They don't see things like we do: A simultaneous analysis of the influence of formal organisational, emergent, and individual factors on emergent patterns in perceptions of organisational mission

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Much of the existing research on organisational mission has focused on mission statement content, neglecting how organisational members themselves interpret the mission. This study uses a communicative approach, arguing that employees will actively interpret their organisation's mission. This topic is important because systematic patterns in employees' perceptions of mission have relevance for organisational processes. This study simultaneously examines the influence of formal organisational, informal/emergent, and demographic factors on patterns of agreement between employees' perceptions of their organisation's mission. Semantic network analysis was used to examine a Public Works Division. Results showed that employees who had a communication tie in the emergent communication network, were in the same functional work group, and who were spatially proximate were more likely to share perceptions of the organisation's mission. Implications for future research and managerial practice are discussed.[i]

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners alike recognise that organisations have had to become more agile in order to effectively compete in today's hypercompetitive and increasingly global environment (Monge & Contractor, 2003). Mission statements have been one of the more frequently used strategies to help achieve this transformation. Bart and Tabone (1999) argued that a mission statement may act as a guideline for organisational members' interpretation and decision making processes, minimising the need for traditional, centralised hierarchical control while maintaining coordination. Bart (2000) reported nine out of ten executives had used a mission statement in the past five years. A 1995 survey by Ledford, Wendenhof, and Strahley showed six out of ten large U.S. firms had developed statements. The prevalence of mission statements is further demonstrated by the wide variety of organisations utilising them, including public school systems, government institutions, libraries (Ehrenhalt, 1997), philanthropic organisations (Sheehan, 1996), academic business programmes (Ireland, 1997), and universities (Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991; Varlotta, 1997).

Mission is defined by Harrison (1987) as representing an organisation's aim, purpose, or reason for being, while Fairhurst, Jordon, and Neuwirth (1997) emphasise that a mission answers the question 'why are we here?' Pearce (1982) states organisations often formalise these issues by developing a written statement, which is a document that defines an organisation's unique and enduring purpose. Bart and Tabone (1999) identify 'Why do we exist?', 'What is our purpose?', and 'What do we want to achieve?' as some of the fundamental questions that a mission statement aims to answer.

Several potential benefits have been identified for organisations that develop and implement mission statements. Pearce and David (1987) discussed how mission statements provide direction for resource distribution as the first step in the strategic planning process. Bart and Tabone (1999), Campbell and Nash (1992), and Whitbred (2005) described how a mission statement may function as a coordination mechanism by acting as a baseline for the decision making of employees in dispersed locations, and Bryce (2002) detailed how a

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mission statement may aid in positioning the organisation to the public.

Despite the vast financial and intellectual resources spent developing and implementing mission statements, there is wide acknowledgment that many organisations fail to realise desired tangible benefits. Fairhurst et al. (1997) state "A consistent theme running through the organisational development literature on corporate Mission Statements is an acknowledged widespread failure in their implementation" (p. 243). Coulson-Thomas (1992) surveyed directors in three organisations and found they had a concern that mission statements were only words on paper. Bart (1997) surveyed 88 managers, and found only 23% felt their firms were making progress towards their mission, while O'Gorman and Doran (1999) found mission statements often served public relations purposes only.

This consistent failure is partially explained by two limitations of previous research on mission statements (for reviews of the mission statement literature, see Fairhurst et al., 1997 & Whitbred, 2004). First, previous research has tended to focus on analysing the content of a sample of mission statements to identify themes that commonly appear. Pearce and David (1987) identified eight components that frequently appeared in mission statements, including specification of target customers and markets, identification of principal products/services, and identification of the firm's desired public image. Other examples of this type of research include Bart and Tabone (1999), Cotton, McKenna, and Van Auken (2001), Forehand (2000), and Stone (1996). This focus neglects the role of organisational members in actively interpreting or assigning meaning to the mission of their organisation. It is consistent with a linear model of communication (Axley, 1984; Varey, 2000), where employees are conceptualised as passively accepting the content of the mission statement. Even if a statement is successfully 'sold' to members, this approach ignores the potential for these same members to develop their own perceptions of the organisation's mission over time.

