

Micro Foundations of Mission Drift: Affective and Cognitive Perspectives

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Abstract

When there is a gradual shift from the intended founding purpose of an organisation, scholars term this mission drift, and it has become a central concern in hybrid organisational research, where commercial and social gains are combined. While prior research has attributed mission drift to macro-level institutional and governance factors, etc., this study highlights the emotional and cognitive processes that contribute to the gradual deviation from founding missions. This paper develops two distinct theoretical perspectives on the micro foundations of mission drift, drawing on Affective Events Theory (AET) and Construal Level Theory (CLT). Using a thematic study, we show how recurring emotional reactions to mission-relevant events (AET) and systematic shifts in psychological distance and cognitive abstraction (CLT) independently and jointly explain how individual-level experiences culminate into organisational-level mission drift. We compare both perspectives, highlight their complementarities and divergences, and propose a research agenda with testable propositions. In practice, we argue that sustaining mission alignment requires organisational interventions that target both emotional climates and cognitive framing. The paper advances microfoundations research in hybrid organising and offers a pluralistic theoretical foundation for future empirical work.

Keywords

affect, psychological distance, social enterprises, cognition, mission drift

1 Introduction

Hybrid organisations, such as social enterprises, B Corporations, and other purpose-driven ventures, embody a central paradox: balancing social mission with commercial sustainability. Despite their promise of "doing well by doing good", these organisations often face mission drift: the gradual deviation from their founding mission (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Mission drift is not merely a change in strategic orientation but a progressive transformation in how organisational members prioritise, interpret, and enact their goals. It undermines the legitimacy of hybridity, erodes stakeholder trust, and challenges organisational identity (Grimes et al., 2019). Understanding how and why this phenomenon occurs remains central to the study of hybrid organisations and organisational purpose.

Existing research has devoted considerable attention to explaining mission drift, typically framing it as a structural and institutional issue. Institutional theories attribute drift to competing logics that generate per-

sistent incompatibilities within governance systems and environmental expectations (Pache and Santos, 2013). Governance-based accounts emphasise misalignment among stakeholder priorities, board composition, or incentive systems (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Other studies highlight external pressures from funders and markets that progressively recalibrate organisational success metrics. Far less is known about how mission drift unfolds from within the organisation; how it is generated and sustained through the micro-level experiences, emotions, and interpretations of organisational members. Macro-level theories such as institutional logics (Schildt and Kodeih, 2025), resource dependence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), and strategic leadership (O'Shannassy, 2021) explain the structural and governance pressures that create the conditions for mission drift. What they leave underexplored is how these pressures take hold: the affective and cognitive processes through which individuals experience and act on them in their day-to-day work. Recent developments

in organisation theory have highlighted the importance of microfoundations: the individual-level cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes that give rise to macro-level outcomes (Felin et al., 2015; Powell and Rerup, 2017). Yet research on mission drift has not fully embraced this perspective. Addressing this gap is important because hybrid organising is a deeply human phenomenon, shaped by emotion, subjectivity, and sense-making.

To explain the microfoundations of mission drift, this paper advances two psychological perspectives: Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) and Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Trope and Liberman, 2010). AET emphasises how workplace events trigger affective reactions that shape behaviour. CLT explains how psychological distance and abstraction influence the way individuals mentally represent goals and make decisions. Together, these theories provide mechanisms through which everyday emotional experiences and levels of cognitive abstraction influence organisational members' sense of mission and the priorities they enact.

This paper responds to calls for microfoundational research in organisation theory (Felin et al., 2015) by theorising mission drift as rooted in how individuals feel, experience, and mentally represent mission-related tensions. We therefore develop two microfoundational perspectives on mission drift:

1. an affective perspective, based on AET, explaining mission drift as a result of patterned emotional reactions to mission-relevant events;
2. a cognitive perspective, based on CLT, conceptualising mission drift as arising from systematic shifts in psychological distance and levels of abstraction in how organisational members construe their mission.

