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What is in a theme? Professionalization in nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations research

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This study examines 1,418 articles in three leading journals in the field of nonprofit organization studies from 1990 to 2010. Using topic modeling to detect dominant themes, we were able to trace the development of the academic research on nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations over two decades. We found remarkable changes with regard to an increasing use of professional, managerialist terminology such as that used in for-profit organizations. This is significant given the potential of the research agenda to influence developments in the nonprofit sector.

KEYWORDS
nonprofit, professionalization, themes, topic modeling

1 | INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of the nonprofit sector has been the subject of considerable research (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015; Dart, 2004; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009; Sandberg, 2012; Suykens, De Rynck, & Verschuere, 2018). Some scholars of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NPOs and NGOs) argue that professionalization threatens the original purpose of the organizations by weakening their grassroots ties and forcing them to enact donor policy rather than follow their own agendas (Banks et al., 2015; Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005). Others argue that NPOs and NGOs are already hybrids—"organizations with two or more sectoral characteristics" (S. R. Smith, 2014, p. 1495)—as the lines between market, state, and third-sector are clear in theory but blurred in practice (Dees, 1998; Evers, 2005). In addition, reliance on funding from government and donors makes NPOs and NGOs more susceptible to managerial professionalism (Claeyé & Jackson, 2012; Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Verbruggen, Christiaens, & Milis, 2011). For instance, Claeyé & Jackson (2012, p. 617) found that stakeholder pressures led to "mimicking and internalizing the managerialist discourse emanating from the global governance structure of international aid and are becoming more business-like" by NPO managers. However, it should be noted that their research also pointed to a hybrid situation representing a combination of managerialist and humanist discourses.

Language is a critical element in the adoption of professionalization by organizations (Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998). The adoption of managerialist vocabulary is one of the indicators of the professionalization process (Apple, 2005; Banks et al., 2015; Fairclough, 1993; Lynch, 2013; Oakes et al., 1998; Roberts, Jones, & Fröhling, 2005). The words we use to communicate about—and the labels we affix to—organizations and their functions are not simply a matter of description; they can also impact organizational legitimacy and success (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Previous studies have identified themes in NPO and NGO literature (Anheier, 1990; Brudney & Durdon, 1993), reviewed the academic literature on these organizations becoming more business-like (Maier et al., 2016), and discussed changing organization discourse (e.g., Eikenberry, 2009; Korff, Oberg, & Powell, 2015; Laasonen, Fougère, & Kourula, 2012). Our study builds on that research by analyzing a large corpus of NPO and NGO research and showing the development of research themes over time.

To reduce researcher influence on the identification of themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) call for research using automated procedures for theme discovery. This study responds to that call. We use topic modeling to identify themes and vocabulary in academic literature on NPOs and NGOs. Topic modeling enables us to extract topics from literature texts. We are not aware of any other studies in the NPO and NGO literature that have used such procedures for theme detection. Our approach aims to discover what theme development reveals about the way NPOs and NGOs are discussed and described in the academic literature. More concretely, we seek to answer the following research question: To what extent does the academic research on NPOs and NGOs reflect professionalization in its nomenclature? This study focuses on a large corpus of NPO and NGO research and shows the development of research themes over time. It provides an overall picture of NPO and NGO research development and the trend toward the use of terminology associated with managerial professionalism from 1990 to 2010. Thematically categorizing the words and terminology, researchers use in their studies over time may reveal a particular focus, emphasis, or shared understanding.

The outline of the study is as follows: We will first discuss and elaborate on professionalization and the use of themes in research. Next, we will describe how the themes detected in three leading journals on NPOs and NGOs—*Nonprofit Management & Leadership* (NML), *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ), and *Voluntas*—are an expression of a developing narrative over time. We will then outline our methodology for theme identification, provide examples from the journals and present our results. Finally, we will examine the contributions and limitations of our research, and conclude by offering some final remarks.

1.1 | Professionalization

Evetts's (2003, 2006, 2011) seminal work on professionalism provides a detailed account of the concept from a sociological perspective. She distinguishes between occupational and organizational professionalism, the former being more traditional and the latter more contemporary (Evetts, 2006). Evetts (2011) states that "Accounts of change describe a shift from notions of partnership, collegiality, discretion and trust to increasing levels of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardization, assessment and performance review" (p. 407). This research focuses on the contemporary understanding of professionalism, and refers to professionalization as the process or exercise of realizing (contemporary) professionalism. Evetts (2011, p. 407) indicates that the "exercise of professionalism is now organizationally defined and includes the logics of organization and the market: managerialism and commercialism."

Borrowing from Evetts (2003, 2006), Noordegraaf (2007) explains that the changing nature of professionalism is due in part to a need to deal with paradigm and identity changes, and to establish legitimacy: "Moreover, these attempts to professionalize are not just about content and strict control, they are also or primarily about attempts to link work to organizational and outside realities and about establishing sociosymbolic legitimacy in changing times" (p. 780). The current focus on measurable outcomes and competencies may be as much about "showing professionalism" as "being" professional, to fit in and to increase legitimacy (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 778).

