Mission (Im)possible?
Determining Organizational Ideology by Examining
Mission Statements

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Introduction[1]

This paper is part of a larger project investigating the relative roles of ideology and gender composition in determining organizational structure and behavior. The project's genesis arose from a study by Meinhard and Foster (2003) that found that Canadian women's voluntary organizations (WVOs) differed from gender-neutral and men's organizations on many different measures. Women's organizations were less likely to adopt a business orientation or pursue new revenue strategies, but were more likely to collaborate with other organizations and more likely to downsize. They also tended to be more pessimistic in their outlook and engaged in more advocacy and political action. Meinhard and Foster (2003) also found that among women's organizations, those that were members of the Canadian National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), an umbrella organization for feminist groups, were more extreme in their differences. In other words, although both NAC and non-NAC organizations differed significantly from gender-neutral organizations, NAC organizations differed the most.

These intriguing findings formed the basis for the main question in this research. To what extent does a feminist organizational ideology influence organizational behavior over and above behavioural differences accounted for by gender composition? The 2003 study did not measure organizational ideology. It assumed a feminist ideology by proxy for organizations belonging to NAC and the lack of feminist ideology for non-NAC groups. The purpose of this study is to identify WVOs with feminist ideologies by measuring feminist organizational ideology directly, and then to compare their behaviour to WVOs that do not ascribe to the feminist ideology.

Methodologically, our aim was to develop a questionnaire that would measure feminist ideology. We approached the task by: a) reviewing the literature on feminism and feminist ideology, b) reviewing the literature on feminist organizations and their distinguishing features, and c) examining existing scales measuring feminist values and outlook. When we got down to the details of generating questions to determine ideological or gender-based characteristics we found we had embarked on a slippery terrain. Following the discursive literature on women and organizations, we found it difficult to ascertain "women's characteristics" and feminism without stereotyping gender binaries as we explain in the literature review below. Despite these difficulties, we developed a 100 item questionnaire that examined organizational characteristics (13 items) organizational attitudes and values reflecting feminist ideology (34 items), and organizational activities and practices (53 items) and pretested it on eight organizations; some known to be feminist and others that were gender-neutral. Some questionnaires were completed by males and some by females.

Even before we began the pretesting, we realized that there were two significant problems with this approach. The first was the difficulty in controlling the possibility of drift or projection of respondents' personal opinions and attitudes to those of the organization for which they were responding. Even though we tried to mitigate this by phrasing the questions in such a way as to constantly remind respondents that they were responding for the organization, and not for themselves, there is really no way of guaranteeing that the responses were indeed reflective of the organization and not merely the individual. The second problem, related to the first is that even if all organizational members hold feminist values, the organization itself may not have a feminist ideology. And yet, the respondent may attribute the consensus position of organizational members as indicating a feminist ideology. For example, all the members of a women's research organization may be feminists, and yet the organization itself is involved in work that has no bearing on feminist issues or even on women. Again, we tried to control for this through the phrasing of questions and detailed questions about the mandate and purpose of the organization.

What we were not prepared for was the utter failure of the questionnaire to differentiate between the four feminist organizations and four non-feminist and non-women's organizations in our pretest sample. While this may have been a reflection of a poorly designed questionnaire, we were skeptical that this was the case since we included questions that had been used in validated questionnaires. After discussing the questionnaire with two of the respondents, it became clear that many of the values expressed in the questionnaire that were once the hallmark of feminist ideology, are now firmly ensconced as part of mainstream values. This begged the question: Can we still say that there is a difference between feminist and women's organizations considering that feminist values are the norm and that there is no longer a coherent feminist movement?

Faced with these two problems – respondent bias and failure to differentiate- we re-examined our original premises and realized that the questionnaire-survey route may not have been the correct one. Therefore, instead of resuscitating the questionnaire, we decided to try a different methodology to differentiate between feminist and non-feminist organizations: content analyzing organizational mission/vision statements.

