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# **Managing mergers**

A micro-perspective on the role of emotions

Susanna Hansson & Sarah Källvik

Supervisor: Sara Brorström  
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# Managing Mergers

## A Micro-perspective on the Role of Emotions

Susanna Hansson

*Master of Science in Management, Graduate School, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg*

Sarah Källvik

*Master of Science in Management, Graduate School, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg*

### Abstract

This article examines the role of actors' emotions on the shaping of an institution within a merger process. Based on an empirical study of a case where four public organizations were merged into one, actors' emotional arguments concerning the merger has been analyzed and related to the theoretical perspective of institutional work. This was done in order to expand the understanding of how actors' emotions are related to activities of shaping an institution within a merger process. We identified that actors experienced several different emotions related to the merger at the same time, which in turn was connected to varying forms of institutional work. The most commonly occurring form of institutional work in this case study was maintenance work, which was connected to the emotions of anger, insecurity, fear and pride. Emotions observed to be connected to institutional creation was emotions of hope and contentment, while emotions of shame and anger drove institutional disruption. This study suggests that within a merger, actors engage in institutional work of maintenance, creation and disruption simultaneously. Thus, the shaping of an institution within a merger process appears to be a complex and ongoing process. By scrutinizing the merger through a micro-perspective, this research thereby shed light on the complexities associated with actors' engagement in institutional work.

### Keywords:

Merger, Emotions, Institutional Work, Micro-Perspective, Discourse

### Introduction

Organizational change efforts are commonplace in all organizations today (Beer & Nohria, 2000) due to organizations striving to adapt to a continuously changing environment (Weick & Quinn, 1999). One aspect of organizational change which has been frequently examined is the one of a merger (Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019). The implementation of a merger implies that entities of relatively equal status join together forming a new organization (Epstein, 2004), which often causes the merging parties to undergo significant changes as the new organization is established (Lawlor, 2013). This is described to be one of the greatest challenges that

organizations may face, since established norms and values of the old organizations become questioned and potentially threatened (Empson, 2017).

A driving force behind the decision to merge organizations is the positive effects that a merger is expected to have (Ravenscraft, 1987; Kitchener & Gask, 2003). While mergers in the private sector are driven by desires of reaching a higher growth than firms relying on organic growth (Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019), public sector mergers are conducted as a result of increased pressures on cost-savings and downsizing (Lawlor, 2013; Luoma-Aho & Makikangas, 2014). This phenomenon has been especially acknowledged within the New Public Management doctrine, which refers to the public sector adopting commercial management practices (Kitchener & Gask, 2003) to deliver value-added services in a cost-efficient manner (Hood, 1991; 1995). Public sector mergers thereby became a strategy commonly used to, for example, lower the costs for administration and management or create economies of scale (Luoma-Aho & Makikangas, 2014).

Despite the large investments made in mergers, more than half eventually fail to reach their objectives (Bartels et al., 2006) in terms of financial and strategic variables (Weber & Tarba, 2013). This high failure rate have been explained by a neglect of non-financial variables, such as incompatibilities between cultures of the merged organizations (Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019), intergroup differences between the old and the new organization (Olie, 1994), a lack of identification with the new organization (Lok, 2010) or employees' attitudes and behaviors obstructing the introduction of new organizational values (Sinkovics, Zagelmeyer & Kusstatscher, 2011). Whereas the majority of the literature on mergers have concentrated on the financial performance of the new organization (e.g. Healy, Palepu & Ruback, 1992; Harford, 2005; Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019), a substantial body of research have taken interest in the integration process of a merger as a key driver for success or failure (e.g. Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006; Bauer & Matzler, 2014; Angwin & Meadows, 2015; Bodner & Capron, 2018). The majority of these studies conclude continuous and honest communication from management to employees, involvement of staff and a clear vision, to constitute crucial elements of a successful merger (De Noble, Gustafsson & Hergert, 1988; Epstein, 2004; Osarenkhoe & Hyder, 2015). Other scholars take on a more narrow approach and investigates how factors such as a rapid integration process is beneficial for the merger (Angwin, 2004; Homburg & Bucerius, 2006; Bauer & Matzler, 2014) or focuses upon the role of employees and how their attachment to the old organization must be weakened before commitment to the new can be achieved (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Marks, 2007).

The difficulties encountered within mergers can be understood through the theoretical perspective of institutional work, which has oftentimes been applied to explain actors' impact on institutional change projects (e.g. Suddaby & Viale, 2011; Raviola & Norbäck, 2013; Muzio, Brock & Suddaby, 2013; Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016). The perspective of institutional work considers how actors influence institutions through their daily actions (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009; 2011). By utilizing their agency, actors engage in efforts to create, maintain or disrupt institutions. Consequently, the institutional work perspective highlights how institutions are shaped by humans (*ibid*), rather than existing on their own (Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey, 2017). An institution is therefore defined as "the product of specific actions taken to reproduce, alter and destroy them" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 216). In a change process, such as a merger, this would imply that human actors play a decisive role on the developments within a

change initiative, as the institution is shaped and reshaped in accordance with the actions taken by actors.

While the foundation of the institutional work perspective assumes actors to cognitively engage in institutional work (Lok et al., 2017), it is also important to acknowledge that humans are emotional by nature (Creed et al., 2014). Thus, to treat individuals as humans rather than emotionless institutional carriers, we should attend to “the meaning-making mindset stages and how they influence the way people experience institutions” (Voronov & Yorks, 2015, p. 579). Through an empirical study conducted on a public sector merger, this article will examine actors’ emotional arguments and lived experiences of the change process. The contribution of this study will be twofold: First, by bringing emotions into studies of change processes, it will be possible to gain a deeper understanding for how actors engage in varying forms of institutional work (Lok et al., 2017). Secondly, the human dimension, scrutinized at a micro-level, constitutes an underrepresented area within studies of mergers (Bauer & Matzler, 2013; Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). This neglected area of research calls for the execution of qualitative studies examining the lived experiences of those individuals who are affected by the merger (Evans, 2017). Adopting a micro-perspective on mergers, focusing on the human aspects, could therefore lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the merger process and the difficulties associated with it (Sarala, Vaara & Junni, 2019). This article is intended to contribute towards filling that gap, by shedding further light on the micro-foundations of the human aspects within a merger process. Thus, the aim of this article is to increase the understanding about the implications of actors’ emotions within a merger process. The research question is: Which emotions are present within a merger process and what role does these emotions have on activities of shaping an institution?

This article is structured accordingly; following from this introduction, the theoretical lens of institutional work is presented. In this chapter we will account for literature within the field, and recent contributions concentrating on the human being behind the act of creating, maintaining or disrupting institutions, with emphasis on actors’ displayed emotions. We then provide a description of the case and its setting, the process of the study, and how the data collection and analysis has been conducted. Following, the empirical findings are presented based on emerging themes related to emotions, which thereafter is analyzed in relation to the theoretical perspective of institutional work, and its implications for the merger process. The last section concludes and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the key findings and gives suggestions for further research.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Institutional work**

Institutional theory has been used since the middle of the 20th century to explain the relationship between organizations and their environments (Selznick, 1948; Sutton & Selznick, 1958). Through this perspective, organizations have been described to formally adapt to societal values and norms using myth and ceremony (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations’ and individuals’ actions are thereby shaped by social structures and systems (ibid), where the institutional pressures result in conformity and compliance among organizations and individuals (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The over-reliance on structure conveyed by

institutional theorists have been subject to critique by several scholars (e.g. Donaldson, 1995; Deephouse, 1999). Consequently, several streams of research have addressed these issues and expanded the perspective of institutional theory, such as the concept of Scandinavian institutionalism (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991), and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

The institutional work perspective places emphasis on the actors within the organization, specifically on how they actively engage with their institutional contexts in order to create, maintain, or disrupt the current institution (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011). This definition of institutional work highlights two important concepts. The first concept is that actors are not solely rule-following “cultural dopes” (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009), instead they are believed to be in possession of some degree of agency (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011). Due to their agency, actors are carriers of institutions (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004) and thereby have the power to participate in creating, maintaining or disrupting the institution (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011). The other central aspect of the institutional work perspective is the requirement of active work conducted by organizational actors (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011). Institutionalization is an ongoing process, and therefore institutions do not exist *per se*, rather they require that actors continuously take part in institutional work (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey, 2017) through their everyday actions and intentions (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011).

The three ways to conduct institutional work; creation, maintenance and disruption, is attained in different ways. Institutional work aimed at creating a new institution may be achieved by, for example, establishing clear rules for what is acceptable within the organization (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This may be done by constructing rewards and sanctions that enforce the boundaries set by actors. Another way of creating a new institution emphasizes actions where actors’ belief systems are altered (*ibid*). This form of institutional creation is produced by constructing collective identities, altering norms and establishing networks (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Zilber, 2017). One example of this may be found in Zilber’s (2002) case study at a rape crisis center in Israel. Through her study, Zilber (2002) found that practices that was traditionally viewed as feminist practices was infused with a different meaning when therapeutically oriented members entered the organization. The interpretations made by actors thereby allowed the same practice to represent two different institutions within the same organization (*ibid*). This study exemplifies how institutional work was achieved by the interpretations and meanings that organizational members provided to certain practices. Thus, it is an example of how actors engage in institutional creation by altering the taken-for-granted norms in the organization.