Our core research question is: How do affective experiences and cognitive construal, as microfoundational processes, provide alternative theoretical explanations for mission drift in hybrid organisations? We make three contributions. First, we advance research on mission drift by providing two theoretically grounded, micro-level accounts of how individual experiences and mental representations can lead to drift. Second, we enrich the microfoundations literature by demonstrating the value of multiple theoretical perspectives. Third, we compare the two perspectives and emphasise the need for further microfoundational research on organisational mission and hybridity.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing mission drift research and its treatment of micro-

foundations. Section 3 develops the AET and CLT perspectives as distinct microfoundational accounts. Section 4 compares the two perspectives, exploring complementarities and tensions, and outlines a research agenda with testable propositions. Section 5 describes the conceptual methodology. Sections 6 and 7 discuss implications and conclude.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Mission drift in hybrid organisations

Mission drift refers to an organisation progressively deviating from its founding mission or shifting attention from social to commercial goals. This has become a central concern in research on hybrid organising. Hybrids are organisational forms that combine institutional logics typically regarded as incompatible, such as social welfare and market efficiency (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Pache and Santos, 2013). While hybridity enables socially based firms to access market mechanisms for scale and sustainability, it also creates persistent tensions in decision-making, resource allocation, and identity management. Mission drift embodies the critical outcome of these tensions: a gradual realignment of the organisation's priorities, often shifting attention toward commercial activities at the expense of the social purpose that originally justified the organisation's formation (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Research has identified several causes of mission drift. Institutional accounts emphasise competing logics and field-level pressures. As organisations navigate multiple institutional demands, their governance structures and practices may privilege one logic over another, resulting in incremental shifts away from mission balance (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache and Santos, 2013). Governance and stakeholder perspectives show that drift can stem from board composition, funding structures, or incentive systems that favour quantifiable economic outcomes (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Cornforth, 2014). Resource dependence and organisational learning approaches highlight how financial vulnerability and adaptive responses to environmental demands gradually refocus internal norms and decision rules (Grimes et al., 2019).

Although these explanations shed light on the contextual and structural conditions under which drift occurs, they share a macro-level orientation. They primarily describe why organisations are susceptible to drift without explaining how drift unfolds as a process of everyday interpretation and behaviour inside organisations. Mission drift, at its core, involves changes in the meaning organisational members attach to the mission and how they experience

the tensions embedded in hybridity. These are inherently micro-level phenomena, situated in the affective, cognitive, and behavioural reactions of individuals as they navigate emotionally charged and temporally complex decisions. Yet these mechanisms remain largely unexplored.

2.2 The microfoundations movement

The microfoundations movement in organisational research seeks to explain macro phenomena as the emergent outcomes of underlying micro-level processes (Felin et al., 2015; Powell and Rerup, 2017). It emphasises that organisations do not act; people do. Macro patterns arise from aggregated individual actions, cognitions, and interactions. This perspective is particularly pertinent to hybrid organising, which depends on continual negotiation of identity and meaning. Hybrid employees and managers interpret signals from markets, funders, beneficiaries, and peers through the lens of personal goals, emotional reactions, and mental construal. For example, the satisfaction of achieving revenue targets or the frustration of failing to meet social goals evokes emotional responses that influence subsequent judgments and decision preferences. Likewise, the cognitive framing of what constitutes "the mission" shapes whether individuals view challenges as trade-offs (win-lose) or as integrative problems (win-win).

Despite extensive efforts to explain mission drift, little work has explicitly connected microfoundational dynamics to the phenomenon. Studies that mention micro-level factors tend to treat cognition descriptively rather than theoretically, for example, noting "shifts in attention" or "compromising values" without specifying underlying psychological processes (Grimes et al., 2019; Jay, 2013). Moreover, while research on hybrid organising increasingly acknowledges the role of emotion (Douglas Creed et al., 2014) and meaning (Besharov and Mitzineck, 2023), few attempts have explained affective and cognitive mechanisms within a formal theoretical process that accounts for macro-level drift. There is therefore a significant opportunity to explore how affective and cognitive micro-processes produce mission drift over time.

2.3 Affective and cognitive mechanisms as microfoundations

Affective and cognitive processes are deeply entwined in organisational environments. Organisational research has often treated cognition as the domain of rational sensemaking and emotion as background affect (Huy, 2012).