The literature overwhelmingly indicates that organizational beliefs and practices manifest in everyday discourse and illustrates the importance of keywords to differentiate organizational meanings. In order to separate feminist from the women's/feminine we had to first create a definition of feminism that would guide this research. This was a daunting task because the definition of feminism has changed significantly over time as the different goals of feminism were met or not met (as in the exclusion of woman of colour or Third World voices etc.), culminating in the enshrinement of women's equal rights in the Canadian Constitution. Feminism today is no longer about achieving equal

rights for men and women. The nature of social inequalities is far more complex as illustrated in the literature review below.

This paper proceeds as follows: First we describe the theoretical underpinnings that justify the use of mission statements as indicators of organizational ideology. Next, we explore the current issues in feminism culminating in a nominal definition of feminism and its operationalization to measure feminist ideology. We then describe the application of the methodology; and finally we demonstrate the validity of its use. In concluding we discuss our findings and the significance for understanding women's organizations and the need for future research

Organizational ideology

Ideology refers to a set of shared values, beliefs and norms that serve to "bind people together and help them make sense of their worlds" (Trice and Beyer, 1993: 33). In an organization, ideology serves as a guiding principle in the promotion of its interests, governing and justifying both the thoughts and actions of its members (Plamenatz, 1970; Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Rusaw, 2000). Because there is a conscious awareness and explicit acceptance of the organization's ideology (King, 1995), it provides the anchor that holds the various, often competing and conflicting interests, together (Plamenatz, 1970; King, 1995). Ideologies not only dictate internal behavior in organizations, they also guide organizations' responses to external problems (King, 1995).

Organizational ideology is often embedded in broader political, social and economic ideologies, e.g. right and left, conservative and liberal, capitalist and socialist. These would be manifested alongside managerial ideologies and may even determine the choice of managerial ideology (Simons & Ingram, 1997). Two common managerial ideologies are unitary and pluralist; the former views organizations as unitary entities wherein the members hold congruent interests and therefore conflict is rare, while the latter recognizes that there is a plurality of interests, some of which may be conflicting (Fox, 1966; Farnham & Pilmott, 1986; Horwitz, 1991). Organizations can also develop their own idiosyncratic ideologies through their institutionalized practices (Ven & Verelst, 2008).

Expressions of an organization's ideology can be found in its promotional materials, internal memos, and strategic plan. The most publicly visible expression of an organization's ideology is in its mission/vision/values statement (Swales & Rogers, 1995;Weiss & Piderit, 1999; Williams et al., 2005). And although the ideology might not be as explicitly stated as in the following example: "Our organization believes in a unified approach by all of our members in pursuing our interests within a capitalist framework", it is nevertheless discernable through statements that are synonymous with, and/or imply adherence to a particular word view. For example: "Together, our members strive to ensure that our organization is a leader in the field by increasing our market-

share and profits." Both of these statements, one explicit, one implicit, indicate a unitary managerial ideology embedded in a broader capitalist ideology.

Feminist organizational ideology

In order to be able to identify organizations with feminist ideologies by analyzing their mission/vision/values statements, we have to first define what feminism in an organization means and then generate a list of phrases that would clearly imply a feminist organizational ideology. We focused our investigation of the literature on feminism and feminist ideology to the organizational context. In general, we found two major trends in the literature. The first examines feminist organizations primarily from a structural perspective; the other views feminism in terms of a discourse on gender and ideology.

Structure

According to Feree and Martin, (1995) feminist organizations grew out of the feminist movement becoming the entities that mobilized and coordinated collective action. They are thus defined as "the places in which and the means through which the work of the feminist movement is done" (Feree and Martin, 1995:13). It was long held that one of the key identifying features of feminist organizations was their collectivist structure which was based on an ideological perspective that paradoxically expected members to "recognize their shared gender identity and unity, but at the same time strive to represent and express the actual diversity among individuals"(Desivilya and Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008: 892). The authors claim that this diversity of discourse leads to internal conflicts within the organization prompting them to consider creating a more formalized hierarchical structure. Organizational research conducted since the early days of the feminist movement lends support to Desivilya and Yassour-Borochowitzes observation. This body of research clearly dispels the notion that feminist organization is synonymous with collectivist structure, and that bureaucratic structure is antithetical to feminist organizations (e.g. Bordt, 1997; Feree & Martin, 1995; Handy et al., 2006; Metzendorf, 2005).

