

# Co-production in Business Counselling in Microfinance Setting: An Empirical Study in Sri Lanka

Business  
Counselling

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## Abstract

Recent advancements in service literature highlight the importance of co-production between the firm and the client in value creation within the domain of microfinance provisioning. The objective of this study is to investigate the concept of co-production in business counselling in a microfinance setting and to formulate a conceptual framework. The paper develops a conceptual model identifying the factors facilitating co-production in business counselling between Counsellors and Owner-Managers. The multiple case study method was used, and 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with counsellors and owner-managers involved in the process. Findings revealed that Micro Finance Institutions' (MFIs) counsellors and owner-managers of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) co-produce in business counselling, generating outcomes that help them improve their performance. The results show that factors such as counsellor-owner-manager expertise, counsellor readiness, follow-up by the counsellor, owner-manager willingness, counsellor-owner-manager communication, and counsellor-owner-manager interpersonal relationships enhance co-production in counselling. Findings further revealed that several contextual factors, such as social mobilization programmes, types of linkage, types of MFI, and lending methodology, influence co-production in counselling. The results further show that MFIs could achieve co-production outcomes such as the number of employments generated, and the number of businesses created. In contrast, owner-managers could experience higher profits and sales.

**Keywords:** Co-production, Business counselling, Microfinance

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## **Introduction**

Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) play a significant role in developing countries, contributing to economic growth and employment generation (Mead and Lieadholm, 1998; Tybout, 2000, Avenyo and Kraemer-Mbula, 2021; Russel, Dixit & Handy, 2023). Despite the importance of MSEs to the economies, they are constrained by low capital, traditional technology, low entrepreneurial skills, and less linkages to other sectors (SAARC, 2000; Rogerson, 2001; Teka, 2022). Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) provide entrepreneurs with financial and Business Development Services (BDS) to circumvent these constraints (SARRC, 2000; Sievers and Vandenberg, 2007; LMPA, 2012). Financial services include unsecured microloans, traditional banking products such as checking and savings accounts, and insurance products for individuals or groups. On the contrary, BDS provide non-financial services such as management training, vocational training, marketing assistance, technology access, etc., to entrepreneurs (Sievers and Vandenberg, 2007; Khavul, 2010; Wu et al., 2022). MFIs have particularly succeeded in empowering entrepreneurs through the provision of credit (Littlefield et al., 2003).

However, credit (capital) alone is not sufficient to achieve the desired development effects of promoting entrepreneurs (Rogaly, 1996; Hulme and Mosley, 1996; Johnson and Rogaly, 1997; Mosley and Hulme, 1998; Gulli and Berger, 1999; Wright, 1999, Hakizimzanz et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs need certain other non-financial assistance referred to as BDS (i.e. entrepreneurial competencies, resources) to become successful (Phillip, 2002; Chrisman and McMullan, 2004; Sievers and Vandenberg, 2007). Thus, policymakers and practitioners of Microfinance try to promote BDS to MFIs. The counsellors attached to MFIs play a vital role in delivering BDS to clients (entrepreneurs). The dyadic relationship between the entrepreneur (i.e. owner-manager) and the counsellor of MFI matters a lot in delivering BDS and achieving the goals of BDS (Abeysekera, 2016). Thus, we use the theory of co-production as the theoretical underpinning for this study, which helps to understand the dyadic relationship between the counsellor and the entrepreneur. A deeper understanding of co-production will help policymakers and practitioners design, allocate resources, and implement BDS programmes effectively. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the concept of co-production in business counselling in microfinance in Sri Lanka and formulate a conceptual framework that could be useful for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. This study first identifies the factors that affect the co-production between the counsellors and the owner-managers, then the contextual factors that influence the co-production, and finally, the co-production outcomes.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. First, we discuss business counselling. Second, we present the concept of co-production. Third, we discuss the research methodology and, finally, the discussion.

## **Business Counselling**

Business counselling refers to the dissemination of knowledge and advisory support to entrepreneurs, with a particular emphasis on startups and early-stage ventures (Chrisman et al., 1987; Nahavandi and Chesteen, 1988; Smeltzer and van Hook, 1991; Nordjo, Boadu, &

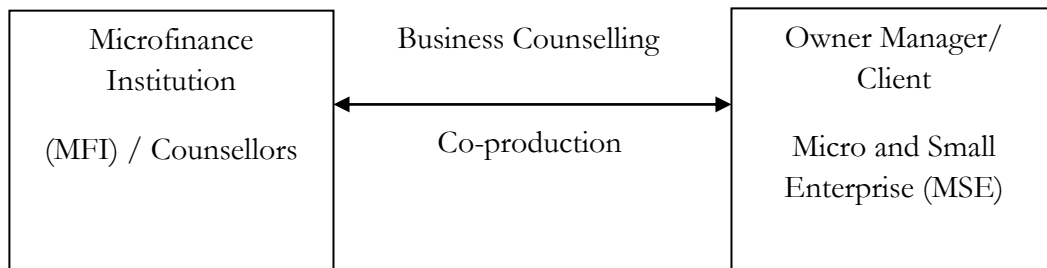
Ahenkan, 2023). Business counsellors play a crucial role in guiding and assisting clients or entrepreneurs in identifying solutions to their unique business challenges.

