is oftentimes arduous, backgrounded, and requires a willingness for the 'spotlight' to be shared. The scaling of social innovation should be seen as a collaborative process (Mair and Gegenhuber, 2021; Montgomery et al., 1995) and this should be reflected in the practical supports provided to social enterprises. Exposing social entrepreneurs to lessons from the public sector reform

Literature and highlighting how complex systems have been influenced previously using combinations of evidence, advocacy, litigation, and the challenges of changing these systems, would help social entrepreneurs understand their roles as change agents within complex, adaptive systems (Chalmers, 2021; Haugh and Talwar, 2016; May, 2012; O'Toole, 2004).

3.2. Counteracting principle 2: employ adaptive tools and processes

The evaluation tools and processes that are promoted within the social entrepreneurship field often speak to a linear process of scaling an innovation. Tools such as balanced scorecards emphasize tracking against agreed objectives/targets and reveal little about the underlying, often emergent processes. More adaptive learning approaches such as Mintzberg, Lampel and Ahlstrand's (1998) strategic learning, Argyris' (2002, 2006) action science, or Patton's (2008) developmental evaluation approaches are better suited to helping social entrepreneurs understand how they influence wider systems. These approaches explore how people within systems interpret change and the ways in which they react and help illuminate how the scaling of innovations is a socially constructed and often contested process. Understanding how key actors perceive reforms and whether they are minded to support or oppose these changes can be invaluable information for change agents. This information can help spark strategic discussions about how to adapt efforts to scale the impact of their work.

3.3. Counteracting principle 3: funders should provide flexible forms of funding

The funding of social innovation scaling also needs to recognize the adaptive nature of scaling efforts. If the cases outlined are representative of wider scaling efforts, then serious consideration needs to be given to providing sufficient scope to be able to adapt and change as reform efforts are implemented. This includes the funder's openness to fund advocacy and policy positions and perhaps, more importantly, to understand that the needs of the organization cannot always be predicted beforehand. Flexible funding needs to be built-in at the outset to respond to events and exploit opportunities that arise. It points to the importance of identifying funders who are not wedded to rigid, checkpoint-based models upon which the release of finances is dependent upon adhering to narrowly defined timelines and achievement-based thresh-holds. A level of comfort needs to be established amongst funders about supporting iterative processes involving contestation, continuous adaptation, and on-going co-creation. Each of these stages will require financial supports that cannot be predicted from the outset.

4. Conclusion

The adaptive approach to scaling that we offer here has implications for social innovation support programmes and funders, as well as entrepreneurship theory, education, and practice. Our research suggests the need to recognize that idea development and exploitation are enmeshed during scaling processes. We have a growing repository of solutions that have been developed and demonstrated as being effective at a local level, but which have never scaled. Future research should focus on exploring the specific practices that have been effective at scaling and adapting solutions to social challenges. This article outlines practical guidance on how we should focus efforts on the implementation of these solutions at a societal level. It also highlights the critical need to move away from heroic mythology to a conception of scaling grounded in practice. In many ways, retaining the seductive myth of heroic individuals scaling social change holds back the social innovation field. Studying the hard, often mundane graft of how innovations are scaled and addressing social challenges using in-depth case studies where social change has actually happened has the potential to re-orientate our understanding of social entrepreneurs away from a mythology that promotes a traits-based, heroic idea of focal individuals, and instead ground our conceptualization of social innovation in practices that have actually promoted significant change. Social entrepreneurs and associated organizations are more likely to be successful at negotiating the intricacies of complex systems as diverse as health, social services and climate change, if they work to influence key stakeholders therein and remain adaptive to navigate the varied challenges that they encounter. Perhaps most importantly, the advancement of this research agenda would also help shape the funding and other support structures to be more effective at promoting effective social innovation practices. As we have detailed, this often involves developing relationships with a range of actors, garnering insights into how these systems operate, and then adapting available resources to influence the systems.

Author contributions

John Healy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. Jeffrey Hughes: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. Gemma Donnelly-Cox: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. Amanda Shantz: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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