The second limitation is that previous research has tended to include only strategic decision makers as participants, which introduces a potential bias into such studies. Evaluating the satisfaction with or effectiveness of a mission statement by interviewing executive level employees incorporates the viewpoints of those who have most likely been involved in the development of the statement, and thus have the most vested interest in its success. Simultaneously, the input of those organisational members who are most responsible for enacting the mission statement to improve organisational processes is ignored. To address the first limitation, this paper uses a communicative approach to the study of mission. It begins with the assumption that any employee may develop his/her own perception of mission (Contractor, Eisenberg, & Monge, 1999), regardless of whether an organisation has a formal statement. Putnam (1983) identifies these perceptions as a means through which organisational members make sense of their world, while Daft and Weick (1984) state they are the mechanism through which managers "wade into the ocean of events that surround the organisation and actively try to make sense of them" (p. 286).

Several scholars (e.g., Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Weick, 1993, 1995) argue that studies need to investigate the cognitive frames or schema that facilitate coordinated action, as they influence what employees consider to be appropriate action. Kuhn and Corman (2003) discussed the importance of schema for successful organisational change. In a longitudinal study, they demonstrated how different dimensions of the content of schema may simultaneously converge and diverge over time. Fairhurst et al. (1997) reported that managers recognised that their employees' interpretations of mission would influence their subsequent behaviour, and thus attempted to actively manage those meanings. In this study, each employee's interpretation of the mission is conceptualised as a cognitive frame that influences the meanings he/she assigns to ongoing events, and ultimately influences decision making and behaviour.

Shared interpretations of organisational mission

Each employee's interpretation of his/her organisation's mission may be similar to those of others. Pockets or subcultures will likely emerge, composed of employees who share interpretations of their organisation's mission. This is consistent with Putnam's (1983) conceptualisation of organisations as "an array of factionalized groups with diverse purposes and goals. Organisations are not monolithic entities; rather, they are coalitions of participants with different priorities" (p. 37).

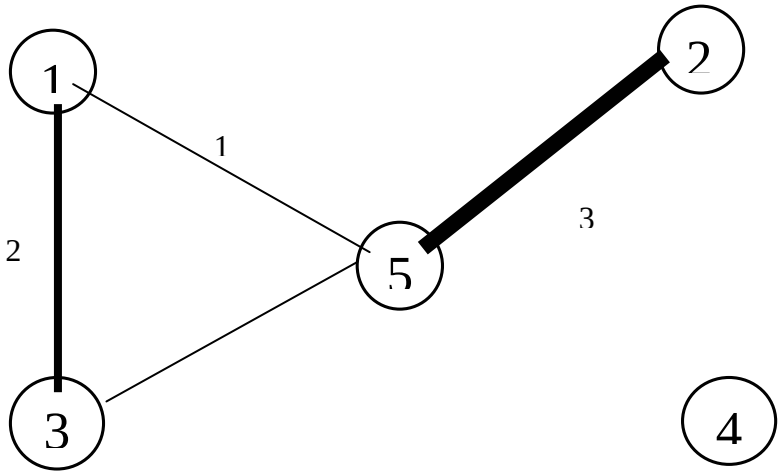
Studies have demonstrated the importance of shared interpretations of mission. For example, Bart and Tabone (1999) found Canadian hospital managers who shared perceptions of content reported their behaviour as being influenced by the mission statement. Collins-Jarvis (1997) and Roberts and Bradley (1991) found the coordination between collaborative alliances was more effective when participants agreed on the content of mission. Heath and Sias (1999), in a case study of a collaborative alliance formed to prevent juvenile delinquency, reported alliance members who had a shared mission were better able to develop and maintain a collaborative spirit as well as more effectively coordinate their efforts.

To address the second limitation of previous research on mission – the tendency for studies to include only executive level participants – this study utilises semantic network analysis. Stohl (1995) defines a semantic network as a representation of the links between organisational members based on sharedness. Monge and Eisenberg (1987) note that a semantic network approach facilitates articulation of the level of agreement between employees' interpretations of a key organisational artifact, in this case shared interpretations of mission. **Figure 1** provides an example of a semantic network. In this figure, circles represent employees in the organisation. The line between employees one and five indicates they agreed on one interpretation of their organisation's mission. Employees one and three agreed on two interpretations, while employees two and five agreed on three interpretations. Employee four did not agree with any other employees' interpretation.