Bordt (1997) found that most of the women-led NGOs in her New York study exhibited a 'collectivist pragmatic,' a hybrid form of organization containing both bureaucratic and collectivist characteristics, and concluded that age and size are the only useful predictors of organization structure in non-profits. Handy and her colleagues (2006) set out to conduct a more detailed analysis of the relationship between feminist ideology and organizational structure before dismissing the connections between the two. The authors inverted Bordt's 'collectivist pragmatics' to 'pragmatic collectivist' because they felt this type resides more closely on the scale toward collectivist than bureaucratic. In their study of women's organizations in India the authors found that the majority of the organizations they interviewed defined themselves as feminists, yet in the typology set by the researchers, most of these organizations fell into the categories of hybrid structures.

The authors concluded that structural changes related to bureaucratization do not change the feminist essence of an organization (Handy et al., 2006:98).

The literature on the structure of feminist organizations overwhelming demonstrates that there is no simple correlation between the structure of feminist organizations and feminist ideology. Both internal and external pressure may lead an organization, regardless of its ideology, to shift from a collectivist to a more bureaucratic structure. Thus to determine whether or not an organization is feminist in ideology, one cannot look to its structure alone. On the contrary, as the second stream of literature on gender, ideology and discourse shows, the relationship between ideological beliefs and practices in organizations is far more complex.

Discourse

While Feree and Martin (1995) argue that feminist organizations are inherently related to the feminist movement, Mansbridge (1995) insists that the feminist movement is neither merely an aggregation of individuals nor organizations but is itself a discourse (27). The discourse perspective is applied not only at the movement level, but also at the organizational level, as illustrated by Ashcraft and Mumby, in their 2004 book *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization.* They suggest that the study of gender and organization is informed by four frames or perspectives: Frame 1 views gender difference as a binary opposition and treats gender as an identity feature engrained in a person's communication habits. Gender is considered in isolation from race, class, sexuality, organizational context and other sociopolitical variables, thus *essentializing* it. The authors reject this frame (p.7). Frame 2 no longer sees gender as *essentialized*, but rather as performed according to mutable social discourses; "gender difference as situated social scripts to which we hold one another accountable" (p.12). This frame sees the meaning of gender as negotiated through daily interactions. Frame 3 examines how ideology is produced through discourse, thus organizational forms like bureaucracy or feminist collectivism become institutionalized through the repetition of mundane interactions in the workplace (p.17). Finally, Frame 4 focuses on a societal narrative perspective, shifting its attention from communication *in* organization to communication about organizing, looking to discourses on work in the wider public arena (p.19).

Using the fourth frame (societal narrative) Ashcroft and Mumby (2004) illustrate how, despite a plethora of women pilots in WWII, discourses in popular culture, commercial aviation organizations and individual pilot experiences have worked over time to secure the state of the (white) male airline pilots as venerated professionals, vs. female hostess whose presence makes flying palatable and comfortable for the average person (130). Similarly, Ridgeway (2009:147) argues that gender is one of the primary frames with which we define self and other and that social relations depend on a shared way of categorizing identity (Ridgeway 147). According to her, the relevance of the gender frame in society intersects with the institutionalized rules and procedures

governing organizations/industries/professions, and thus influences career success and ultimately career choice. She points out, for example, that women do better in newer, flexibly structured biotech firms than in hierarchal research organizations such as pharmaceutical firms which have long been biased in favour of men in engineering and the physical sciences. Furthermore, in wealthy societies where material needs are generally met and self-expression is valued, gender stereotype has a more prominent effect on career choice (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Ridgeway (2009) concludes that the possibility to fully eliminate the hierarchy between men and women in societies that intensify their organization on the basis of gender difference is unlikely.

A focus on discourse also serves to pay attention to micro-practices within organizations. As Edley (2000) points out, these micro-practices are also influenced by gender stereotypes, even in women's organizations. For example, women in a women-run business used discursive essentializing, that is, emphasizing features that are stereotyped as female in order to negotiate power relations within the firm. Discursive essentializing was used to convert anger or dissent in the organization into expressions of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) or the emotional nature of women, in order to deflect conflict (Edley 293).