Within the realm of Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), counsellors typically provide a spectrum of Business Development Services to owner-managers, which include but are not limited to imparting financial literacy knowledge, aiding in business plan formulation, facilitating business registration, offering guidance on record-keeping, establishing connections to training resources, fostering market and loan linkages, fostering the creation of producer groups, and facilitating technology transfer (Sievers and Vandenberg, 2007; de Wildt, 2004; ADEMCOL, 2001; Gunathilaka, 1997).

In Sri Lanka, a number of MFIs provide BDSs via counselling. These MFIs' counsellors extend their services to entrepreneurs (owner-managers) in various locations, including MFI offices, owner-manager group meetings, and the entrepreneurs' homes or business premises (Abeysekera, Patton and Mullineux, 2015). Counselling is offered in both group and one-on-one settings (de Wildt, 2004; ADEMCOL, 2001; Abeysekera, Patton and Mullineux, 2015; Kayongo, Tom, and Mathiassen, 2021). However, it is important to note that this study specifically concentrates on one-on-one counselling sessions. Importantly, it should be emphasized that counselling services are readily accessible to clients of MFIs at no cost.

There should be a collaboration between the counsellor and owner-manager (i.e. co-production) to have a successful counselling intervention in a microfinance setting.

Figure 1 below depicts how collaboration/co-production occurs in business counselling within microfinance.



**Figure 1:** Co-production in Business Counselling

Further, the following contextual factors, such as types of MFIs, type of lending methodology, type of linkage and social mobilisation programmes could influence co-production between the counsellor and owner-managers and are explained below.

### ***Types of MFIs***

According to Jansson et al. (2004), there are four types of MFIs; Non-profit MFIs (e.g. NGOs), Bank MFIs, Non-bank MFIs and Cooperative/Credit Union MFIs. Depending on the type of MFI (i.e. bank, NGO), the nature of investors, the objectives, and the lending

methodology, the catering market segment varies. However, all these MFIs could be mainly categorised into two groups based on their profit-earning orientation. For example, NGOs and cooperative MFIs are funded by social investors and are more concerned with achieving dual objectives (financial and social) (Galema et al., 2012). These MFIs strongly desire to achieve social objectives such as business development services and healthcare (Maes and Foose, 2006). Further, they often cater for poorer clients by using group methodology. In contrast, bank MFIs are often funded by profit-oriented investors who want MFIs to earn profits (i.e. financial objectives). These MFIs regularly cater for non-poor clients by using an individual lending methodology (Galema et al., 2012; Denotes and Alexandar, 2004). Based on the type of MFIs the degree to which counselling is provided may vary. For example, non-profit-oriented MFIs could provide more counselling compared to profit-oriented MFIs.

### ***Lending Methodology***

Group and individual lending are the two basic methods. The idea of group lending is that loans (i.e. microcredit) are given to the individual members of a group. However, the group, which consists of 3 to 10 members, is responsible for the repayment of loans of the individual members to the MFI and that is called group liability (Van Eijkel et al., 2011; Hermes et al., 2005; De Wildt, 2004; ADEMCOL, 2001). The main difference between group lending and individual lending is that individual lending demands collateral from clients for money to be lent (Khavul, 2010; Denotes and Alexandar, 2004). The type of lending methodology could affect counselling. Counsellors could spend more time with the clients when group methodology is present due to group meetings being held than those operating in an individual lending setup.

### ***Types of Linkages***

MFIs use either unified or parallel linkage to deliver microcredit and BDS to owner-managers (Dunford, 2001). When using unified linkages, the same people from one MFI deliver credit and BDS. In contrast, when using parallel linkages, MFI has two different organisational units that are separate cost centres and use different people to provide credit and BDS. The type of linkage could influence the counselling provided by MFIs. For instance, counsellors of MFIs that use parallel linkages have more time to provide counselling than MFIs with unified linkages.

### ***Social Mobilisation Programmes***

Social mobilisation programmes involve awareness building about MFI products, forming groups and societies of members/clients, training members to manage groups/societies, and providing BDS. It was found that the central part of the social mobilisation programme is group formation and training clients to manage groups. In general, MFIs conduct social mobilisation for about three months before microcredit is provided (Kotze and Plesis, 2003; Claycomb et al., 2001; Bettencourt, 1997; Kelley et al., 1992). Social mobilisation programmes may have a bearing on counselling. Since counsellors meet potential clients/owner-managers at these programmes, the clients could be better trained for future counselling.

## Concept of Co-Production

For this study, we adopt the view of co-production as "joint efforts between two parties who jointly determine the output of their collaboration" (Parks et al., 1981). Further, we consider the dyadic relationships between individuals in this study, i.e., the relationship between the counsellor and the owner-manager. Moreover, we consider three customer factors that are critical to effective co-production: perceived clarity of the task/role; ability or competence; and motivation (Meuter et al., 2005; Bettencourt et al., 2002; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2000; Lengnick-Hall, 1996; Lovelock and Young, 1979).

