

# **How do we know who we are when the dust settles?**

**The experience of organisational identity  
formation post-merger**

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*by*

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# ABSTRACT

Poorly planned and executed merger integrations may result in destroying intrinsic value associated with a highly identified workforce, due to an inability to foster post-merger identification during the integration phase (Riketta, 2005; Dukerich, Goldenm, and Shortell, 2002). This, together with the notion that the way in which employees interpret and enact the merger ultimately shapes and realise the intended merger (Guitte and Vandembemt, 2013; Balogun and Johnson, 2005; 2004; Balogun, 2006), reinforces the call for leaders to pro-actively consider both the 'hard' and 'soft' elements of a merger integration (Giessner, Ullrich and van Dick, 2011; Mc Donald, Coulthard, and de Lang, 2005). This research set out to understand and explore how a merger integration experience affects the way members of a legacy client services organisation, identify and engage with the new post-merger organisation, in order to enhance the merger integration process.

I positioned this study as a longitudinal internal action research project that adopts a three-stage conceptual research process model, which allows for the meditation of theory and practice components, in order to deliver theory-practice linkages (Tenkasi and Hay, 2004) over a 3.5-year period. The project execution phase embraces an interpretative phenomenology approach (Van Manen, 1990), whilst also involving employees in the co-construction of the research by incorporating co-operative inquiry group meetings and collaborative management research practices (Canterino, Shani, Coghlan and Brunelli, 2016). Quantitative data stemming from three annual Employee Engagement Survey responses further augment the qualitative data gathered.

The outcome of the first action research cycle, i.e. a conceptual process model that illustrates the cyclical journey employees experienced during the merger, as well as nine phenomenological themes emerging from the qualitative data analysis, which provides a rich description of the essence of the shared experience, informed the collaborative approach in the second action research cycle. The latter resulted in more subtle influencing activities, as the research steered the organisation towards a collaborative organisational development approach, and highlights my own journey as a self-perceived marginalised employee-researcher, towards an empowered peripheral insider-researcher.

I contribute to actionable knowledge by proposing two conceptual models aimed at assisting leaders to better plan and execute merger integrations. The first model suggests the need for leaders to view a merger integration as a system of three inter-related cycles, with each cycle representing a specific state of sensemaking, and emotions, associated with the fluid process of identification, and, as such, each requiring specific actions to enhance the merger experience through facilitated identification and engagement. The second constitutes a four-level merger integration model for leaders, suggesting specific leadership attributes behaviours and actions needed to support successful and sustainable merger integrations. Furthermore, the study also supports and builds on the extant literature, in the areas of organisational identity, merger and acquisition and sensemaking.

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## **Glossary of terms**

AR – Action Research

CED – Central, Enduring and Distinct

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

CIO – Chief Innovation Officer

CREAD – Central, Recognisable, Enduring, Adaptable, and Distinct

CSM – Critical Sense Making

CMR – Collaborative Management Research

DBA – Doctorate of Business Administration

EES – Employee Engagement Survey

M&A – Merger and Acquisitions

MBA – Masters of Business Administration

MSc – Masters of Science

IAR – Internal Action Research

OD – Organisational Development

OI – Organisational Identity

# CHAPTER ONE

# 1 INTRODUCTION

---

Organisational identification is viewed as an important psychological state that mirrors employee's attachment to their place of work, and in a sense define 'who they are'. For some employees, their organisation can be the principal basis of their social identity (Hogg and Terry, 2000) and consequently their strongest source of self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This sense of belonging, or identifying with the organisation, is accompanied by some emotional and value significance to the employee, as well as a significant level of psychological safety (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, and Bacharach, 2000). Therefore, unsurprisingly, high organisational identification correlates positively with increased job-satisfaction, performance, citizenship behaviour, and decreased absenteeism and turnover rates (Riketta, 2005).

Mergers and acquisitions (M&A) on the other hand are associated with a range of negative psychological consequences: lower post-merger identification; decreased job-satisfaction, collaboration and interpersonal trust; and increases in conflict, discrimination, stress and turnover (Riketta and van Dick, 2005; Terry, 2001; Ullrich and van Dick, 2007). A key contributing factor for these findings is the significant level of uncertainty and anxiety that accompany merger integrations, which is arguably exacerbated by both individual and collective existential angst concerning the extent to which the current group identity will survive. Highly identified members of an organisation, in particular, may perceive a merger as threatening to their sense of 'who they are', and mergers may confuse the stability and endurance of their current identity conception (Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, and Pruyn, 2006).

Despite the repeated call for organisations to prioritise organisational, human and cultural elements pertaining to the merger (Goreham, 2011; Marks and Mirvis, 1998; 1982), and in particular for leaders to focus on minimising the immense and far-reaching negative psychological effects of the merger (Cartwright and Cooper, 1990), employee perspectives have generally been relegated to the background. Given that even the mere announcement of a merger can increase uncertainty and fears amongst employees (Giessner, Ullrich and van Dick, 2011), it is particularly astonishing that leaders give little attention to how employees relate to each other, and to the new organisation, during the merger integration-planning phase (Mc Donald, Coulthard, and de Lang, 2005; Cartwright and Cooper, 1990).

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that historically approximately only half of all M&As are said to be successful (Schneider, 2003; Gadiesh, Ormiston and Rovit, 2003; Gadiesh and Ormiston, 2002; Kaplan, 2002; Stanwick and Stanwick, 2001; Covin, Kolenko, Sigtler and Tudor, 1997; Weber, Shenkar and Raveh, 1996).

Whatever the reason for M&As not delivering their intended synergies, it is clear from research that it is not only financial and operational performance that is negatively affected by poorly managed integration efforts (Galpin, et al. 2010). Poorly performed integrations may result in destroying intrinsic value associated with a highly identified workforce, in either or both of the pre-merger entities (Riketta, 2005; Dukerich, et al. 2002). An inability to foster post-merger identification during the integration, and to prevent potentially long-lasting damage to the relationships between the merging organisations and its employees, may undermine the value creation intended by the merger. Thus, it stands to reason that leaders should pay particular attention to designing and implementing integration processes that foster early identification and engagement between merging partners (Giessner, et al. 2011).

This research contributes to the research stream that explores the nature of organisational identification, or identity sensemaking from the 'change recipients' perspective. It builds on the notion that although environmental forces are most likely to initiate M&A activities, it is the way in which employees interpret and enact the merger that shapes and realises the intended merger (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005; Balogun, 2006; Guitte and Vandenbempt, 2013). The purpose of this internal action research (IAR) project was to explore, describe and positively influence and impact the merger experience, and the essence of the organisational identity (OI) formation process, as shared by professional client service employees during a 3.5-year longitudinal study. For the purpose of this study, organisational identification is said to occur when organisational members define themselves, at least partly, in terms of what the organisation is perceived to represent (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004).

The following chapter sets out to provide the organisational context of the merger, followed by briefly situating the research in the literature, before outlining the research aims and research question. A short section situates me, as researcher, in the merger context, before highlighting the value of this research. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the structure of this report.

## 1.1 THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

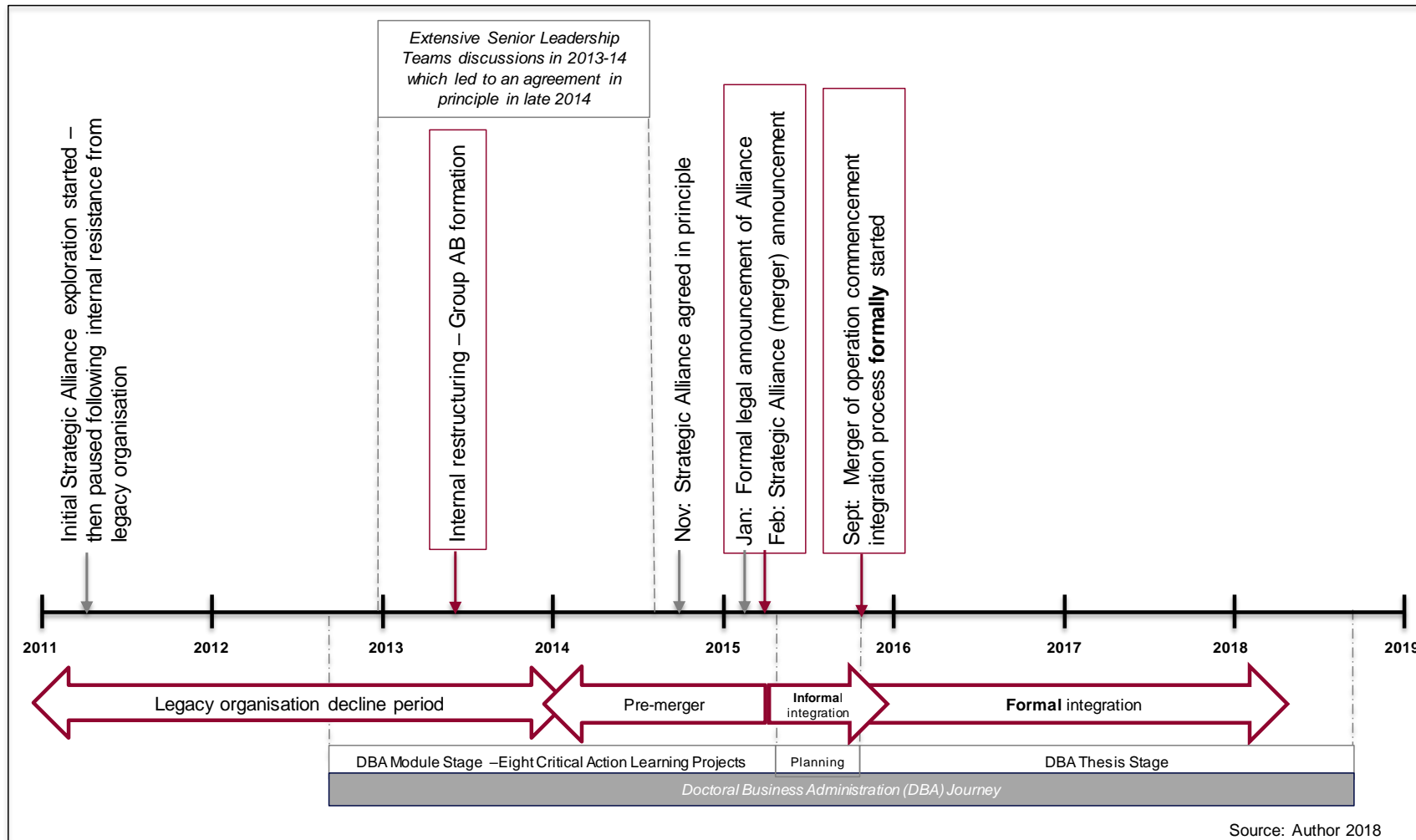
This research took place within a UK-based professional services organisation, hereafter referred to as '*the legacy organisation*', during a period of tremendous change following a strategic alliance and subsequent merger of operations with a fast growing, innovative and global organisation, hereafter referred to as '*the merging organisation*'. Given that both partners needed to retain their charitable status, the legal status of the merger is officially a strategic alliance. Thus, the legacy organisation retained its brand name as an integrated brand into the umbrella brand of the global partner. As part of the merger of operations, the restructure positioned the legacy organisation as a professional services division within the much larger global organisation's operations and identity. I have limited the focus of this thesis to the UK based legacy organisation part of the global entity only, given that we exist very much as a separate entity, with our own site, our own leadership team, and our profit and loss account.

## 1.2 THE RESEARCH PROCESS PRESENTED ME WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

- a) Describe the merger experience of employees over a 3.5-year period, in an attempt to explore the process of identity formation post-merger.
- b) Positively influence, as opposed to directly impact, the merger experience.
- c) Reflect on the experience of being an 'insider-researcher' (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) surviving the merger integration as an autonomous knowledge worker employee, as opposed to a 'manager-researcher' (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001), with a mandate to address merger integration-related issues.

This research took place during a period of extreme organisational flux, following the announcement of our strategic alliance in February 2015, and the subsequent commencement of the merger of operations in September 2015. However, I elected to begin the narrative at the start of my doctoral studies, in September 2012, which also happened to be the fourth year of our organisational decline period, to understand the complex merger process. Figure 1 below illustrates the correlation between the time-line of the key organisational events and my Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) journey.