Institutional work of disruption requires that actors undermine and disassociate with institutionalized assumptions, practices and beliefs (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 238) suggest that actors disrupt institutions by “redefining, recategorizing, reconfiguring, abstracting, problematizing and, generally, manipulating the social and symbolic boundaries that constitute institutions”. Engagement in institutional disruption is illustrated in the study conducted by Laurell and Sandström (2016) who analyzed how actors discussed Uber in social media. In their study, the authors found that the occurrence of Uber and other similar firms eluded existing rules and regulations within the taxi industry, thereby disrupting the institution. Similarly, Wicks’ (2001) study of a coal mining disaster in

Canada illustrates how institutional disruption may be accomplished by the actions taken by actors. Due to the meanings provided by coal miners towards their work, a changing institutional mindset occurred within the organization, a mindset of invulnerability. Consequently, the changing mindset caused actors to recurrently violate institutionalized safety rules and norms, which ultimately caused the accident (ibid). These studies show how institutional disruption involves undermining or attacking the mechanisms which causes actors to comply with an institution.

In alignment with the creation or disruption of an institution, maintaining an institution is not attained without effort, rather it requires that actors engage in purposeful efforts to sustain the institution (Oliver, 1992). An institution may be maintained by ensuring compliance to the rules and identities of the institution which serve to sustain and reproduce existing institutional norms and beliefs (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Maintenance work therefore places emphasis on the sustaining of myths, symbols and rituals within the institution (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). One study which exemplifies how maintenance work may be conducted is the study partaken on the Swedish Public Service Television, where Norbäck (2019) show how actors conducted maintenance work by applying the history and heritage of the organization onto a new situation. By reusing their history, actors took part in rhetorical work which constructed and justified their interpretations and meanings outside of the organization (ibid). Actors may also engage in institutional maintenance work through their resistance towards change (Rainelli Weiss & Huault, 2016). In their study on a regulation project concerning financial OTC markets in Europe, Rainelli Weiss and Huault (2016) show that an institution can be maintained through the strategy of creating incommensurables. By highlighting how the reform would not suit the institution or the institution's clients, actors' resistance towards change ensured that the status quo could remain uncontested, thereby enabling institutional maintenance (ibid).

These examples illustrate how institutional work is socially constructed by actors who, in varying forms, influence the institution in accordance with their wishes (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004). In this process of institutionalization, language and discourses becomes a useful tool to shape institutions (ibid). Discourses can be articulated in varying forms, such as through stories, narratives, rhetoric, symbols or myths (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) and has been frequently examined within studies on institutional work (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004). Discourses are used to promote actors' beliefs about the institution and is a way to make sense and provide meaning to actors' experiences, actions and practices (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Riedy, Kent & Thompson, 2019). Through discourse analysis, it thereby becomes apparent that actors' cognitions and perceptions are important aspects which can help explain how institutional work is conducted (Zilber, 2008; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zilber, 2017; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey, 2017).

### **Emotion work**

Recently, researchers have introduced a new level of analysis, emotions, into studies on institutional work, which goes beyond solely focusing on cognitions and perceptions (Voronov & Vince, 2012) by emphasizing how human experiences and feelings can explain how institutional work is carried out by actors (Lok et al., 2017). By bringing emotions into discursive studies, several researchers (e.g. Herepath & Kitchener, 2016, Massa et al., 2017)

have shown the importance of emotions, where emphasis has been placed on how emotions can be used strategically in order to gain support for institutional projects and goals. One example of this is the study conducted by Moisander, Hirsto and Fahy (2016) which examines the Finnish government's attempt to gain support for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) by using rhetoric's to manage the moral emotions and affective ties that underpin the legitimacy regarding EMU. Through their study, the authors showed that government-authored texts strategically invalidated emotions which could drive resistance, while they evoked emotions that supported an adoption of EMU (ibid). Hence, emotions can be used by actors as political tools in order to shape the institutional culture in accordance with that actor's wishes. Similarly, Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019) studied how emotions were incorporated into specific rhetorical arguments over the course of an institutional project. By studying discourses in the form of written institutional work by pharmacy leaders, the authors found that discursive institutional work varies over time and that emotions evolve in response to changes in the field (ibid). These studies show how actors can engage in institutional work by channeling emotions as a means to achieve their goals. Including emotions into analysis of institutional work can thereby provide an increased understanding about how actors make sense and give meaning to the organization and its practices (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey, 2017).

An array of emotions may influence the way we engage in institutions (Voronov & Vince, 2012) and researchers have found that specific emotions, namely hope, anger, fear and shame, are commonly connected to work to either create, maintain or disrupt an institution (e.g. Creed et al., 2014; Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016; Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019). Depending on the situation, one emotion may be incorporated to maintain an institution, while in another situation it may serve to disrupt an institution (Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019). This finding highlight that the use of the same emotion can serve different means due to the context dependence involved in institutional work.

The creation of a new institution within an institutional change effort requires actors to become emotionally engaged in the new institution (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Lok et al., 2017). Although actors may see advantages of an institutional order, they may not necessarily act as enthusiastic defenders of it if they are emotionally disinvested from the institution (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Thus, positive emotions such as hope have been found to facilitate the creation of a new institution (Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019). During change efforts, hope encourages actors to be persistent to the change process by the pursuit and belief that it will lead to positive outcomes for the organization as well as its members (ibid). Similarly, Moisander, Hirsto and Fahy (2016) show how a reduction of fear, hence a reduction of unpleasant emotions, participated in gaining support for their project of incorporating EMU into the Finnish society. On the contrary, feelings of dissatisfaction to the current institution and its practices have proven to lead to institutional disruption (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). By drawing on injustices or inequalities, actors engage in anger work, which aim to disrupt these unfavorable ways of working (Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019). Furthermore, the study conducted by Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019) showed how feelings of fear created a message that action to change was necessary. Thus, fear in this situation encouraged actors to engage in change efforts and involved making the status quo undesirable (ibid). Contradictory, the feeling of fear has also been found to contribute to institutional maintenance (Gill & Burrow, 2018). In their study

within haute cuisine and its aim of delivering excellent food, Gill and Burrow (2018) show that actors engage in maintenance work when they experience threats and violence. The feeling of fear of having violated the rules and norms of the institution made actors engage in maintenance work (ibid). Due to actors' strong desire to preserve social bonds, a feeling of shame also motivates actors to act in accordance with institutional norms (Creed et al., 2014). Actors guarding the institution clearly show, by shaming others, the boundaries of what is acceptable within the institution, which causes actors striving to be socially accepted to participate in institutional compliance (ibid). These studies show the varying impacts that feelings can have on institutional work and highlights that people's lived experiences are at the core of institutional work (Lok et al., 2017).

Only in the recent decade, researchers have begun to examine the role of emotions within the concept of institutional work (Lok et al., 2017). These attempts have proven fruitful in order to grasp the underlying perceptions and meanings embedded in emotions, since institutions reveal themselves through the hopes, fears and fantasies of involved actors (ibid). It has been suggested by Lawrence, Leca and Zilber (2013) that future studies within the theoretical perspective of institutional work should attempt to broaden the understanding of individuals' experiences while they engage in institutional work, rather than making sense of actors' engagement in institutional work in retrospect. Thus, examining the emotions expressed by actors within an organization that is currently undergoing a large change initiative, the one of a merger, may broaden the understanding about how institutional work plays out in situ during a change process. Incorporating emotions into an analysis of institutional work can thereby provide insights into how actors perceive an ongoing merger process, and what role actors' emotions have on activities of shaping an institution.

## **Methodology**

### **Introducing the setting**

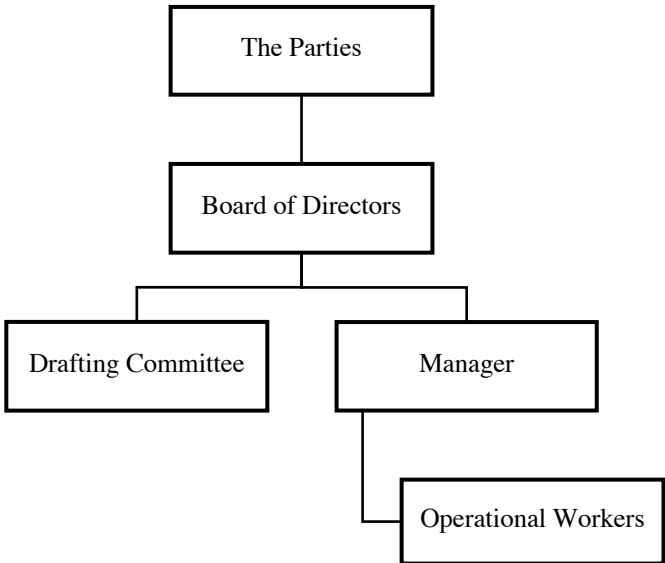
The research departure from a case study of a merger where four public financial coordination organizations, located within the city of Gothenburg, were merged into one. Unless otherwise stated, the displayed information about the merger and the organization is based on information gathered from interviews. The newly merged organization is responsible for financial coordination within the entire city of Gothenburg while the previous organizations were responsible for financial coordination over a smaller geographical area within the city. Financial coordination is statutory regulated, with the purpose of providing rehabilitation activities which enable people of working age to achieve or maintain work ability, and to improve their health condition (Lag om finansiell samordning av rehabiliteringsinsatser, SFS 2003:1210). This is achieved through coordinating the finances of four public organizations; The Swedish Public Employment Service, The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, The Municipality and The Region (ibid). These public organizations were mentioned as "the parties" by the respondents and will therefore further on in this article be referred to in this manner.