The workshop initially developed the concept of co-production in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University in 1973. Originally the idea of co-production related to the clients' or citizens' involvement in production (i.e. direct user involvement either in public or private sectors). This concept fuelled a great interest among public administration scholars in the US in the 1970s and the 1980s (Parks et al., 1981).

Scholars argued that citizens as clients would receive an effective and efficient service from the professional staff employed by large bureaucratic agencies. After studying police services in the US, they discovered that the centralised police department could not provide a better direct service to the clients /citizens (Ostrom, 1999). Hence, they realised that the service provider and the client needed to collaborate in the production. Further, they also realised that the production of a service, as opposed to a good, was difficult without the active participation of those receiving the service (Ostrom, 1999). Thus, the term co-production focuses on the individuals and groups in producing services at the micro-levels. Still, it could impact society's meso and macro levels (Ostrom, 1999).

The concept of co-production was initially studied in industrial and service markets. Further co-production was initially discussed regarding economic efficiency gained from collaborating with a customer in a business-to-business context, resulting in competitive advantage (Fitzsimmons, 1985). In the 1990s, scholars started to discuss the co-production concept in consumer markets. In consumer markets, the emergence of the 'customising consumer' was witnessed who takes an active role in the production process (Firat, 1991; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993, 1995; Firat et al., 1995; Firat and Shultz, 1997). In recent times, the work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2006) on value co-creation and service-dominant logic of marketing, the new school of thought has driven the idea of co-production. Until recently, the dominant thinking was that customer value creation goes with the product (Goods Dominant logic, G-D). However, Vargo and Lush (2004) proposed the Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic in which service provision rather than goods is the foundation of economic exchange. These authors argue that value does not exist only in the finished good but is defined and created in co-production with the consumer (Vargo and Lusch, 2006). They propose that goods are part of the distribution in the service provider, and the customer is always a co-producer. Moreover, their S-D logic identifies how customer collaboration affects co-production and how it brings about benefits such as lower costs, customised service offerings and increased productivity.

Marketing theory encourages service providers and customers to interact and participate in service production (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Auh et al., 2007; Lusch et al., 2007). Etgar (2008) describes co-production as customers performing various production activities and encompasses all cooperation formats between the customer and the service provider.

According to Vargo et al. (2008), the points of customer-firm interaction are critical for creating value, and value is co-created through their reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship. Similarly, service co-production is based on interactions between the firm and the customer at individual levels (i.e. dyadic relationships).

The studies on co-production have largely focused on bilateral relationships between service providers and users and the overall impact of co-production services, ignoring how contextual factors such as the macro-environment and proximate environment; co-production management such as institutional design; and strategic management affect co-production (Cepiku and Giordano, 2014; Verschuere et al., 2012). This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by identifying contextual factors that can influence co-production in counselling.

## Research Method

Exploring co-production dynamics between counsellors and owner-managers in a microfinance environment represents a contemporary phenomenon that necessitates thorough examination within its authentic context. Consequently, adopting a case study methodology emerges as the most suitable approach for this research endeavour (Yin, 2009). This method facilitates the nuanced exploration of pertinent issues and insights, offering the potential for a comprehensive comprehension of the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, the utilization of multiple case studies aligns with the objective of theoretical generalization, as opposed to the pursuit of statistical generalization, which constitutes the primary aim of this study. Thus, the selection of a multiple case study methodology was deemed appropriate to conduct this research investigation.

Individuals working for MFIs and the owner-managers of MSEs were the units of analysis. Six cases were considered for this study, which aligned with Eisenhardt's (1989) recommendation of four to ten case studies to achieve theoretical saturation.

A sample of six cases, i.e., MFIs, were chosen purposively considering the types of MFIs, their lending method and linkage types. A senior manager, a counsellor and three owner-managers from each MFI were selected for data collection. Owner managers had been with selected MFIs for a minimum of three years, and they were managing MSEs sectors of furniture, rice mills, car service, ornamental plant, coir, poultry feed, mosquito nets, incense sticks, ginger sweets and grocery. Counsellors had been with respective MFIs for at least three years.

The profiles of the MFIs selected for the study are given below in Table 1.

**Table 1: Profiles of MFIs Chosen for the Study.**

MFIs	Type of MFI	Lending methodology	Type of Linkage
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MFI-1	Private Bank	individual	Unified
MFI-2	Government Bank	Group	Unified
MFI-3	Government	Group	Unified
MFI-4	Non-Bank	Group	Parallel
MFI-5	Cooperative	Group/individual	Unified
MFI-6	Non-Bank	Group	Parallel

Source: Authors survey

Before commencing the definitive data collection phase, a preliminary pilot study was conducted to refine the structure of the semi-structured interview questions. Subsequently, a total of 30 interviews were carried out, with interview durations spanning from 45 to 90 minutes. These interviews were meticulously recorded using audio recording equipment and transcribed verbatim. Adhering to ethical principles, explicit informed consent was obtained from each interviewee before the commencement of the interviews.