More formally, a semantic network is a matrix where each cell *ij* indicates the level of agreement between *i*'s and *j*'s interpretations of a concept, artifact, or issue important to the organisation. While the starting point for developing a semantic network is each organisational member's individual interpretations, the unit of analysis is the semantic link between any two employees *i* and *j*. The strength of the link indicates the level of sharedness between the two respective employees' interpretations. The aggregation of the semantic links results in an 'n by n' matrix (where n equals the number of employees in the organisation), representing the semantic network of the organisation. This provides a measure of the level of agreement on interpretations of mission between all members of the organisation, allowing examination of theoretical hypotheses predicting who is more likely to share interpretations with whom.

Use of semantic network analysis as a strategy for studying emergent patterns in employees' interpretations of mission is consistent with current approaches scholars are utilising to study knowledge networks in organisations. Borgatti and Foster (2003) described how a network strategy instantiates a structural approach to studying organisational phenomenon. Recent research (e.g., Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Cross, Rice, & Parker, 2001) has demonstrated how a network approach explains information seeking behaviour in organisations. A second area of research that utilises a network approach to examine knowledge transfer processes is more directly related to this study. Hansen (2002) demonstrated how the effective transfer and sharing of knowledge between units in large firms was partially dependent on the pattern of network ties within the organisation. Inkpen and Tsang (2005) discussed how common understandings and meanings between network members may act as a resource that facilitates knowledge transfer.

Figure 1. Illustration of positive and null semantic ties.



- No line indicates two employees did not agree on an interpretation of artifact. This is a null semantic tie.
- A thin line indicates the two employees agreed on one interpretation of the artifact. This is a positive semantic tie.
- The medium line indicates the two employees agreed on two interpretations of the artifact.
- The thick line indicates the two employees agreed on three interpretations.
- Semantic network analysis sets no limits on the number of interpretations any two employees may agree on.

Monge and Contractor (2003), along with Kilduff and Tsai (2003), discuss how cognitive social network approaches focus on the convergence and divergence of the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of network members. Semantic network analysis provides a means for articulating the pattern of agreement/disagreement in interpretations of mission that incorporates the viewpoints of all members of the organisation.

Hypotheses concerning shared interpretations of mission

There are three categories of theoretical mechanisms used in this study: formal structures, informal structures, and individual attributes. Formal structures are defined by Johnson (1992) as relationships that are imposed or mandated, and are often specified in organisational charts. The formal structures used in this study are functional work group and hierarchical level. Informal structures are defined by Monge and Contractor (2001) as relationships that emerge naturally and in addition to those formally mandated, and may be represented as the emergent communication network. The informal structures used in this study follow who has a communication tie with whom and who communicates with similar others. Monge and Contractor (2003) define attributes as individual characteristics of organisational members. The attributes used in this study are tenure and gender. A final mechanism, spatial proximity, incorporates aspects of both formal and informal structures. Spatial proximity is defined as the physical distance between the desks of any two organisational members. These seven mechanisms were selected because each provides relevant explanations for who is more likely to share interpretations of organisational mission. The following hypotheses summarise these explanations.

Functional work group

An organisational member's functional group is the department or project team to which he/she belongs. Levine and Moreland (1991) pointed out that people in the same functional group tend to perform similar and interdependent tasks, and tend to have similar thoughts concerning issues such as the distinguishing characteristics of the group and the work the group performs. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) identified similarity in functional group membership as one dimension along which organisational segments of employees with similar interpretations develop, while Van Maanen and Barley (1984) discuss how organisational members who work on similar and interdependent tasks in groups or teams will express similar beliefs. Departments or work groups in organisations may develop their own subcultures (Gregory, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1993). These interdependent conditions increase the likelihood of interactions (Bormann, 1996) and common goal formation (Carletta, Garrod, Fraser-Krauss, 1998). These findings lead to the first hypothesis of this study, which is that *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they are in the same functional work group.*

Hierarchical level

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) identified hierarchical level as a second dimension along which organisational sub-cultures develop. Employees on similar hierarchical levels are exposed to similar types of information. Daft and Weick (1984) specify managers at higher levels must participate in strategic planning meetings with one another to enact the environment in which they are embedded, while McPhee and Poole (2001) emphasise the need to have innovative solution processes. This role mandates direct and ongoing communication (Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Marting, 1969). MacLeod, Scriven, and Wayne (1992) reported employees at similar hierarchical levels were more likely to have frequent interaction. Martin (1992) discussed how tensions often develop between those at different hierarchical levels, while Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) analysed how doctors (high hierarchical level) and nurses (low hierarchical level) developed different understandings. These findings suggest the second hypothesis of this study, which is that *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they are at the same hierarchical level.*

