Is Prosocial Motivation Enough? Mission Drift of Employees in Chinese Nonprofits

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Abstract. Mission drift is a common phenomenon in non-profits. However, related studies on employees remain scant. In this study, we combine mission drift and employees' turnover intention literature, and investigate mission drift at employee level based on interviews in the context of six nonprofits in China. The results show that: (1) employees who choose to work in nonprofits have a strong sense of prosocial mission; (2) employees believe that organizations have some defects, which are inconsistent with their own image of prosocial mission; (3) employees' mission drift exists in nonprofits, which may lead to their high turnover intention. Taken together, we believe mission drift deserves our future research attention.

Keywords: employees; mission drift; nonprofits; content analysis; China.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of China's economy and the needs of social transformation, social organizations have entered a period of rapid development. As of January 2021, the number of social organizations in China has exceeded 900,000 [1]. Among them, the number of nonprofits represented by charitable organizations has reached 9,480 by the end of 2020, with a net asset scale of nearly 200 billion yuan [2]. In practice, with the characteristics of "altruism" and "voluntariness", nonprofits actively contribute to social agendas such as poverty alleviation, rural revitalization, energy conservation and emission reduction, and promoting universal education. However, while nonprofits are booming, there are also perplexing problems around them, such as insufficient fund-raising ability [3], poor self-appreciation ability [4], lack of talents [5], poor information disclosure [6], decline in credibility [7], etc. Among them, the brain drain problem of organizations has become an important factor hindering their growth, and leading to unqualified, low operation efficiency [8]. Therefore, how to solve the personnel dilemma has become an important issue for nonprofits currently.

In this study, we argue that the problems may be originated from employees' personal mission drift. Specifically, employees who join the nonprofits have more sense of personal altruistic mission, which shapes their prosocial image. Nevertheless, there are inconsistencies between employees' personal image and actual behavior, referred to personal mission drift in our study. Mission drift may drain employees'psychological resources and increase their possibility of leaving the organization. While it is common in nonprofits, the current literature on nonprofits does not have a clear definition, nor does it provide a detailed exploration of its influence on employees. With the current study, we investigate whether employees'mission drift exists in non-profits, and whether it may increase the possibility of their turnover.

2. Literature review

2.1 Research on employees' turnover in nonprofits

Nonprofits are the third sectors different from governments and enterprises [9,10,11]. In nonprofits, high turnover rate and lack of talents are key issues, which reduce operation efficiency and service quality [5].

In view of the urgency and importance of human resource management in nonprofits, some scholars began to study the factors affecting the turnover intention of employees in nonprofits. For example, Ke et al. (2018) [12] believe that there is a positive relationship between psychological contract violation and turnover intention. Chen et al. (2019) [13] find that the relative deprivation of employees exists in nonprofits and emotional exhaustion partially transmits the negative effect of employee deprivation on turnover intention.

In general, the existing studies have discussed the factors affecting the turnover intention of employees in nonprofits from the aspects of employees' psychological factors, but we believe that employees' sense of mission is also relevant. Employees in nonprofits have an obvious sense of mission of serving the public, compared with those in for-profit organizations [8,14]. And such sense of mission is one of the driving forces for them to join nonprofits and give public services. When this driving force disappears or changes (that is, mission drift), employees are very likely to leave the organization. To identify such process, we need to resort to qualitative methods such as interviews.

2.2 Research on employees' mission drift

The research of mission drift originated from the organizational level. Grimes et al (2019) [15] define mission as a social cognitive bridge between an organization's image and its actions. Mission conveys why an organization should exist and how it should act. Further, they believe that with the passage of time and the progress of organizational action, the public perceives that there is a discontinuity or inconsistency between an organization's actions and its image. And this inconsistency is called mission drift. Scholars think that mission drift is more likely to occur in financial organizations with prosocial attributes. For example, Xing Yan (2015) [16] believes that there is a contradiction between MFIs business sustainability and public poverty reduction goals, which makes organizations prone to mission drift.

Although mission drift has been widely studied at the organizational level, the research on mission drift at the employee level needs to be further supplemented. We think that the mission drift of employees means that when the actual behavior of employees is inconsistent with their image, this inconsistency is mission drift. It is meaningful and necessary to explore the problem of employees' mission drift in organizations, especially nonprofits. On the one hand, the sense of mission is closely related to these employees. First, when employees choose to join nonprofits rather than for-profit enterprises, it means that employees agree with the prosocial mission of the organization. Second, the sense of mission shapes the prosocial and altruistic professional image of non-profit organization employees in front of the public. On the other hand, the change of employees' mission may affect employees' work enthusiasm, organizational loyalty, and turnover intention. So, we hold that mission drift is an important factor affecting employees' turnover in nonprofits.

3. Study design

In order to deeply explore whether there is mission drift among employees in nonprofits, we mainly adopt the methods of interview and content analysis. The reasons for adopting these research methods are that the interview can help capture the novel and deep information, and improve the reliability and validity of research findings. Meanwhile, content analysis is helpful to clarify the respondents' answer logic. Therefore, we first conducted face-to-face interviews with

employees one by one, and then used content analysis to analyze the interview contents of respondents.