Data were analysed thematically. Throughout this analysis, techniques, and strategies such as pattern matching, and cross-case synthesis were strategically employed to distil meaningful insights and identify patterns across the dataset. It was conducted in alignment with the primary research objectives<sup>1)</sup> to find out factors that affect co-production between the counsellors and owner-managers, 2) to identify the contextual factors that influence the co-production, 3) to identify the co-production outcomes. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the relevant themes and patterns that emerged from the data.

The studies have shown how case study research can achieve reliability and validity. Construct validity was achieved in this study by using multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, company records and websites. Internal validity is used to establish causal relationships. (Yin, 2009). This is done by using pattern matching in case studies. The researcher examined that MFIs studied sustained their BDS programmes with their strategies (i.e. pattern matching). External validity defines how the study's findings can be generalised. This study uses multiple cases, which is better than a single case study in generalising the findings. However, the case study method focuses on theoretical rather than statistical generalisation. Reliability demonstrates that the operations of a study, such as data collection procedures, can be repeated with the same results. A case study protocol is used in the study, which helps other investigators to have the same results if the study is repeated (Yin, 2009).

### **Analysis and Findings**

The cross-case analysis shows that counsellor-owner manager expertise, communication, interpersonal relationships, owner-manager willingness, counsellor readiness, and follow-up and feedback affected co-production between the counsellors and owner-managers. These themes

(co-production factors) identified are discussed below, identifying contextual factors that influence the co-production factors.

## **The findings related to objectives 1 and 2**

### ***Counsellor – owner-manager expertise***

Counsellor–owner–manager expertise (emerged as a theme/factor that affected co-production in the counsellor-owner manager dyad in all the cases analysed. Counsellor expertise is believed to be superior to that of owner-managers. Thus, counsellors can help owner-managers improve their skills, knowledge and resources (i.e. the ability of owner-managers) through their expertise and enhance co-production.

The expertise attributed to counsellors encompasses both their business acumen and experiential knowledge. Their business knowledge pertains to the insights and understanding derived from their educational qualifications, which ideally include advanced-level examinations, preferably within the realm of commerce, as well as degrees in business management. Moreover, it encompasses training programs undertaken by business management and counselling.

The experiential knowledge or experience of counsellors refers to the knowledge gained through years of working with owner-managers and MFIs.

The following example shows how a counsellor from MFI-3 gained **business knowledge** through qualifications.

*"I have passed Advanced Level in the Commerce subject stream. Right now, I am taking banking exams. Our bank also trains us in financial literacy, record keeping and business plan preparation. I always use this knowledge gained through qualifications when I counsel clients."*

The following excerpts highlight how **experiential knowledge** is used by counsellors to handle problems in business registration and packaging.

The counsellor from MFI-1 indicated that.

*"Some clients do not know where to register their business. Some with a business already started a few years back still need a business registration. So, we advise them to register the business at the provincial council, saying that they will start the business with the help of the MFI. Otherwise, the provincial council will charge a penalty for delaying the registration."*

The findings also show that the expertise of counsellors is influenced by the types of linkage and the counsellor selection method. For example, counsellors attached to MFIs with unified linkage have low expertise. The findings revealed that certain Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), exemplified by MFI-6, adopt a unique approach to counsellor selection, appointing owner-managers to fulfil this role. However, it was observed that these owner-manager-turned-counsellors exhibit limited expertise, primarily attributable to their lower levels of formal education, absence of specialized training, and limited prior experience in delivering counselling services. This stands in contrast to the professional counsellors employed by other MFIs who



possess a more robust background in counselling. Moreover, it was found that the counsellor selection method was based on the type of MFI. For example, bank MFIs would select qualified counsellors compared to cooperative MFIs. However, the study does not inform how the experiential knowledge of these owner-manager-counsellors (i.e. when they do business) helps them in their counselling roles.

Owner-manager expertise represents a customer's accrued knowledge about how a product should perform. The expertise of owner-managers increases client involvement in co-production. The findings illuminate a significant relationship between the training programs facilitated by Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) and the enhancement of owner-manager expertise. These programs contribute positively to the accumulation of expertise among owner-managers, further reinforcing the co-production processes associated with counselling and social mobilization.

The following quotations show the importance of the owner-managers expertise in co-production in counselling and how social mobilisation programmes enhance co-production.

The counsellor from MFI-3 expressed that.

*"Social mobilisation programs conducted by the MFIs improve the owner-managers expertise in counselling. Those who have followed the social mobilisation programme know the importance of counselling and actively engage in counselling."*

The owner-manager (garments) of MFI-5 stated that,

*"We learned about counselling from the social mobilisation programme offered by MFIs and were offered counselling in the programme. This training helps us engage in counselling."*

### **Owner manager willingness**

The findings from all the MFIs studied show that owner-managers willingness is essential in co-production in counselling. Owner managers put effort into co-production (e.g. spending time with the counsellor, providing information, and being pleasant) due to their willingness.