Figure 1: A time line illustrating the relationship between key organisational events and my DBA journey



### 1.2.1 Understanding the pre-merger challenges within the legacy organisation

The period preceding the merger was fraught with internal issues stemming from tensions between strategic focus and execution, identity and purpose, leadership and followership, autonomy and accountability. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) posits that part of employees' sense of self is gained from their membership in social or organisational groups. In addition, shared history provides a crucial foundation for people to understand who they are, or to give meaning to who they are (Reicher, 2008; Sahdra and Ross, 2007; Sibley, Liu, Duckitt and Khan, 2008; Smeeke, Verkuyten and Poppe, 2010; Wohl and Banscombe, 2008). The pre-merger legacy landscape constituted two highly identified business units (BUs), Group A and Group B. Both BUs existed as closely defined groups of people, with rich histories and stories, founded on shared philosophical underpinnings to their work, values and practices. This manifested as two groups holding very strong organisational identities, experienced as two distinct sub-groups within the legacy organisation.

These groups seemingly provided members with a sense of self-esteem, based on the set of distinct values and behaviours internalised by each group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In this way, the behaviours of the group members represented an internalisation of each group's particular identity (Haslam, Postmers and Ellemers, 2003), and highly identified members displayed behaviours that were perceived to be essential to contribute to their group's success (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

The 'not-so-secret' rumours of a bid to secure a strategic alliance with the current merger partner in 2011, was the fuse that triggered a revolt of resistance to the merger by many members from within Group A. Their response halted merger negotiations, and subsequent 'behind closed doors' events that occurred within the higher echelons of the organisation, and resulted in the mass departure of the leadership team of Group A. These events preceded and/or precipitated the merger of Group A and Group B in a major restructuring event early in 2013, which led to the formation of the amalgamated Group AB, which saw an uneasy alliance of legacy members.

Thus, in line with theory, our restructuring response to the decline contributed to significant changes in leadership, combined with an explicit focus on cost cutting (Jetten, O'Brien and

Trindall, 2002; Arogyaswamy and Yasai-Ardekani, 1995) and preceded the first wave of voluntary and involuntary redundancies throughout the organisation. These events further accentuated the changes in membership, and left in their wake many who felt disenfranchised and disenfranchised with the organisation, its leadership and its attempts at turnaround (Weitzel and Jonsson, 1989; Bar-Tal and Antebi, 1992; Kelman, 1992).

### **1.2.2 Positioning our merger integration experience**

The formation of a strategic alliance with our current global strategic partner, henceforth referred to as 'the merger', arrested our organisational decline. Given the charitable legal status of both parties, care was taken to position the integration strategy as a strategic alliance resembling a 'best of both' integration process that would represent a true cultural integration retaining features from both corporate partners (Marks and Mirvis, 1998).

However, given the legacy organisation's dire financial position, compared to the far stronger financial investment the merging organisation made in the alliance, there could be no doubt that our strategic partner was the 'dominant/acquiring merger partner', with our legacy organisation being the 'subordinate/acquired merger partner' (Clougherty and Duso, 2009). This gave the dominant partner a higher pre-merger status and resulted in their control of the integration pattern in proportion to their pre-merger status (Giessner, et al. 2006). Thus, legacy employees found themselves in an unequal situation of status, influence and power in decision-making, throughout the integration phase.

It is my belief that regardless of one's role or position within the legacy organisation, the merger had a profound impact on our experience at work. This research sets out to trace the shared experience of both professional knowledge workers and management/co-ordinators within the legacy organisation during the period immediately following the merger announcement. The research process explicitly tapped into the extant literature on OI and M&A, in order to inform an in-depth understanding of the key experiences associated with a merger process, and to inform the merger integration activities through a collaborative sensemaking process.



### **1.3 SITUATING THE RESEARCH IN THE LITERATURE**

Mergers by necessity imply the integration of different structural and organisational components, as well as broader cultural and people aspects associated with the merging entities, respectively referred to as the 'hard' and 'soft' elements within the M&A literature (Haspeslach and Jemison, 1991). Mergers not only precipitate operational and organisational changes; they also generate a great deal of uncertainty that often persists over long periods of time (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000), and challenges stability and endurance of the current sense of identity held by members of the merging organisations (Bartels, Dowes, de Jong and Pruyn, 2006).

Identification, or how a person sees him or herself in relation to social groups, is the foundation of many social psychological theories (see Tajfel, 1981 for example). The process of identification, or OI formation, enjoys prominence as a key soft element that might either help or hinder merger integration efforts (Bartels et al., 2006; Empson, 2004; Puusa and Kekäle, 2015). Organisational identification embraces the notion of self-concept (Pratt, 1998), and the perception of 'oneness' (Ashford and Mael, 1989). Crucially therefore, when a person identifies with a specific organisation, or part of an organisation, and are forced to separate from that organisation, they will experience a deep existential loss (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004).

Given our post-merger context, I used an OI lens to frame my IAR process, in order to describe, understand, and where possible, influence the essence of the shared merger integration experience of members from within my own professional services organisation.

### **1.4 RESEARCH AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

The research aim was to better understand the as yet unidentified/unspoken issues associated with the M&A experience, in order to bring constructive recommendations to the management team that might lead towards more interaction and integration between leadership and employees that were not identifying themselves with the emergent post-merger organisation. Thus, I set out to explore our lived experience, as an unclear

phenomenon with subtle shifts in perception and behaviour as the merger integration progressed, in order to discover more about our post-merger reality, and our adaptation to this reality, in an attempt to influence from a position without authority.

The research question was:

*How does the experience of a merger integration process affect the way members of a legacy organisation identify and engage with the new post-merger organisation?*

The thesis title *'How do we know who we are when the dust settles?'* alludes to the longitudinal collaborative sensemaking process that explored the process of OI formation post-merger within the legacy professional services organisation. This IAR study is positioned within interpretative phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) and dialogic organisational development (OD) practice (Canterino, Shani, Coghlan and Brunelli, 2016), as the research process sought to surface, understand, and legitimise the subjective meanings of individual and shared experiences, in order to learn from multiple perspectives and inform organisational practice.

## **1.5 SITUATING MYSELF WITHIN THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT**

As this study is the result of an IAR process, it seems prudent to position myself in this journey. Earlier explorations of insider research positioned the researcher exclusively as a practicing manager, giving rise to the term 'manager-researcher' (Coghlan, 2001; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001) and positions manager-researchers as 'Head of' (Nuttal, 1998) or 'Director of' (Krim, 1988). In later IAR publications, a more inclusive terminology of 'member' versus 'manager', and 'insider-researcher' versus 'manager-researcher' appears (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). The review 'Doctorates by Action Research for Senior Practicing Managers' (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1994) mainly positions IAR as the domain for senior leaders/managers alone. However, I support the view that managers who undertake action research (AR) projects might be located anywhere in their organisation's hierarchy (Coghlan, 2001), evidenced by my own DBA experience. I started my DBA journey as a 'hybrid manager' (Rouleau, 2005), i.e. assuming both supervisory and functional tasks, and just before the onset of the thesis stage, I moved out of a management role, into a more autonomous professional client service delivery role within the same organisation. This step

was a deliberate career progression move for me, and it meant that throughout the thesis stage of the DBA, I was able to embrace the insider-researcher role of a 'change agent' operating from a more peripheral organisational position of influence. Therefore, part of my own reflective journey has been to navigate and negotiate a slightly less traditional insider 'employee-researcher' role that the thesis stage afforded me.

At the outset of this study, I felt that our organisational narrative evidenced struggles to make sense of 'who we are' and 'who we want to be' and 'who we are not' and 'what we don't want to be'. In an attempt to make sense of what the organisational changes meant for me personally, I attuned to the notion that it is human nature to strive to validate, sometimes irrationally, and in a flawed manner, our abilities, qualities and insights in the areas which we feel define our sense of self-worth (Crocker and Park, 2004). I also became aware of a growing sense of insecurity around my job, my role, and my self-worth as a practitioner, as redundancy rounds continued to rock our world. I longed to feel safe and turned to the literature to explore ways in which we might increase our collective felt security, and reinforce relationship security (Lemay and Clark, 2008).

Probably because of this strive for psychological safety, and my subsequent engagement with literature, I became more informed about the notion of OI, and even more attuned to the signs of identity ambiguity and identity conflict surrounding me. It represented a 'red and hot' issue I felt compelled to act on (Björkman and Sundgren, 2005). In February 2015, after the strategic alliance announcement, I began to consider how I might be able to use an AR process to explore the impact of the merger process on identity formation, and identification and engagement with the post-merger organisation. This was when my early research problematization process started and the journey began. I have remained with the organisation for the duration of this study and, as part of my reflection throughout this report, will share the impact this journey has had on me and my career, as the story unfolds.

## **1.6 THE VALUE OF THIS RESEARCH**

This study draws on the shared merger experience of employees to confirm the value of considering OI as a crucial 'soft' element in a merger integration. The qualities and attributes of the actual AR process itself created opportunities to shape and impact the merger

integration process. In this way, the process in fact enabled a personal and collective shift in identification and engagement within our post-merger context, through a number of small, almost imperceptible interventions. It contributed to the creation of a relational and collaborative space that allowed us to make sense of who we were in the face of the changes we were part of and, I would like to believe that as a post-merger entity, it helped us to regain our voice, our value and our trust in each other.

The research draws upon the reflections and insights gained from both theory and practice-based activities in order to propose two contributions for actionable knowledge, aimed at better equipping leaders and managers in planning and executing a merger integration process. Firstly, it offers a '*Three-cycle merger integration process model*' that exhorts leaders to view a merger integration as a system of three inter-related cycles, with each cycle representing a specific state of sensemaking and emotions associated with the fluid process of identification, and, as such each requiring specific actions to enhance the merger experience through facilitated organisational identification and engagement. Secondly, it presents a '*Three-level merger integration leadership model*' that suggests specific leadership attributes, behaviours and actions are required to support a successful integration process, focussed on public, inter-personal, and personal domains.

## **1.7 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT STRUCTURE**

Another six chapters, in a very traditional thesis layout, follow this introduction chapter. I offer a comprehensive review of the literature, followed by a description of the methodology, which leads to the presentation of the findings and analysis. I follow this chapter with reflections on the actionable knowledge and practical implications for the organisation, before concluding the report with a reflection on my journey as a scholarly-practitioner and conclusions.

# CHAPTER TWO

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The notion of identification has significant implications at individual, group and organisational levels. In particular, organisational identification has been positively associated with performance and organisational citizenship behaviours, and negatively associated with turnover intentions and actual turnover (Bartel, 2001; Haslam, 2001; van Knippenberg, 2000; Abrams, Ando and Hinkle, 1998; Tyler, 1999). In turn, authors identify the 'dark side' of organisational identification (Walsh and Glynn, 2008; Elsbach, 1999) which is linked to over-identification, and associated with less desirable effects for the individuals and the organisations. For example, over-identified individuals can become completely consumed by work; losing a sense of individual identity, becoming less able to see faults in the organisation, or less willing to point them out. In addition, more recent research has highlighted the difficulty highly identified members have in accepting organisational changes, such as restructuring and merger integrations (Walsh and Glynn, 2008).

Most of the empirical studies that explore the interface of OI and mergers seem to utilise a case study approach (de Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015; Puusa and Kekäle, 2015; Walsh and Glynn, 2008). A number of empirical studies attempt to quantify associations between variables and moderating factors (Jetten and Hutchison, 2011; Hassan, 2012; Lupina-Wegener et al. 2014; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Other studies imply that mergers are a dynamic experience, with *ex ante*, *in itinere*, and *ex post* phases, which means that organisational leaders and managers should pay attention to the evolution of OI (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The latter supports the call for researchers to consider the temporality of identity formation, and in particular to investigate OI over time and throughout the extended merger integration process (Gioia et al. 2013; 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Goodman et al. 2001). I feel that this longitudinal IAR study is able to provide such insight, and to influence the actual integration process at the same time.