The merger was described by actors to have constituted a long and complex process, where the idea to merge the four organizations had arisen a couple of years before the new organization was launched. The decision to merge was foregone by an external investigation and was thereafter voted upon by each of the parties. The purpose of the merger had its basis in



expected efficiency gains, more efficient allocation of funds and cost savings for administration (Stadsledningskontoret, 2018). After the decision to merge was taken, a working group was appointed with the purpose of preparing for the merger. The new organization started on July the 1st, 2019, and the old organizations ceased three months after that, whereupon the new manager entered two additional months later. The data collection was gathered in February 2020, seven months after the new organization was launched. At this point in time, an inventory of the organization had begun, which would continue during the year of 2020 (Samordningsförbundet Göteborg, 2019). Hence, at the time when the data was collected, it was not yet decided how the new organization would operate in the future and what would remain from the old organizations,

The new organizational structure can be found in figure 1. The parties appoint members



for the board of directors which consist of representatives from the parties (Samordningsförbundet Göteborg, 2019). The board of directors are the ultimate decision-makers within the organization and have the responsibility to hire the manager (Stadsledningskontoret, 2018). The manager, together with the drafting committee, is in turn responsible for the preparation of material and errands for the board of directors (ibid). The operational workers are responsible for the coordination of, or work within, the varying activities. These consist of lended personnel from the parties and fall under the responsibility of the manager.

Figure 1. Hierarchical structure of the organization (simplified)

**Research design**

Conducting a case study is a method useful in order to gain insights into the specific context-dependent knowledge which follows from the human interpretation of a phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Since this research aims to increase the understanding of which emotions are present in a merger process and what role these emotions have on activities of shaping an institution, the qualitative research method of a case study was applied. While a common misunderstanding about case studies is that the results may not be applicable on other cases, the benefit of a case study is that it provides deeper knowledge and understanding of a situation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This has been considered essential for this report since it examines the implications of human emotions related to a merger process. In this manner, a case study can provide an interesting narrative of a phenomenon which is underestimated compared to formal generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

This case constitutes an example of an ongoing merger process and will therefore shed light on a specific point in time of the process. Whereas process data may be difficult to analyze due to its temporal embeddedness and its tendency to draw upon changing relationships, events

and thoughts (Langley, 1999), these features are also considered to be a strength in this study. Conducting a study on a merger process allowed the examination of emotions simultaneously as they were experienced by actors. This case study will therefore provide an opportunity to study an ongoing phenomenon, based on the individuals experiencing the change process. This method may provide a fairer description of the situation than possible with investigations in retrospect, as suggested by Lawrence, Leca and Zilber (2013).

### **Data collection**

When conducting a qualitative study, the use of different data collection methods can provide a wider understanding of a phenomenon (Silverman, 2013). Therefore, both interviews and documents have been utilized in this study. Documents were reviewed prior to the interviews to provide the researchers with an understanding of the organization and its mission, the purpose and background to the merger. Thus, the documents provided a comprehensive understanding of the unit of study, which is important in order to enhance the quality of the gathered data (Kvale, Brinkmann & Torhell, 2009). The reviewed documents contained the investigation leading up to the merger, the law regulating the organization, an official statement regarding the federal order, the operational plan, the budget and a risk analysis of the potential risks associated with the new organization.

Within the data collection of this study, emphasis has been placed on interviews, since data derived from interviews have the advantage of allowing an in-depth examination of an organization, which makes it possible to grasp perceptions and experiences (Denscombe, 2009). In total, 26 interviews have been conducted with people from varying levels across the organization. A compilation of these can be found in Table 1. The interviews have mainly taken place at the respondents' offices and generally lasted between 40 to 70 minutes, thereby allowing a detailed description of the respondents' personal experiences. The process of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) has been applied to this study, meaning that field material was collected whilst it added new and relevant information. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding in the merger process, actors at different levels of the organization was asked to participate in the case study. First, all members of the board, the drafting committee and the former managers got a request for participating in the study, where four members of the drafting committee, three members of the board of directors and all except one of the former managers accepted to participate in the study. Thereafter, the concept of snowballing (Myers & Newman, 2007) was applied, where actors were asked to recommend others that could be of interest to the study. Snowballing led us to interview many operational workers, 18 in total. An equal distribution of respondents with background from the four old organizations have been strived for in order to gain a nuanced picture of the merger process.

<b>Actor</b>	<b>No of meetings</b>
Manager	2
Operational worker	18
Board Member	3
Member of the Drafting Committee	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>

*Table 1. List of interviews*

Prior to meeting the respondents, an interview guide was constructed. The interview guide contained openly formulated questions following a semi-structured manner. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage that they provide more vivid descriptions (Silverman, 2013) and avoids guiding the respondents' responses (Nygren, 2012). This was desirable since the respondents were encouraged to share their perceptions and experiences of the merger process. Since process studies often includes complexities of events and relationships, where boundaries are ambiguous and temporally embedded (Langley, 1999), it was important that the respondents could speak freely in relation to the themes of the interview guide. The interview guide was therefore constructed based on themes which aimed to capture the process of the merger. The main themes identified were *preparations*, *practices*, *conflicts* and *emotions*. The same themes were used for all interviews, but specific questions were asked depending on the respondent's position within the organization. The interview guide contained some general questions such as "What was the preparation before the merger like for you?" and "How has the merger affected you?". In order to receive comprehensive answers, the respondents were asked follow-up questions during the interviews and were asked to give as many examples as possible.

### **Ethical considerations**

The use of in-depth interviews raises some ethical concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). In order to deal with these issues, actors have been anonymized and a consent agreement was signed by the respondents before the interviews were conducted. The consent agreement clarified that respondents could withdraw from the study at any time, that they had the right to access transcripts and that data would be presented with respect to the integrity of the individual. Participants have been given the opportunity to proofread the report and has been as anonymized as possible in the text. To ensure the anonymity of the individual, the former managers, coordinators, coaches and administrators have been compiled into the title of "operational workers".

Another concern with interviews is that the interview situation contributes to an asymmetrical power dynamic between the interviewer and the respondent (Kvale, 2006). To develop a trustful relationship with the respondents and thereby reduce the asymmetrical power dynamics, three preparatory interviews were conducted. These interviews aimed at establishing contact and receiving information about the organization, and were conducted with actors in possession of managerial experience at the organization. First, an interview with a former manager was conducted, followed by an interview with the new manager. Following, a group interview was executed with the new manager and the four former managers. The asymmetrical power dynamics was also counteracted by the usage of semi-structured interview questions. Through this method, the respondents were given the possibility to discuss what they considered to be of importance, thereby providing the respondent with the possibility to control the content of the interview.

### **Analysis of data**

When analyzing the empirical data, the study has taken inspiration from the grounded theory approach since this methodological approach allows researchers to, on a micro level, explore the interpretations, meanings and emotions of actors within a process (Langley, 1999). For this

reason, the analysis has been conducted in accordance with what Martin and Turner (1986) refers to as the three aspects of the grounded theory craft. In the first stage, several activities were conducted, such as notewritings during the interviews to highlight important aspects, transcriptions of the interviews and close readings of the gathered material. The process of triangulation, where findings from different sources are compared to each other (Olsson & Sörensen, 2011), was also conducted in this stage of the analysis. Thus, the gathered information from the interviews was compared with each other and with information gathered from documents, which according to Olsson and Sörensen (2011) lowers the insecurity of data. These activities were performed simultaneously during the data collection process and thereby allowed the researchers to identify and recognize patterns already during the process of gathering data.

Secondly, the gathered data was evaluated by conducting a coding process, where patterns from the data collection was sorted into different themes. These codes were constructed in accordance with the themes used in the interview guide, where the theme of emotions was especially noticeable in the gathered data. The thematization of varying emotions has taken inspiration from the study by Sinkovics, Zagelmeyer and Kusstatscher (2011) who constructed an analytical framework for investigating the role of emotions in a merger. Based on their study, the overarching theme of emotions was during the coding process divided into several types of emotions, such as *insecurity*, *anger* and *fear*. By using the emotional categorization provided by Sinkovics, Zagelmeyer and Kusstatscher (2011), it was possible to see how specific emotions were related to varying aspects of the merger, such as leadership or communication. In the empirical section, these emotions have been grouped and sorted according to their relation to the current situation, past experiences or future expectations.