3.1 Interview design

To learn about whether individual mission drift occurs in nonprofits, we designed several related questions, such as: "why did you work in nonprofits?", "Is the work in the nonprofits consistent with your expectations?", "What problems do you think exist in your organization and industry?" etc. Through these in-depth interviews, we obtained the first-hand information about mission drift of non-profit organization employees, which laid a solid foundation for the subsequent content analysis.

3.2 Study object

We selected 23 staffs from six nonprofits in Shenzhen as participants. These organizations are well-known in children's medical treatment, caring for marginalized groups, environmental protection, community public welfare, cultural exchange, and non-profit organization training. The interviewees are widely distributed in terms of job position, age, gender, and years of employment.

3.3 Analysis of interview data

Scholars often use content analysis as the analysis method of interview data. To follow other scholars [17], we use this method and take the paragraph as the minimum unit.

3.4 Construction of coding table

After carefully sorting out the interview data, we summarize two kinds of reasons why employees enter nonprofits, which are prosocial reasons and non-prosocial reasons. Following Ke et al. (2014) [18], we summarize three types of employees' existing behaviors: behaviors at the individual, team, and organizational levels. However, we mainly focus on "reasons related to prosociality" and "behaviors at the individual level" to study the manifestation of employees' mission drift in the non-profit organizations. The reasons and behaviors are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 standard coding structure of mission drift manifestations of employees in nonprofits

	Code 1: the reason why employees enter nonprofits
	Prosocial reasons
101	They think the organization's services are valuable
102	They are keen on public welfare
103	They like the working environment or atmosphere
	Non-prosocial reasons
104	Major and work are related
105	They are recommended by friends or elders
106	Previous jobs are related to the organization.
107	The pressure in the organization is low.
108	Work is stable.
109	The work is not limited to age.
	Code 2 Existing behaviors of employees
	At the individual level
201	Complain about low pay
202	Care about the doubts of the public
203	Worry about small promotion space
204	Complain about multiple jobs
205	Complain about the intensity of overtime
	At the team level
206	Weak financial awareness of team members
207	Disharmonious employee relations
208	Less cross organizational communication
	At the organizational level
209	Lack of training
210	High turnover rate
211	Poor organization's operation mechanism
212	Lack of human resource management
213	Problems existing in project designing
214	Unbalanced staff structure
215	Weak fund-raising ability
216	Lack of governments' support

(Source: We construct the coding table based on the interview text)

4. Content analysis results

4.1 Reliability and validity verification

The reliability of content analysis is generally derived from the consistency of the coders, which is greater than 0.9. In order to verify the validity of content analysis, two professors, one focusing on the field of public welfare and charity, and one studying human resource management, were invited to evaluate the content validity. In addition, the training and precoding of coders before formal coding also ensure the content validity of this study. Finally, the content validity coefficient (CVR) is 1.

4.2 Analytical results

In Table 2a, "prosocial reasons" account for 45.00% of the total reasons for employees entering nonprofits, indicating that the number of employees entering the organization for this reason is large and our study has research significance. Among the prosocial reasons, keenness on public welfare, valuable service, and working atmosphere are the top three factors. Overall, these employees have a strong sense of altruism and mission to serve the society.

Table2 analytical results

Table 2a reasons for employees to enter the non-profit organization		
Reason	Frequency	Proportion in total frequency
Prosocial reasons	18	45.00%
They think the organization's services are valuable	7	38.89%
They are keen on public welfare	8	44.44%
They like the working environment or atmosphere	3	16.67%
Non-prosocial reasons	22	55.00%
Table 2b problems existing in the industry or organization		
Existing behaviors of employees	Frequency	Proportion in total frequency
At the individual level	25	37.88%
Complain about low pay	11	44.00%
Care about the doubts of the public	5	20.00%
Worry about small promotion space	3	12.00%
Complain about multiple jobs	4	16.00%
Complain about the intensity of overtime	2	8.00%
At the team level	3	4.55%
At the organizational level	38	57.57%
Table 2c behaviors of employees who "think the service of the organization is very valuable" and enter the organization		
Complain about low pay	100.00%	
Care about the doubts of the public	28.57%	
Worry about small promotion space	28.57%	
Complain about multiple jobs	28.57%	
Complain about the intensity of overtime	14.29%	
Table 2d behaviors of employees who "are keen on public welfare" and enter the organization		
Complain about low pay	65.50%	
Complain about multiple jobs	37.50%	
Worry about small promotion space	28.57%	
Care about the doubts of the public	25.00%	
Complain about the intensity of overtime	25.00%	
Table 2e behaviors of employees who "like the working atmosphere or environment" and enter the organization		
Complain about low pay	100.00%	
Care about the doubts of the public	66.67%	
Worry about small promotion space	33.33%	

Among the behaviors of employees at the personal level (as shown in Table 2b), "complaining about low salary" is the most common, accounting for 44.00% of the total frequency; followed by "caring about the doubts of the public", accounting for 20.00%. Worrying about "small promotion space", "multiple jobs" and "intensity of overtime" are also mentioned. This level of behavior holds 37.88% of the total number of behaviors, and so the proportion is not small. Combined with the interview content, we find that after entering the organization, employees begin to pay attention to the problems that will affect themselves.

