

When Practices of Care Come to Signify Harm: Meaning Inversion and the Entanglement between Means and Ends in Child Welfare Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Social mission organizations pursue valued ends through practices of care that are infused with meaning and emotion. Existing research often treats fidelity to mission as preserving valued ends, maintaining core practices, and resisting pressures that pull organizations away from their purposes. Yet organizations do not control whether prevailing moral understandings of their practices remain stable over time. Drawing on a historical study of three child welfare organizations in a rapidly growing American urban center from the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, we examine how organizations respond when practices once understood as care, protection, and compassion come to signify harm, inadequacy, or failure. We develop the concept of *meaning inversion* to describe a reversal in the moral and emotional valence of established practices as prevailing moral understandings shift. Our findings show that meaning inversion threatens legitimacy because missions and practices become entangled with one another. We find that different approaches to governance, protection-based versus possibility-based, shape how organizations respond to meaning inversion. These responses either selectively accommodate the moral contestation that results from meaning inversion or use it to reconstitute the relationship between means and ends. Our study contributes to research on social mission organizations by showing that fidelity to mission over time may require not preserving established practices but reconstituting the underlying entanglement between means and ends.

Keywords: Meaning inversion; means–ends entanglement; social mission organizations; old institutionalism; mission fidelity