Exploration of the evolution of OI addresses the central and existential questions about 'who are we' as members within the integration process renegotiate their reason for existing (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Such existential questions often give rise to research questions

focussed on the 'why' (Gioia et al. 2000; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). However, these existential questions are also frequently reframed as research questions concerning the 'how' when it comes to OI evolution, in an attempt to understand the process of identification that occurs during organisational change (Whitley, Gal and Kjaergaard, 2014). It seems fitting for this study to place organisational identification during our merger integration as "the 'object' of human experience" (van Manen, 199, p.163) for two reasons:

- a) A "*phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon*" (Creswell, 2013, p.76).
- b) Phenomenologists focus on reducing individual encounters to a description of the universal essence, i.e. a "*grasp of the very nature of the thing*" (van Manen, 1990, p.177).

In particular, as the phenomenological description consists of 'what' a person experienced, and 'how' they experienced it (Moustakes, 1994), this approach finds its place in the literature on the dynamics of OI, and, in the impact of mergers on employee identification. In my review of the literature, I found reference to empirical studies adopting a qualitative approach to explore the subjective experiences and attitudes (Puusa and Kekäle, 2015), as well as the process of meaning making (Corley and Gioia, 2004) of employees during mergers or spin-offs. However, I did not find any mention of a phenomenological approach into OI formation during mergers *per se*. Organisational researchers have predominantly explored the cognitive component of OI, whilst the evaluative and affective components received only limited attention (Hassan, 2012). Hence, I propose that this study may affect the merger integration process through reflectively linking insights gained from the literature, with the greater understanding of the employees' emotional experience during the merger, in order to inform management practice throughout the integration period.

### **2.1.1 Structuring this chapter**

In structuring my review of the literature review, I adopted a 'concept-centric' approach (Webster and Watson, 2002, cited in Levy and Ellis, 2006). I applied a concept-mapping technique (Rowley and Slack, 2004) to capture the complexity and linkages of the body of knowledge around a subject area, as illustrated in the mind-map in Figure 2 below.





This mind map served to inform the structure of this chapter, as set out below:

I used '*OI and identification*' and '*the impact of mergers on OI and identification*' as two central concepts, highlighting relevant themes identified in the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed (Levy and Ellis, 2006). As discussed later, I adopted a social constructivist perspective, as well as a social identity theory approach, to the research. In reviewing the literature, it soon became evident that the view on OI had shifted from that of it being a fixed and permanent state, to include the notion of identity fluidity and flexibility. Thus, I start by exploring some of the constructs around identity dynamics, which then flowed naturally to the importance of the relational aspect in the process of identity formation. This led to an exploration of the body of knowledge focussing on the notion of sensemaking, which seemed to offer a natural bridge between the concept of identity fluidity and the role of relationships in the process of identification, particularly in a M&A context.

As most of the research explored mentioned the role, and/or impact, of emotions in the process of identification and sensemaking, and because my personal experience confirmed the underlying depth of emotions associated with the merger integration process, I also devoted a section to exploring the role of emotions in organisational identification during M&A activities. As some of the research reviewed suggested a close link between emotions, engagement, motivation and commitment, I briefly explored the linkages between OI and commitment in the context of mergers. This led to an exploration of the notion of 'beyond identification' in an attempt to understand the impact disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification may have in a merger context.

I dedicate the final section of the literature review to the process of identification, in particular antecedents and barriers to identification within the M&A context, particularly focussing on four sub-themes.

## **2.2 OI AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE**

Some authors have attempted to classify the OI research into deliberate theoretical perspectives (de Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015), for example social actor and social constructionist theories (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), whilst others added to the debate by

expanding these theoretical perspectives to include institutional and population ecologist perspectives (Gioia, Patvarhana, Hamilton and Thomas, 2010). This research thesis embraces the social constructivist perspective of OI, which encompasses the notion of sensemaking, i.e. OI “*resides in collectively shared beliefs and understandings about central and relatively permanent features of an organization*” (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006, p. 434). Therefore, I premise my subsequent methodological and thereby epistemological choices for this research on social constructionism that emphasises that the social world of organisations is a subjective construction of individuals who, with language and interactions, collectively shape and sustain an OI of inter-subjectively shared meaning (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006).

## **2.3 OI AND THE SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY APPROACH**

As with many research studies focussed on M&A integration processes, this research also draws on social identity theory (Tajfel, 19781; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; 1986) and self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985), both of which align with a social constructivist perspective. Social identity theory suggests that individuals distinguish their own membership in groups, through the process of defining the social boundaries delineating particular groups, after which they self-categorise themselves as either belonging, or not belonging, to a specific group. Social identity theorists propose that the primary motivation for individuals to self-categorise, and thus identify with a group, stems from the need for defining oneself, and creating meaning in one’s life, i.e. validating the self-concept (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008).

Social identity theory also recognises that the process of social identification involves cognition, through a categorisation process of ‘oneness’ with a group. This means that individuals partly define themselves in terms of their group membership. Thus, in contrast to their personal identity (‘I’), social identities include a reference to their selected shared group attributes (‘We’). In addition, cognitive identification with a specific social group forms the precursor to both emotion and behaviour (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Accordingly, it has been argued that identification (‘I am’) becomes distinguishable from internalisation (‘I believe’), as well as from commitment, which has been positioned by some as a means to an end, as opposed to a core part of an individual’s self-definition or self-categorisation. To illustrate, “...

*'I am committed to this organization because ongoing membership will make me rich' versus 'Membership in this organization helps me to define myself' ...*" (Gundlach et al. 2006, p.1607). Furthermore, self-categorisation theory positions this process of emergent group-orientated behaviour as a process of depersonalisation. For example, when a particular social identity is salient, the individual's self-perception is inclined to be based on qualities common to the group, rather than on individual attributes (Turner, 1985). In this way, social identities may become the guiding factor for the behaviours of organisational members. For example, to the extent that individuals' social identities remain distinct from others, identification with that group provide groups members with enhanced self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Organisational identification then becomes something to foster. OI can be described as the degree to which employees *"engage in a process of self-stereotyping whereby their behaviours are orientated towards, and structured by, the content of that group or organization's defining characteristics, norms and values, resulting in the internalization of a particular organizational identity"* (Haslan, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003, p. 360). Within a M&A context, high identification with the post-merger organisation is a key contributing factor to the success of the merger (Millward and Kyriakidou, 2004; van Dick, Wagner, and Lemmer, 2014; van Dick et al. 2006). Yet, given the inevitable disruption to social groups during a merger integration process, achieving this remains a challenge (Jetten and Hutchison, 2011; van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen, 2001).

Therefore, given the radical changes experienced in social groups and organisational structure during our merger integration process, using the lens of social identity theory to explore the essence of the shared experience, seems apt.

## **2.4 THE RELATIONAL ASPECTS OF IDENTITY**

Within the body of knowledge focussing on identity research in organisations, researchers have attempted to highlight the common features of personal, social and organisational identities by stressing the relational aspects of identity, as well as the fluidity and flexibility in all three levels of identity analysis. Personal identity is arguably essentially relational, in that

one's self-concept, or personal identity, exists within a relational frame (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). For example, the self-concept of a mother relates to the presence of others to care for, or an effective leadership identity to having followers. Social identity too is relational and is constantly negotiated and defined through relational interactions and comparisons with assorted out-groups, resulting in the in-group becoming the salient locus of individual attachment and identification (Whitley et al. 2014). Finally, organisational identities are relational too, and OI is rooted in the deep cultural levels of the organisation (Gioia et al. 2000), inherent in shared history and experience, and in the context of the numerous interactions between the organisational members and their stakeholders, i.e. customers, competitors, and suppliers (Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Gioia et al. 2000).

Therefore, it will be impossible to explore the notion of identity without also considering the nature of relationship prevailing in the context of identification. Furthermore, given that mergers have the tendency to change organisational membership, it can be argued that post-merger shifts in identification may be unavoidable, thus, making it imperative to explore identity dynamics.

## **2.5 IDENTITY FLEXIBILITY AND FLUIDITY WITHIN A M&A CONTEXT**

In light of growing support for the notion that personal, social and organisational identification is inherently a relational process (Whitley et al. 2014; Weick, 1995), identity research over the last two decades has increasingly focused on the notion of identity fluidity (Gioia et al., 2000). Therefore, the seemingly stable and enduring features of identity present in earlier research assumptions have been called into question, and the early definition of the distinctive characteristics of OI as centrality, endurance and distinctiveness (CED) (Albert and Whetten, 1985), has been expanded to include recognisability and adaptability (CREAD) (Foreman and Whetten, 2012).

Within the M&A literature there is also general agreement that static definitions of OI are inadequate when dealing with dynamic situations that impact on identification (Alvesson and Willmot, 2002). Stronger individual identity mirrored in the identity of others within the organisation contributes to greater resistance from individual and organisational identities to

change (Fiol, 2002). This has led to researchers exploring various antecedents and processes associated with OI dynamics over time, lending further credence to the notion that OI changes over time (He and Baruch, 2002; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). In particular, additive changes such as M&As (van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen, 2001; Lupina-Wegener, Schneider and van Dick, 2011; Barney, 1998), restructuring changes (Brown and Gioia, 2002; Alvesson and Willmot, 2002), and subtractive changes, such as spin-offs and divestments (Corley and Gioia, 2004), have been linked to the occurrence of identity ambiguity, identity claims and identity conflict. All of these give rise to a shift in OI over time. Upon reflection, given that OI is a dynamic and fluid construct, situated within a specific context, which, during a post-merger integration phase is ever changing and unknown, this research study should respond well to the call for longitudinal, epistemological research designs to match the non-linear OI dynamics (Stahl et al., 2013).

### **2.5.1 Factors to consider in identity dynamics**

The concept of *situated identity* (Scott and Lane, 2000) proposes that an understanding of self exists within a particular social setting, relative to that time, situation, and audience. Therefore, as members within an organisation persistently exposed to a similar situation develop a shared situated identity, changes in their situation, such as a restructuring and/or merger integration process, may break their shared identity. M&As not only present a break with the past, and past identities (Jetten and Hutchison, 2011; van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen, 2001), they may also introduce problems related to incompatible organisational cultures, or conflicting identities (Bartels, et al. 2006).

An actual experience of a shift in their identity, will also illicit resistance from individuals or groups, as a response to a felt threat (Iyer, Jetton, Tsivrikos, Haslam and Postmes, 2009). In failing to help individuals make sense of what the change might mean to them, and their personal and/or collective sense of self, their perceived resistance will not be overcome (Isabella, 1990), and hence, their commitment to the newly formed organisation will be slow to develop (Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991; Ullrich, Cody, LaFasto, & Rucci, 1989). Arguably, integration strategies that emphasize continuity between the past, present and future may mitigate resistance to the merger integration, particularly when the merger is associated with high-levels of identification with the pre-merger organisation(s).

This view correlates with the post-merger evolution of the OI definition of *transitional identity* (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen and Thomas, 2010). It denotes a process of forming an interim articulation of what the organisation has become that is neither concrete nor definitive, but ambiguous enough to allow multiple interpretations without becoming so ambiguous that it becomes threateningly unfamiliar. Thus, balancing ‘sources of identity inertia’ i.e. factors linked to the situated identity, and ‘enablers of identity changes’, i.e. antecedents to OI dynamics, is proposed as key to achieving successful formation of a new post-merger shared identity (Clark et al., 2010).

Another enabler for identity change may be the concept of *construed external image* (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994), which refers to the organisation’s perception about how they are being seen by outsiders. OI literature suggests that if organisational members sense a discrepancy between the way they see themselves and the way they believe outsiders see them, a sensemaking process is triggered which may lead to identity change (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000). Authors argue that alignment between OI and construed external image tends to strengthen the sense of identity within members of an organisation undergoing change (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Ibarra, 1999; Brown and Starkey, 2000). Thus, a proposed mechanism for organisations wishing to facilitate a shift in a current OI is to create, and consistently communicate, both externally and internally, a desired organisational image, which is incongruous with the construed external image of the members.

Another process model to facilitate a change in OI aims at addressing both labels and meaning within the organisation (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Oliver and Roos, 2007). Within an OI context, labels are regarded as self-referential symbolic expressions of the socially constructed identities, which in turn enable members to rationalise ‘who they are as an organisation’. When differing claims of ‘who we are as an organisation’ emerge within a change process, the foundation of an identity conflict occurs which fills the void created by the identity ambiguity (Glynn, 2000). Identity ambiguity has been defined as “*a collective state where organizational members found themselves without a good sense of who they were [...] or a sense of what the future held for them as an organization*” (Corley and Gioia, 2004, p. 178). Therefore, focusing on changing labels used to express identity and/or on changing the meaning associated with those labels, offers a way to shape and/or steer

identity change. This supports the suggestion that managing rhetoric during planned radical identity change is crucial to assist members to disidentify with the old identity, and to align themselves instead with the new identity and core beliefs (Fiol, 2002).