Based on the above tables 2a and 2b, we further explore whether there is employees' mission drift in the interviewed nonprofits. Among the employees who "think the service of the organization is valuable" and enter the nonprofits (as shown in Table 2c), all employees complain about "low salary", and 28.57% of them care about "the doubt of the public", "small promotion space" and "multiple jobs". Such behaviors are inconsistent with the initial images, which convey their willingness to serve the society. It is one of the concrete manifestations of mission drift. In the interview, such examples include:

An employee thinks that the organizational service is meaningful. But she also mentions that the organization may have a little advantage in salary at first, and now it doesn't have it. Besides the organization is small and there are many jobs need doing.

In comparison, it can be seen from table 2d that 62.50% of the employees, who enter the non-profit organization because they "are keen on public welfare", complain about "low salary". 37.50% of them mention the distress of "doing multiple jobs". The above behaviors are different from the altruistic image reflected by employees' enthusiasm for public welfare, which is one of the specific manifestations of mission drift. In the interview, the employee states as follows:

An employee is keen on public welfare, but still feels that he is under great pressure to undertake financial, personnel and comprehensive management at the same time.

Moreover, all employees who enter the organization because they "like the working atmosphere or environment" (see Table 2e) complain about "low salary". And 66.67% care about "the doubts of the public". This is also in contradiction with the prosocial and altruistic nature initially shown by employees, which is one of the specific manifestations of employees' mission drift. Examples include:

An employee likes the helpful atmosphere in the organization, but believes that the lack of understanding of the organization in public has limited the development of the organization.

To sum up, the behavior of employees is inconsistent with their initial mission or the image perceived by the public (see Fig 1 for details). Besides, we learn that some employees with mission drift have had a clear turnover intention, such as:

An employee works in a non-profit organization because she loves public welfare, but complains that factors such as low salary, high overtime intensity and small promotion space have made her tired and have no hope for the organization.
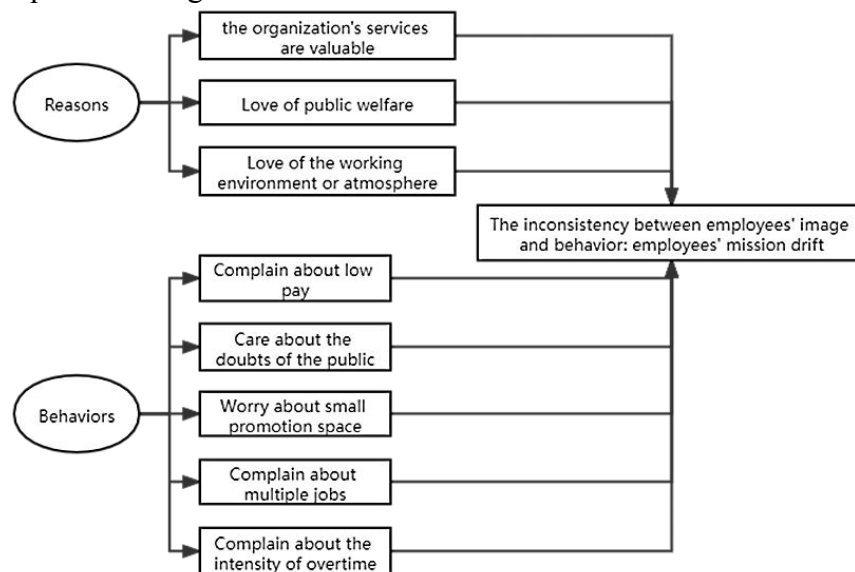
Fig 1 manifestations of employees' mission drift

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study finds that employees' mission drift exists in nonprofits in China. Although most employees have a strong sense of prosocial and altruistic mission, they are concerned about problems including low salary, external doubts, overtime, multiple job responsibilities, and limited promotion space, which result in their mission drift.

Our findings have made some contributions. First, we enrich the research on human resource management of nonprofits employees. The inconsistency associated with their mission drift indicates the contradiction in their psychological level, which further consumes their own psychological resources and enhances their willingness to leave. It is unsurprising as prosocial

behavior enhances personal selfishness to some extent [19]. In other words, employees expect to obtain self-benefit and personal development while providing help and services to the society. Second, we extend the study of mission drift at the micro level. Such drift at the individual level is as important as that at the organizational level, which provides a basis and reference for subsequent cross-level research. Third, we argue that managers should consider the mission direction of employees when formulating human resources practices. They can take preventive actions by giving non-material incentives, optimizing personnel promotion channels, and enhancing organizational mission spillover effect.

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