The willingness of owner-managers to participate in counselling sessions is underpinned by specific motivational factors. These motivating factors encompass economic benefits and product-related factors toward active engagement in co-production endeavours.

The following statement shows how **economic benefits** shape owner-managers willingness to participate in co-production.

The owner-manager (furniture) of MFI-1 explained that,

*"I was able to improve the sales and profits of my furniture business due to advice I got from our counsellor. So, I always want to work with him."*

Owner managers would be willing to engage in counselling if its **location** is nearby. The findings also show that they prefer it if the counsellor visits them at home to discuss things privately, which is more convenient for them. Moreover, owner-managers can spend money on transportation or consider dress codes if the location is closer.

The counsellor of MFI-1 stated that,

*"I provide counselling at cluster meetings, my office, and clients' homes. When we visit clients at home, they do not have to worry about their dress code or transportation. If they are to meet"*

The findings show that the **time** the counselling takes place could influence the willingness of the owner-managers to take part in counselling. Owner-managers lead busy lives, juggling their business responsibilities and household tasks, underscoring the critical value of their time. Most of them expressed a strong preference for scheduling meetings with counsellors during the morning or evening hours.

The owner-manager (poultry feed) of MFI-5 stated that,

*"We prefer the counsellor to visit us in the morning or evening. Generally, we are busy during lunchtime."*

The counsellors interviewed also mentioned that they were concerned about the timing of counselling.

The counsellor of MFI-4 said that,

*"Morning and evening sessions are good times to meet the client. Sometimes the client may be busy with business and household chores between 11 am and 4 pm. So, I always visit clients either in the morning or evening."*

The findings from cases show that **social mobilisation programmes** conducted by MFIs motivate owner-managers to engage in counselling. The following excerpts give examples of this.

The counsellor of MFI-5 explained that,

*"Social mobilisation programmes will enhance the client's engagement in counselling. The client who has undergone the social mobilisation process knows the importance of counselling because he has already seen a change in him."*

The owner-manager (poultry feed) of MFI-5 highlighted the importance of the social mobilisation programme.

*"The social mobilisation programme has helped us. I was in a group of five members. We learnt how to work in a group. Besides, this programme taught us household and business management, savings, and other topics. This programme motivated us to work with the counsellors."*

The findings show that only MFI-2, MFI-4, MFI-5 and MFI-6 have strong social mobilisation programmes. Thus, these MFIs may be more willing to engage in counselling due to these programmes.

## Readiness

Counsellor readiness refers to counsellors committing sufficient time to co-production to achieve a level of intensity required for impact (i.e. number of hours available for counselling). Higher readiness allows counsellors to spend more time with clients to enhance their ability, clarity, and motivation, which are crucial to co-production.

Results from the cases indicate there are two job-related reasons for the counsellor which impede his readiness:

- 1) The nature of the job, i.e. full-time or part-time.
- 2) Activities that are not related to co-production.

The following example shows how the **job's nature affects the counsellor's readiness**.

The counsellor of MFI-6 stated that,

*"My job as a counsellor is a part-time job. I work as a counsellor while engaging in my business (garments). So, I do not have enough time to meet clients and follow up with them as I would like to."*

The findings also show that due to **debt collection and loan targets (i.e. non-co-production activities)**, sometimes counsellors need more time to provide counselling, which could affect co-production.

The counsellors of MFI-3, MFI-4, MFI-5 and MFI-6 mentioned that they could only focus partially on counselling due to debt collection.

The counsellor of MFI-3 explained that.

*"When recoveries are high, the management wants us to focus on debt collection fully, and we cannot provide counselling in this period."*

The study findings further reveal that counsellor readiness is affected by the MFI linkage type and the job's nature. For example, it was found that counsellors working for MFIs with unified linkages have lower readiness, as they have to engage in work additional to counselling (e.g. debt collection). In contrast, counsellors working for MFIs with a parallel structure have higher readiness, as they only focus on counselling. Moreover, it was found that counsellors attached to specific MFIs (e.g. MFI-6) work part-time and need more time for counselling.

## Counsellor owner-manager communication

The research findings underscore the critical role of communication between counsellors and owner-managers in the co-production process within counselling. Effective communication

skills demonstrated by the counsellor enhance role clarity and motivate owner-managers, encouraging them to carry out their assigned tasks actively. The communication skills of the counsellor can increase the clarity of roles and motivate the owner-managers to perform tasks. It was also revealed that the owner-manager needs to communicate with the counsellor and provide all the relevant information to co-produce with him better.

Four sub-categories emerged from the interviews of counsellor-owner manager communication:

1. Counsellors' communication using non-technical words.
2. Owner-managers' communication.

The respondents from the six MFIs felt that **communication using non-technical words** was important in counselling. Using layman's language can enhance the clarity of tasks communicated to the owner-manager.

The counsellor of MFI-2 indicated that.