Finally, the categorizations of different emotions were defined and related to the theoretical lens of institutional work. During this process, the categories of emotions constructed in the previous step was sorted into three overarching categories, namely institutional creation, institutional maintenance, and institutional disruption. The connection to institutional work was achieved by noting how several actors expressed the same emotions towards a specific aspect of the merger, and how these emotions contributed to activities related to the various forms of institutional work. For example, several actors expressed the emotion of hope towards future developments, which through the theoretical lens of institutional work could be considered as a legitimating activity, thereby contributing to institutional creation. Thus, the final step for analyzing data enabled a connection between the empirical data and the chosen theoretical perspective. Furthermore, the methodology for analyzing the empirical data has been conducted in an iterative process of re-reading and analyzing continuously.

## **Empirical findings**

At the time of this study, seven months had passed since the new organization was launched. During this period of time, actors described how they experienced several changes which affected them in different ways. In this chapter, the emotional arguments and experiences presented by organizational actors concerning the merger of the four organizations within the city of Gothenburg, will be accounted for. Initially, emotions connected to the current state will be presented, which refers to emotions connected to events and happenings taking place in

relation to, or shortly after, the termination of the old organizations. Thereafter, emotions connected to future expectations will be described, followed by emotions relating to past experiences, rooted in the old organizations which existed before the merger. The chapter will end with a summary of the main findings.

### **Emotions connected to the current state: contentment, anger and insecurity**

#### *Positive effects of the merger*

The primary argument used by actors to describe why the merger had been conducted was that the merger should create more equality across the organization. Before the merger, the four organizations operated in different and distinct areas of the city. As a result of the merger, citizens would have equal rights to take part of the activities offered by the organization, regardless of where they lived. The merger was also described by actors to contribute to equality regarding how they in the organizations would conduct their work. One of the respondents described that “now it’s different everywhere, and instead you want to have it in one way over the entire city” (Operational Worker 5). Actors described that having one organization would result in “more uniformity” (Operational Worker 12) and a possibility to apply “an entire city perspective where you have a consensus and you do things the same way” (Operational Worker 9). Similarly, members of the board also recognized that there were gains stemming from merging the four organization, one of them described:

“I would like to say that the merger was conducted for two reasons; first, to improve efficiency. You should not have too large superstructures, but instead you should get as much of the resources as possible out to the citizen. The second is to get more uniformity across the city [...] and in our activities, so that you open up for the entire city and the citizens within it.” (Board member 1)

Since the organizations merged into one, several changes had occurred which had mainly affected the board of directors and the drafting committee. Those two groups had been up and running for a year versus half a year when this study was conducted. The greatest yet realized change associated with the merger was that there was now only one board and one drafting committee for the entire city, instead of one in each of the old organizations. Before the merger, members of these two groups had to attend a larger number of meetings, where they perceived that they were “saying the same things in every meeting we went on, which became untenable” (Member of the drafting committee 4). The new way of organizing had therefore led to savings in time and resources within these groups of the organization, as they now had received “a common arena for the same questions instead of having four arenas with the same questions” (Board member 2).

Another palpable change was that the merger had resulted in a shared budget, instead of four separate budgets, which caused reactions among several actors. One of the members of the drafting committee described that “the coordinating organizations in Gothenburg had different amounts of money or funds at their disposal. One of the organizations had a great deal more than the others, so it became an inequality or injustice between them” (Member of the Drafting Committee 3). Uniting as one organization was therefore described as a way to reduce these inequalities. Some actors, in particular at the operational level, described how they hoped

that with a shared budget there would be equal conditions for development across the city and that they might be able to draw upon more resources for developing their activities.

In the light of how actors accounted for several advantages of uniting, while some also described how they had been positively affected by the merger, the emotion of contentment could be found among actors in the newly merged organization. With the new organization, several actors expressed contentment about increased equality and savings on time and resources. They also accounted for the positive aspects behind the reason to merge. However, even though the respondents gave examples advantages arising from the merger, which to some degree could indicate an emotion of contentment, most actors rationally reasoned for these and presented arguments that were neutral, rather than emotionally infused.

#### *A lack of directives and communication*

Even though most actors were able to account for expected positive effects of the merger, several actors described that they did not know or were confused about the purpose of the merger. When being asked to describe the purpose, several actors reported that they had not received any official explanation or motivation for the reason to merge. One of the respondents described this as if “there was no clear purpose with the merger” (Operational worker 2), while another stated that “I have not seen anything pointing at this being our vision” (Member of the drafting committee 3). Operational workers in particular found it hard to describe the purpose of the merger, and therefore used vague descriptions. For example, when being asked about the purpose of the merger one of the respondents answered that “Well, you might wonder about that. Not that it is something bad, but there could be a lot of different purposes. I have just not been a part of that discussion, so it’s hard to know” (Operational Worker 11). Other operational workers used formulations like “as I have interpreted this merger, the purpose was...” (Operational Worker 14), “One could imagine that the purpose was...” (Operational Worker 4), or “I guess it [the purpose] was to get some kind of similar mindset across the city” (Operational Worker 6). This implies that although many actors had similar conceptions about the purpose with the merger, no shared framework had been upheld. Instead actors had made their own interpretations based on what they had experienced within and prior to the merger process. A number of those interviewed described how they therefore felt left out with no insight into the plans and strategies of the new organization. One of the respondents described the situation as follows:

“I have not been involved in anything. Never, not once, not a question. When I talk with others, I get to know that they feel the same way, they also experience that they do not know very much, and we do not know who to turn to with our questions. It is very hard, and it is difficult for us working here since the activities are expected to continue as usual.” (Operational worker 13)

As a result of the lack of a clear strategic direction conveyed by the managerial function, several actors at the operational level were not able to see, or had a hard time imagining, upcoming changes as an opportunity for them. Instead they described how they were confused or lacked information. Ever since the merger was conducted, operational workers described that they had been “completely left in the air” (Operational worker 8), “entered into a vacuum” (Operational worker 13) or that they “keep on waiting for directions about what to do” (Operational worker

11). For some respondents, this situation caused them to question their own role in the organization.

“I am unsure of my mandate, should I even work with this? I have a lot of questions that I must deal with right now. Like, is this okay? Should we do it like this and what should the agreements say? Should I work on this at all, shouldn't I? Should I let it go? As of now, you can say a lot of things, but you get no answer back, so you do not know, was it good or was it bad? That's it. Does anyone care or not? Sure, it can be like this in a transition phase, but you still want to know. There are many thoughts in your head.” (Operational worker 4)

The not-knowing and lack of top-down communication led some of the operational workers to become suspicious of what was happening and questioned if there was a mission that was not spoken out loud. For example, respondents pointed out how they at their location first got the message from the board that they did not have any intention of changing anything within the operations. Instead, the merger was a way for the parties to spend less time and resources on meetings. However, this had not been complied as “things did not become what they said it would be from the beginning” (Operational worker 5) which referred to the overview that was being conducted of their activities. Another worker described the will of the board to be very vague and suspected that there were unspoken intentions where they wanted to change more than they said, stating that “it will be interesting to see how much is left of our activities here in a year” (Operational worker 4).

From the findings above it appears as if several respondents demonstrated the emotion of insecurity. The poor perception about the purpose of the merger, the lack of top-down communication and doubts about one's own role and mandate caused actors to experience the emotion of insecurity. Actors in the organization, almost exclusively operational workers, did not know why the merger was conducted, what was going to happen, or how it would affect them. The emotion of insecurity could thereby be seen to affect actors in their daily work, as they did not know how to proceed with their work or act. At some places in the organization, this insecurity was described to be highly present at the office, affecting those working there: “There are budget cuts, so we know that we who are working here are going to be fewer, someone is to be removed. There was one person here that quit, because she could not handle the insecurity” (Operational Worker 14).