Change overload exacerbates identity ambiguity, and vice versa (Corley and Gioia, 2004). For example, the presence of identity ambiguity further exacerbates the feelings of change overload because it becomes harder to commit to and identify with the changes, and ongoing work, without a clear sense of “who we are”, “where we are going” and “how do the changes relate to our new identity?” Thus, change overload, identity ambiguity and identity tension are all precursors to sensemaking during merger integration processes, and may contribute to the suggestion that M&A activities can lead to multiple identities presenting within the combined organisation (De Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015; Pratt and Corley, 2007).

### **2.5.2 Legacy identities**

It is possible for an organisation’s identity to endure as a legacy identity beyond the survival of the instigating organisation itself (Walsh and Glynn, 2008). Therefore, in a merger context, this may be experienced as members of a former organisation/BU adhering to a shared claim of ‘who we were’ despite the demise of that organisation/BU. They maintain a legacy identity, which sees them explicitly drawing central and valued OI characteristics from the past to the present, and regularly enact these through collectively shared activities and artefacts. Legacy identities may persist for long or short periods, and as the legacy activities are carried forward it becomes clear what identity elements are valued, or not, as central and distinctive (Walsh and Glynn, 2008). Legacy identities that persist beyond a demise of the original organisational form, or structure, i.e. because of a merger, acquisition, spin-off, or divestment, can offer a sense of security and safety to those who claim them during times of dramatic change (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006).

The research around legacy identities reveal that leadership plays a crucial role in propagating, and prolonging them (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Glynn, 2008; Walsh and Glynn, 2008). Within the M&A context, the demise of the organisations ‘as is’, and the subsequent shared loss and uncertainty experienced by organisational members who are

most affected, seemingly present leaders with important opportunities to engage in meaning-making activities (Podolny, Khurana and Hill-Popper, 2005).

## 2.6 THE ROLE OF SENSEMAKING IN IDENTIFICATION

As discussed, individual identity is greatly impacted by social interactions with others, in that relationships with others affect a person's set of beliefs, values and expected or acceptable behaviour (Corley and Gioia, 2004). This therefore, links identity with the social constructionist approach adopted in this research, in that different shared beliefs and understandings around meaning and interpretation result from our individual and collective process of meaning making or sensemaking. Furthermore, identity construction is linked to the sensemaking process because the identities of those experiencing change impact and influence the way in which they make sense of events and enact meanings (Thurlow and Helm Mills, 2014). This supports the notion that *"who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity"* (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005, p.416). In this way, it is not possible to separate sensemaking actions from the actors making sense.

Sensemaking is a process of social construction during which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environment, i.e. personal meaning construction (Maitlis, 2005). In addition, because organisational sensemaking infers a process of shared sensemaking (Isabella, 1990; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), organisational leaders are encouraged to be cognisant of identity and identification, in that *"... knowledge of individuals' beliefs about an organization's identity is crucial for discerning the importance of an issue, its meanings, and its emotionality. These interpretations, shaped by the organization's identity, move individuals' commitment, involvement, indifference, and resistance in particular directions and thereby direct and shape organizational actions"* (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991, p.547).

Building on this, the literature supports the notion that sensemaking forms an integral part of organisational leadership or leadership processes, especially during times of radical change



(Weick et al. 2005; Humphreys, Ucbasaran and Lockett, 2011). Furthermore, as a sense of identity serves as a 'rudder for navigating difficult times' (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p.13), it stands to reason that during prolonged merger integrations, when organisations and people are in flux, a focus on helping employees navigate the unavoidable shift in self- and social-categorisation resulting from changing social referents, becomes increasingly important. For these reasons also, there exists general consensus that a specific focus on the process of individual and collective sensemaking during merger integrations is key for a successful outcome of M&A activity (Jetten and Hutchison, 2011; van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen, 2001; Bartels et al. 2006; Amiot, Terry and Callan, 2007; Hornsey and Hogg, 2000).

### **2.6.1 Sensegiving: A way to provide plausibility and legitimacy**

Closely related to sensemaking, yet, distinct from it (Ravasi and Shultz, 2006), is the process of sensegiving, defined as *"a process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organisational reality"* (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensegiving is an influencing process (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997), and consequently, it can arguably shape identification, with persuasive, or evocative language, and excellent discursive skills. Furthermore, sensegiving forms an integral part of the process of 'normalisation', which in turn forms part of a critical sensemaking framework. During 'normalisation', *"efforts are made to construct plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility normalizes the breach, restores the expectation"* (Weick and Sutcliffe, in Navis and Glynn, 2011, p.488), and implies a two-way process of both sensemaking and shared sensegiving occurring in a process of dialogue.

Interestingly, rendering plausible meaning making is less reliant on factual accuracy, and more reliant on believability, i.e. plausibility is *"an attempt to fit together the evidence available, thereby completing a puzzle despite having only some of the puzzle pieces at hand"* (Yue and Mills, 2008, p. 71). Through this active, yet subjective, process of meaning making, legitimacy emerges as some frames and narratives become more dominant and salient, thus integrating sensemaking and sensegiving within the experience.

This view of linked sensemaking and sensegiving activities is supported by a dynamic process model of sensemaking (Park, 2014; Walsh and Glynn, 2008), which involves cycles of sensegiving and sensebreaking, and builds on the notion of three types of identity gaps, i.e. individual-individual (I-I); organisational-organisational (O-O); and individual-organisational (I-O) gaps (Park, 2014). In order for identification to occur, at any/all of these three levels, identities need to be/become integrated, i.e. closing any gaps that may be present between the different identities involved, and that this process involves both sensemaking and sensegiving cycles. Thus, getting this process right is important, as failure to reach integrated identities can lead to employees experiencing identity conflict (Pratt, 2000) which in turn disrupts the efficiency and performance of the organisation (Fiol, 2002), and also negatively impacts the happiness and satisfaction of the workforce (Dukerich et al. 2002).

Consequently, thinking about OI formation in terms of specifically located identity gaps will enable leaders to guide organisations in defining what actions are most likely to achieve organisational identification. This model introduces a third activity called 'sensebreaking' into the mix. For example, in this dynamic process model, sensegiving activities are interpreted as activities that reduce identity gaps, i.e. pain-relieving activities, whereas sensebreaking activities are positioned as activities that increase identity gaps, i.e. pain-generating activities (Park, 2014). Sensebreaking activities become particularly relevant when an organisation presents with employees that are highly identified with an OI that is no longer fit-for-purpose but needs updating. Some authors refer to this process of sensebreaking as 'organisational disruptions' (Fiol, 2002), aimed at weakening employee's identification with the old OI, referred to as *disidentification* (Ashforth, 1998).

The process of sensebreaking, or disidentification through necessity, needs to start with events and narratives that signal clearly that the current referents or framework of sensemaking, and thus, identification, is no longer plausible (Bartunek, 1988). It is important to note that this process will lead to loss of meaning, associated with uncertainty and ambiguity, and will most certainly involve '*felt pain and disequilibrium*' (Pratt and Barnett, 1997, p.81) particularly for highly identified individuals.

In essence, because sensemaking through sensegiving and sensebreaking is underpinned by the notion of situated identity, i.e. '*an understanding of self, relative to that time, situation and audience*' (Scott and Lane, 2000, p. 46), OI can be broken or damaged by a change in the situation or context. Similarly, identification with an organisation can be established and/or strengthened by providing a stable and constant situational context. For this reason, I would consider sensemaking, sensegiving and sensebreaking as crucial elements of any merger integration process to help both individuals and the organisations make sense of any identity gaps that may appear.

### 2.6.2 Critical sensemaking (CSM)

Leading on from this growing interest in the concept and process of sensemaking, arguments were made that sensemaking alone does not explicitly address the issue of power, power relationships, or specific contexts. Inherent in the process of organisational sensemaking are the implicit links to power, privilege, and voice. Therefore, attention needs to be given to whose narratives or stories are being disseminated or heard, what actions or behaviours are being enacted and enhanced in the change process, and the language used and whose choice it is (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010). This critique has led to the introduction of the term *critical sensemaking* (Thurlow, 2010; Helm Mills et al. 2010), in recognition that individuals do not determine their own sensemaking, but that their sensemaking process is influenced by external forces outside their control, and within an internal context of power. Thus, critical sensemaking (CSM) admonishes leaders to consider two elements: *formative contexts* (Unger, 1987) and *organisational rules* when planning or implementing sensemaking processes.

Formative contexts are said to reference the "*... assumptions, arrangements, and shared ideas that exist to produce and preserve a particular vision of social life, so as to make routine behaviour and existing structures seem permanent*" (Rostis, 2010, p.34). In this way, sensemaking processes are shaped by the formative contexts, which "*serve to both constrain and enable the number of choices available to sensemakers as they search for plausible meanings within a complex environment*" (Thurlow and Helm Mills, 2014, p. 247).

Complimentary to this notion, is the view that organisational rules impact sensemaking at organisational level, in that it also establishes the context in which sensemaking takes place (Thurlow and Helm Mills, 2014), especially when organisational rules are seen as “... *the phenomena whose basic characteristics is that of generally controlling, constraining, guiding and defining social action*” (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991, p.3). Consequently, formal rules, i.e. policies and processes, and/or informal rules, i.e. ‘the way we do things here’, by their very existence, impose limits on individual sensemaking and actions. This notion implies that employees can perceive rules as organisational routines, or categories of meaning, which have become socialised into ways of knowing and acting (Colville, Brown and Pye, 2011). In this way, organisational rules provide a pre-existing sensemaking tool that contributes to the plausibility and legitimisation of sensemaking clues, and as such, play a role during merger integrations.

## **2.7 THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN SENSEMAKING AND IDENTIFICATION**

In change and crisis literature, emotion, particularly strongly felt emotion, is an inhibitor to cognitive processing in general, and to sensemaking in particular (Shiv et al. 2005, cited in Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Arguments supporting this view are underpinned by the notion that sensemaking has arousal, i.e. a triggered autonomic activity, at its foundation, and implying that the number of cues that can be processed, i.e. cognitive functioning, is reduced during a time of arousal. Therefore, arousal impairs the sensemaking process as felt emotions shape the meanings that employees ascribe to the changes experienced.

Within the change and M&A literature, there are well-documented links between emotions and change confirming that fundamental changes concerning personnel, OI, work practices or environment, often trigger intense emotions (Huy, 2002; Isabella, 1990; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Bartels et al. 2006). Although felt emotions can derail, or complicate, sensemaking for employees, it can also provide valuable information that facilitates sensemaking of the organisation. As less than moderately intense emotions have almost no impact on sensemaking, as opposed to very intense emotions, which are more impactful (Huy, 2002; Maitlis and Sonnenshein, 2010), leaders may want to focus on surfacing strongly felt emotions as a matter of priority, as these may affect identification with the post-merger organisation.

Supporting this view, there is theoretical and empirical support for the link between emotions and identification (Wegge et al. 2011). Research has shown that in organisational settings where positive emotions were present, employees displayed greater levels of organisational identification, as opposed to lower levels of organisational identification in environments where negative emotions were found. In the same study, organisational identification acted as a valuable resource in coping with stressors (Wegge, Schuh and van Dick, 2012). Therefore, creating a strong argument that OI is an important variable for enhanced resilience of employees experiencing stressful situations (Halsam, 2004). For example, social identity, and by extension OI, has been shown to affect both the ability of an individual to decide whether or not a given stressor is perceived as threatening to self, i.e. primary appraisal, as well as the perception the individual holds regarding their ability to cope with the stressor, i.e. secondary appraisal (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). This means that OI can provide the basis for more positive perceptions of stress-related information, as well as the foundation for social support and coping within an organisation.

Further strengthening the argument for a focus on emotions during mergers, is the research that demonstrates that social identification also contributes to the satisfaction of a range of human needs, such as belonging and affiliation, which in turn leads to higher levels of well-being and general emotional satisfaction (Pratt, 1998), leaders should actively facilitate organisational identification post-merger. Research supports this view, demonstrating that highly identified employees demonstrate more positive work-related outcomes, for example increased adaptability or readiness for change, i.e purposeful intention to remain with the organisation (Drzensky, Egold and van Dick, 2005; van Dijk and van Dick, 2009), increased work motivation, greater collaboration and, as one indicator of well-being, higher overall job-satisfaction (Riketta, 2005).