In their study of professionalism in the nonprofit sector, Hwang and Powell (2009), indicate that the term professional "has historically referred to individuals who derive legitimacy and authority from their formal education and claims to specialized expertise" (p. 268). They state that an increase in education led to a rise in the founding of organizations which in turn produced a need for more mangers to work in these organizations. The authors hold that the proliferation of managerial professionals across organizations resulted in the development of management as a "necessary and legitimate technical skill" (p. 269). The term professional has consequently become less associated with specialized expertise in a given field and more associated with competencies in rationalized activities such as strategic planning, financial audits and evaluation of outcomes. Hwang and Powell (2009) refer to this practice as managerial professionalism. Their findings showed that the implementation of rationalized activities in the form of plans and benchmarks, for example, may improve a NPO but the design and implementation of these plans take time and money—resources that might otherwise have gone to serving the organization's constituents. Good NPO management has become synonymous with the implementation of private sector business practices (Claeyé & Jackson, 2012).

Banks et al. (2015, p. 709) describe professional nonprofits as those that "master the donors' terminology and ways of working, and who can satisfy strict accounting processes to governments." They indicate that, efforts of these organizations to become more accountable, more professional, and more like private sector organizations are responses to social, economic, and political pressures. Further, they argue that reliance on donor funding in some regions has resulted in more moderate, professionalized NPOs and NGOs run by educated personnel rather than activists with local ties Banks et al.'s use of the term professional is most closely associated with Hwang and Powell's (2009) managerial professionalism and Evetts's (2006) contemporary, organizational professionalism.

The use of terminology associated with managerial professionalism is one signal of scholars speaking in terms that its funders in government and industry understand. Appropriating the right language can facilitate approval and appropriating the wrong language can be risky: "Different vocabularies undermine the actors in a field and their degree of competence" (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 272). The use of "proper" terminology by researchers in their study of NPOs and NGOs may be important to the researcher, his/her employer, the organization under study, and/or the sector as such use fosters legitimacy. An important reason for individuals and organizations to adopt the language and structures of others is to improve access to resources, political power, and legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In distinguishing between NPOs and NGOs and business, Dart (2004) states that "nonprofit is understood to be organized around an interconnected nest of prosocial and voluntaristic values and goals with few references to the means and structures by which these values are enacted" (Dart, 2004, p. 294). In contrast, business-like suggests greater emphasis on structure, economy, effectiveness, strategic expansion, technological know-how, and creating leaner organizations (Alexander, 2000; Dart, 2004). Specific terminology related to this might include accountability, transparency, strategic planning and project evaluation (Roberts et al., 2005); performance, outcomes, efficiency (Korff et al., 2015); market analysis, core competence, profit and revenue generation, high-volume

service delivery, results-oriented, doing well versus doing good, short-term versus long-term outlook, specialist versus generalist focus on aid provision (Dart, 2004); and capacity, entrepreneurial, planning, resource development, and effectiveness (Bishop, 2007).

Based on the research above, we refer to professionalization in this study as a tendency toward a focus on performance, measurable outcomes, accountability, and the use of private-sector management tools to structure activity, develop strategy, and improve efficiency and effectiveness. We maintain that the terminology associated with this focus becomes "a carrier of a shared understanding in the creation and maintenance of organizational structures" (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000, p. 1252).

Thematically categorizing the words and terminology, researchers use in their studies over time may reveal a particular focus, emphasis, or shared understanding. Below we define what we mean by theme and elaborate on the use of themes in research.

1.2 | Themes

A theme is a "postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society" (Opler, 1945, p. 198). In social science, themes have been termed categories, codes, and labels (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Agar (1979, p. 13) recognizes themes as "beliefs, values, or rules of behavior." Karsdorp and Van den Bosch (2013) use the term motifs in their research on folktales. Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that themes have also been referred to as motifs, categories, codes, and labels. Regardless of the terminology used, the scientists above all seek to answer the question "What is this expression an example of?" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 87). Here an expression might be a text, an image, or an object. Identifying themes from these expressions provides insight into our cultural heritage (Karsdorp & Van den Bosch, 2013) as well as into emerging issues (Griffith, Cavusgil, & Xu, 2008) and research opportunities (Chatha & Butt, 2015).

Themes are useful in research because they serve as indicators and information: Indicators of what is being talked about and information concerning how these topics are being talked about (Agar, 1979). Thus, themes can both reflect and steer the discussion of a particular subject; studying them can inform us about the past, present, and future of a particular culture or cultural development and as such they guide our research (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The study of themes is not only relevant to research in anthropology and sociology, but to business as well (e.g., Chatha & Butt, 2015; Griffith et al., 2008; Radziwill, 2013). Regardless of the discipline, theme identification reflects societal values, and theme analysis reveals structure in the balance of these themes (Opler, 1945).

2 | METHODS

Given the power of themes to indicate and inform regarding the values and beliefs of a society, we have a genuine interest in trying to identify them. A number of techniques can be used for theme identification, depending on the type of research: repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data, theory-related material, cutting and sorting, word lists and key words in context, word co-occurrence, and metacoding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Other investigators have discovered themes by applying different techniques to those listed above. For example, Radziwill (2013) employs citation network analysis, text mining, association analysis, and clustering. Griffith et al. (2008) rely on citation analysis and a Delphi analysis for theme discovery. Hence, there is not a once-size-fits-all approach to theme identification. Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest that different techniques can produce different

themes but that this can be a benefit to the research rather than a drawback. The key issue, the authors claim, is being explicit about methods used and judgments made. One of the questions that Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 105) pose concerning future research in theme identification is "To what extent can we develop automated procedures for finding themes?" We hope to respond to that question below by showing how software technology can be employed to discover themes in large bodies of text regarding research into NPOs and NGOs.