However, understanding both as microfoundations is essential because these psychological mechanisms shape how organisational actors engage with their environment. Affect guides attention, assigns importance, and influences which goals individuals pursue or abandon (Forgas, 1995). Construal and cognitive framing determine how individuals perceive the psychological distance of events and thus the level of abstraction in their goals and evaluations (Trope and Liberman, 2010). This dual focus enriches our understanding of how adaptive behaviours emerge, how complex organisational processes unfold, and what outcomes they produce, making this approach necessary for advancing theory and practice in organisational research.

The importance of affective processes for organisational outcomes has received growing attention. For instance, Krén and Séllei (2021) demonstrated that leaders' emotional competencies, particularly self-awareness and awareness of others, correlate with organisational performance in successful companies. Extending this logic to hybrid organisations, we argue that affective microprocesses not only shape performance but also influence whether organisations maintain or drift from their founding mission.

2.4 Why AET and CLT?

This paper draws on two distinct but underutilised psychological theories. Affective Events Theory (AET) provides an account of how workplace events evoke affective reactions that shape attitudes and behaviours (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). It specifies that emotional experiences are triggered by discrete events or outcomes that carry personal or organisational significance. These affective responses influence thought patterns, decision-making, and performance beyond the specific event. In hybrid organisations, affective events such as donor pressure, beneficiary praise, or mission setbacks regularly confront organisational members with emotionally loaded cues about what matters.

Construal Level Theory (CLT) complements AET by explaining how psychological distance; temporal, spatial, social, or hypothetical, determines the level of abstraction in mental representations (Trope and Liberman, 2010). High-level construals involve abstract, value-oriented thinking and focus on why actions matter, while low-level construals emphasise concrete thinking about how to act. CLT has been applied to decision-making, moral judgment, and self-regulation, but rarely to the longevity of organisational mission. Together, AET and CLT offer a powerful lens for examining the microfoundations of mission drift.

3 Two psychological perspectives on mission drift

Hybrid organisations routinely encounter events that trigger affective reactions: moments of pride when financial targets are exceeded, frustration when social objectives seem unattainable, anxiety under resource pressure, or anger at perceived mission compromise. These experiences shape interpretation and decision processes that ultimately influence the organisation's strategic trajectory. Two well-developed psychological theories, Affective Events Theory (AET) and Construal Level Theory (CLT), show how such micro-level experiences translate into behavioural and cognitive outcomes. Section 3 examines each theory and highlights its combined potential for explaining the microfoundations of mission drift.

3.1 Affective Events Theory (AET)

Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) explains how workplace events generate emotional experiences that, in turn, influence attitudes and behaviours. According to AET, employees experience discrete affective events, such as receiving praise, facing criticism, or witnessing a mission success, which generate emotional reactions. These emotional states shape appraisals, behavioural intentions, and long-term outcomes such as organisational commitment or behaviour. A fundamental insight of AET is that individuals' choices and actions are often shaped more by immediate emotions than by long-standing value systems or abstract principles (Fisher, 2000).

AET unfolds through two key mechanisms:

1. Event appraisal and emotional response.
Individuals continuously appraise workplace events in terms of personal relevance and goal congruence. Events perceived as advancing one's goals elicit positive emotions (e.g., pride, joy), while those that hinder goals elicit negative emotions (e.g., frustration, guilt) (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996).
2. Accumulation into lasting affective patterns.
Recurring affective experiences accumulate into long-term patterns such as enthusiasm or cynicism, which shape task behaviours, social interactions, and organisational identification (Ashkanasy and Dorris, 2017).

Relevance to mission drift: In hybrid organisations, affective events are often linked to ongoing mission tensions. When financial performance is consistently rewarded and celebrated while social outcomes generate frustration or uncertainty, emotional reinforcement skews attention toward the commercial domain. From the perspective of AET, mission drift can be understood as the

result of emotionally charged experiences that systematically shift members' motivation and focus toward areas that offer consistent emotional satisfaction. The process can be represented as follows:

- Mission-relevant event (e.g., funder praises profit growth/beneficiary thanks team for social impact) → Affective reaction (pride, guilt, frustration) → Shift in attentional focus and goal prioritisation → Repetition over time → Affective climate favouring commercial over social goals → Mission drift.

