Theorizing Organizational Mission and Mission Statements in a Structuration Framework

Joel O. Iverson

University of Montana
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One of the central concepts for the identity of any organization, especially nonprofit organizations is organizational mission. Mission is known as the “core purpose (DeLone, 2007) of the organization and as the answer to the collective question of “why are we here?” (Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997). The centrality of mission and the nearly universal development of mission statements in NPOs (Kirk & Nolan, 2010) demonstrate the importance of mission and mission statements. In this essay, I contend that mission and mission statements are currently conflated constructs; the connection of communication to mission (beyond mission statements) needs further development; and the communicative enactment of mission is of important theoretical value. I offer a structurational view of mission and mission statements as a means of meeting each of these needs.

When studying organizations, understanding their purposes can be an interesting challenge. In the case of for-profit organizations, the central questions of purpose is often claimed to be the generation of profits for shareholders. However, one of the central features of nonprofit organizations is that they must have a mission that centers on a public benefit (Salomon, 1999). In fact as Lewis (2005) indicates:

A more common conclusion in the NPO literature is that mission is at the heart of the organization’s identity and has great implications for managerial behavior and organizational performance, and perceptions of NPO effectiveness. (p. 251)

Mission is the central justification for an NPO. Campbell and Yeung (1991) contend that mission is the “cultural glue” that pulls disparate parts of the organization together around a common function or purpose. At one level a mission is easy to grasp as a central purpose or reason to act, but understanding the nature of mission, conceptualizing something as vague as cultural glue can
also be difficult to say the least, let alone describe in detail and even enact in practice. Instead, research focuses on the mission statement as the mission. This move is problematic, but is dealt with later.

In extant research, the mission of a nonprofit organization is examined in three primary areas: measuring mission and effectiveness, mission drift, and mission attachment. For mission and effectiveness, mission accomplishment as well as organizational effectiveness examined. Both are very difficult to measure and effectiveness tends to be a social construction where mission is often defined based on outcomes that are more provable and tangible than from an altruistic stance (Herman & Renz, 1999; 2008). The effectiveness of mission can be examined in terms of financial success (Bart, 1996; Desmidt & Prinzie, 2009) and motivating employees (Wright, 2007) as well. The outcomes of this research have yet to definitively establish that mission (mostly mission statements) have any connection to performance or effectiveness (Desmidt & Prinzie). Mission attachment for employees has been connected to employee intent to stay (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003). Mission drift, a case of an organization straying from its mission, can come from multiple sources including financial pressures, but also external pressures, internal policy decisions as well as multiple causes of change (see Jones, 2007 for a good review of early mission drift literature).

In most research regarding NPO mission statements, the statements are treated as static entities. Research such as Desmidt and Prinzie (2009) and Kirk and Nolan (2010) treat the mission statement as a static artifact that can be tested for financial performance, utility, quality, focus, and other objective characteristics. This approach removes the process of communicating and meaning creation from analysis. Rather, mission statements are the mission as a reified, articulated substance. To give an example, 2-1-1 (a social service information and referral
agency) has a mission statement of “Connecting people to services.” This statement is treated as the mission instead of examining how the phrase is used in communication among organizational members. The statement becomes the mission, missing that this phrase was constructed and is used in the process of communicating. However, some research, especially within the field of communication focuses on how mission statements are used as a management communication tool (Fairhurst, et al) and that mission statements have differing meanings in different organizational networks (Whitbred, 2005). This research recognizes that mission statement meanings are enacted communicatively, but do not conceptually separate organizational mission from mission statement.

Mission and mission statements do need independent theorizing. Just as ideas such as freedom are distinct from the word freedom or statements that articulate freedom such as song lyrics and the U.S. Constitution, the organizational mission is distinct from a statement that attempts to articulate the mission. For example, a mission can exist even if an NPO has no mission statement. As Kirk and Nolan (2010) state, “Like external stakeholders, managers and employees may develop a strong sense of mission without a mission statement” (p. 486). NPOs and their missions existed before carefully worded statements became the normative practice.

In order to avoid conflating mission and mission statement, I contend that as communication scholars we need a framework that can separate organizational mission from mission statements and allows us to explore the relationships between mission, mission statements, communicative enactment of mission, communicative use of mission statements, and organizing in general. I advocate using a structuration framework to no longer conflate mission and statements and better theorize the relationship between mission and statements. For this model I propose a structurational framework (Giddens, 1984), which utilizes basic structuration model (see Figure
One) that places mission at the system level of conceptualization in order to position mission statements, organizational agents, and understand how mission is communicatively enacted.