*"We often deal with clients who do not have good business knowledge and low formal education. Hence, we always use simple language without jargon in communication with clients. For example, when counselling, we do not use words like 'prgadanaya' (capital); instead, we use a simple word they understand."*

The owner-manager (coir) of MFI-2 expressed the opinion that.

*"The communication of the counsellor is vital. He needs to communicate using simple language that we can understand."*

The following example shows the importance of **communication between the owner-manager** in counselling.

The counsellor of MFI-5 declared that.

*"Some clients are shy to talk with counsellors. Then we cannot help them. But most of our clients are very forward and confidently communicate thanks to the group activities."*

The findings show that the type of lending methodology enhances communication. Group lending methodology enhances communication due to the group activities of the members.

### **Interpersonal relationships**

The in-depth interviews with the counsellors and owner-managers of the six MFIs revealed that the counsellor-owner-manager interpersonal relationship influences co-production. The findings show that enhanced relationships will result in better co-production, as owner-managers will provide more information to the counsellors (i.e., client information provision is key in co-production). They will all exchange communal favours, which are beneficial to co-production.

The research findings indicate that several factors, including similarities between counsellors and owner-managers in areas such as dress code and attitudes, the frequency of their interactions, and the perceived power distance between them, significantly impact the dynamics of their relationship.

The counsellors of MFI-1 and MFI-3 stated that they wear clothes similar to those of the clients (without wearing a tie and coat or formal dress), which encourages the client to become closer to the counsellor and results in a better relationship. This **similarity in dress code** could enhance the owner-managers' satisfaction towards the counsellor since they may think that the counsellor's lifestyle is similar to theirs.

The counsellor of MFI-1 indicated that.

*"When we go to the field to meet clients, we never wear ties and coats, which will distance ourselves from them."*

The findings show that the **social interaction** between the counsellors and owner-managers improves the relationships, resulting in satisfaction between the parties.

The counsellors and owner-managers interviewed highlighted the importance of social interaction in developing relationships. The following are two excerpts to show this.

The counsellor of MFI-3 stated that,

*"We always attend clients' weddings and other events. When we go to the field and meet the client, we always greet them and ask how their family is doing. So, a client is delighted, and in this way, we keep in touch with them."*

The owner-manager (garments) of MFI-3 declared that,

*"Our counsellor is very friendly with us. He is like a family friend; he even attends our family functions."*

The counsellor's attitudes in looking at owner-managers' problems from their viewpoint (**Similar attitudes**) were a factor that enhanced the relationship.

The counsellors of MFI-2 and MFI-6 believed they needed to look at clients' problems from their point of view. The similarity in the way of looking at things (i.e. attitudes) could enhance owner-managers' satisfaction towards the counsellor since the owner-managers feel that the counsellor's way of thinking is similar to their own.

The counsellor of MFI-2 stated that,

*"Our clients are low-income and uneducated people. So, we must put ourselves in the client's shoes when dealing with them. Then, the clients feel comfortable and say everything. In this way, we can establish a relationship with the client."*

The owner-manager (garments 2) of MF-6 corroborated the counsellors' view, saying,

*"We like it if our counsellor looks at our problems from our point of view."*

**The intensity of contact** was also a factor that improved the relationship.

The MFI-1, MFI-2, MFI-4 and MFI-5 counsellors said they maintained relationships with clients by visiting them frequently and staying in touch.

The counsellor of MFI-1 indicated that.

*"When you visit the client a few times, the client becomes closer to you, resulting in a better relationship. This relationship helps me to have a better counselling session."*

**Power distance** - The findings also suggest that clients maintained a submissive relationship with MFI-1, MFI-2, MFI-3 and MFI-4 counsellors due to their high-power distance. It shows that there is a high-power distance between superiors and subordinates in Sri Lanka.

In particular, the counsellors of MFI-3 and MFI-4 stated that the owner-managers respect them due to this power distance and listen to them. The following is an example to show this power relationship.

The counsellor of MFI-3 stated that,

*"When we go to the field, the clients call us "Mahatthaya" (Sir). This shows they respect us, so they always want to listen to us."*

The findings also show that the debt collection role of counsellors of certain MFIs (those using unified linkage) badly affects the interpersonal relationship between counsellor and owner-manager, resulting in counsellors finding it challenging to provide counselling to default owner-managers. The research findings additionally reveal that the debt collection responsibilities assigned to counsellors in specific Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), particularly those utilizing a unified linkage approach, harm the interpersonal relationship between counsellors and owner-managers. This adverse effect results in counsellors facing considerable difficulties delivering effective counselling services to owner-managers who have defaulted on their obligations.

### **Post-intervention counsellor follow-up and feedback.**

The results from the study demonstrate that a counsellor follows up, and feedback is imperative in counselling co-production. The counsellor must follow up with the owner-manager and provide feedback on his business progress. Follow-up and feedback improve the clarity of the task and the ability and motivation of the owner-manager, hence improving co-production incidence.

The following is one of the excerpts that show how counsellors follow up on owner-managers and provide feedback.

The counsellor of MFI-2 expressed the view that.