AET thus provides a foundation for understanding the affective microfoundations of mission drift. However, emotions alone do not dictate organisational reorientation. How individuals construe mission-related goals, the level of abstraction in their mental representation of "what we are doing and why" determines whether affective cues reinforce short-term priorities or sustain long-term commitment. To capture this complementary process, we turn to Construal Level Theory.

3.2 Construal Level Theory (CLT)

Construal Level Theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010) explains how psychological distance; temporal, spatial, social, or hypothetical, influences the way individuals perceive, think about, and evaluate objects, events, or goals. The theory states that the more psychologically distant an event feels, the more abstractly people construe it. Conversely, psychologically close events are represented more concretely. High-level construals are abstract, value-oriented, and focus on the *why* of action. Low-level construals are concrete, detail-oriented, and instrumental, focusing on the *how* of action.

Shifts between these levels of construal affect goal representation, moral reasoning, and strategic decision-making (Liberman and Trope, 2014). In hybrid organisations, mission drift can be understood as a change in how decision makers mentally construct the organisation's purpose over time (Cornforth, 2014). When psychological distance is large, actors think abstractly about the mission; when distance decreases under pressure, they think concretely.

Two mechanisms of CLT are particularly relevant to mission drift:

1. Psychological distance as a cognitive regulator.
Temporal or social distance expands mental horizons, enabling decision makers to evaluate consequences over longer time scales and align decisions with lasting values.

2. Fluctuation under contextual pressure.

Construal levels are not static; they fluctuate according to task demands, stress, and affect. Under imminent threat or short-term pressure, construals typically shift toward concrete, operational thinking.

Relevance to mission drift: Hybrid organisations are especially vulnerable to construal level fluctuations. Members should manage broad, temporally distant ideals (social change) and immediate, measurable outputs (financial results, client satisfaction). When event-specific pressures increase budget deadlines, investor demands, and audit cycles, psychological distance shrinks, generating low-level construal focused on concrete, short-term targets. Over time, sustained exposure to such proximal demands may change mental representations of "the mission" from a high-level moral purpose to a set of readily executable deliverables.

We introduce the term *construal collapse* to describe this phenomenon: a sustained lowering of psychological distance such that organisational members consistently construe the mission in concrete, short-term rather than abstract, long-term, purpose-oriented terms. For example, a social enterprise originally founded to "reduce urban homelessness through purposeful employment" may, under sustained donor pressure for quarterly metrics, begin to construe its mission as "place 50 clients in jobs per quarter". While the latter is measurable, it loses the original purpose's moral and temporal breadth. Mission drift thereby manifests as collective *construal collapse*. CLT provides a clear cognitive pathway through which micro-level decision contexts translate into macro-level mission redefinition.

3.3 Comparison

3.3.1 Complementarities

The affective and cognitive perspectives share important complementarities:

1. First, affect and construal are interconnected. Emotional states influence construal levels, and construals shape how future events are emotionally encoded (Forgas and George, 2001). Negative affect narrows attentional scope, inducing low-level, concrete construals focused on immediate results, while positive affect broadens attention, allowing reflection on higher-order purposes (Fredrickson, 2001). These dual processes mutually reinforce each other, creating recursive feedback loops that lead individuals to prioritise short-term, tangible achievements over abstract social goals.

2. Second, both theories emphasise temporality. AET is event-based: emotions fluctuate across time as mission-specific events occur. CLT positions cognition along temporal distance: the nearer the deadline or pressure, the lower the construal. Together, they suggest a dynamic model in which affective events compress psychological distance, altering construal, which in turn shapes how future events are perceived and emotionally encoded.
3. Third, both perspectives transcend the individual level. Through emotional contagion, group discussions, organisational routines, and shared emotional climates, teams develop alignment in psychological distance and level of abstraction (Barsade, 2002; Huy, 2012). Emotional reactions to mission-related events can contract or expand psychological distance for entire teams, recalibrating how members collectively construe the mission, as purpose (abstractly) or as performance (concretely).