The empirical research in this study centered on identifying the themes used to describe NPOs and NGOs from 1990 to 2010 in three academic journals: *NML*, *NVSQ*, and *Voluntas.* The authors conducted a preliminary Web of Science search with "nonprofit organization" and "nongovernmental organization" as the search terms. The top 20 journals were selected for further review. These included *NML*, *NSVQ*, and *Voluntas*, as well as *Public Administration Review*, *World Development*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, and the *Journal of Business Ethics.* Following this review, it was decided that only nonprofit specialty journals would be utilized for the study given that the reporting on NPOs and NGOs in the nonspecialty journals was not consistent with regard to time. For example, the *Journal for Business Ethics* archive found 57 articles with the terms "nongovernmental organization" "NGO," "nonprofit organization," or "nonprofits" in the abstract from 1990 to 2010, but only seven of the articles were published before 2004. Thus, while other journals may contain studies that address NPOs and NGOs from time to time, *NML*, *NVSQ*, and *Voluntas* are devoted to NPOs and NPO-related issues which provide more insight into the thematic development of the academic discussion on NPOs. In addition, *NML*, *NVSQ*, and *Voluntas* are interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journals dedicated to nonprofit research and management that have been in publication since at least 1990. Other studies such as Maier et al. (2016) have also identified these journals as leading publications in nonprofit studies.

The year 1990 was selected as a starting point for the research because the 1990s marked the beginning of greater NPO and NGO activity and participation globally (Charnovitz, 1997; Marberg, Van Kranenburg, & Korzilius, 2016). Two decades of articles were deemed appropriate for the study; previous research has indicated that this time frame is sufficient for thematic analysis (e.g., Anheier, 1990; Brudney & Kluesner, 1992). In total, the title and abstract of 1,418 documents were analyzed: 416 from *NML*, 624 from *NVSQ*, and 378 from *Voluntas* (see Figure 1 for the distribution over time
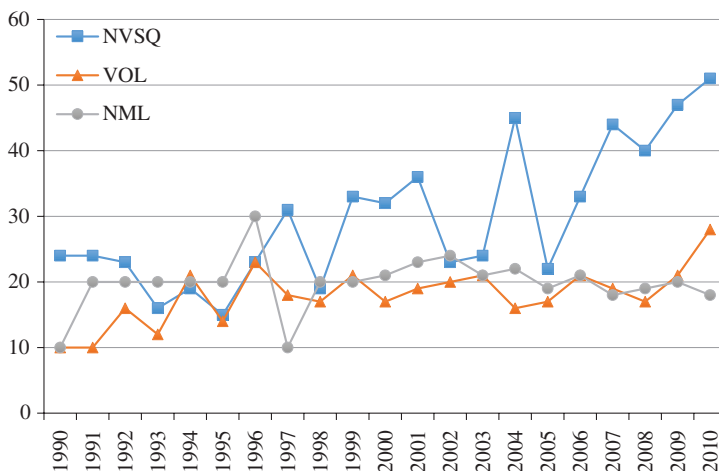

FIGURE 1 Distribution of all 1,418 journal articles in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, Voluntas, and Nonprofit Management & Leadership*

of all 1,418 journal articles). The difference in the number of documents per publication can be attributed to publication frequency and additional supplements. The documents were analyzed as one database and not as separate publications because the goal was to determine thematic development in the field as a whole and not to compare individual journals.

As part of our analysis, we employed topic modeling to extract topics from texts. In previous research, Aksuyek (2014), Blei (2012), and Griffiths and Steyvers (2004) showed that topic modeling was a suitable method to discover scientific topics in the scientific journals *Management Science*, *Science*, and *PNAS*, respectively. Simply stated, topic models are probabilistic models that reveal relationships between words and documents within a corpus. Blei and Lafferty (2009, p. 71) succinctly express the utility of topic modeling in research: "By discovering patterns of word use and connecting documents that exhibit similar patterns, topic models have emerged as a powerful new technique for finding useful structure in an otherwise unstructured collection." Topic modeling has been found to be especially effective in analyzing large document collections (Karsdorp & Van den Bosch, 2013; Rubin, Chambers, Smyth, & Steyvers, 2012). In analyzing the JSTOR archive of *Science* from 1980 to 2002, Blei and Lafferty (2007) use a specific type of model called latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to identify the key words and topics associated with each year in the journals. Blei, Ng, and Jordan (2003, p. 996) define LDA as "a generative probabilistic model of a corpus. The basic idea is that documents are represented as random mixtures over latent topics, where each topic is characterized by a distribution over words." Another explanation of LDA is that it identifies sets of words which "tend to reflect underlying topics that, in combination, characterize every document in a corpus" (McFarland et al., 2013, p. 610). We used the Stanford Topic Modeling Toolbox (Stanford TMT), version 0.4.0 to perform the LDA. The Stanford TMT allowed us to generate the top terms per topic within a given time frame, providing a view of the evolution of topics. We chose the Stanford tool after reading about its applicability (Ramage, Rosen, Chuang, Manning, & McFarland, 2009), its reputation as user-friendly software, because it was designed for social scientists rather than engineers, and because it is Excel-compatible, facilitating data analysis.

One of the advantages of using an automated system to detect topics is that we reduce the risk of finding what we are "consciously or unconsciously looking for" (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 259). These authors argue that this has been a pitfall in many framing studies in which authors do not explain explicitly how their frames were identified. Although frames and themes are not synonymous, the concerns regarding identification are similar. Matthes and Kohring also maintain that reliability is an issue because frame identification is coder-specific. LDA resolves some of these concerns by removing the researcher from the identification process. However, LDA still involves researcher input. McFarland et al. (2013) indicate that expert validation, or ground truth, of the topics can be an important part of the process to control for data errors, remove unrecognizable clusters, and assign names.