Communication ties

Communication is a critical means through which employees develop interpretations and meanings of organisational events (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986). Convergence theory (Rogers and Kincaid, 1981) predicts that actors in social networks who are linked with one another will be more likely to develop similar attitudes and interpretations. Burt (1980) and Kilduff and Tsai (2003) discuss how direct ties allow interaction to occur. This exposure to similar information environments results in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours converging, or becoming more similar (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990). Several empirical studies (e.g., Carley, 1991; Hartman & Johnson, 1989) have demonstrated this effect. Convergence theory suggests the third hypothesis, which is that *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they communicate with each other.*

Communication with similar others

Several researchers (Burt, 1980, 1987; Lorrain & White, 1971; Wasserman & Faust, 1994) define two employees as being structurally equivalent when they have communication ties to similar others. For instance, two salespeople in an insurance firm may work for the same supervisor and interact with the same administrative support staff, but have not direct ties to each other. Since they have similar relations with others in the network, they have exposure to similar information environments. Thus, convergence in perceptions occurs. Carley (1986) found

structurally equivalent students were more likely to have similar interpretations of the word tutor, while Contractor, Eisenberg, and Monge (1999) reported equivalent employees were more likely to have similar interpretations of their organisation's mission. These results suggest the fourth hypothesis, which is that *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they communicate with similar others in the organisation.*

Proximity

Two organisational members are more spatially proximate if they are located physically close to one another. Proximity influences the emergence of interpretations through the mechanism of exposure, which incorporates aspects of both formal and informal structure. Several studies have demonstrated employees who are spatially proximate are more likely to communicate with one another (e.g., Allen, 1978; Monge, Rothman, Eisenberg, Miller, & Kristie, 1985; Zahn, 1991). Given that an employees' physical location is often formally assigned to them, proximity reflects formal structure. Further, two employees who are spatially proximate are more likely to be exposed to the same indirect cues concerning mission from the environment. For example, an organisation's formal mission may encourage participation by all employees, but in practice a manager may keep his or her door open, but actively discourage any visitors. Such indirect cues reflect informal processes. These influences suggest the fifth hypothesis, which is *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they are spatially proximate.*

Similar tenure

Employees who have been in the organisation for similar periods of time have been exposed to similar critical organisational events. Jablin (1987, 2001) discusses how upon first joining an organisation, employees undergo a socialisation process. The process has been conceptualised as occurring in three stages (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2002). During the anticipatory stage, employees gather information from a variety of sources prior to entering the organisation, and develop expectations concerning their upcoming experiences. During the assimilation stage, employees spend time in the organisation and develop an understanding of the organisation's culture. Such interpretations will tend to be stable until critical events (Albert & Whetten, 1985) or turning points (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2002) occur. Kramer (1993a, 1993b, 1995) empirically demonstrates how employees undergo an additional socialisation process after a critical organisational event, which may result in changing interpretations of mission. Employees who have similar tenure have been present for similar critical events, suggesting hypothesis six, which is *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they have been in the organisation for similar lengths of time.*

Gender

Eisenberg and Goodall (2002) summarise how research grounded in feminist approaches has demonstrated that men and women tend to view the world differently, or that men and women are treated in systematically different ways. Helgeson (1990) reported men tend to view organisations as hierarchical structures, while women view organisations as webs or networks of relationships. Calas and Smircich (1996) found women tend to view competition as 'doing excellently' together, while men view it as 'excelling over' others. Together, these results demonstrate systematic differences in men's and women's interpretations of organisational issues, suggesting hypothesis seven, which is *employees i and j will be more likely to have similar interpretations of the mission of their organisation if they are both the same gender.*

Methods

The following sections describe the study that examines these hypotheses.

Participating organisation

The participating organisation is the public works division of a military base of approximately 35,000 located in the southern United States (hereafter PPS). At the time of this study, all the employees of PPS were civilians, though many were retired military personnel. PPS is responsible for all aspects of maintenance, development, and planning associated with the physical infrastructure of the base. PPS is divided into five departments, based on function. Public Property Support Administration coordinates the efforts of other PPS departments and represents PPS's interests to the remainder of the base. Engineering Plans and Services is responsible for supporting base activities from an engineering perspective. Facilities Management provides financial support functions to the remainder of PPS. Installation Housing ensures soldiers and their families have adequate accommodations. Environmental Natural Resources Management Office is charged with assuring the activities on the base are within federal, state, and local environmental guidelines.