The pervasiveness of gender stereotyping in societal narrative, is evident in women's magazines as well. Exploring the connections between vocabulary and gender ideology in four US women's magazines (*Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Working Women* and *Ms.*), Marisol del-Teso-Craviotto (2006) reveals that the frequency and positions of words such as 'woman', 'man,' or 'work' in the articles reveal ideological differences between the magazines.[2] *Ms.*, for example frequently used the words 'woman' and 'work' in a social context whereas *Good Housekeeping* and *Cosmo* more often used these terms in individual contexts reflecting a more traditional approach, minimizing the social aspect of gender issues (2016-2017). Del-Teso-Craviotto also found that frequently used vocabulary tended to relate to particular semantic fields in each magazine, which in turn can contribute to the creation of particular gender ideologies (2017). She gives the example of 'family' in *Good Housekeeping* which appeared not only as focus of articles in the magazine but also in articles about other topics such as health, food, or famous women. The author concludes that it is not the frequency of terms that inform a certain ideology, but the context and placement of these terms and how they are used to create a particular discourse.

Definition of feminist ideology

The findings from the pretest of our questionnaire on feminist ideology and behaviour in organizations led us to conclude that ideas that were once considered feminist, such as equal pay for equal work, have diffused into normative organizational ideology as organizations known to be gender neutral and non-feminist responded positively to

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[2] The programs WordSmith Tools and Concord were used to do the discourse analysis.

believing in feminist values. Feminism has shifted from a grassroots mass movement with a clear mandate to attain women's enfranchisement and legal rights to a diffused, divided, depoliticized and institutionalized academic discipline (see Scott, 2004). What were once radical notions such as abortion rights, and equality for women have been attained in Canada on a legal level. Having achieved the enshrinement of women's equality in the Canadian Constitution, the feminist battle has now moved into the social and cultural realm, dealing with issues such as the subtleties of power in the workplace, dealing with the continued harassment of women, elevating women's self esteem, especially in disadvantaged groups and implementing existing laws. In short, feminism today is more about changing attitudes than changing laws.

Nominal definition

Because feminism "draws on, works closely with, and often is practically indistinguishable from other [activities] by women addressed to women's concerns" (Mansbridge, 1995:33), any definition of feminism must differentiate it from these other types of activities. According to Mansbridge (1995:33), the distinguishing feature of feminism is its goal of ending male domination in society. With this in mind, the following is our working definition:

> *A feminist organization is one that works towards correcting the power imbalances still prevalent in social and cultural contexts that continue to create systemic disadvantages to women.*

Operational definition

Using this definition as the basis for determining feminist ideology, we generated a list of phrases derived from the literature that would serve as our operational definition of the feminist ideology.

- "empowerment of women who are otherwise politically and economically disenfranchised" (Ashcraft and Mumby 51).
- "patriarchal power is a persistent feature of social structures" (Ashcraft and Mumby 56).
- "development of just, coercion-free social and institutional contexts (Ashcraft and Mumby 57).
- "efforts for reproductive rights, employment and pay equity, and the political representation of women at all levels; against battering, rape, and other forms of violence against women, to name a few" (Ferree and Martin 5).
- " a political agenda of ending women's oppression" (Ferree and Martin 5)
- "question authority, produce new elites, call into question dominant societal values, claim resources on behalf of women, and provide space and resources for feminists to live out altered visions of their lives." (Ferree and Martin 6).
- "ending male domination" (Ferree and Martin 33).

- (against) oppression, dominance, and authority (Handy et. al. 75)
- "Advocating for the rights of women" (Handy et. al. 91)
- "resolving the unmet needs of women: victimization, lack of power, and vulnerability of women to dominant individuals and to patriarchal social, political and economic systems" (Metzendorf 2)
- Caring for battered and raped women (Metzendorf 2)
- Direct uses of the word feminist and addressing gender differences

To summarize, all of these statements in one way or the other, address the power imbalance between men and women in society. Thus mission statements that include phrases that refer to one or more of the themes below would indicate that the organization has a feminist ideology.