*"At the beginning of the year, I hold selection sessions for societies in the region I work for. From these sessions, I select about 50 clients to provide counselling to. I regularly follow up with these clients and give them feedback on their businesses. Follow-up and feedback are important in counselling."*

The owner-manager (wicks) of MFI-1 discussed the importance of follow-up and feedback.

*"The counsellor identifies the next stage of my business and gives me a target. Then he follows up on that regularly. This motivates us. The counsellor and I have even drawn up a long-term plan for me, for example, what I should do in five years in my business. So, I work with the counsellor to achieve my goals."*

The responses and the observations made in the study show that the counsellors of MFI-1 and MFI-2 follow up on the owner-managers and provide feedback on their business progress in a systematic way. They select owner-managers who need counselling and systematically work with them to improve their projects. In contrast, in the other MFIs studied, counsellors must systematically follow up on the owner-managers. They provide business assistance if the owner-managers ask for it or ask them whether they have any problems in the field or at meetings. Moreover, the counsellors from MFIs using unified linkage are constrained by time as they must engage in non-related co-production activities such as debt collection.

### **The Findings related to objective 3**

#### ***Co-production outcomes***

The six cases studied reveal that co-production outcomes in counselling are twofold: 1. MFI-related, and 2. Owner manager-related.

#### ***MFI-specific outcomes***

The case study findings show that MFI management has broad socio-economic co-production outcomes in BDS. These outcomes were: during a specific period, how many new businesses were created, how many new employment opportunities were created, how BDS (given through counselling) have improved the management of owner-managers and the business growth of the owner-managers. This is evidenced by excerpts from the microfinance managers interviewed from the six cases. One of the excerpts is given below.

The Enterprise Development Services Manager of MFI-1 stated that.

*"In November each year, the branch has to give me a plan for the next twelve months. This plan consists of how many training sessions they will conduct, how many market linkages will be formed etc. When the plan comes to me, I modify it based on the overall strategy if necessary. We look at the following goals as ultimate BDS outcomes:*

- 1) How BDS improve client management.*
- 2) How many new employment opportunities are created?*
- 3) Client growth in terms of assets and income.*

4) *How many new businesses are created."*

MFI also had other co-production outcomes in BDS, such as better loan repayments, client retention, client satisfaction and client relationships, client graduation, access to a low-cost deposit base and social capital creation.

The interviewees from MFI-3, MFI-4, MFI-5 and MFI-6 held the common view that BDS improves owner-manager retention. The owner-managers who have received counselling may stay with the MFI, obtaining more microcredit and counselling.

The Branch Manager of MFI-3 stated that,

*"The clients who obtain counselling continue to stay with us and take more loans."*

### **Owner manager-related co-production outcomes.**

The research findings indicate that co-production efforts between counsellors and owner-managers have led to tangible outcomes, including enhanced sales and increased profitability for the businesses managed by owner-managers. Furthermore, these collaborative efforts have resulted in the improvement of business knowledge and the adoption of better business practices by owner-managers. It's noteworthy that all Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) unanimously agreed that the provision of Business Development Services (BDS) facilitated through counselling played a pivotal role in driving these positive outcomes. These services contributed significantly to the growth of owner-managers' sales, profitability, and their overall understanding and implementation of improved business practices.

The owner-manager (ginger sweets) of MFI-1 highlighted the importance of counselling to their businesses.

The owner-manager (ginger sweets) of MFI-1 said that.

*"Before, I used to dry ginger using the sunlight, and I had to use manual labour. Having observed this practice, our counsellor wanted me to participate in dehydration training. Now, I use a machine to dry the ginger due to the training. This move has improved productivity and profits, as I do not have to pay for labour."*

The counsellor of MFI-3 corroborated the importance of counselling by saying that.