### *Reactions to the new leadership*

The new structure with one manager and one deputy manager for the whole city contributed to operational workers experiencing that they lacked support, communication and a connection to the leadership function. Actors described the top-down communication as poor or as if there was no existing leadership at all at this point in time. One of the respondents described how the structure of the new organization and the new ways of working was not pleasant, neither suitable for the organization:

“Nothing exists anymore. Now we are really in control by ourselves, with some contact to someone if we want to ask something. And it's not even clear what we can ask and can't ask. [...] Closeness is important to have with the people you are

leading. You cannot only see us at a meeting occasionally, then you are not a manager. It is not enough. I have never experienced anything like that before, a boss comes in and is present once a month and then nothing.” (Operational worker 8)

The irritation related to the management’s absence in the daily work was shared by other operational workers, who wished for more contact and increased presence by the manager. Actors argued that the new structure was not suitable for this type of organization which demands closeness to the manager to make rapid decision and to keep the flexibility of the organization. Previously, an important feature of each of the old organizations was the flexibility which allowed actors to act upon changes in their environment, for example regarding changes in demand for their services or new directives from the authorities. Due to a more centralized organization, the decision-making process had become longer, and actors experienced that this crucial flexibility was not possible any longer. One of the respondents described the dissatisfaction:

“I can't really see that it is getting better with just one boss, rather that it is much like it is in the authorities, that the road to the boss becomes very long. The road to a decision becomes much longer. It doesn't really fit this business; we have to be able to make decisions almost every day because it's so diverse. There must be a closeness to the manager and that person must be familiar with what we are doing, and I doubt the new manager will be able to do it, because the organization is too big.” (Operational worker 16)

At the same time, the new manager had identified the need for an intermediary that could bridge the distance between the managerial function and operational workers, whereupon plans were made to appoint local managers at some locations. This initiative, although asked for by operational workers, also generated reactions amongst actors. The new initiative caused actors to question what the merger aimed at achieving, if they were now going to fall back into old structures. One of the respondents described how “this new position causes you to become pensive about what this [the merger] actually mean, was it just a way to save money on a managerial position?” (Operational worker 9). Another argues that “it would be easy to question why the merger was to be conducted in the first place when we are now falling back into old structures” (Operational worker 16). These arguments imply that actors had begun to question the execution of the merger itself.

Respondents also described how they perceived the integration between the organizations as too slow. Shared among the majority of the operational workers and by several in the managerial function, was a frustration over the long processes that occurred when establishing new ways of working. During the merger process, a stagnant condition had become apparent in the activities of the organization. When information about the merger first was sent out, several actors experienced that the organization entered a standby mode. From this point of time until the time for the data collection, one respondent reported that no specific developments had been conducted, since they “thought it was no point making any changes, because we do not know how it will be in the future” (Operational worker 11). At the operational level, respondents expressed irritation over having to wait for further directions and not being able to move forward and develop their activities.



“I think they expect everything to keep on going as it has always done, and I have that ambition too, but it cannot go on in the same way. That does not work, because you must develop the business all the time. It is not possible to keep on doing things the same way, because the time runs away, so much is happening all the time and then you cannot be stuck in this, you must continuously develop the organization to make it work.” (Operational worker 7)

Due to the long period of waiting for further managerial actions to be taken, the enthusiasm and excitement initially perceived over opportunities for development, was for some operational workers inhibited. During time, an irritation instead spread among some actors, as they kept waiting for instructions and directives from the managerial function. This affected actors' attitudes towards the new organization negatively, as they expressed critique towards developments arising after the merger. Consequently, an emotion of anger had spread among actors, especially among operational workers, towards the execution of the merger itself. The emotion of anger caused actors to refer to how the old organizational structures were better suited for the organization. Several respondents, mainly those working at the operational level of the organization, expressed anger over the new structure, and the lack of directives and information from the managerial function. Some of the changes made could therefore be observed to evoke the emotion of anger amongst actors in the organization.

### **Emotions connected to the future: hope and fear**

#### *Expectations about the future*

During the interviews, actors vividly described what future developments they were expecting from the merger. Overall, most actors described how they in some way anticipated that the merger would bring positive effects for them in the future. In their daily work operational workers envisioned how they would gain from the unification by enhancing their knowledge, increasing their network and resources, as well as achieving a clearer structure for them to rely upon. For example, respondents described how they expected that the merger would cause “the exchange between the organizations to become easier” (Operational worker 3) and that the “implementation processes in the organization might become easier as there will be fewer steps to go through” (Member of the Drafting Committee 3). Some actors also argued that the merger might lead to the organization becoming a more important actor nationally, since becoming larger would lead to the organization having a “stronger voice to use in the coordinating sphere” (Operational worker 7). The merged organization was also described to provide actors with an opportunity to reconsider current constellations and make improvements in current ways of working. One of the respondents described the following expectations:

“I think it will be exciting, it feels like all the possibilities in the world exists for us. Going to work nowadays is a little exciting. And, now this opportunity begins where we might be able to influence and change things. [...] I have noticed that there are some things here that would be beneficial to change, and now you can bring this stuff forward by using the argument that “now there are new times”.” (Operational worker 11)

Moreover, some operational workers anticipated that the merger would bring changes that would contribute to a clearer structure for how to enroll individuals into their offered activities. This was possible as the management was developing a framework for what criteria had to be fulfilled for being admitted. Operational workers also expressed that they longed for a network creation through which they could exchange knowledge and experiences in their daily work. These respondents described how they felt lonely in their role and hoped that now when the organization had become bigger, it would be possible to establish contact with other actors in similar roles, with whom they could exchange knowledge and experiences in their daily work.

As this argumentation show, increased collaborations across the new organization could bring benefits for several actors working at the operational level. With the creation of a new, joint organization, the emotion of hope had been raised that the merger would result in access to more resources and knowledge, clearer structure and networks with other operational workers. This emotion was driven by different desires about what the future might hold and created a sense of longing for the opportunities of development which were made possible through the merger. The emotion of hope therefore contributed to a willingness amongst actors in the organization to participate in the new organizational order in order to benefit from these potential positive effects of the merger.

#### *Concerns about the future*

While the merger caused some actors to look forward to future developments of the organization, the merger also caused actors to envision the future with less desirable effects. Several of the operational workers described how they perceived that their position, site or practices became threatened or questioned by the new management, resulting in an anxiety related to the future. For example, one actor expressed concerns that “the soul of the organization might be lost” (Operational worker 14) as the organization became bigger and more centralized, while another argued that the decision to merge and the new perspective of a unified-city in the organization, interfered with the purpose of coordinating activities:

“If you say that now the whole city is going to be equal, the whole of Gothenburg, that was not the purpose with the legislation. The purpose of the legislation was that we would meet the local needs, and they do not look the same across the city.”  
(Operational worker 8)

The importance of keeping the local perspective was stressed by all actors during the interviews, at the same time as they worried that it would be lost in the future. Although the managerial function emphasized the importance of keeping a local perspective, arguing that “the vision [of the new organization] is to become more strategic at the same time as the local perspective is preserved” (Manager), losing the local perspective was still one of the greatest concerns raised amongst operational workers. Since the city is demographically different, residents had varying needs for rehabilitation, which required activities to be designed specifically for those citizens. The tailored operations and local anchorage were what operational workers described as the core of the organization. Before, a belief had been that anyone could come up with an idea for an activity, even the citizens themselves. It was therefore argued that practical ways of working from the bottom and up risked being lost when the local perspective became less noticeable, as the new organization turned out to be more centralized. Moreover, actors expressed that a lot

of the organization's knowledge was locally sited and therefore risked being lost when moving towards a more centralized organization.

“I really hope that there may be some nuances behind it so that it will not become too rigid. The city's residents look a little different and need different rehabilitation. There, we must help to nuance how the assignments can look for each target group so that you do not say that it is a homogeneous group that needs rehabilitation, because it is not. We risk losing this uniqueness of tailored operations.” (Member of the drafting committee 2)

“If we have one model for the city of Gothenburg, it risks being too similar and it will be difficult to consider the local conditions. Therefore, I have not been so positive about this at all. I have not obstructed or so, but I have not supported the idea either.” (Operational worker 3)

Hence, actors worried about whether the new conditions that followed from the merger would have a negative impact on their work. A significant number of respondents also anticipated how the new manager and the deputy manager would find it difficult to understand the activities that existed in the organization. For example, during the following year after the four organizations merged, the new manager would conduct an overview of the activities in the organization, which would be evaluated before further decisions were acted upon. However, several respondents did not believe that those conducting the overview were knowledgeable enough to do it correctly, whereupon they argued that there was a risk that activities which had worked fine and produced good results in the past risked being terminated, along with those who had not worked as well. One of the respondents described the situation as follows:

“What I might fear is that you throw the baby out with the bath water, that the review is performed and then you stand there and say “okay, what happened here? Now we have removed things that would have been good to maintain”.” (Operational worker 12)

These descriptions included actors' different perceptions about how the future would unfold as a result of having merged the four organization into one. Actors descriptions of these potentially negative future effects manifested the emotion of fear. They feared that certain important features of the old federations would be lost and that activities which had worked fine in the past would be terminated. Although these fears had not been realized at the time of the data collection, but rather concerned expectations of the future, fear appeared to work as a way to oppose the new organization or undermine its legitimacy by stating that the new perspective was not appropriate for the organization.

### **Emotions connected to past experiences: shame and pride**

#### *Conscious inaccuracies*

During the construction of the new organizational order, respondents with their belongings at three of the old organizations had felt that their ways of working was not correct according to the new regime. Instead, they perceived that it was the ways the fourth organization operated that was advocated. Consequently, actors across all locations perceived the fourth organization

as the headquarter, where actors stated that “this is the headquarter” (Operational Worker 6) or “it is easy to understand why it became the headquarter, the reason for that is because it is where the decision-makers are situated” (Board Member 3). The perception of this location being the headquarter was enhanced by the fact that members of the organization were still separated from each other physically as they operated from the same facilities as prior to the merger.

