



What do Metaphors Say about Philanthropic Foundations?

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Foundations are not only one of the oldest organisational forms, they are also a concept that is difficult to grasp. To understand foundations, and navigate the ambiguities surrounding them, various metaphors have been used to describe their roles and characteristics: from ‘entrepreneurs’, to ‘instruments of power’, or ‘Pandora’s boxes’.

Such metaphors, however, are rarely neutral: they emphasise certain facets while downplaying others. When looking across them, they point to recurring tensions associated with foundations’ forms and functions.

Exploring metaphors of foundations thereby offers practitioners, policymakers, and foundations an opportunity to reflect on how they are portrayed and perceived, and – for foundations in particular – how they position themselves, and how they might position themselves differently.

#Philanthropy #Foundations #Reflection #Strategy

Background

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Context



- Metaphors, as a form of figurative language, enable us to understand one thing in terms of another. In organisational research, they are used to make complex or abstract phenomena more tangible, and to open up alternative perspectives.
- Metaphor analysis remains relatively uncommon in philanthropy research. However, by identifying patterns and meanings across the different, and at times contradictory, ways in which foundations have been described, it can help to organise these perceptions into recurring themes, and show how understandings of foundations have shifted over time.
- This study uses a historic-analytic approach to metaphor analysis. Drawing on academic and non-academic sources, it identifies 109 unique metaphors used to describe foundations. Using thematic analysis, it groups these into ten overarching clusters.

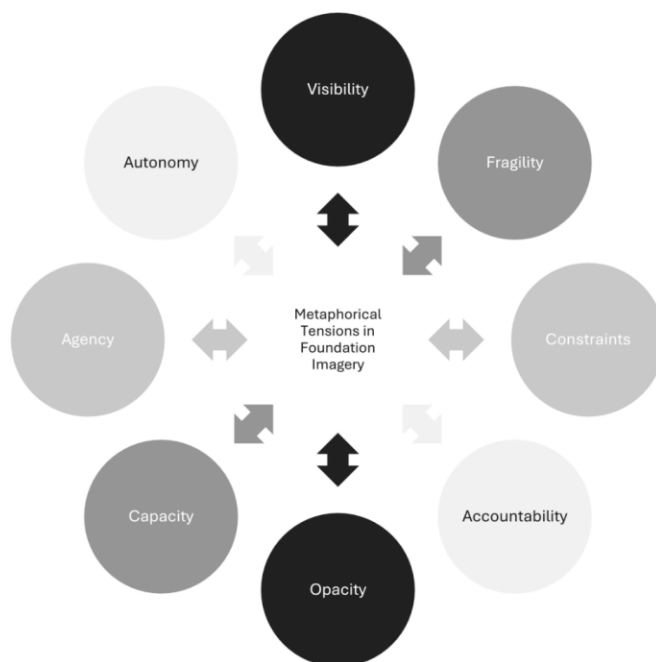
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Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- With foundations alternatively described as 'passing gear' (displaying an ability to respond quickly to unexpected changes), 'Santa Claus' (giving gifts while paying attention to who behaves and who does not), or 'lemmings' (displaying a herd mentality), the paper clusters the 109 metaphors into ten overarching themes. These point to foundations as: influence, inexplicit, inertia, indulgence, inadequate, insulated, intelligence, insecurity, individual, and image.
- Taken together, the ten themes reveal recurring tensions in how foundations are understood: between foundations' visibility and opacity, autonomy and accountability, agency and constraints, capacity and fragility.
- The paper also highlights that the prominence and emphases of metaphors of foundations have shifted over time, and that metaphors on foundations do not proliferate when there is consensus, but rather at times of change, e.g. when foundations grow as organisations, when they change direction, or when explanatory frameworks are needed to make sense of them.
- For practitioners, this makes metaphor analysis a useful reflective tool. Exploring the metaphors associated with a foundation can help to identify how it is perceived, what expectations are attached to it, and whether these align with how it sees and positions itself. Thereby, it can assist in critically examining one's own practices and, if deemed necessary, adjusting or repositioning them.



Jung, T.2026. "Of Titans and Terraria: Exploring and Conceptualising Philanthropic Foundations Through the Lens of Metaphors." *Journal of Philanthropy*31, no. 2: e70053. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.70053>

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