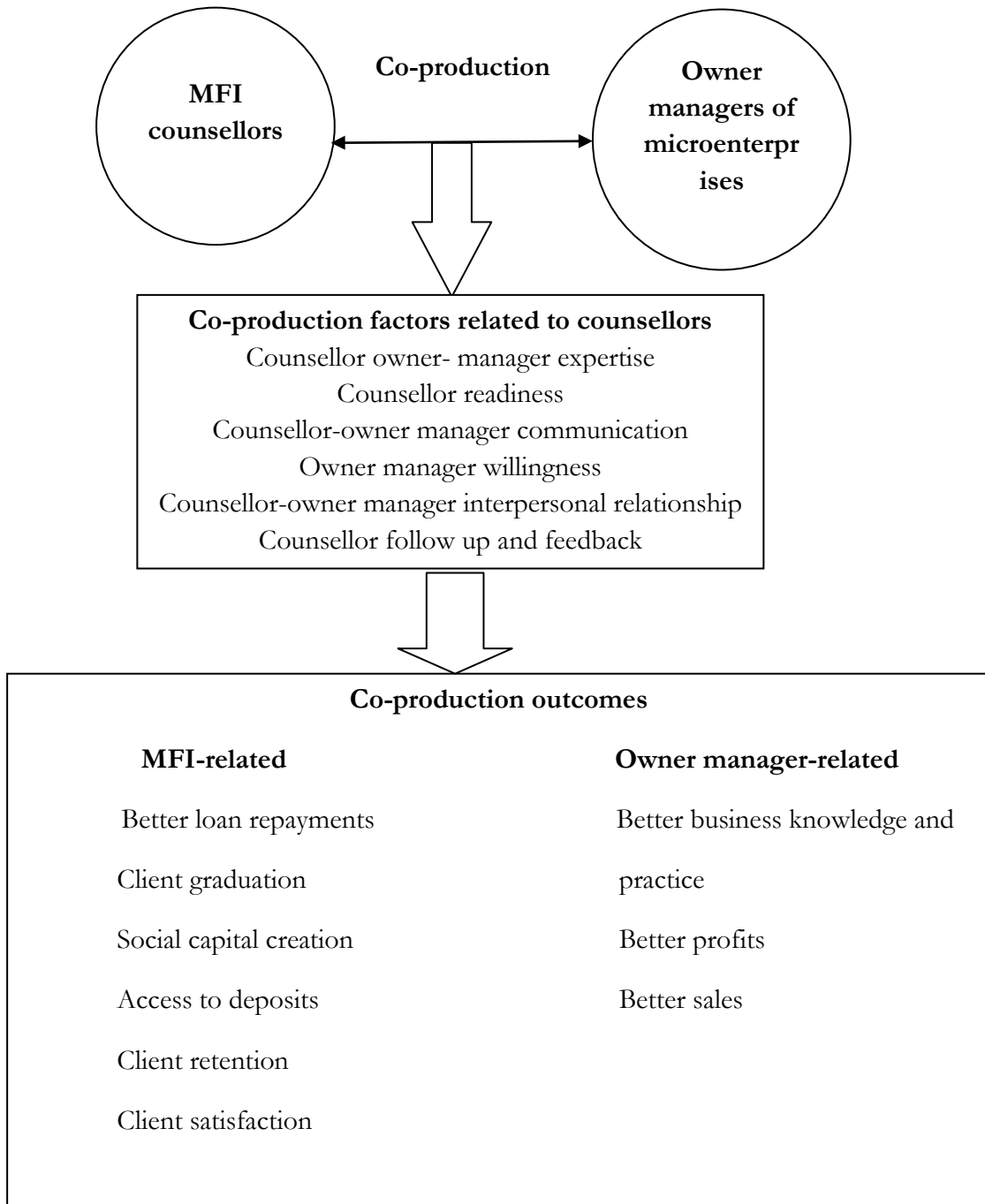
*"A client's sales and profits will increase due to our BDS. Counselling is not all about advising on business, such as business plans and record-keeping; we also provide marketing linkages. I have introduced 15 clients to a pineapple exporter (i.e. market linkage). So, these clients do not have to go through intermediaries now; hence their sales and profits have increased."*

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study found six factors affecting co-production between the counsellor and the owner-manager. These factors are counsellor-owner-manager expertise, counsellor readiness, counsellor-owner-manager communication, owner-manager willingness, counsellor-owner-manager interpersonal relationship and counsellor feedback and follow-up. These factors are



consistent with the co-production literature (Rice, 2002; Chrisman, 1989; Bove and Johnson, 2000; Auh et al., 2007; Bettencourt et al., 2002; Bovaird and Löffler, 2012; Abeysekera, 2020).



**Figure 2:** Conceptual Framework

For example, the literature on co-production shows that the expertise of counsellors and owner-managers helps improve the performance of counselling intervention (Rice, 2002). However, the literature does not show how business knowledge and experience components of expertise help owner-managers in a different manner. Similarly, though the main themes, such as expertise, readiness and willingness, align with the extant literature, sub-themes under each theme

are not discussed in co-production literature. However, they are discussed under different disciplines. For example, the power distance that affects the relationship between counsellor and owner-manager is discussed in cross-cultural psychology (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Further, the study revealed several co-production outcomes (i.e., MFI-related and owner-manager-related) compatible with the microfinance literature (Rice, 2002; Schroeder, 1990; ADEMCOI, 2001; Halder, 2003; Karlan and Valdivia, 2006). However, the contextual factors that affect co-production are absent in the literature. Since there is a gap in co-production studies concerning contextual factors, this study fills this gap by identifying such factors (Pestoff, 2012). See Figure 2 for the conceptual framework that shows co-production factors, outcomes, and contextual factors based on the findings. The outcomes of this study make substantial contributions to both the knowledge and practical applications within various domains. These findings advance the theoretical understanding of co-production and enrich the fields of business counselling and Business Development Services (BDS) literature. The researchers could use this study's findings to research microfinance, counselling and co-production fields. Practitioners and policymakers can use the study findings to develop BDS by improving the counselling intervention. They could focus on co-production and contextual factors this study identified to achieve co-production outcomes. This is a cross-sectional study; a longitudinal study can add more insights. MFIs selected were limited to 6. The findings would have been richer and could have easily been generalised if more MFIs were selected.

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