At the time of data collection, PPS has 66 employees. The average tenure was 10.5 years, with a standard deviation of 7.18 and a range from one month to 30 years. Of the employees, 48 were male. All employees participated, for a 100% response rate.

Procedures

The data analysed in this study was collected as part of a four year National Science Foundation funded project. An interdisciplinary team composed of researchers in organisational communication, computer science, and engineering partnered with PPS to help develop a technological infrastructure appropriate for supporting their work processes. Mission data was collected to help inform discussions of the priorities of PPS. Over the period of the project, members of the research team visited PPS 15 times. Given the length and intensity of the partnership, PPS members were willing participants.

For the data in this study, each respondent participated in a private structured interview that lasted approximately one hour. Respondents were given a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed confidentiality of responses. Respondents were then given a copy of the survey, and responded orally while the researcher recorded responses. Both respondents and researchers requested clarifications when needed.

Instrumentation

Dependent variable

Each respondent was asked to describe the mission of PPS (defined as the purpose, strategy, values, and behavioural standards of the organisation). After the respondent completed his/her initial response, the researcher asked whether 'there was anything else you would like to add.' This approach was taken for two reasons. First, it ensures consistent procedures were followed by all interviewers, helping to control for potential biases in responses. Second, this method was an attempt to strike a balance between the need for informative and complete responses from participants and the need to avoid inadvertently prompting participants to provide responses that were not salient to them. Surveyors recorded responses.

Responses were coded using the following procedures. Coding categories were developed through a variation of the steps described by Lofland and Lofland (1995). First, the responses of all participants were listed. Second, two separate researchers independently examined the responses, looking for commonalities among all of the items on the list. Common items were then collapsed into categories. Third, the two researchers compared category schemes and resolved any discrepancies. The two researchers then independently coded all responses for these categories.

Reliability was then calculated. Since the average reliability for all categories was above 0.70, the two coders met and reached consensus on all discrepancies. The final codes were organised into a people-code matrix, where each

row represented an individual employee and each column represented a coding category. *Ij* equaled one if person *i* reported code *j* as part of his/her interpretation of the organisation's mission. The people-code matrix was post multiplied by its transpose, to give an 'n by n' matrix where cell *ij* equaled the number of times *i*'s and *j*'s interpretations shared the same theme. The following formula specified by Contractor, Monge, and Eisenberg (1999) was used to calculate the strength of the semantic link between each dyad:

$$S_{ij} = T / (U + V - T)$$

S_{ij} equals the strength of the semantic link, U indicates the categories that member *i*'s interpretations were coded into, V indicates the categories that member *j*'s interpretations were coded into, and T indicates categories shared by both *i* and *j*. This provides the ratio of number of interpretations shared by *i* and *j* to the total number of interpretations offered by both *i* and *j*. A zero indicates *i*'s and *j*'s interpretations did not fall into any common categories; a one indicates *i* and *j* shared all their interpretations. *Ij* in the resultant semantic network equaled the level of sharing between *i*'s and *j*'s interpretations.

Independent variables

The following section describes how the independent variables of work group membership, hierarchical level, communication, structural equivalence, proximity, tenure, and gender were operationalised.

Functional work group membership. Functional work group was identified using an organisational chart developed by PPS. The accuracy of these groups was established by having the head of PPS verify that the organisational chart was an accurate representation of functional teams. A matrix was created where cell *ij* equaled one if *i* and *j* were in the same functional group (otherwise zero was entered).

Hierarchical level. Respondents were coded for their appropriate hierarchical level, where 1 = support staff/technician, 2 = specialist/engineer, 3 = team leader, 4 = area chief, and 5 = division chief. The specific levels were identified from each member's job description. The head of PPS reviewed the codes to verify their accuracy. A matrix was created where cell *ij* equaled one if *i* and *j* were at the same hierarchical level (otherwise zero was entered).

Communication. Respondents were provided with the current roster of PPS. Respondents read each name, and reported any task related communication with him/her during the past two months. Communication was defined as "conversations in person, in meetings, by phone, via electronic mail, or by memoranda." Respondents estimated the amount of communication per week. An 'n by n' asymmetric matrix was created, where cell *ij* equaled the number of minutes per week *i* reported communicating with *j*.

Structural equivalence. Burt (1980, 1987) defined the Euclidean distance measure of structural equivalence, which provides an index of the similarity in any two employees' communication patterns. If *i* and *j* are structurally equivalent, the entries in their respective rows and columns of the communication matrix will be identical, and their Euclidean distance will be zero. To the extent *i* and *j* are not structurally equivalent, the entries in their rows and columns will differ, and the Euclidean distance between them will be large.