We tested the Stanford TMT results using term frequency and inverse document frequency (tf-idf). tf-idf is a statistical measure that shows the importance of a word to a document in a corpus, and is a useful method for comparison here (Karsdorp & Van den Bosch, 2013). Term frequency is multiplied by inverse document frequency, and the result is a weight for each word. The higher the weight, the more relevant the word (Zhang, Yoshida, & Tang, 2011) is. tf-idf was used as corroborating analysis to substantiate and validate the labeling of the themes.

With regard to topic naming or labeling, the first researcher reviewed and labeled the topics. The second and third researchers also reviewed the topics and the labels provided by the first researcher. Agreement was reached as to the final labels after agreement based on consensus. It is worth noting that only two of the topic labels were further specified but otherwise not dramatically revised. The

top two topics for each year were documented, along with the corresponding terms for those topics. The topics and terms were then analyzed by the first researcher to determine whether or not there was a discernable structure or pattern to the topic distribution over time. Based on the topic distribution produced by LDA, the first researcher was able to group years together and identify a clear pattern of change in topical cohesion from 1990 to 2010. Topic modeling often reveals "distinct periods of topical cohesion" (Anderson, McFarland, & Jurafsky, 2012, p. 2). When an academic journal corpus is the subject of study, such topical cohesion reflects a particular research agenda at the time.

We refer to the "distinct periods" as themes. For theme identification, one member of the research team analyzed the LDA and tf-idf-produced results for each year and then categorized the years thematically based on the terms assigned by the LDA and tf-idf. Independent of the first researcher, another member on the team performed the same thematic categorization. The researchers compared their results, and were in agreement on all years except 2006 (95% agreement), for which neither researcher was able to discern a clear topic for the year on its own. When 2006 was considered with the years prior and after, the researchers were able to provide a context for that year and were in agreement on the final outcome.

3 | RESULTS

The Stanford TMT derived 30 topics of 20 words each from the corpus of 1,418 documents from 1990 to 2010. The researchers provided labels for each topic based on the word-sets as part of the ground truth process. Table 1 provides an example of two topics produced by the Stanford tool and the words that make up those topics. The numbers after the words indicate the weight representing

TABLE 1 Example of Stanford Topic Modeling Tool topic distributions (Sample Topics: 01 and 11)

Topic 01: Global Civil Society	Weight	Topic 11: NGO International Strategies	Weight
society	179.48	ngos	188.94
civil	139.88	ngo	62.94
global	76.01	nongovernmental	43.42
international	41.69	international	36.62
movement	30.51	strategies	34.42
world	29.53	ireland	19.85
democratic	28.47	projects	19.60
democracy	25.86	advocacy	19.39
movements	20.95	northern	15.64
economic	20.26	network	14.97
growth	20.24	case	14.28
nongovernmental	15.83	poor	14.11
policy	14.54	challenges	13.80
concept	13.80	philanthropy	13.39
actors	12.51	non-governmental	12.93
rights	12.47	meaning	12.76
place	12.39	china	12.73
war	11.70	examines	11.85
emerged	11.63	peace	11.71
south	11.51	building	11.67

the relevance of the word for that topic. For instance, for Topic 01 the words "society" and "civil" were the most relevant words, followed by "global," "international," and "movement." The communality of these words resulted in the labeling of Topic 01 as "Global Civil Society." Another example is Topic 11 for which the words with the highest relevance were "ngos," "ngo," "nongovernmental," "international," and "strategies." Consequently, Topic 11 was labeled as "NGO International Strategies". In a similar fashion all the other topics were labeled by the researchers; Table 2 gives an overview of the 30 topic labels.

Table 3 contains a list of the dominant two topics for each year from 1990 to 2010 as generated by the Stanford modeling tool. The numbers in the columns 1 and 2 represent the number of the first and second topics produced by the Stanford tool. In the same columns, the numbers in parentheses represents the weights of the topics, assigned by the Stanford tool, compared to all other topics for that year. The topic with the highest weight in a particular year is listed first. The topic with the second highest weight is listed second. For example, in 1990, the most dominant topic was Topic

TABLE 2 The 30 topics

Topic number	Topic label
01	Global Civil Society
02	Volunteerism
03	NPO Programs, Staff, & Management
04	Funding & Tax
05	Accountability & Management
06	Volunteer/Employee Motivation & Satisfaction
07	Healthcare
08	Corporate Philanthropy
09	Mission & Strategy
10	Inter-organizational Collaboration
11	NGO International Strategies
12	Executive Management
13	Future of Agency Funding
14	U.S. National Nonprofits
15	Effectiveness & Accountability
16	Faith-based Organizations
17	Associations, Members, & Participation
18	Economic Theories & Perspectives
19	Financial Performance
20	Religious Capital Ties
21	NPO Geographic Scope
22	Forms of Civic Institutions
23	Strategic Resource Planning
24	Manager Behavior
25	NPO Leadership
26	Women & NPOs
27	Local Program Change
28	Theoretical Understanding of NPOs
29	NPO Education Programs
30	Governance, Policy, & Leadership

TABLE 3 First and second topics per year identified by the Stanford Topic Modeling Tool