- Feminist/gender
- Women's status/rights
- Battered women/domestic violence/rape/violence against women
- Reproductive rights/abortion
- Male/patriarchal oppression/domination/inequality/equality
- Consciousness/empowerment of women

Methodology

Internet searches were used to locate women's organizations. For this pilot study, only organizations with the following information were included: the name of the organizational leader, a listing of the members of the board, and inclusion of the mission/vision/values statements on their website. To be classified as a WVO, the organizations had to meet two criteria: 1) a women in the top position, e.g. president, executive director (ED), chief executive officer (CEO), executive vice president (equivalent ED), or executive coordinator; and 2) a board with at least two thirds of the directors women. Sixty-five organizations meeting these criteria were selected and their mission statements were analyzed and rated by two raters, using the phrases above as a guideline for classification. The relevant phrases for making their decisions were copied beside the organization's name.

All the organizations were then contacted either by phone or by e-mail in order to validate our classifications. Following Handy, et al. we decided that the best way to determine the validity of our content analysis is to ask the respondent outright whether their organization was a feminist organization. We actually asked four questions as listed below:

1. Would you consider your organization to be a feminist organization?
2. Is your executive director a woman?
3. How many women on your board? Men?
4. Would you be willing to participate in a longer on-line survey?

The overall response rate was 30%, giving us a sub-sample of twenty out of sixty- five organizations for our survey.

Results

Of the 65 content analyses there were 7 disagreements between the raters indicating that there was an 89% inter-rater agreement. Twelve organizations were placed in the feminist category, 7 in a category called "maybe feminist" and 39 in the "non-feminist" category. Of the seven disagreements, only one was a "large disagreement" with one rater categorizing an organization as feminist and the other as not feminist. Three were between feminist and maybe feminist and three were between maybe feminist and not feminist. None of these seven organizations responded to our mini-survey, so we are not able to confirm which rating was the correct one.

Table 1 presents the validity findings. Eight of the twelve organizations categorized as feminist responded to the mini-survey and all eight were correctly identified. Only two out of seven organizations from the "maybe" category responded and they were split, with one claiming to be feminist, and the other claiming not to be feminist. Of the 39 organizations in the "not feminist" category, nine responded. Six organizations were accurately identified and 3 claimed they were feminist.

Table 1. Matching the content ratings with the organization's own definition								
FEMINIST			**MAYBE FEMINIST**			**NOT FEMINIST**		
Fem	**Not Fem**	**N/R**	**Fem**	**Not Fem**	**N/R**	**Fem**	**Not Fem**	**N/R**
NUMBER 8	0	4	1	1	5	3	6	30
% MATCH OF TOTAL RESPONSE 100%	100%		50%	50%		33%	67%	
RESPONSE RATE 67%			29%			23%		

Conclusion

These initial results show promise for this method of determining whether an organization's ideology is feminist or not. The 100% accuracy of our correctly identifying feminist organizations validated the methodology. We expected nothing more than the 50/50 split with maybes because we ourselves were unsure as to where to place these organizations. The weakness in this methodology arises with the organizations that we categorized as "not feminist". Of the nine responses, three considered themselves to be feminist.

As discussed earlier, self rating is problematic, in that the respondent may have ascribed to the organization a philosophy they hold, rather than an organizational philosophy. It could also mean that there has been a systematic drift of values since the mission was written. Indeed one might hypothesize, and test in future research, that in these cases the organization was founded many years ago, and its mission statement has not recently updated.

As Handy et al (2006) found in their research, the self identification of the organization as feminist often contradicted the behavioural aspects of the organization in terms of its structure and decision making. The reverse was never the case, also suggesting some respondent bias, that is if the respondent feels the need to appear desirable to the interviewer, then it is likely that the respondent might self identify the organization as feminist. This may certainly have been the case, as the interviewer (a woman) was asking of another woman, working for a woman's organization if the organization ascribed feminist values. It is not surprising that the respondent would like the organization to be viewed in a positive light and hence identify it as a feminist organization.

In general, our numbers to date are too small to validate or invalidate this methodology of testing feminist organizations. The next step in this project is to broaden our sample and have the organizations fill out the behavioural aspects of the questionnaire, in order to determine whether ideology has an impact on behaviour.

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