Although a detailed explanation of structuration theory is beyond the scope of this position paper, I will attempt to briefly sketch out this framework and then demonstrate the basic structuration notion as adapted to the understanding of organizational mission and mission statements. First, Structuration theory developed by Anthony Giddens (1979; 1984) is a metatheory that has been utilized by organizational communication scholars (Poole & McPhee, 2005 review many of these examples) to understand how organizations, small groups, and other organizational systems such as use of technology are enacted communicatively. Structuration explains how social systems are simultaneously created and used by social actors. Rather than treating social systems as permanent entities, Giddens (1984) recognizes that it is through our practices that we continually produce and reproduce social systems:

Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible. (p. 2)

Structuration centers on agent action that draws upon structures (rules and resources) that enable and constrain action. A good example is language. Speakers draw on rules and resources of a language (words, grammar, structure, etc.) and through the use of language reproduce the language or make changes through creative use producing new structures as part of the system. I contend that viewing organizational mission as the system (see figure 1), placing mission statements as a structure (resource) allows for understanding that organizational actors draw on the mission statement as well as other structures (such as past organizational actions,
understandings of mission, stories, and other examples) in the process of enacting organizational mission through their practices.

By viewing organizational mission through a structurational view, mission and mission statements are distinct conceptually. A mission statement itself is not overly reified as its own entity as found in much of the current NPO literature. Rather, humans communicate the mission statement, draw on the mission statement as a reference point, and enact the meaning they draw from the mission statement. A mission statement is now a resource that organizational members (and others, potentially) use to communicate ideas to members (Fairhurst et al) as well as externally to other stakeholders. Mission statements can also be used as a guiding rule when a manager or coworker questions another member’s actions through the mission statement. For example, a worker at a homeless shelter may criticize another worker for turning someone away by referencing the mission statement. Further, the structuration model supports the possibility brought out by other research that a strong sense of mission could be developed without a mission statement (Kirk & Nolan). Other rules and resources such as successful mission accomplishment examples and failures are theoretically placed into the process of enacting the meaning of mission. Third, this theoretical approach centers communication (McPhee & Iverson, 2009) as the process of enacting the meaning of mission. Just as Kirby and Krone (2002) use structuration theory to articulate that family leave policies are enacted (through communication) differently than how they are officially written, similar arguments can be developed regarding the meaning of mission. How members of an NPO enact mission changes the meaning of mission. Fourth, theorizing mission as communicatively enacted by agents allows scholars to avoid the conduit metaphor for mission statements. Mission statements are no longer the

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1 Cade Spaulding and I have been working on analyzing data from an NPO using stories of success and failure as ways to understand how mission is communicatively enacted.
container of the mission, but instead are an organizational structure drawn on by members to
guide decisions, evaluate behavior, explain actions to outside stakeholders, and co-construct
meaning. Positioning mission statements as a resource opens up the possibilities to see the
multitude of ways that mission is communicatively enacted.

In addition, structuration supports findings of scholars who have been critical of mission
statements such as Feldner’s (2006) critiques that rites and rituals reflect and reinforce the
organizational mission. Rites and rituals are also rules and resources that can be drawn upon and
enacted to produce or reproduce the meaning of mission. Whitbred (2005) further supports an
agent-centered view. Whitbred found that people in the same network (formal and emergent) are
more likely to share similar perceptions of the mission. If mission is interpreted in different
ways, it equals differences in behavior. Mission, in essence, serves as a frame for meaning and
actions. In sum, “effectively communicating mission matters” (Bart, 2000, p. 61).

The structuration model of mission also explains the mixed findings regarding the efficacy of
a carefully crafted mission statement. Take for example, Kirk and Nolan’s conclusion about
mission statements, “a significant investment of time and resources in crafting a finely tuned
mission statement may not be justified easily in terms of financial performance” (p. 486). This
research assumes that a mission statement when written may have an effect, but it is
insignificant, and different studies find differing benefits to a mission statement. Perhaps the
difference is not simply the construction of the statement, but how that statement is enacted as a
structure in various organizations. Structuration emphasizes would direct this research to 1)
examine the communicative enactment of the mission statement, not just its form; 2) other
communication about mission among internal and external stakeholders; and 3) the connections
of performance measures to performances of mission.
Overall, organizational mission can be a vague and confusing concept. As a result, one articulation of the mission, the mission statement has been conflated with mission. The problem of treating the mission statement as the mission is clear from a communication perspective. The words are not the idea. I advocate a structurational model for understanding and exploring the relationships between mission, mission statement, and other communicative actions within NPOs. Mission statements are one of the structures (rules and resources) that are drawn upon and enacted in NPOs. Organizational agents draw upon these structures and thus produce and reproduce the meanings of those structures. In this short proposal I have omitted multiple examples, details, and implications of a structurational theorizing of mission. I do contend that the structurational model of organizational mission provides an approach that centers communication processes of organizing in NPOs.
References


Figure One

Structurational Model of Organizational Mission