In addition, social cognition studies demonstrated that how we feel significantly influence the way we perceive others, i.e. the social judgements we make (Forgas and Bower, 1987). The group engagement model posits that social identification is largely impacted by the way people feel other group members are treating them (Blader and Tyler, 2009). Individuals who feel respected by other group members tend to develop higher levels of social identification, because being treated with respect reflects a person's status within a group, and individuals identify more strongly with groups in which they are afforded higher status (Tyler and Blader, 2003; 2002). It is also argued that individuals in a good mood are less critical, more lenient in

interpreting behaviours of others and more likely to engage in self-esteem bolstering explanations of negative interpersonal interactions (Forgas, 1994), thus resulting in them being less inclined to interpret negative interpersonal interactions as a sign of disrespect (Wegge et al. 2011). The opposite would hold true for individuals who are experiencing negative emotions. Thus, emotions affect interpretations of perceived respect demonstrated in interpersonal interactions, and by extension impact social identification. The literature on pro-social behaviour also supports the notion that positive mood enhances social identification or social orientation of individuals (Wegge et al. 2011). For example, evidence exists that people in good moods demonstrate greater concern for the welfare of others, and provide more support for others, than people who are in bad moods (Holloway, Tucker and Hornstein, 1977). It is therefore arguable that this compassion and care for others associated with positive emotions, as opposed to a more self-centred and judgemental attitude associated with negative emotions, forms an important antecedent of social identification and self-categorisation.

In summary, the link between organisation identification and emotions seems to be two-way process. A positive emotional state is linked to higher degrees of OI (Wegge et al. 2011) and high OI in turn may function as a resource in coping with work-place stressors, in particular reducing health complaints and burnout (Schaubroeck and Jones, 2000).

## **2.8 LINKAGES BETWEEN OI AND COMMITMENT**

For the purpose of this study, the concept of commitment was briefly explored, starting first with *affective* and *continuance commitment* (Meyer and Allen, 1984). Affective commitment pertains to employee's emotional attachment, identification, and involvement within the organisation. Continuance commitment is the perceived costs, or lack of alternatives associated with leaving the organisation. The authors subsequently added a third component: *normative commitment* (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991) based on the notion that employees can be committed to an organisation because of moral obligations (Wiener, 1982). To date, some disagreement remains on whether or not normative commitment is distinguishable from affective commitment, and whether continuance commitment is in fact a unidimensional construct that can accurately be measured (Hassan, 2012).

With time, various other multi-dimensional frameworks for commitment have been proposed, including dimensions such as value commitment and commitment to stay (Angle and Perry, 1981); moral, calculative and alienative commitments (Penley and Gould, 1988). The commonality to all of these frameworks, and the relevance to M&A, is the notion that commitment to organisations represents a psychological state that locks employees into a particular course of action (Hassan, 2012). Despite the ongoing debate concerning the nature and constitution of the psychological state (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001), most of the commitment frameworks include a psychological state that pertains to the employee's affective connection with the organisation. In addition, most commitment models also acknowledge that employees may remain committed to the organisation due to lack of choice, or fear of costs associated with leaving. The onus on merging organisations therefore, is to establish whether employees who remain post-merger, based on obligation, or cost-avoidance factors, are demonstrating commitment to the organisation, or not (Hassan, 2012).

Theory would suggest that OI and commitment are not related, i.e. OI is rooted in the individual's definition of their self-concept, whilst organisational commitment is not (Ashforth et al. 2008; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). This view of distinction is supported by the notion that self-definition is only core to OI and not to organisational commitment (Pratt, 1998). For example, "*Organisational commitment is often associated with, 'How happy or satisfied am I with my organization?' ... Organizational identification, by contrast, is concerned with the question, 'How I perceive myself in relation to my organization?'*" (Pratt, 1998, p. 178). Others note that the difference in antecedents between the two constructs also support the notion that they are distinct from each other (Hassan, 2012). For example, commitment is an attitudinal construct stemming from perceived organisational support, transformational leadership, lack of role ambiguity and role conflict, as well as perceived organisational fairness (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). The relevance of this to mergers is that often leaders rely on Engagement Survey scores to assess the effectiveness of the merger integration, yet the survey itself seems to measure commitment and not OI. The key antecedents for OI are perceived distinctiveness, organisational reputation, salience of out-groups, perceived similarity, association or liking, shared history, values and goals, and a sense of organisational fairness (Van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006; Riketta, 2005;

Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992), things that are not generally assessed in an engagement survey.

Upon reflection, what may be relevant to a merger integration context is the lack of real differentiation between the outcome of organisational commitment and organisational identification, as demonstrated by a range of studies. For example, both constructs relate to job motivation, job satisfaction, job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, turnover intention and absenteeism (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Riketta, 2005). Engagement surveys that assess elements of identification, commitment, and in particular perceived psychological state/contract, as key indicators for successful merger integrations, may offer helpful insight to leaders.

### 2.8.1 Beyond organisational identification

Notwithstanding the importance of the process of identification, it is arguably merely one way that individuals may achieve a sense of self in relation to their organisations (Pratt, 2000; Ashforth, 2001; Elsbach, 1999). In particular, an expanded model of identification that includes multiple ways in which individuals can define themselves through organisational attachments, i.e. *identification*, *disidentification*, *ambivalent identification* and *neutral identification*, has been proposed (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Disidentification is the process that occurs when individuals define themselves as not having the same attributes or values that they believe the organisation possesses (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). In particular, disidentification constitutes an active and conscious separation from the identity of the organisation (Elsbach, 1999), and as such it is not merely the opposite of identification. In fact, research proposes that disidentification is a unique psychological state and a separate variable (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Ashforth, 2002; Dukerich et al. 1998; Pratt, 2000). “[I]dentification involves connecting (typically positive) aspects of the organisation to oneself, whereas disidentification involves disconnecting (typically negative) aspects of the organisation from oneself” (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004, p.3). Disidentification is associated with both turnover and retention, and turnover in particular contribute to increased costs to the organisation (Hom and Griffeth, 1995). Disengagement of employees who remain presents a specific challenge to leaders who must deal with their strong negative views of the post-merger organisation whilst unwilling or unable to leave (Meyer and Allen, 1997). However, not all disidentification is essentially harmful to the organisation and there is



evidence that in some cases disidentification contributes to beneficial behaviours such as whistle blowing, innovation and conscientious dissent (Ashforth and Mael, 1998).

Ambivalent identification occurs when individuals simultaneously identify and disidentify with their organisation, or aspects of it (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt and Douchet, 2000; Elsbach, 2001). This process of ambivalent identification resembles conflicted identification where individuals simultaneously and consciously attend to both positive and negative aspects of another entity (such as an organisation) over long periods of time (Duckerich et al., 1998). For example, the term 'tempered radical' (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) refers to individuals with ambivalent identification, i.e. they both identify with and are committed to their organisations, whilst also being committed to a cause or ideology that conflicts with that of their organisation. It is also possible for employees to have mixed feelings or ambivalent identification with the same aspect or facet of the organisation. For example, employees may simultaneously identify with the need for centralisation, yet disidentify with the loss of decentralised benefits. Ambivalent identification is likely to drain cognitive and emotional resources from individuals and is likely to result in employees who are unwilling to go over and above their specific job description, i.e. unwilling to 'go the extra mile'. In addition, individuals with ambivalent identification transmit mixed messages. Not only may this lead to a perception of duplicity, i.e. as presenting a façade of conformity; it may also lead to them experiencing isolation and stress (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

Neutral identification comes about when there is an explicit absence of both identification and disidentification, i.e. employees who experience neither identity overlap with, nor identity separation from their organisations (Elsbach, 1999). However, neutral identification is not merely the absence of perceptions and attachment, but may be a conscious cognitive state and mode of self-definition. In this way, the lack of identification and disidentification become self-defining and can result from a variety of reasons. Examples are, a conscious desire to avoid strong attachments due to past negative experiences (i.e. 'once bitten, twice shy'); or self-descriptions (i.e. 'I am an island'); or a particular management style (i.e. 'I don't take sides; I follow the rules'). Regardless of the reason for neutral identification, the result is employees who define themselves as neutral or dispassionate towards their organisations, and therefore less inclined to display engagement and to champion the organisation (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). This provocative view of beyond identification serves as a reminder that OI is a complex phenomenon and that it deserves specific attention when organisations want

to ensure that they have a sustainable future, with a resilient, content, committed and highly identified employee-base.

Upon reflection, the literature makes a compelling argument that during a merger integration process, it is key to find a way to explore employees' sense of belonging to, or identifying with, the post-merger organisation, over and above their willingness to remain with the organisation. As discussed in the previous sub-section, it would be wise to establish their willingness to engage with activities above-and-beyond their job description, or citizenship behaviour that may benefit the organisation as a whole. As shifts in commitment and/or OI may be something that appears over time, and may wax and wane, depending on a person's experience within the merger context, it seems wise for organisations to continue to assess employees over an extended period of time.

## **2.9 THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL CONTINUITY IN M&A**

The shared recollection and understanding of what it is that forms the foundation of a social identity can provide a group with a collective memory and a unique heritage. Such a historical memory heightens group identification, as well as perceptions of common fate (Liu and Hilton: 2005; Reicher, 2008). Research suggests that group members invest a great deal of effort in cultivating and honouring their in-group's heritage and protecting their interpretation of historical events (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). Put differently, historical continuity, or the degree to which the future will remain like the past, provides the existential ground on which social identity is built, and therefore individuals are extremely affected the moment they perceive a threat to their past (Iyer et al. 2009). When confronted with the possibility that their heritage may be lost, group members may engage in actions to preserve historical continuity, in essence resisting change.

Empirical M&A research suggests that the higher the perception of historical continuity, the greater the shared perception that upcoming merger events would represent a break with the past, and the more resistant group members became to the merger (Jetten and Hutchison, 2010). However, the research also shows that providing such members with reassurance that some elements of their legacy identity will remain intact, in particular their organisation's name, resulted in increased willingness to with the post-merger identity

(Hewtone and Brown, 1986; Horney and Hogg; Jetten and Hutchison, 2010). This supports the next sub-theme, which explores the notion of projected continuity as a separate antecedent to OI.

Upon reflection, the notion of historical continuity serves to underline the vital role of understanding historical group perceptions in anticipating and managing group dynamics during merger integrations.

## **2.10 DOMINANCE AND PROJECTED CONTINUITY IN M&A**

Low identification with the post-merger organisation is often the key reason why merger integrations fail (Giessner et al., 2006; van Dick et al., 2006; van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Ullrich and van Dick, 2007). High identification with the post-merger organisation is a crucial ingredient for successful M&A activities (Millward, and Kyriakidou, 2004; van Dick et al., 2004; van Dick et al., 2006).

It is clear that despite merging into the same post-merger organisation, merger partners can find themselves in very different positions (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2014). Three types of merger patterns influence the post-merger reality experienced by merging partners:

- a) An *assimilation pattern* which implies that a high-status partner may attempt to assimilate (absorb) the merging partner;
- b) An *integrations-proportionality pattern* which occurs where the high-status partner dominates the merging partner in proportion to the pre-merger status, and;
- c) An *integration-equality pattern* or *transformation pattern* which take place on an equal status basis. Not surprisingly, the latter integration pattern is often the preferred option for members of the lower status-merging organisation (Giessner et al., 2006).

For the purpose of this thesis, I define dominance as the superior ability of one group to influence the integration process over that of the other, a view supported by the literature (e.g. van Knippenberg et al., 2002; Lupina-Wegener et al., 2014). In most M&A cases, the acquiring organisations are most likely to dominate the integration process, and it is widely

acclaimed that even in 'mergers of equals' imbalances of influence exists (Meyer and Altenborg, 2007). In exploring the dynamics of OI during M&A processes, researchers noted that members of the dominant group seem to transfer their identification more readily from their pre-merger organisation to the post-merger organisation. However, this phenomenon was rarely true for members of the subordinate group, who seem more likely to resist shifting their identification to the post-merger organisation (van Knippenberg and van Leeuwen, 2001). In such cases, strong pre-merger identification translates into low post-merger identification (Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Millet, 2005).