Year	First topic	Topic label	Second topic	Topic label
1990	21 (176)	NPO Geographic Scope	7 (164)	Healthcare
1991	7 (155)	Healthcare	4 (155)	Funding & Tax
1992	30 (241)	Governance, Policy, & Leadership	12 (201)	Executive Management
1993	23 (152)	Strategic Resource Planning	18 (149)	Economic Theories & Perspectives
1994	4 (259)	Funding & Tax	13 (256)	Future of Agency Funding
1995	15 (304)	Effectiveness & Accountability	21 (202)	NPO Geographic Scope
1996	26 (278)	Women & NPOs	6 (207)	Volunteer/Employee Motivation & Satisfaction
1997	15 (215)	Effectiveness & Accountability	21 (202)	NPO Geographic Scope
1998	18 (282)	Economic Theories & Perspectives	8 (151)	Corporate Philanthropy
1999	11 (463)	NGO International Strategies	1 (251)	Global Civil Society
2000	28 (252)	Theoretical Understanding of NPOs	7 (242)	Healthcare
2001	11 (238)	NGO International Strategies	2 (225)	Volunteerism
2002	11 (309)	NGO International Strategies	1 (215)	Global Civil Society
2003	5 (353)	Accountability & Management	9 (262)	Financial Performance
2004	22 (364)	Forms of Civic Institutions	28 (260)	Theoretical Understanding of NPOs
2005	6 (271)	Volunteer/Employee Motivation & Satisfaction	15 (178)	Effectiveness & Accountability
2006	1 (422)	Global Civil Society	14 (339)	U.S. National Nonprofits
2007	29 (378)	NPO Education Programs	6 (324)	Volunteer/Employee Motivation & Satisfaction
2008	2 (275)	Volunteerism	23 (228)	Strategic Resource Planning
2009	2 (350)	Volunteerism	30 (317)	Governance, Policy & Leadership
2010	11 (395)	NGO International Strategies	3 (349)	NPO Programs, Staff, & Management

Note. Labels are provided by the researchers. Topic weight is given in parentheses.

21 (weight 176) that we labeled "NPO Geographic Scope." The second most dominant topic was Topic 7 (weight 164) that we labeled "Healthcare." We used the dominant topics over the years to arrive at themes that were representative for distinct periods. As stated, theme identification was established by corroborating LDA and tf-idf results for each year. Then we categorized the years thematically based on the terms assigned by the LDA and tf-idf. In doing so, we checked for important topics in a period and whether they showed limited overlap. For example, in the period 1990–1994 characteristic topics were: 4 "Funding & Tax," 7 "Healthcare" and for the period 1995–1998 these were: 15 "Effectiveness & Accountability." In addition, there was one overlapping topic (18 "Economic Theories & Perspectives"). The tf-idf results for the period 1990–1994 were words such as nonprofit, welfare, tax, generosity, funding, political, corporate, international, institutions, philanthropy, charity, and changes. For 1995–1998, tf-idf generated words such as accountability, legal, leadership, revenue, accountable, women, effectiveness, and change governance. This led us to differentiate the two periods and to provide the themes described below (e.g., 1990–1994: Establishing Purpose, Doing Good, Change and 1995–1998: Effectiveness and Accountability).

3.1 | The themes: 1990–2010

This section offers a description of the themes that were determined using topic modeling. These descriptions are followed by expressions of the themes in the form of academic journal articles. As

explained above, topics were derived from the three academic journals using LDA. From these topics, we were able to identify patterns, or themes, in the texts over time. Some themes overlap in various years, but the patterns were distinct enough to reveal five thematic periods of communication about NPOs and NGOs. It should be noted that the examples below were purposively selected and are not part of the methodology concerning theme selection. Rather, they have been included to provide examples of the types of expressions that collectively form the theme for each time period. In addition, we randomly selected and analyzed 10 abstracts to show how researchers talked about NPO and NGO issues in their studies over time.

3.1.1 | 1990–1994: Establishing purpose, doing good, change

Much of the research during this period was devoted to establishing what NPOs are, what they do, how best to study them, and the changing relationships between private/government/and nonprofit sectors. The overriding tone is that nonprofit, voluntary, and NGOs are providing a positive service to society. There are numerous examples of doing good, changing relationships, and historical comparisons. In the December 1993 issue of *Voluntas*, three of the articles analyze historical data to explain how the organizations differ or change over time, whether existing theory can explain events, and what the future research trends might be. In *NVSQ*, Koldewyn (1992, p. 135) describes how Hispanic NPOs and NGOs helped improve social services and voter districting. He also indicates that "changing realities have also motivated key organizations to replace older, piecemeal approaches to community problems with regional and strategic ones." In other words, these organizations have been doing good work, but changes in the economic climate have stimulated these organizations to adopt more professional strategies.

The random selection of abstracts resulted in one hit in the period 1990–1994: Messer (1994) in a study entitled "Emergent organization as a practical strategy: Executing trustee functions in Alcoholics Anonymous." Messer asserts that "Recent theories of nonprofit organizations have explored alternative organizational visions, emphasizing that nonprofits often are embedded in larger communities and that their organizational styles are embedded in distinctive cultures of voluntarism. Such perspectives, however, suffer because they tell us little about how to understand notions such as accountability and trusteeship." In addition, the article "offers a theory of how accountability and trusteeship functions may be effectively performed in an organization that is guided by a distinctive culture and idiosyncratic organizational practices that differ sharply from the bureaucratic, corporate model of organization" (p. 293). We tentatively suggest that in this randomly selected study there is a hint of focus on the emergence of managerial concepts of accountability and effectiveness, but that the author warns against simply applying managerialist models to organizations without taking into account organizations' characteristics and culture.