Proximity. During one site visit, a member of the research team developed a series of diagrams indicating where each respective employee's desk was located. Using this information, a proximity matrix was developed where cell *ij* equaled three if *i* and *j* were in the same office, cell *ij* equaled two if *i* and *j* were in adjacent offices, cell *ij* equaled one if *i* and *j* were in the same building, and *ij* equaled zero if otherwise.

Tenure. Respondents were asked the year and month they joined the organisation. Tenure was calculated as the number of years and percentage of months an employee had been in the organisation. This vector was transformed into a symmetric matrix, where cell *ij* equaled

the absolute difference between *i*'s tenure and *j*'s tenure. For example, employee A had one year of tenure, B had four years of tenure, and C had 20 years of tenure. The absolute difference between A and B is three years, between A and C is 19 years, and between B and C is 16 years. Lower numbers in the cells of this matrix indicate employees *i* and *j* had been in the organisation for similar lengths of time.

Gender. The gender of each respondent was noted during the interview. A matrix was created where cell *ij* equaled one if *i* and *j* were the same gender (otherwise zero was entered).

Analysis

Hypotheses were tested using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP), a nonparametric technique developed to facilitate significance tests for social network data (Krackhardt, 1987; 1988). Independence assumptions are not tenable for network data (if *i* reports communicating with *j* it is more likely *j* will also report communicating with *i*), making parametric statistics inappropriate. The UCINET program, as described by Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman (1996), was used to facilitate all analysis.

QAP analysis uses two steps. First, it computes the appropriate statistics (either Pearson's correlation coefficient or a standard multiple regression) across corresponding cells of the dependent and independent matrices. Second, it randomly permutes the rows and columns of the dependent matrix, re-computes the correlation or regression, and stores the result. The second step is repeated thousands of times in order to compute a distribution appropriate for testing the specific association. The statistic calculated in step one is compared to the distribution. For the correlation analysis, if less than 5% of the random correlations are the same size or larger than the initial correlation, this indicates statistical significance at the .05 level. For the regression analysis, the R-square and each coefficient are compared to the respective distributions. If less than 5% of the random coefficients are as large as the coefficients calculated in step one, this indicates statistical significance at the .05 level. Similarly, if less than 5% of the random R-squares are as large as the R-square calculated in step one, this indicates a significant model fit at the .05 level. QAP correlations were calculated between all the variables. Hypotheses were tested with an MRQAP model, where the dependent semantic network of similarity in interpretations of organisational mission was regressed on the seven independent variable matrices.

Results

Table 1 summarises the results of the QAP correlation analysis. Functional work group ($r = .226$), communication ($r = .163$), structural equivalence ($r = -.078$), and proximity ($r = .280$) were all significantly associated with shared interpretations at the zero order level. Table 2 summarises the results of the regression analysis. The model was significant ($R^2 = .08$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis one predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations of mission if they were members of the same functional work group. This hypothesis was supported ($b = .05$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis two predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations of mission if they were at the same hierarchical level. This hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis three predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations if they had a communication tie. This hypothesis was supported ($b = .01$, $P < .05$). Hypothesis four predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations if they communicated with similar others. This hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis five predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations of mission if they were proximate. This hypothesis was supported ($b = .08$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis six predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations of mission if they had been members of the organisation for similar lengths of time. This hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis seven predicted *i* and *j* would be more likely to share interpretations of mission if they were the same gender. This hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

Organisations of all types have developed and implemented mission statements, often with limited success. This study utilises a strategy that complements the extant research on mission, using semantic network analysis to facilitate the simultaneous examination of mechanisms explaining patterns in employees' shared interpretations of their organisation's mission. Three factors were found to influence the likelihood of shared interpretations. First, employees who were in the same work group were more likely to have similar interpretations of mission, suggesting interdependency of task is important. Second, employees who communicated with one another were more likely to have similar interpretations, providing evidence for a convergence effect. Third, employees who were spatially proximate were more likely to have shared interpretations. Contrary to expectations, employees who were at the same level of the hierarchy, who communicated with similar others, and who had similar tenure and the same gender were no more likely to share interpretations.