The operational workers that were not situated at the headquarter expressed how they felt as if they had been doing things the wrong way in the past, and even if they were still conducting their activities similarly to before the merger, an awareness of them doing the wrong thing was present. Some actors in these three locations experienced themselves as being judged unsuccessful. For example, two operational workers described how they in their working group were under the perception that they were currently working in a way that would not be allowed to continue, since the new manager had mentioned that it was a problem that the ways of working differed between the organizations and that this were to change in the future. These statements caused actors to perceive that they had transcended norms that the management aimed at establishing. Hence, they were aware that this would be terminated or adjusted in a future stage.

“We work in one way here that we think works and of course everyone has an interest for that to remain, but you are also aware that it may not be like that since we have activities that we run in a way which many organizations do not. [...] It has been mentioned that we run activities in a way you are not supposed to do, even though there is a reason why we do that, and it is because of the way the city district looks.” (Operational worker 9)

“It has been mentioned that it is wrong to conduct activities the way we have, you are not allowed to work like that. That is a typical example of how it clashes with how we have worked.” (Operational worker 4)

The descriptions presented by actors where they expressed that they had been operating in a manner which would not continue embodied the emotion of shame. Actors expressed, through the emotion of shame, an awareness that they had transcended norms of the new organization. Consequently, actors had begun to express shame towards past practices and had thereby begun to depart from their old organizations.

#### *Greatness of the old organization*

Although actors with belongings in three of the old organizations showed an awareness of them doing something wrong, they still talked positively about their old organizations and past accomplishments. In different ways, these respondents described how they in their organization had been extra successful in certain areas, how things they did was unique or how they in some sense differed from the others. Expressions, such as “we had successfully understood the complexity and the need of the citizen” (Member of drafting committee 1) and statements like “how good we were doing that” (Board Member 3) frequently occurred during the interviews. One respondent described how the working environment at their site had been thriving and rewarding, whereupon “many people actively applied and wanted to work here because they felt that it was such a stimulating place” (Operational worker 3).

Actors belonging to the old organization which through the merger became considered to be the headquarter, also talked happily about their organization and how their ways of working were transferred into the new organization. During the interviews it became clear that these actors was satisfied with them having executed their work in a way which was embraced and promoted by the management in the new organization. One of the respondents describes their past accomplishments:

“We worked well together, and we were able to show good results. We are the district that have produced the highest number of people getting out in self-sufficiency, and who works most actively with coordination and who got the meaning [with the law].” (Member of the drafting committee 2)

One of the respondents, also belonging to the headquarter, described that “in hindsight, I think that we kept track on things better than others have, like on the economy and such. I think that must have created a sense of security” (Operational worker 10). Another worker continued along the same track, acknowledging that they at this site “have had everything under control and in order, which they have not in other places” (Operational worker 6). One example of this was the execution of different agreements between parties in each of the four old organization, which had not been conducted similarly. This was, at the time of the data collection, conducted in accordance with how the fourth of the organizations did it:

“Here, there has been legal agreements, my boss have signed a contract for how much I am here which has not existed at the other places. In other locations maybe you have trusted each other’s words more. That is not sustainable. You have been working on old merits and you notice now when you shut down that accountants react and wonder where is the agreement for this? So, this is what I mean with a bit of a clash. Now we redo and do things correctly.” (Operational worker 6)

Evidently, the memory of the old organization evoked the emotion of pride among members, regardless of which of the old organization these actors belonged to before the merger. When describing their past, all claimed the uniqueness of their organization or how they had done things in a successful way. It could also be observed how the emotion of pride was especially strong among actors belonging to the organization now considered as the headquarter, as their ways of working was made use of in the new organization.

### **Summary of findings**

To summarize, several different emotions was displayed by actors in the new organization. Actors’ positive emotions of the merger was to a great extent connected to hopes about the future and contentment over what was experienced as positive effects of the merger. These emotions caused actors to perceive the new organization as beneficial for them. The emotion of contentment was to a greater extent derived from actors at a managerial level, such as members of the board of directors. However, this research showed that all actors could recognize benefits from merging, although those were sometimes described in a neutral, rational way. The emotion of pride was found among actors and was mainly connected to past

accomplishments in the old organizations. Although having merged, actors still talked about the history of the old organizations.

Negative emotions were to a greater extent connected to the current state of the merger and the comparison between the new organization and their past experiences. Those negative emotions included insecurity and anger, whereupon the emotion of shame and fear were connected to past and future expectations. Anger and insecurity were mainly linked to top-management communication and the new structures of the organization, which differed from previous ways of working. It was mainly operational workers who expressed these negative emotions, implying that the merger had affected them in what they considered to be an unfavorable manner. The emotion of fear was evoked as a result of actors expecting negative consequences to occur in the future as a result of the merger. A concern shared by all actors was the fear of the local perspective being lost, where some feared that activities would be shut down due to a lack of knowledge or due to budget constraints. Shame was perceived by those actors who did not belong to the headquarter and arose as a result of them being informed that their ways of working were wrong according to the management.

Consequently, in this merger process, actors experienced positive and negative emotions simultaneously. For example, several respondents displayed positive emotions concerning the advantages of merging, while they at the same time experienced the emotion of anger towards the new organization and its structure. These findings demonstrate how the merger process evoked different kind of emotions within the same individual. Consequently, through these varying emotions, the responses towards the merger differed.

## **Analysis**

The empirical description above showed that a variety of emotions were apparent among actors at the time of the data collection, and that an actor could express both positive and negative emotions simultaneously. By scrutinizing the emotional discourses presented by organizational actors in a merger process, this section will discuss how emotions contribute to activities of shaping an institution within a merger process. This section will also discuss the implications of these emotions, thereby adding to the ongoing discussion of how actors' affect the merger process.

### **Creation of a new institution**

Institutional creation is achieved when actors manage to construct a new collective identity (Zilber, 2017). Several researchers (e.g. Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016; Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019) have found that an institution can be created through the usage of positive emotional discourses. In a merger, this implies that the merger process would be promoted by actor's usage of positive narratives. The positive emotional arguments displayed by actors in this case study were emotions of hope and contentment towards the new organization. Similar to previous studies (e.g. Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019), it could be observed how these emotions expressed by actors served to facilitate the creation of a new institution.

The emotion of hope was expressed by actors through their desire to become a stronger actor, expand collaborations across the organization, and an eagerness to make improvements to the organization. Likewise, to the findings by Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019), the emotion

of hope thereby encouraged persistence in the change process by focusing on the belief that the merger would lead to positive effects in the future. As such, actors used mental pictures of future developments to confirm the new organization. The emotion of hope thereby became important for the creation of an institution, as this emotion served to justify the purpose of the merger. Similar to the findings of Moisander, Hirsto and Fahy (2016), such justification and legitimization became an important activity for the creation of an institution. The emotion of hope may have been especially important for the creation of a new institution in this case study, where the merger process expanded over several years, as hope according to Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019) enables persistence in the change process. This finding thereby suggests that the emotion of hope is crucial for the creation of a new institution when the merger process expands over a long period of time.

Contentment was expressed among most organizational actors who, through these emotions, expressed satisfaction towards the merger. The new organization was believed to reduce previous inequalities and injustices across the city and the different locations. Differences between the organizations regarding the budget and the offered activities was expressed as the root to these injustices. For those benefiting from a shared budget the merger constituted a gain and could therefore be compared to how Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) describe rewards being used to enforce the new institution. By enforcing changes that are perceived as positive, actors started to use positive discourses concerning the merger. Hence, it appears as if the actors through these arguments were engaging in the creation of an institution. This finding is similar to the study by Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019) who found that actors, by drawing on injustices and inequalities, engaged in emotion work aimed to disrupt unfavorable ways of working. By expressing contentment towards reduced inequalities and injustices actors justified the merger. Using discourses focusing upon positive effects and future expectations of the merger thus confirmed the new organization, which constituted actors' engagement in institutional work of creation.

Even though emotional arguments regarding both contentment and hope could be observed in this case study, several arguments in favor of the merger were formulated in a neutral and rational manner, rather than constituting a strong personal engagement. This lowers the possibility for institutional creation, as an emotional investment is necessary in order to create a new institution (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Although actors may see advantages of a new institution, advantages alone do not necessarily make actors work as enthusiastic defenders of the new institution (ibid). This was noteworthy in how actors used rational arguments to describe the advantages with the new organization, rather than displaying a strong emotional engagement towards the new organization. However, despite low emotional engagement, the first steps towards institutional creation might have been taken through actors' arguments serving to justify and legitimize the merger, which could be found in the emotional arguments of hope and contentment.

### **Disrupting the old institutions**

Some emotional arguments expressed by actors in the merger process could be traced to active work of institutional disruption, which according to Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) implies an undermining and disassociation with institutionalized assumptions, practices and beliefs. The negative emotions of shame and anger could in this case study be connected to institutional

disruption, since these emotional arguments resulted in actors distancing themselves from the previous institutions and their practices, in favor of the new organization.