3.1.2 | 1995–1998: Effectiveness and accountability

Table 3 shows that after 1994, a new theme emerged in the research on NPOs and NGOs in the three journals in our study. Common terms used in the titles and abstracts for these articles were effectiveness, accountability, performance, and evaluation. This period revealed more emphasis on comparison: what organizations have done in the past compared to the present and how the landscape has changed. FitzGibbon (1997, p. 27) states that "Nonprofits are scrambling to account for their fiscal policies, management structure, and the value of their missions. This current crisis of accountability is only the most recent manifestation of a problem that has plagued voluntary organizations for over a century." In their study of NPO effectiveness, Herman and Renz (1998, p. 35) indicate that "because funders' overall judgments of NPO effectiveness are more highly correlated with the

implementation of these procedural elements of objective effectiveness, they may be disposed to support an organization that is seeking to develop or strengthen these good management practices." Both examples convey an industry movement toward increased accountability, evaluation, and professional management practices.

The random selection of abstracts resulted in two hits in the period 1995–1998: Harris (1998) and Jackson and Holland (1998). Harris (1998, p. 144) notes that "Nonprofit scholars have generally paid little attention to the organizational features of voluntary associations." She "proposes five key challenges of associational organization: meeting long-term goals and individual member's needs, balancing member-benefit and public-benefit goals, setting priorities in the face of competing interests, controlling member volunteers, and integrating paid staff." Jackson and Holland (1998, p. 159) developed a Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BSAQ) to assess board performance in six areas (not mentioned in the abstract: contextual, educational, interpersonal, analytical, political, and strategic) "that characterize highly effective boards." They state that "results indicate that the BSAQ is a sound and useful tool for evaluating board performance." We tentatively infer that both randomly selected studies in this period to some extent focus on effectiveness and accountability by addressing features of goal realization, setting priorities and by identifying areas of performance of effective boards.

3.1.3 | 1999–2006: Management and globalization

The year 1999 appeared to usher in a new thematic development in NPO and NGO research. The data shows an emphasis on terms such as NGO, international, strategy, management, civic, forms, and institutions. *NVSQ* devoted a supplement in 1999 to NGOs and the challenges of globalization. An *NVSQ* supplement in 2000 focused on collaboration and strategy. A supplement in 2004 highlights civic service internationally. *Voluntas* also began in 1999 with articles about the third sector being at a "crossroads" and emphasizes globalization and NGOs. In 2004, *Voluntas* published an issue entitled "Managing Nonprofit Organizations." Articles dealt with subjects such as management challenges (Helmig, Jegers, & Lapsley, 2004), the effectiveness of pay-for-performance (Theuvsen, 2004), and strategic management (Van der Pijl & Sminia, 2004). Articles in *NML* during this time revealed a similar trend. Kaplan (2001) in his article entitled "Strategic Performance Measurement and Management in Nonprofit Organizations," outlined the benefits of adapting the Balanced Scorecard for use in nonprofit organizations. His emphasis on the need to "achieve strategic focus" (p. 369) exemplifies the sentiment of academic research in the field during this period.

The random selection of abstracts resulted in four hits in the period 1999–2006. Golensky and DeRuiter (1999, p. 137) describe "the planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation phases of a recent, successful merger of five small social service agencies." This was done "to cope more effectively with environmental uncertainty, especially in regard to government contracting." The authors discuss "the successes and the struggles encountered in the merger" […] of "this kind of organizational restructuring."

From institutional roots, Burger and Veldheer (2001, p. 221) explain the historical growth of the nonprofit sector in the Netherlands. They argue that three factors explain the sector's current size: the "long and rich tradition of private initiatives, […] the posture of the government created a political environment that stimulated nonprofit growth […] and the scheme of collective finance and private provision for key welfare state services."

Callen, Klein, and Tinkelman (2003, p. 493) quantitatively investigate "the relationship between nonprofit board composition and organizational efficiency." In consistency with earlier research they find "that major donors monitor nonprofit organizations at least in part through their board membership."

Hailey and James (2004, p. 343)—in a study subtitled "International perspectives on NGO leadership development"—examine "the role of leadership development in NGO capacity building and assesses some of the challenges of developing a new generation of NGO leaders" and "conclude that there is an urgent need to build the capacity of NGOs to develop their leadership capability."

The four randomly selected papers in this period address aspects of management and globalization: leadership, effectiveness, organizational efficiency, budgets, board membership, finance, and international perspectives. In doing so, they consider successes, challenges and struggles, and provide nuanced views on these matters. However nuanced, these studies point to increased attention to aspects of NPO and NGO management and globalization.

3.1.4 | 2007–2009: Education and becoming more professional

In an article in N*VSQ* in 2006, Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, Newman, and McLaughlin (2006) concluded the following about their research on advocacy organizations and field restructuring: "To be successful, emerging fields must gain traction in systems of higher education, the major gatekeeper and arbiter of professionalization efforts" (p. 709). The subject became even more prominent in 2007, as evidenced by *NVSQ*'s publication of a supplement devoted to university education programs in nonprofit and philanthropic studies.

With regard to professional language making its way into NPO and NGO circles, we find articles during this time on charity branding (Sargeant, Ford, & Hudson, 2008), "wholesaling social change" (Hecht, 2008), governance (Speckbacher, 2008), and executive compensation (Mesch & Rooney, 2006).