Studies exploring the process leading towards this differential relationship between pre- and post-merger identification for dominant and subordinate groups in the post-merger organisation revealed that *projected continuity* is an important mediator in this identification transfer relationship. This can be done by highlighting future anticipated benefits of identifying with the post-merger organisation (Rousseau, 1998), creating a sense of what the organisation is becoming, i.e. a bright future (Clark et al., 2010), clarifying the necessity of the merger and establishing a sense of continuity in the future post-merger organisation (Giessner, 2011; Ullrich et al., 2005).

## **2.11 IN SUMMARY**

The literature review revealed that the majority of qualitative research exploring organisational identification during mergers, consisted of case study methodologies incorporating both primary and secondary data collection (Carlson, 2016; Glynn, 2000; Corley and Gioia, 2004), although there is also evidence of case studies exploring OI relying purely on secondary data (Backer, 2008). From the review of the literature, it would seem that case studies generally adopted either an interpretative qualitative approach or a grounded theory methodology (De Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015) to analyse the data. The few studies, which explicitly adopted a phenomenological approach, seem to depend mainly on primary data, and data analysis resembles a narrative interpretative qualitative approach (Puusa and Kekäle, 2015). The exploration of the body of knowledge focussing in OI and M&A, jointly informed the research design. I discuss the data analysis processes separately in the subsequent three chapters of this report.

In summary, I used my pre-understanding of the literature to guide the thesis process. It provided priori codes for data analysis, and informed the critical reflection on the findings and implications for the organisation. The literature assisted me in answering my research questions and in shaping recommendations that underpinned the actionable knowledge gained from this experience.

# CHAPTER THREE

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

I structured my methodology description to provide a comprehensive overview of the research process, and the chapter commences with an outline of the conceptual process model I adopted to ensure the integration of theory and practice (adapted from Tenkasi and Hay, 2004). In essence, my study included 3-stages: i) project definition; ii) project execution; and iii) project impact stage.

I start with a description of the research process that emerged as the project definition unfolded, as my understanding of the issue developed, and as the post-merger organisational research setting evolved. I then describe the method used in executing the project in the latter part of the chapter. This chapter ends with a brief description of the ethical considerations associated with the research.

### **3.2 MY RESEARCH APPROACH: A CONCEPTUAL PROCESS MODEL**

I shaped my approach by the desire to balance theory and practice, and to mediate the strategies needed in order to deliver theory-practice linkages within the constraints of my organisational context. Thus, I underpinned my approach with the premise that both theoretical actions and practical realities mediate research actions, a view supported by others (Tenkasi and Hay, 2004). I pursued the project framing or definition stage of this study embracing the notion that the process should both practice mediated actions and theory mediated actions. This resulted in two parallel streams of activity:

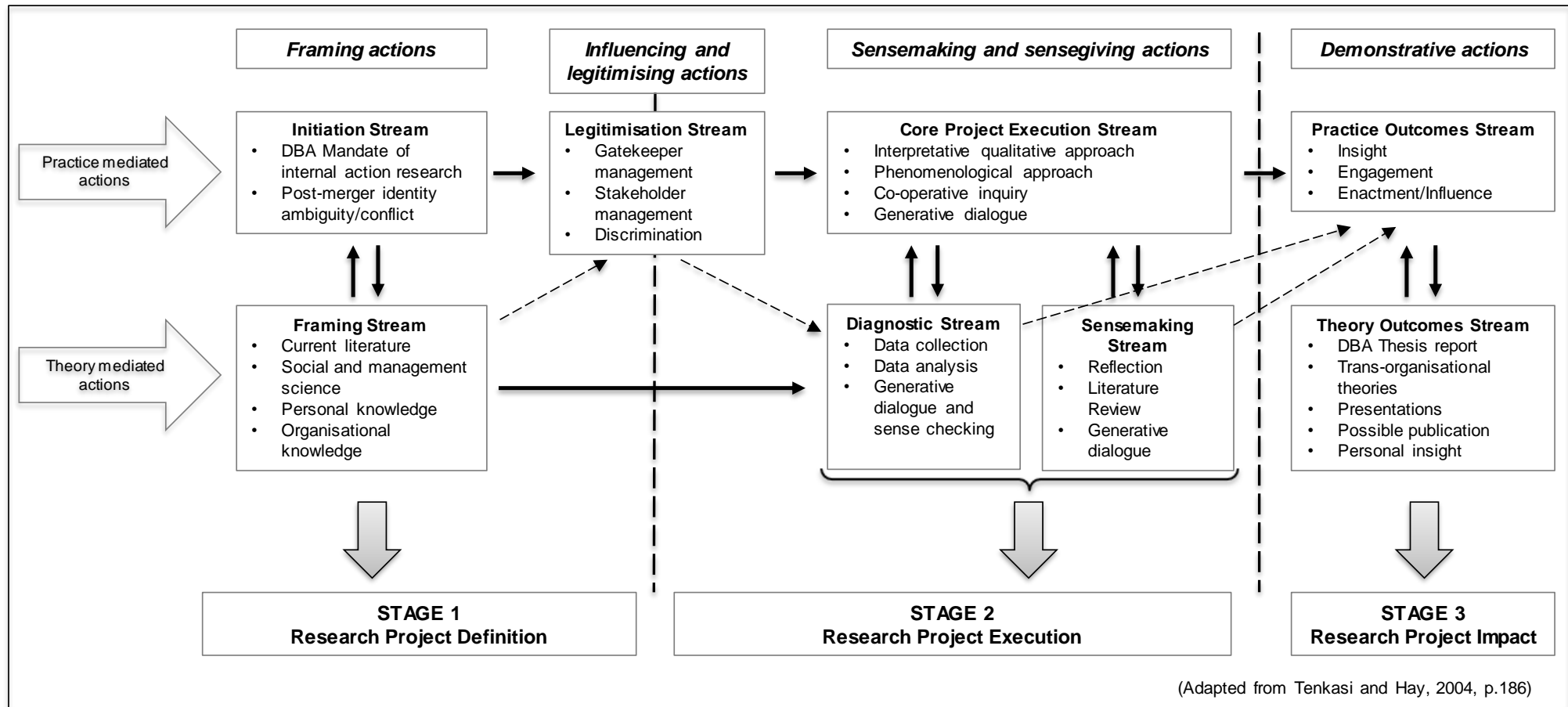
- a) the initiation and legitimisation stream of activities informed by my practice-based reality as employee, and;
- b) the theoretical framing stream positioning my research within the context of the literature.

The legitimisation activities continued beyond the project definition stage, particularly given that the leadership structure continued to shift as the merger unfolded my experience.

I also experienced the project execution stage as a prolonged period of sensemaking and sensegiving activities influenced in parallel by theory and practice (Tenkasi and Hay, 2004). I set out to discuss the activities associated with the core project execution, as well as the diagnostic and sensemaking streams associated with this stage later in this chapter. Figure 3 below provides an overview of the various theory- and practice-based activities, which formed part of the research process, and provides a quick snapshot of the more in-depth methodology descriptions to follow in this chapter.



Figure 3: Overall research approach demonstrating theory and practice mediators



1

<sup>1</sup> The project impact or 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of my research approach, forms the focus of the subsequent chapters in this research report, and is therefore not covered in this chapter.

### 3.2.1 Philosophical assumptions and influence of social constructivism

The philosophical (ontological and epistemological) and methodological choices present in this research are premised on the assumption that the social world of organisations is a subjective construction of individuals, who, through the use of language and interactions, shape and adopt an organisational identity of inter-subjectively shared meaning (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Therefore, my research is underpinned by my axiological beliefs that as employees we negotiate a set of organisational values amongst ourselves that we feel we can honour, and these values and/or our desire to honour these values, may shift as the organisational context around us shifts.

As I embrace a social constructivism orientation in my research, this shaped my approach to the inquiry and to the writing of this report. My organisational context and my desire to co-create research with my colleagues influenced my approach to inquiry. Thus, my methodology displays a variety of qualitative methods of data collection. I do reference quantitative data, but I do so in the service of sense making and description of findings, rather than a method to infer causal factors for identification and engagement. I emphasise a more literary narrative, embracing metaphor and storytelling. Table 1 below summarises the implications of the social constructivism interpretative framework on the research study.

*Table 1: The associated philosophical beliefs related to Social Constructivism*

<b>Ontological beliefs</b> <i>(the nature of reality)</i>	<b>Epistemological beliefs</b> <i>(how theory is known)</i>	<b>Axiological beliefs</b> <i>(role of values)</i>	<b>Methodological beliefs</b> <i>(approach to inquiry)</i>
Multiple identities are created and constructed through our shared, lived experiences, as well as in our interactions with others.	Reality is co-constructed between myself (as employee-researcher) and my colleagues, and our collective reality is shaped by individual experiences.	Our individual values are honoured, and are negotiated among us, and as this occurs within our organisational context, our negotiation will also consider how our personal values relate to our organisational values.	The writing style emphasises more of a literary (storytelling) narrative. Methodology reflects an indicative method of emergent ideas (through consensus) obtained through methods of interviewing, co-operative inquiry groups, images, metaphors, observations, informal dialogue and narrative analysis.

*(Source: Adapted from Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011)*

### 3.2.2 Embracing phenomenology

During my early exploration of the OI literature within the M&A context, I noticed the strong sense of concern among organisational scholars that current theorising on organisational change, including shifts in identification, did not adequately capture the lived reality of the recipients of organisational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This seemingly contributed to a surge in authors adopting a sensemaking lens (Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005) in an attempt to more adequately understand the processes and experience of organisational change from a phenomenological perspective.

A sensemaking approach becomes embedded in a cognitive, social, and discursive process, which underscores meaning making as a complex social interaction, imbued with emotion and fuelled by a complex, idiosyncratic, collaborative, retrospective and dynamic processes through which captured cues are rendered into meaningful interpretations (Guetter and Vandenberg, 2014; Daft and Weick, 1984; Weick, 1979, 1995). Thus, given that the purpose of phenomenology is “*to describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon*” (Cresswell, 2013, p.76), or to provide a “*grasp of the very nature of the thing*” (van Manen, 1990, p.177) it is well suited to exploring the merger experience from the change recipient’s, or employee’s perspective.

Arguably phenomenological assumptions rest on three common principles (Cresswell, 2013), namely:

- a) phenomenology is the study of lived experiences;
- b) the study of the phenomenon is intentionally conscious (Steward and Mickunas, 1990; van Manen, 1990), and;
- c) the development of descriptions of the essence takes precedence over the explanation of the analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

My own approach resembles a blend of *hermeneutic phenomenology* (van Manen, 1990) and *empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology* (Moustakas, 1990) in that it is focussed both on my interpretations of the data and on a description of the experiences of the participants (Cresswell, 2013). Unlike empirical, transcendental phenomenology which embrace Husserl’s notion of *epoche* (or bracketing), in which the researcher actively, and as much as possible, sets aside their own experiences when engaging in the research process, I was consciously aware of my own experience throughout both the merger and the study. I

did include a form of 'bracketing' in that I did not include my own comments as part of the qualitative data, instead reflecting critically on my experiences through a process of note taking.

The remainder of this chapter explores the Project Definition and Project Execution stage of the research methodology. It was a conscious decision to structure this methodology chapter into sub-sections dealing with Stage 1 and Stage 2 of my conceptual research model, with the result that, unlike traditional methodology chapters, I discuss the sample group and data collection methodology associated with specific research cycles in two different parts of this chapter. In adopting this approach, I am able to offer the reader a comprehensive overview of the emergent nature of the 3.5-year research process, whilst also demonstrating the distinctly different data collection methodologies associated with each stage, in a chronological order.

### **3.3 STAGE 1: RESEARCH PROJECT DEFINITION**

This section sets out to explore the framing actions undertaken at the outset of the research project.