Table 1: QAP Correlations

	Shared Interpret a-tions of Mission	Same Functnl Work Group	Same Hier. Level	Comm. Tie	Comm. with Similar Others	Spatial Proxmty	Similar Tenure	Same Gen-der
Shared Interpreta-tions of Mission	1.0	0.226**	0.009	0.163**	-0.078*	0.280**	-0.022	0.008
Same Functional Work Group		1.0	0.058*	0.410**	-0.354**	0.673**	-0.033	0.002
Same Hierarchical Level			1.0	0.043	0.026	0.107**	0.004	0.009
Comm. Tie				1.0	-0.044	0.436**	0.025	0.022
Comm. with Similar Others					1.0	-0.184**	0.056	0.010
Spatial Proximity						1.0	-0.016	0.003
Similar Tenure							1.0	-0.042
Same Gender								1.0

** $p < .01$
* $p < .05$

Table 2: Results of QAP Regression

	B	β
Intercept	0.90	0
Same Functional Work Group	0.05	0.08*
Same Hierarchical Level	-0.01	-0.01
Communication	0.01	0.04*
Communication with Similar Others	-0.01	-0.01
Spatial Proximity	0.08	0.25*
Similar Tenure	0.04	0.04
Same Gender	-0.00	-0.01

R2 = .08 ($p < .001$)
* $p < .05$

These results are consistent with previous research reported by Fairhurst et al. (1997), who convincingly argued and provided empirical evidence that managers do in fact attempt to manage the meanings employees assign to the mission of their organisation. This study provides more specific guidance, indicating that managers need to pay special attention to both the formal factor of work group membership and the informal factor of emergent communication when developing strategies on how to best frame these issues for employees.

Attempts to establish a consistent, direct causal link between any given employee's perceptions of mission and his/her behaviours (e.g., decision making) are likely to fail. Rather, perceptions of mission serve as frames for both interpreting events and future communicative activity. Whether such perceptions are consistent with or contrary to a mission statement or the desires of strategic decision makers is a critical issue for managers at all levels to understand. The recent collapse of ENRON provides a case in point. A formal mission statement would not have specified that employees should engage in unethical/illegal behaviour. Yet, some employees certainly perceived such behaviours as the true mission of the company, and adapted accordingly. Semantic network analysis provides a means for assessing whether such discrepancies exist in a given context, and what factors influence the emergent patterns.

This study has several limitations, which are also directions for future research. First, the study was cross-sectional. Many scholars (e.g. Martin, 1992; Schultz, 1994; Weick, 1995) have discussed how interpretations may change over time from a sense-making process. Second, few studies have systematically analysed the best ways to communicate and implement a mission. For example, as Eisenberg (1984) has argued, should organisations communicate an ambiguous mission to employees, and let them interpret it? Or, as Fairhurst et al. (1997) have suggested, should management actively manage the meaning of the mission? What channel should be used for communicating a mission statement? Is it better to use videotapes and assure all employees view the same consistent message, or is it better to have managers give presentations? These types of issues need to be examined. A third limitation in this study was that the participating organisation was a bureaucracy. While bureaucracies continue to exist in large numbers (including most academic institutions), future research should examine the generalisability of these results to newer organisational forms.

Finally, while it is true that semantic network analysis uses the reported perceptions of employees as initial building blocks, this technique lacks the depth of insight afforded by other types of methods. Common understanding of important issues such as mission may facilitate coordination processes within an organisation, but this approach is inappropriate

for examining the empirical implications of other conceptual approaches. Quinn and Dutton (2005) conceptualise conversational dynamics as a source of energy driving coordination processes, and articulate how speech acts are formed into narrative sequences to facilitate the actual coordination process. Similarly, Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor (2004) argue that coordination occurs through interactive exchanges, and that the recursive quality of language is critical for dealing with the simultaneously unitary and pluralistic realities of organisational life. These explanations of coordination are grounded in the specific exchanges that occur within organisations (Orlikowski, 2002). In essence, there is a trade-off. In the semantic network approach taken in this study, conceptual depth and deep understanding are traded for simultaneous testing of multiple mechanisms and the inclusion of all organisational members. Hopefully, the variety of approaches will be used to complement each other.

Research on employees' interpretations of their organisation's mission is in its infancy. The vast majority of current research and theorising is biased towards the viewpoint of upper management. The roles and interpretations of all other employees are largely ignored. Given the current lacklustre success of mission statements, perhaps future emphasis on those who actually use the statements is warranted. This study provides a first step in this direction.

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