The management of volunteers and measurement of their activity are also important subjects during this period. Mook, Handy, and Quarter (2007) point out that although there is an extensive literature on the value of volunteerism, most of the research has not been about including volunteer activity in accounting and financial statements. The authors state that increased accountability requirements and project-based funding from donors involves costly and burdensome reporting practices that may not reflect the true value of an NPO's contribution. Mook et al. call for new accounting paradigm that "properly illustrates the value that they generate" (p. 59), but until such a standard is initiated, NPOs will still be measured against the same standards as business. In an article in *NML* about measuring the value of volunteers, Bowman (2009, p. 504) states that his research is of use to nonprofit managers because it shows that volunteers are not substitutes for paid staff and that managers should consider activities such as recruiting, training, and supervising as "means to increase volunteer productivity." In their 2009 article about volunteer management, Brudney and Meijs (2009) suggest that volunteers be considered a natural resource. They recommend further research on preserving and growing the "volunteer energy" as well as determining which "strategies can be used to enrich volunteer management to recycle and grow the volunteer resource" (p. 577). These three articles focus on the improvement of management and measurements.

The random selection resulted in three hits in the period 2007–2009. Mohan and Patrick-Mohan (2008, p. 34S) research money upstream in health care philanthropy. Their study "explores investment in the development of a health care workforce with core professional responsibilities of health advocacy, public leadership, and interprofessional collaboration as one such upstream strategy. By supporting students who are engaged in communities, funders can build health professionals who are able to fulfill core roles of service and advocacy and become meaningfully engaged in re-envisioning American health care."

B. C. Smith's (2008, p. 19) paper, "The sources and uses of funds for community development financial institutions" examines "interorganizational connections maintained by community development financial institutions" in which "network actors are observed across three dimensions: collaboration, resource dependence, and information exchange, from the perspective of an intermediary organization." "Couched

in the theory of efficient network structure [this] illustrates that governance structures within the CDFI industry involve an identifiable cohort of public, nonprofit, and private sector actors, and these associations facilitate a system of network links across an expansive array of resource needs."

Haley-Lock (2009, p. 421) studies the "quality of part-time employment [in] the domain of nonprofit human services, specifically grassroots organizations in which paid work is itself a relatively new reality." "Analyses at the level of jobs suggest that employment benefits extended to part-time jobs are minimal compared to their full-time equivalents, but there are also striking variations among different part-time titles. The results offer insights into the nature of part-time work in these nonprofit human service settings and potential challenges for effective management."

These three randomly selected papers all touch upon aspects of education and how (NPO) organizations are becoming more professional: the development of workforce in leadership, collaboration, resource dependence, network links, and a focus on paid (as opposed to voluntary) positions all point to management development.

3.1.5 | 2010: Strategy and regulation

In 2010, the concepts of strategy and regulation appear more frequently, while the trend toward a business narrative and practices continues. In 2010, *NVSQ* published a "mini symposium" on NPO self-regulation. Sidel (2010, p. 1040) indicates that self-regulation principles can be adopted for many reasons, including as a means to decrease competition, to sideline organizations that may bring harm to industry reputation, to gain greater access to donor funds, to avoid government regulation, and to "clarify and strengthen shared identity in particular parts of the nonprofit community." Bies (2010, p. 1058) maintains that self-regulation in Europe "serves variously to stimulate the nonprofit economy, to substitute or complement regulation by the state, or to institutionalize nonprofit practices and enhance nonprofit legitimacy."

Nezhina and Brudney (2010) analyze NPO adoption of the requirements mandated in the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX), regulation that was passed to increase accountability and transparency in for-profit institutions. The authors found that adoption of SOX standards took place in larger organizations "under greater pressure for accountability" (p. 297). These organizations are expected to play by the same rules as their for-profit counterparts. In their study of the RED campaign aimed at combating AIDS/HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis in Africa, Wirgau, Farley, and Jensen (2010) argue against the commercialization of philanthropy, stating that the way products are sold to raise funds in this campaign places the focus on the consumer rather than the cause, results in decreased transparency, and allows business too great of a voice in determining how aid is spent. O'Brien (2010, p. 339) found that NGOs are often "stuck in the middle" trying to maintain legitimacy while undergoing pressure to conform to professional norms: "The organization also faced increasing isomorphic pressures derived from changes in funding and the need to justify its performance, which in turn weakened the legitimacy of the organization" (p. 355). This example shows that while isomorphism, or adopting the language and structures of others, may lead to greater legitimacy with one stakeholder, it may result in a loss of legitimacy with another.

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | Overview and contribution

The main objective of this study was to respond to the following research question: To what extent does the academic research on NPOs and NGOs reflect professionalization in its nomenclature? We employed topic modeling—a powerful method that to our knowledge has not been used in NPO and

NGO studies—to identify five main themes in the research on NPOs from 1990 to 2010. In their research, Ryan and Bernard (2003) asked whether automated procedures could be developed to identify themes. Our study shows how themes can be identified using such procedures. In addition, we showed that methodology triangulation, topic modeling, and tf-idf as analyses methods and using a combination of purposive and random sampling of articles in the three leading top journals in the field, confirmed the patterns we found in the data.