#### **3.3.1 Framing of the research problem**

Establishing what the project would focus on within my organisational context was the amalgamated result of a practice-mediated project *initiation* stream, and a theory-mediated project *framing and contextualising* stream of activities (Tenkasi and Hay, 2004). Empirical research suggests that most actionable research projects, i.e. those commonly found within the DBA context (Huff and Huff, 2001), are framed primarily as a result of practice mediated actions, i.e. a blend of organisational needs/crisis deficits, future state opportunity/vision, or a leadership mandate (Tenkasi and Hay, 2004). In light of our pre-merger decline, restructuring attempts, and our post-merger integration context, I was motivated to develop insight into lessons that we could learn within our own integration process, which may enable us to improve the merger experience of employees, and to mitigate against negative impacts of the merger on the success and sustainability of the organisation. It was my belief that such insights, particularly those that generate practical suggestions for what

organisations can do to foster identification and subsequent engagement with the post-merger entity, before, during and after a merger integration process, would also make a valuable contribution to the business management literature.

As identity ambiguity and identity conflict seemed to be present within the pre- and post-merger organisation context, the incumbent CEO supported in principle my attempt at exploring the phenomenon of organisational identity formation post-merger. Upon reflection, the initial attempt at framing my research formed a crucial part of my own sensemaking experience of the pre- and post-merger changes. I recognised that my research process encompassed theories of group processes and inter-group relations, thus entering the domain of a social identity approach, arguably a very suitable approach for studying a merger integration process (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2013). As discussed in Chapter two, social identity theory and self-categorization theory offered me two lenses through which to notice the merger's impact on the notion of 'us' and 'them', and to reflect on the tension between shared group attributes creating tangible social identities of 'we', and the rise of the values of the personal identity of 'I'.

I framed my research issue as a study of our organisational merger experience from the view point of professional services employees situated in the subordinate merging partner, or legacy organisation, with the view to generating insights that might assist my own and other organisations in better managing employee experiences during the merger integration process. Within our professional services context, I focused on two types of employees in particular: *knowledge workers*, and *manager/co-ordinator professionals* (hereafter referred to as managers/co-ordinators).

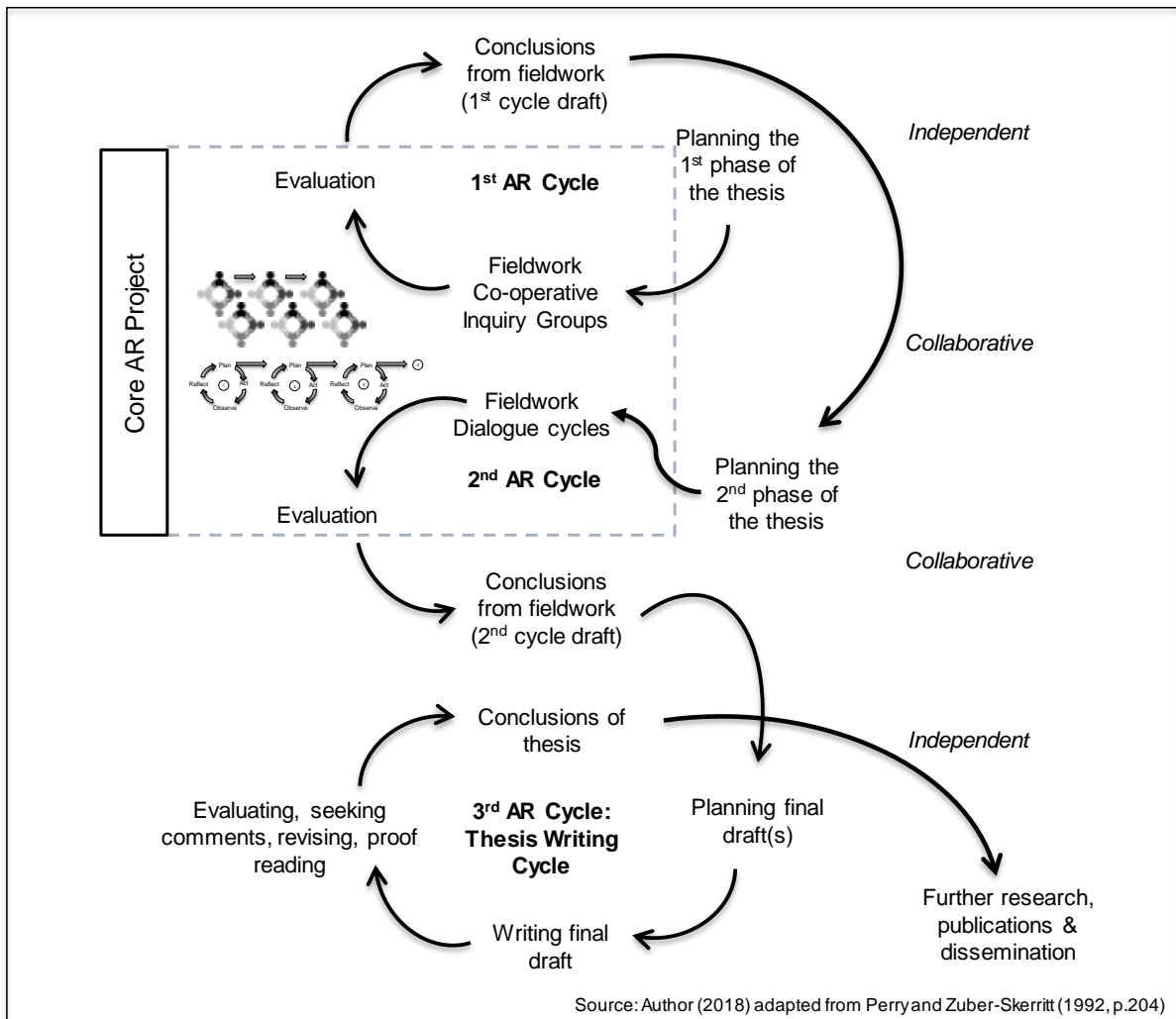
### **3.4 STAGE 2: RESEARCH PROJECT EXECUTION**

This section sets out to describe the '*core project execution*' stream, i.e. the diagnostic and sensemaking activity streams undertaken and, in particular, how the methodology concerning these streams were informed by both theory and the ever-changing post-merger environment in which this stage of the research was conducted. The research execution stage incorporated various components of qualitative research, as discussed in this section,

and I would argue that the lines between the project execution and the project impact stages were blurred and not distinct as suggested by the Tenkasi and Hay (2004) model.

The longitudinal research execution process adopted the social sciences AR model that calls for two distinct types of AR project stages (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2007). The first project stage, known as the '*core AR project*' focuses on addressing the contextual, practical and thematic outcomes of the AR cycle(s) aimed at exploring the 'practical problem', and the second cycle is a '*thesis AR project*' which addresses intellectual propositional knowledge about the 'research problem' which is situated within a body of knowledge. Positioning the research process thus also ensure the linkage between practice and theory, enabling the researcher to deliver against the two requirements of AR set out at the start of this chapter. However, I adapted this model by adding a second AR research cycle that effectively extended the core project phase into two sections, as illustrated by Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: My IAR Project Execution Process



Briefly, the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle constitutes the phenomenological study which was conducted through semi-structured interviews and co-operative inquiry groups. This approach combined the diagnostic and sensemaking streams of activity as set out in my research process (adapted from Tenkasi and Hay, 2004), and allowed me to cycle between data collection, data analysis, reflection, and ongoing review of the literature, in a continual process that also involved generative dialogue and sense checking over an eight-month period.

The outcome, or output of this 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle was the emergence of eight themes and a conceptual process model describing the essence of our identity formation experience post-merger, which is discussed in detail in the phenomenological reflection of Chapter Four. Two of the emerging themes from this cycle prompted me to consider a 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle, in order to

address a shared notion of lack of sensemaking opportunities, as well as a shared concern around 'loss of significance', which included the sub-themes of loss of voice, loss of value and loss of psychological safety/trust. Thus, the outcome of the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle motivated me to engage in more participatory research elements during the subsequent AR cycle as I was struck by the argument that the force that lies behind action is a vision of what ought to be, and the needs of a community for ameliorating the living conditions of the people (Park, 1999).

The main aim of the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle was to foster engagement in a generative dialogue with as many members of the leadership team and my peers as possible, around the eight themes and the conceptual process of identification and engagement which emerged from the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle. I also deviated from Zuber-Skerrit and Perry's (2007) guidelines in the adoption of a much more fluid and pragmatic approach to sharing the outputs of the collaborative fieldwork elements within my organisation, throughout the entire execution stage, as opposed to a separate project report to the organisation.

The ensuing sub-sections set out the detailed methodology for both the diagnostic and sensemaking streams for both AR cycles. It is prudent to note again that in contrast to a more traditional methodology chapter structure, this report includes a review of the data collection and data analysis methodology associated with each of the AR cycles, in a chronological order, as opposed to a section at the end of the methodology chapter. The reason for this is that the methodology of 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle was informed by the outcome of the data analysis of the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, and I felt it would have been too confusing to structure the chapter in any other way but chronological.

### **3.4.1 The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle – Rationale and intent**

The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle commenced during the initial post-merger phase within the legacy organisation. I not only wanted to understand in depth the shared experience of the merger integration from the viewpoint of those who lived it within my own organisation; I also felt compelled to 'do something' about some of the management transgressions I perceived to be happening around me.



I was eager to enact the argument that organisations are recursive systems displaying inter-level dynamics (McCaughan and Palmer, 1994) used effectively by insider researchers to foster organisational change and learning (Coghlan, 1996; Rashford and Coghlan, 1994; Roth, 1996). Thus, I turned the 1<sup>st</sup> research cycle into an approach that would address at least two levels of inter-level dynamics:

- 1) connecting my personal learning about the merger integration experience, by way of 'learning-in-action' through my agency as employee-researcher, thus, using my dual role or employee-researcher, as well as my informal influence; and
- 2) creating a process that would foster group learning through shared consideration of both the content and the process of our shared merger experience (Schein, 1999), through engagement and dialogue.

### 3.4.2 The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle – Research design

It seemed to me that my position with the legacy organisation presented me with excellent access to a homogenous sample of peers and colleagues I could engage in order for us to collectively describe *what* the merger experience meant for us, and *how* it impacted our organisational identification (Creswell, 2013). Thus, I adopted a longitudinal phenomenological approach to study the lived experience of my peers and colleagues during the merger integration of our professional services organisation.

I set out to create a process whereby I could explore the conscious lived experiences of a group of people (van Manen, 1990), and develop descriptions of the essence of the shared experiences, whilst also analysing and explaining the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I adopted a social constructivist interpretative framework as I support the ontological position that '*multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others*' (Creswell, 2013, p.36). Given that as employee-researcher I was also living through the merger integration experience, I acknowledged that my experience as both researcher and practitioner would influence our shared co-construction of reality. Thus, I considered the notion of 'bracketing' associated with phenomenology with some trepidation, as I was conscious that my own experience of the merger integration would undoubtedly influence my analysis and interpretation of the data. However, where possible, I endeavoured to acknowledge and separate my own subjectivity during the data collection and analysis phase. In particular, during interviews I followed a semi-structured interview guideline

(discussed in more detail in section 3.4.3 below) with the conscious intent of not interposing my own views during the interview. In addition, during the co-operative inquiry groups, I attempted for the most part to facilitate the conversation by asking questions, rather than offering my own views. Furthermore, during the analysis phase, I refrained from using any of my own contributions to the dialogue in the transcripts to inform my themes. Instead, I opted to reflect on my own experiences using memos. In Chapter Six, I reflect and analyse my own feelings and thoughts arising from the research, as a separate stream of data for me to consider.

### **3.4.3 The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle - Data collection**

I structured the data collection methodology for the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle as two-stage approach.

#### *Stage one*

I conducted the first stage of data collection over a two-month period, which commenced seven months after the merger announcement and ended after the first month of the formal merger integration process. I collected data for the first stage via in-depth one-hour long semi-structured interviews with four former knowledge workers (three male and one female) who exited the organisation no less than three months prior to the interview. I deemed the sample size as representative because during that 5-month period, only seven knowledge workers exited the organisation, and after the fourth interview, the shared narratives were very similar and did not yield new and/or conflicting data (Charmaz, 2014). I obtained signed consent from each interview prior to the interview, and supplied them with a copy of the Participant Information Sheet related to Phase 1 of my research (See Appendix 1).