3.3.2 Points of divergence

Despite their complementarities, the two perspectives diverge in meaningful ways. AET draws attention to managing emotional experiences and cultivating a sense of mission alignment at an affective level. It implicitly prioritises "feeling right" about the mission. Without emotional connection, even missions that are cognitively well-construed may fail to motivate sustained commitment. CLT, by contrast, focuses on mental representation. It informs how goals and plans should be framed and communicated for understanding, motivation, and concrete action. CLT emphasises "thinking at the right level of abstraction" about the mission. This cognitive perspective values mental representations that match the distance and complexity of the goal, enabling better planning, forecasting, and alignment.

Practically, this divergence implies that different interventions may be required depending on whether the primary risk of drift is affective (e.g., emotional burnout, cynicism) or cognitive (e.g., loss of long-term perspective under short-term pressures). Organisations may need to address both.

4 A Multi-perspective microfoundations agenda

By adopting multiple microfoundational perspectives, scholars can explore mechanisms and treat mission drift as a phenomenon with potentially multiple, coexisting psychological bases. We therefore propose the following research agenda with testable propositions.

4.1 Propositions for future empirical research

Drawing on the integrated Affective Events Theory (AET) and Construal Level Theory (CLT) framework, this section advances four propositions to guide future empirical research on mission drift. The first three specify the affective, cognitive, and interactive mechanisms driving drift, while the fourth identifies how combined interventions may prevent mission drift:

1. Proposition 1 (AET): The higher the frequency of positive affective events associated with commercial goal achievement relative to social goal achievement, the greater the likelihood of mission drift.
2. Proposition 2 (CLT): Sustained exposure to short-term performance pressures (e.g., quarterly reporting cycles, donor deadlines) reduces psychological distance to commercial goals, increasing the probability of construal collapse and subsequent mission drift.
3. Proposition 3 (Interaction): Negative affective events (e.g., social mission setbacks, beneficiary complaints) will amplify construal collapse when psychological distance is already low, accelerating mission drift.
4. Proposition 4 (Intervention): Organisational interventions that:
 - balance affective rewards across social and commercial achievements;
 - expand temporal distance through long-term impact reviews will be more effective in preventing mission drift than interventions targeting either mechanism alone.

4.2 Key research questions

Beyond these propositions, we encourage exploration of the following questions:

1. Under what conditions do affective environment and construal shifts play a stronger role in mission drift? (e.g., early stage vs. mature hybrids; donor, funded vs. earned, revenue models)
2. How do organisational interventions that target emotional climate compare to those that target temporal structures in preventing mission drift?
3. Can empirical designs, such as longitudinal case studies and experience sampling methods, be constructed to isolate affective and construal mechanisms in observed cases of mission drift?
4. How do affective and construal processes interact with macro-level factors (e.g., governance structures, institutional logics) to produce mission drift?

5 Approach to theory development

This study adopts a conceptual, theory-building approach, integrating research on mission drift, affective processes, and construal theory to develop novel theoretical perspectives. We conducted systematic searches in Scopus (Elsevier, online), Web of Science (Clarivate, online), JSTOR (ITHAKA, online), and EBSCOhost (EBSCO Information Services, online) using terms such as "mission drift", "hybrid organisations", "affective events", "organisational emotions", "psychological distance", and "construal level". Search strings included combinations such as "mission drift" and "hybrid organising", and "psychological distance" and "decision-making". Only English language publications were included.

The initial search yielded approximately 400 results. After removing duplicates, 214 records remained. Titles and abstracts were screened against inclusion criteria, excluding studies that focused solely on purely commercial firms, treated mission drift only peripherally, mentioned emotions only superficially, or were not available in English. This screening reduced the corpus to 48 articles. Full-text screening ensured relevance to mission drift, affective events, or construal processes in hybrid or social enterprise contexts, resulting in a final corpus of 23 studies. These studies spanned diverse organisational contexts, including social enterprises and hybrid organisations.

The final corpus was thematically coded around four domains: affective reactions, affective events, psychological distance, level of abstraction, and hybrid tensions. Insights from this coded set were synthesised through comparative theorising to elaborate how AET and CLT independently and jointly shed light on the microfoundations of mission drift. As a conceptual study, we utilised only secondary sources; no empirical data collection was required. The article is limited by its reliance on English, language, and indexed publications.