The following overarching themes were discovered using topic modeling: (a) 1990–1994: Establishing Purpose, Doing Good, Change; (b) 1995–1998: Effectiveness and Accountability; (c) 1999–2005: Management and Globalization; (d) 2006–2009: Education and Becoming More Like Business; (e) 2010–?: Strategy and Regulation. The themes represent new developments in scholarship on NPOs and NGOs over time, as well as the introduction of a vocabulary that represents the more managerial or professional lexicon fostered by business and government. In the 1990s, scholarship on NPOs and NGOs in the specialty journals analyzed in this study focused mainly on the positive impact of NPOs and NGOs, volunteerism, and establishing the role of these organizations in society. Later, the language and vocabulary reveal an increasing emphasis on management, performance, and outputs (Bishop, 2007; Roberts et al., 2005).

The research on education in the journals is an important development as education is one of the systems in which new institutional rules, and vocabularies, manifest themselves and are further legitimated (Meyer, 1977). The appropriation of the language of performance and measurement points to significant developments taking place within the field of the study of NPOs and NGOs (Korff et al., 2015). When staff members—in this case scholars—develop fluency in the language of the "logics of the organization and the market" (Evetts, 2011, p. 407), this serves to increase legitimacy and further embeds the language in the organizations (Oakes et al., 1998). Language adoption is not the only indicator of legitimacy, but it is an important one given that discursive practices and use of the business lexicon are a feature of social change (Fairclough, 1993; Korff et al., 2015; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Hence, studying texts that organizations produce provides insight into with whom the organization wishes to identify for financial, political, or other purposes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oakes et al., 1998; Verbruggen et al., 2011).

To the extent that researchers become carriers of these words is of primary interest in this research. The effects of managerialism and the neoliberal ideology on higher education have been widely discussed and debated (Archer, 2008; Harvey, 2007; Lynch, 2013; McClennen, 2008–2009). Lynch (2013) argues that the language associated with new managerialism—the governance system within neoliberalism—plays a key role in the regulation process as words are not just symbolic; they designate the parameters for our activities. Apple (2005, p. 19) fears that as the language of managerialism becomes increasingly a matter of "common sense," challenges and criticism of it will decline. McClennen (2008–2009, p. 463) goes even further to contend that "neoliberal pressures on higher education have resulted in a faculty too fearful or at least too docile to ask questions, challenge, and debate the way that our work has changed." It is not the aim of this study to argue the advantages and disadvantages of a neoliberal ideology on higher education. It is important, however, to acknowledge the scholarly debate regarding the pervasiveness of new managerialism within academia, and the claims that it necessarily impacts research choices, framing, and articulation (Harvey, 2007; Lynch, 2013).

As institutions of higher learning adopt the terminology associated with managerial professionalism to maintain legitimacy with practitioners, business, and government by speaking their lingua franca, some scholars fear the marketization of education (Fairclough, 1993; Gumport, 2000) and call for new education models that focus on knowledge production for the public good instead of

knowledge capitalism (Peters, 2013). Sandberg (2012) indicates that nonprofits are still governed by neoliberal ideology and argues that researchers have a role to play in the development of the field. She indicates that scholars need to move beyond the dominant "discourse of non-profit-as-aide" and "create an opportunity *to change what is possible to say* about the nature of nonprofit service" (Sandberg, 2012, p. 955, emphasis added).

The current study illustrates remarkable developments in the use of vocabulary in nonprofit studies, a vocabulary associated with managerial professionalism and measurable outcomes (Evetts, 2011; Hwang & Powell, 2009). While scholars may not be able to control market and social forces, many agree that the academic voice is part of the professionalization debate. The way researchers investigate, write about, and make sense of organizational activity has the potential to impact both their own field as well as the fields they are studying (Eikenberry, 2009; Laasonen et al., 2012).

4.2 | Limitations and future research directions

Utilizing three top specialty journals in the field provided a view of the general development of research trends with regard to NPOs and NGOs. Future research might include additional journals to provide an even more complete picture, or focus on nonspecialty journals or trade publications and compare the theme development to the findings presented here. Additionally, we selected 1990–2010 as our period of study, but extending this time period might reveal additional theme development. Another limitation of the study is focusing on the use of vocabulary alone an indicator of the professionalization of academic research. While we believe the language academics use in their research is a reflection of an attempt to gain or maintain legitimacy, we also understand that there are additional indicators (Van Dijk, 2006). It might be interesting to analyze the journal articles from a discourse perspective with regard to sentence syntax, mood and modality, lexical style, hyperbole, metaphors, etc. (Fairclough, 1993). We did not differentiate between articles against, in favor of, or neutral toward managerial professionalism. Future research might elaborate on the specific perspectives of the articles.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study centers on a broad range of NPO and NGO research topics and the terminology that scholars use in their studies. It uses research themes to operationalize the utilization of business language by scholars in studies on NPOs and NGOs, and illustrates the suitability of topic modeling for theme discovery and analysis of the academic literature. We were able to identify themes using topic modeling and map the development of research in the field, specifically the language that scholars have used in their research over the last two decades. Our findings indicate that the language associated with efficiency and measurable outcomes has etched out a conspicuous presence in the research on NPOs and NGOs.

Recent research (Maier et al., 2016) has analyzed the literature on NPOs becoming business-like and the causes and consequences of this trend. Our study looks at the development of the research agenda on NPOs as a whole and how it has evolved over time. Together the studies point to an increasing inclination among NPOs and NPO researchers toward professionalization.

What are the implications of the findings in this study? Regardless of the position one holds on neoliberalism and professionalization in NPOs and NGOs and academia, it is imperative that we remain aware and critical of the drivers of our research agendas and the language we use in our investigation and analysis. We believe that scholars' influence on the development of the nonprofit sector

will depend in part on how future research approaches NPOs and NGOs and articulates actual or proposed changes in form and function.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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