The emotion of shame was evident among actors at three of the four previous organization who had been made aware by the management that they had been operating in a manner which would not be allowed to continue in the new organization. This finding aligns with the study by Creed et al., (2014) who found that actors guard institutions by evoking the emotion of shame among other actors. Through shame, these guardians show the boundaries of what is acceptable within the institution (ibid). In this study, this became evident through the managerial action of stating what was right and wrong, which caused actors to experience the emotion of shame, as they became aware that they had not acted in accordance with organizational expectations. Actors, due to their desire to preserve social bonds, will attempt to act in alignment to the rules and norms of the institution (Creed et al., 2014; Gill & Burrow, 2018). Consequently, through emotions of shame, previously institutionalized practices became questioned during the merger process. This changing mindset would, according to Wicks (2001), contribute to undermine institutional mechanisms, thereby disrupting the old institutions. Thus, the managerial action of stating what was right and wrong evoked the emotion of shame among actors, which contributed to the disruption of old practices. Unlike the study by Creed et al. (2014), the findings of this study therefore suggest that the emotion of shame was connected to institutional disruption rather than institutional maintenance. This strengthens the argument presented by Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019) that emotions are context-dependent and varies depending on the situation.

In this research, the emotion of anger was also found to be connected to actors' engagement in institutional disruption. Several operational workers expressed anger towards the current situation as they perceived that the merger had brought a stagnant condition into the organization. These actors argued that too little change had occurred in the merger process, whereupon they were not satisfied with having to conduct work and act similar as prior to the merger. Since institutional disruption occurs when actors elude existing institutions (Laurell & Sandström, 2016), actors' anger, arising from the wish to end old norms and habits, could be connected to the engagement in institutional disruption. Actors' descriptions of how they experienced a stagnant condition also point to the need to have speed in the implementation process, referred to within the merger literature as a decisive feature for the success of a merger (Angwin, 2004; Homburg & Bucerius, 2006; Bauer & Matzler, 2014). In the organization subject for this study, it appears as if increased speed in the merger process could serve as a tool to reduce emotions of anger towards the new institution, which may strengthen the attachment towards the new organization. Consequently, through emotions of anger directed towards the stagnant condition, actors undermined the mechanisms which constituted their old institutional values, thereby engaging in what Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) refers to as institutional disruption. Unlike the emotion of shame, this finding confirms that actors engage in institutional disruption due to a dissatisfaction to the current institution as suggested by Zietsma and Lawrence (2010).

Literature on the merger process suggest that for actors to commit to the new organization, their attachment towards the old organization must be weakened (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Marks, 2007). Actors displaying the emotion of anger and shame towards old practices thereby caused actors to deviate from their old organizations, as they undermined



institutionalized assumptions and practices. Consequently, the implications of actors' engagement in institutional work of disruption within the merger process contributed to promote the new organization.

### **Maintenance of the old institutions**

Institutional maintenance is achieved through activities serving to sustain and reproduce the current institution (Micelotta & Washington, 2013) and was the most commonly occurring form of institutional work in this case study. Actors in the organization drew on several emotions which could be associated to institutional maintenance, where the majority was negative emotions concerning critique towards the new organization, in favor of the old institutions. The emotions which were found to maintain the old institution were emotions of anger, insecurity, fear and pride.

The emotion of anger took its expression in actors' critique towards a lack of communication and leadership, and too long decision paths. Actors utilized anger due to their belief that the new organization and new ways of organizing did not suit the purpose with the organization. Instead, actors argued that it was crucial to make quick decisions which required a closeness to the manager. Although actors could see advantages with the merger, they created incommensurables between old and new practices by arguing that the new organization and new ways of organizing did not suit the purpose with the organization, likewise to the study by Rainelli Weiss and Huault (2016). Consequently, by ensuring the incoherency between old and new practices, actors legitimized previous practices and could thereby continue to turn to their former manager for questions, which ensured that old practices could be sustained in the organization. Through emotions of anger, actors could thereby resist the consequences arising from the merger and could, similarly to the study by Rainelli Weiss and Huault (2016), ensure that the institution was maintained.

Moreover, although the management responded to the critique of lacking an intermediary between them and the operational workers, and planned on assigning local managers at some locations, operational workers expressed anger towards this initiative as well. Reintroducing similar positions as before the merger made several actors question why the merger had been conducted in the first place. Actors' responses to these change initiatives are similar to the findings by Goodrick, Jarvis and Reay (2019), who showed that discursive institutional work adapts in response to organizational changes. Despite efforts from the management to adjust to operational workers emotional arguments, actors raised new arguments, and thereby continued to engage in the maintenance of their institutions. These anger arguments point to the importance of understanding what perceptions and meaning actors provide to actions, which has been highlighted by several scholars (e.g. Zilber, 2002; Norbäck, 2019). In accordance with literature within the field of institutional work (e.g. Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011; Riedy, Kent & Thomson, 2019), these findings demonstrate that through everyday actions, intentions and beliefs, actors participate in shaping the institution. In order to facilitate the merger process, this finding suggest that management needs to pay attention to the meanings underlying actors' emotional arguments.

The emotion of insecurity appeared as a result of a vague course of direction for the new organization as it was described by actors to lack a clear purpose and vision. Because of the insecurity towards the purpose of the merger actors were uncertain about their mandate and

what was acceptable within the new organization. Furthermore, operational workers questioned whether there was a hidden agenda behind the decision to merge, since they had received contradictory information from the managerial function. Consequently, these actors experienced difficulties relating to and accepting the new organization. These findings can be put in contrast to the study by Moisander, Hirsto and Fahy (2016) who demonstrate the importance of establishing legitimacy for a change effort to be accepted and promoted by actors. The fact that the top-down communication was perceived as insufficient among actors resulted in an insecurity and distrust towards the managerial function. Thus, as suggested within the merger literature (e.g. De Noble, Gustafsson & Hergert, 1988; Epstein, 2004; Osarenkhoe & Hyder, 2015), consistent and honest communication is a decisive factor for success in the merger process, whereupon improved communication might have caused actors to legitimize the merger. These findings show that when the vision and communication is perceived as insufficient, actors instead turn towards and advocates old organizational structures and practices, which constitutes the work of institutional maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Micelotta & Washington, 2013).

Fear has been shown to trigger institutional maintenance when actors are exposed to threats and violence (Gill & Burrow, 2018). Despite a lack of threats and violence, this study found that actors engaged in institutional maintenance of their old institutions through emotions of fear. The emotion of fear connected to future developments was primarily expressed through argumentations regarding the importance of keeping the local perspective in the new organization. By drawing on the fear of losing the local perspective, and thereby losing what they perceived to be the foundation of the organization, actors questioned the decision to merge. Instead of accepting the change, actors drew on their past experiences and legitimized an engagement in institutional maintenance through arguments regarding the necessity of remaining the local perspective. This finding is similar to the results of the study by Norbäck (2019) who showed that actors can engage in maintenance work by applying their history and heritage onto a new situation. Actors did not absorb the fact that the managerial function also shared this concern and tried to reduce the risk that the local perspective would be lost as a consequence of the merger. Instead, emotions of fear caused actors to disassociate from the new organization by constructing the idea of the local perspective into a symbol for what constituted the organization. Thereby, the myths, symbols and rituals of the old organizations were sustained, resulting in institutional maintenance in accordance with the suggestions made by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006).

Additionally, the emotion of pride was apparent among actors who frequently referred to their old organizations by drawing upon previous accomplishments, old ways of working or what characterized them prior to the merger. By expressing pride towards their past organization, these actors maintained an attached to old practices which allowed the myths, rituals and perceptions of the old institution to remain uncontested, which constitute institutional maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Whereas the acclimatization of a new organization is dependent on compatibilities in traditions and practices (Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019) and a reduction of intergroup differences (Olie, 1994; Bartels et al., 2006), actors clinging to their old organization reinforced an us-versus-them situation. This contributed to clear boundaries between the old institutions and its retention. Actors engagement in institutional maintenance was further reinforced when the

practices of one of the four previous organizations, by actors referred to as the headquarter, was premiered by the new management. Consequently, the emotion of pride resulted in the sustention of the boundaries between the old organization, thereby enabling the maintenance of these institutions.

Despite efforts from the management to create a shared institution, the most commonly occurring emotions at the time of the data collection was connected to institutional maintenance. Through emotions of anger, insecurity, fear and pride, actors engaged in the preservation of their old organizations. These emotions constitute an example of how an institution requires the active work of actors, in accordance with the literature on institutional work (e.g. Oliver, 1992; Hampel, Lawrence & Tracey, 2017) by illustrating how the emotions expressed by actors affected and shaped the institution.