6 Discussion and implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

This paper contributes to organisational research by incorporating psychological microfoundations into the examination of mission drift, thereby extending beyond conventional macro-level explanations. It enhances understanding of mission drift as a process influenced by individual emotional experiences (AET) and cognitive framing (CLT), emphasising the complementary roles of affect and cognition. By advancing AET and CLT, the paper advocates for

pluralistic theorising to capture the intricate, multi-layered nature of mission drift in hybrid organisations.

The paper also contributes to the broader microfoundations literature (Felin et al., 2015; Powell and Rerup, 2017) by demonstrating how two distinct psychological mechanisms can explain the same outcome. This suggests that mission drift is not a unitary phenomenon but may arise through different psychological pathways in different organisational contexts or even simultaneously within the same organisation.

Our findings align with recent work demonstrating the relevance of affective competencies for organisational outcomes. Krén and Séllei (2021) showed that emotional intelligence, self-awareness, awareness of others, and self-management correlate with organisational performance. While Krén and Séllei (2021) focused on emotional intelligence and financial performance in traditional firms, we extend this line of inquiry by showing how affective events and emotional climates specifically contribute to mission drift, a distinct outcome particularly relevant to hybrid organisations.

6.2 Practical implications

For managers and leaders of hybrid organisations, our analysis suggests several actionable implications:

1. First, organisations should monitor and manage the emotional climate. Recurring affective events, whether celebrations of financial wins or frustrations with social setbacks, shape members' motivation and focus. Leaders should deliberately create positive affective events around social impact (e.g., beneficiary story sharing, impact celebrations) to balance the emotional pull of commercial success.
2. Second, leaders should be aware of how psychological distance and construal levels fluctuate under pressure. When facing budget deadlines, investor demands, or audit cycles, the organisation's mission may unconsciously shift from an abstract purpose to a concrete set of short-term tasks. Interventions to maintain psychological distance, such as regular long-term impact reviews, mission sabbaticals, or advisory boards focused on long-term purpose, can counteract construal collapse.
3. Third, interventions targeting both emotional experiences and cognitive framing may be necessary to sustain mission alignment. For example, a hybrid organisation might:
 - celebrate both commercial and social milestones equally (affective intervention);

- require quarterly reviews that explicitly connect short-term operational decisions to long-term mission objectives (cognitive intervention).

6.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations:

1. First, as a conceptual paper, it does not provide empirical tests of the proposed mechanisms.
2. Second, the synthesis relies on existing English language and peer-reviewed literature, which may introduce publication and language bias.
3. Third, the propositions offered are intentionally general; future research should specify boundary conditions such as organisational size, funding model, or institutional environment.
4. Fourth, the paper does not systematically address potential negative consequences of preventing mission drift, such as reduced financial sustainability or innovation.

7 Conclusion

This paper has sought to enrich the study of mission drift by theorising its microfoundations through two distinct theoretical perspectives: an affective perspective based on Affective Events Theory, and a cognitive perspective based on Construal Level Theory. We have shown how each generates its own account of how individual experiences and representations lead to macro-level drift. The AET perspective conceptualises mission drift as the outcome of patterned emotional experiences that create affective climates favouring commercial over social goals. The CLT perspective explains drift as the consequence of systematic shifts in psychological distance and level of abstraction that reframe the mission around what is temporally near and concrete. Together, they illustrate the value of pluralistic microfoundational theorising in organisation studies. The core insight is this: mission drift is not solely a structural or governance failure. It is also an emotionally and cognitively enacted process that unfolds daily through how organisational members feel about mission-relevant events and how abstractly or concretely they construe their organisation's purpose. Understanding these micro-level dynamics opens new avenues for both research and practice.

Future research should build on this work by empirically examining affective versus construal microfoundations in different hybrid contexts and explicitly theorising their interaction with macro-level conditions. Longitudinal case studies, experience sampling methods, and experimental

vignette designs are particularly suited to testing the propositions advanced here. In doing so, scholars can advance a richer, more psychologically grounded understanding of

how and why organisational missions drift and how such drift might be prevented.

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