### **The complexities associated with the merger process**

An analysis of the emotional arguments expressed by actors within the merger process showed how they mainly engaged in work to maintain their old institutions, although some activities connected to institutional creation and disruption could also be traced, as illustrated in figure 2. Actors' engagement in institutional maintenance implies that although the managerial function tried to integrate actors in a shared institution, they failed to create a commitment towards the new organization. This can be traced to actors perceiving the communication and leadership to be insufficient, whereas actors turned to their old structures and practices. The implications of actors' engagement in institutional maintenance within the merger process was that this form of institutional work caused actors to preserve their old organizations, instead of committing to and creating a new, shared institution. By increasing the communication and leadership between the managerial function and operational workers, the emotions connected to institutional maintenance may be reduced while emotions connected to institutional creation or institutional disruption of the old institutions may be enhanced. This finding aligns with previous studies within the field of institutional work, which show that positive emotions (Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019) and a reduction of negative emotions (Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016) facilitate the creation of an institution.

From the emotional arguments displayed by operational workers, it became apparent that actors simultaneously expressed arguments containing positive and negative emotions concerning the merger process. In the merger process, these emotional arguments shaped the institution in different ways, as they contributed to actors' simultaneous engagement in institutional maintenance, creation and disruption. This strengthens the importance of understanding actors' emotional discourses which affects the shaping of an institution within a change process, in accordance with previous studies (e.g. Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016; Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019). The findings of this study show that it is possible for actors to, in one situation engage in institutional creation, while they in the next may strive to preserve old institutional values by engaging in institutional maintenance. The emotional range of individuals may therefore span over different types of institutional work performed simultaneously as both the old and new organization may be promoted at the same time. This finding shows how actors' engagement in institutional work is an on-going and complex process.

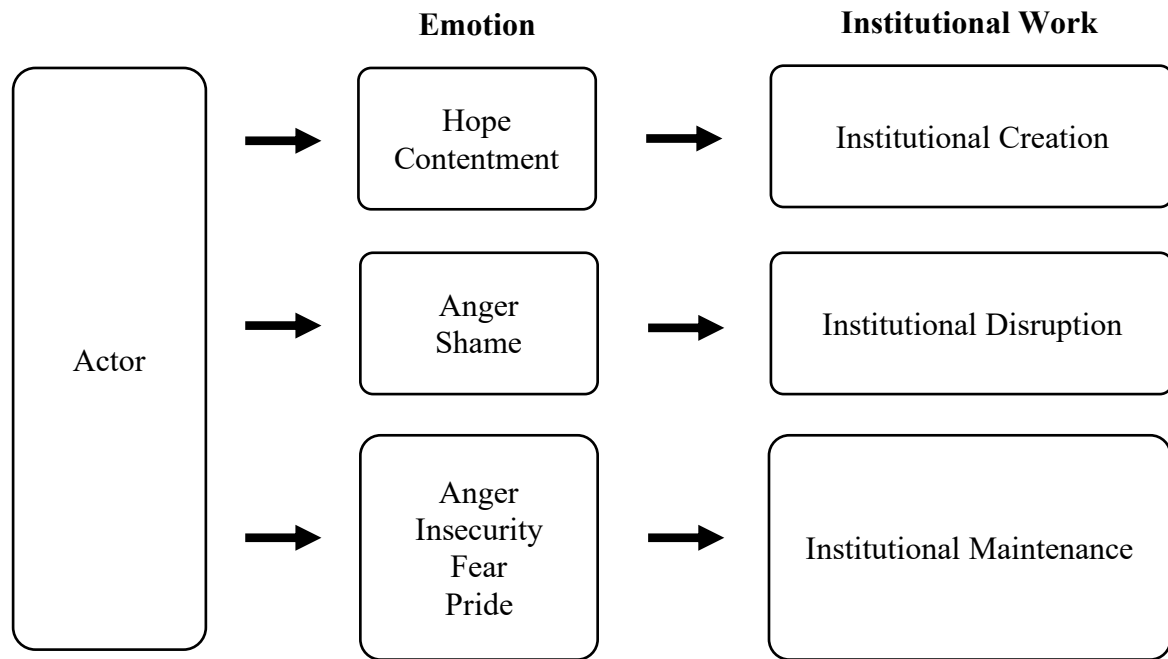


Figure 2. Actor's emotions and their connection to institutional work

The contradictory character of actors' emotions became visible for example when operational workers expressed hope over the changes to come, while they simultaneously expressed anger when changes were realized. In accordance with previous studies (e.g. Zilber, 2002; Norbäck, 2019), this finding indicates that actors' interpretations are at the core of institutional work. By acknowledging that actors' interpretations affect the engagement in institutional work, it becomes evident that actors may not act in a predictable or rational manner. Thus, by recognizing that humans are emotional by nature (Creed et al., 2014), it is possible to gain a deeper understanding for the actions undertaken by actors. By scrutinizing the merger process through a micro-perspective, insights about the complexities associated with actors' engagement in institutional work have been achieved.

## Conclusion

While most of the existing literature on mergers focuses upon financial outcomes (Healy, Palepu & Ruback, 1992; Harford, 2005; Renneboog & Vansteenkiste, 2019), this research address human aspects related to the merger process. By examining actors' emotions at a specific point in time of the merger, this research has offered insights into the experiences of individuals, while they are undergoing a change process. This study has contributed to the knowledge about which emotions are present within a merger process and what role these emotions have on activities of shaping an institution. Thus, this study adds to the existing literature on mergers by shedding light on what Sarala, Vaara and Junni (2019) refers to as a micro-perspective on the human aspects related to the process of a merger. These findings thereby complement and extends existing literature on merger processes (e.g. Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Epstein, 2004; Bodner & Capron, 2018).

The findings of this study illustrate that actors experienced several different emotions simultaneously in the merger process. These emotional arguments entailed actors to engage in varying forms of institutional work which influenced the institution in different ways. Whereas

scholars within the institutional work perspective recently started to incorporate emotions into their analyses (e.g. Voronov & Vince, 2012; Creed et al., 2014; Gill & Burrow, 2018), this research extends the knowledge about how emotions are connected to actors' engagement in institutional work. Complementing the studies about how actors may use discourses strategically to appeal to certain emotions (Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016), and how discourses in the form of written institutional work displays emotions (Goodrick, Jarvis & Reay, 2019), this study contributes to the understanding of how emotions, disclosed through emotional arguments, is connected to different forms of institutional work.

Suggested by the findings of this article, hope and contentment contributed to the creation of a new institution by confirming and justifying new orientations. Shame and anger were observed to contribute to the disruption of old institutions, as these emotions caused actors to detach from their old organizations. The majority of the emotions apparent in this study, however, contributed to the maintenance of old institutional values. The emotions of anger, insecurity, fear and pride caused actors to reproduce and sustain old institutional values. Moreover, actors experienced several different emotions simultaneously and continuously reacted to changes initiated by the management, which served to facilitate different forms of institutional work at the same time. This finding points to the complexity associated with grasping the actions taken by actors, since actors' emotions may be contradictory, causing them to engage in various forms of institutional work simultaneously. Thus, this study has illustrated how actors' engagement in institutional work is an on-going and complex process.

### **Implications for practice**

As suggested by the findings of this study, the emotional discourses displayed by actors will result in different behaviors and attitudes which affects how the institution is shaped within a merger process. This research therefore urges to an awareness that mergers constitute an emotional process for involved actors. The managerial function therefore needs to recognize and be alert to how human emotions may bring implications for the shaping of an institution in a merger, which in turn may affect the integration of actors. Despite the importance of managers providing support and communication towards their employees (De Noble, Gustafsson & Hergert, 1988; Epstein, 2004; Osarenkhoe & Hyder, 2015), a key recommendation is that managers become aware that purely logical arguments for the decision to merge may not necessarily be sufficient to influence actors' engagement in a specific type of institutional work. Instead, emotions should be appealed to so that an emotional attachment can be created towards the new institution. Moreover, management needs to bear in mind that the shaping of an institution is an ongoing and complex process, where each initiative taken by the managerial function is responded to by actors' engagement in institutional work. Consequently, creating a new, shared institution within a merger process requires the managerial function to continuously respond to the interpretations and emotions provided by actors. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that by obtaining an increased understanding for the emotions experienced by actors within a merger process, the merger can be better managed.

### **Future studies**

Further consideration should be given to the human issues related to the shaping of an institution within a merger process. Whereas this research contributes to the knowledge of which emotions

are present in a merger process and how these affect the institution, more awareness could be gained about the possible antecedents of emotions related to the merger process. It would be insightful, both from a theoretical perspective and for practical implications of how to manage a merger process, to investigate the practical way in which emotions could be appealed to. Future studies could therefore focus upon how certain actions or events may trigger different emotions among actors. While this study examines emotions experienced within a merger process during a limited amount of time, future studies should aim at grasping the complexity of actor's emotions through a longitudinal study. Through this method, emotions can be observed as they arise and followed as they are developed and altered, thereby increasing the understanding of how emotions evolve during the merger process. This could contribute to an increased understanding of the connection between institutional work and emotions. Deeper knowledge could therefore be gained by conducting more comprehensive studies which involves interviewing a larger number of actors, from several different mergers, over a longer period of time. Through this study, we hope to inspire future research within the area of mergers and emotions.

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