I wanted the focus of these interviews to be retrospective, and I intended to use the data collected from the participants to provide a richer context of their pre-merger experiences. I was keen to explore their experiences during the early merger integration phase, which directly contributed to their exit from the newly merged organisation, in an attempt to test some of the theories explored in the literature review. To help minimise my subjectivity during the interview process, I employed the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), to help me develop a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 2) aimed at gathering data in the most unbiased manner possible. I took care to phrase the

questions in a non-biased and open manner aimed at exploring both their cognitive and emotive experience, and recollection of their process of identification before and after the merger (Charmaz, 2014). I designed the semi-structured guideline to question their recollection of the process of identification with the legacy organisation in an attempt to understand, a) whether they considered themselves to have been highly identified with the legacy organisation, and, b) whether they could recall their experience of identification (or non-identification) with both the pre- and the post-merger organisation.

Thus, I framed my interview questions carefully in a way that would allow my interviewees to share with me their experience of the merger process, without me leading or guiding the interview flow. I inquired about experiences, processes and people that affected their process of identification both pre- and post-merger. In an attempt to explore their perception of the new merger partner, I asked open questions exploring how they perceived the merger partner prior to the announcement, what they based this on, and how this shifted (or not) as the merger became a reality. I also inquired about any specific key moments during the pre- and post-merger phase that stood out for them personally and explored their recollection of the events they recalled with them.

### *Stage two*

This second stage of data collection consisted of an eight-month longitudinal study, involving two co-operative inquiry groups, initially eight participants per group, which each met three times for a one-hour meeting. This period of data collection started in November 2016, thus nine-months after the announcement, and within the third month of the formal integration process. I obtained informed consent from all the participants during the first meeting, and supplied each member with a Participant Information Sheet for their records (See Appendix 3).

I designed this stage to do two things:

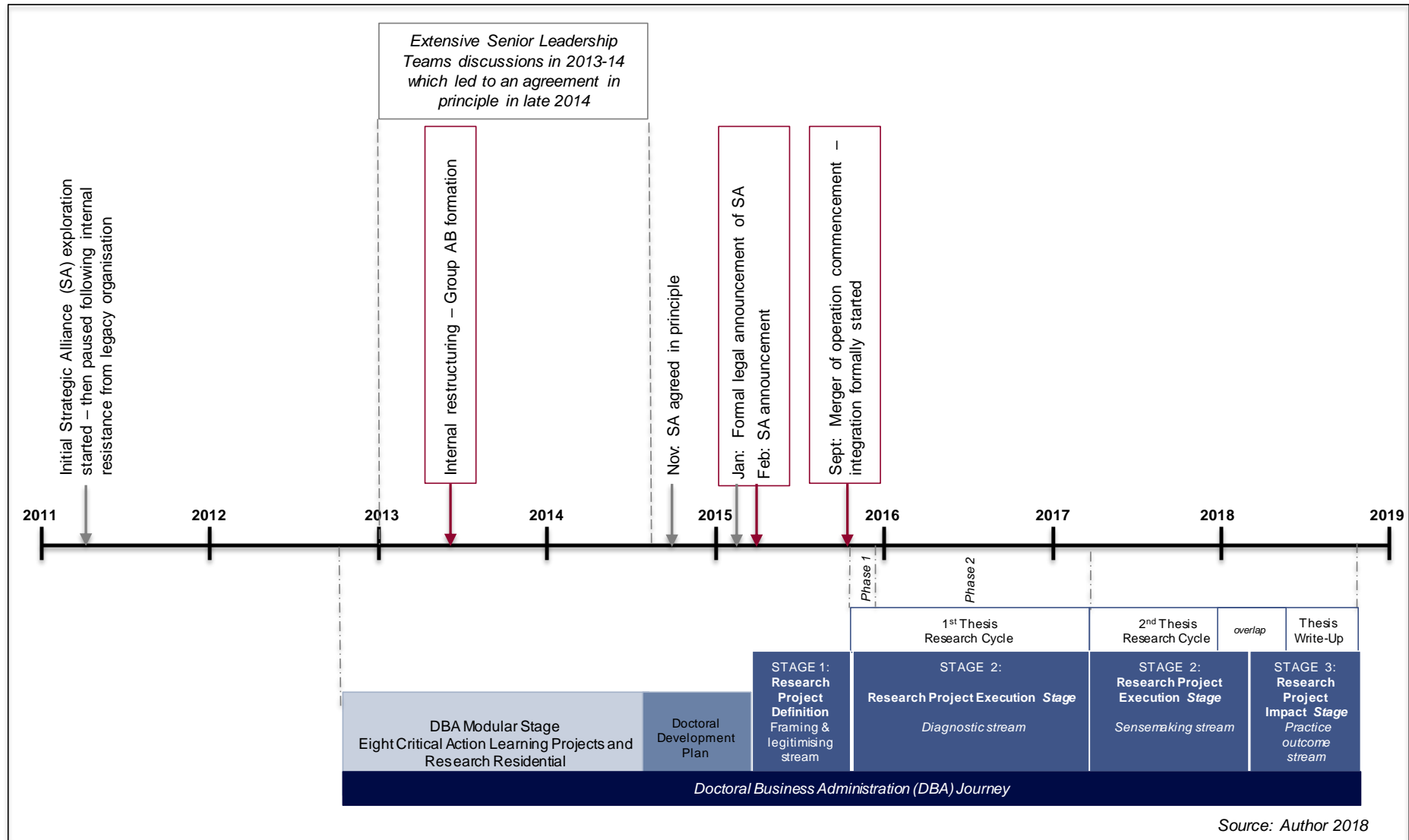
- 1) to look back, i.e. to reflect together on how we came to identify (or not) with our legacy organisation, and how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are';
- 2) to explore and discuss if, and how, our sense of personal and shared identity evolved, or shifted, during the integration phase.

I used a semi-structured guideline to help me facilitate the initial co-operative inquiry meeting (See Appendix 4). The aim of the co-operative inquiry meetings was to establish an emergent collaborative inquiry process, which focused on the very real issue of organisational identification, and subsequent engagement, with the post-merger organisational reality. These meetings had the dual intention of bringing about some measure of change and of generating robust and actionable knowledge. In particular, in selecting to use co-operative inquiry groups, I attempted to create a safe space for dialogue and communication, in order to bring *“people together around shared topical concerns, problems and issues ... in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do”* (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100).

In this way, the aim of our various co-operative inquiry dialogues was to *“promote a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change”* (Grundy, 1987, p. 154). This supported the scholars purporting that AR is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry through a process that is constructed and conducted with members from the organisation, rather than on or for them (Coghlan and Shani, 2014; Shani and Pasmore, 1985).

Figure 5 below illustrates a timeline mapping the research cycles as they related to the key organisational events in the lifecycle of the legacy organisation.

Figure 5: Timeline mapping DBA research approach to key organisational events



### 3.4.4 The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle - Sample size and sampling technique

It was a deliberate action to establish two co-operative inquiry groups from two homogenous groups within our organisation (Creswell, 2013). Each group represented members from within a specific social identity group which existed both in the legacy, and in the post-merger organisation, in order to ensure that I gathered a broader perspective of the merger experience ranging across groups of employees to whom I had ready access. The two co-operative inquiry groups established were:

- 1) **Group 1:** Eight knowledge workers, both with and without management responsibilities; some from the former legacy business units, i.e. Groups A, B and C, and some recruited into the post-merger organisation; and
- 2) **Group 2:** Eight managers/co-ordinators (excluding senior managers, to avoid hierarchical reporting lines); some from the former legacy business units, i.e. Groups A, B and C, and some recruited into the post-merger organisation.

I used a purposive sampling process (Palys, 2008) as I deliberately set out to approach 24 members from within the organisation whom I knew personally, or whom I felt would be open to work with me in an action research-based approach. I sought to avoid hierarchical reporting lines between participants in the same inquiry group, in an attempt to position us as peers in order to free the conversation from lines of authority or power. This meant that there were several members of the two social identity groups, whom I could not approach.

As I had no mandate to address a specific organisational issue or concern, I framed my request for participation as an opportunity for joint sensemaking. It was my hope that my approach would lead towards a form of participative qualitative research that might enact change within the post-merger organisation. Several of the members I originally approached declined to participate. Four felt that their current workload precluded their participation; two felt their prior involvement with the pre-merger restructuring would make it difficult for other members to discuss, without prejudice, their experiences with them in the groups; whilst two stated that they were planning to exit the organisation in the near future.

The sample selection excluded knowledge workers who were working within the dominant partner organisation at the start of the data collection phase, on the basis that we had very little contact with any of them, given our separate location, leadership structure and internal practice. This did not change throughout the duration of the data collection phase, and even 3.5-years into the merger process, the majority of the employees associated with the two groups mentioned in this study remain very much isolated from the dominant partner's organisational structure and members.

Given the eight-month timeframe of this study, the organisational context did affect the membership and participation of both co-operative inquiry groups over time. For example:

- a) All eight members never attended group 1 meetings simultaneously. The number in attendance varied between five and six per meeting. To compensate for this, we split the third co-operative inquiry group meeting into two separate meetings to enable all eight members to participate again.
- b) Group 2 lost two members after the second meeting, as the merger through further redundancies and restructuring affected managers/co-ordinators in particular. I recruited a new member for the third co-operative inquiry group meeting, with full consent from attendees.

Integrating new members did not seem to have any impact on the quality of conversations, or on the levels of trust that were established within the groups, but the departure of members from Group 2 had a definite impact on our shared experience. For example, during the second co-operative inquiry group meeting, we had to say goodbye to a member of the group who was leaving because of involuntary restructuring that occurred that week. This was a very emotional and difficult meeting for all and yielded rich reflections on the emotional impact the merger experience was having on all of us, and as discussed in section 3.5, provided me with a rich opportunity to reflect on my own experience using memos.

*Aligning my choice of co-operative inquiry as a qualitative approach to AR.*

Within a participatory AR approach, relationships form an integral part of the overall research approach, and therefore the nature and the quality of relationships between researcher and participants is critical to both the process and the outcomes of AR (Brown et al., 2003; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). AR literature mainly describes the initiation and formation of

the participatory relationships in a short narrative description (for example, Baghar, 2007; Collins, 2005; Fine and Torre, 2006), with a few authors paying more critical attention to the difficulties in establishing such relationships (for example, Arieli et al., 2009; Busza, 2004).

I believe that the participative research approach adopted in this study allowed for the creation of a mutual inquiry space where we could have very honest conversations about all aspects of our individual and collective organisational life touched by the merger integration process. I also know that the study capitalised on my own trustworthiness as a friend and colleague. Thus, I believe that my research approach resulted in a systemic, participative approach to inquiry that allowed members of my organisation to extend their understanding of problems or issues stemming from our shared experience of the merger integration process. Furthermore, the process contributed towards actions that contributed towards the resolution of the problems or issues (Stringer and Genat, 2004) we explored collectively. Therefore, I position this study as an approach to research and knowledge development, as opposed to a research method *per se* (Stringer, 1999).

#### *Co-operative inquiry facilitation*

Both co-operative inquiry groups were *full-form* in that I, as initiator, was also a co-researcher and co-subject with the other members in both groups (Heron, 1996). In a very broad sense, I lightly facilitated the co-operative inquiry meetings to guide our reflections along a time continuum from when we first joined the organisation, to where we were at each point of our meetings during the integration period. We explicitly described our experience of joining (which included our experience of identification with the organisation we joined), followed by an exploration, and description, of how the announcement of the merger and the subsequent integration process affected us, and our sense of belonging.

Where appropriate, I explored some of the themes that emerged from my ongoing engagement with the data and the literature, over the course of this eight-month data collection period. In this way, I felt confident that the themes generated in the data during the first theory research cycle, stemmed from the experience of a diverse group of employees, directly affected by the merger, whilst also being informed by my pre-understanding of M&A literature.



### 3.4.5 The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle – Data analysis methodology

I recorded all the semi-structured interviews and co-operative group meetings, with permission, and later transcribed and anonymised through the allocation of pseudonyms. I anonymised all other named members of the organisation(s), or any reference to a specific building or location, through the substitution of identifiable information with generic referencing. For example, by referring to 'a senior leader' or 'building A', I excluded any passages of text that might lead to the identification of the participant, or anyone else within the organisation(s), if I could not safely anonymise the text. Where applicable I created a memo to myself concerning the background and/or contextual relevance of the discarded passage to help me with my own narrative interpretation, if needed. Once I completed this process, I uploaded all transcripts to a computer software package, NVivo 11 Pro, which I used to assist with the qualitative data analysis approach as set out below.

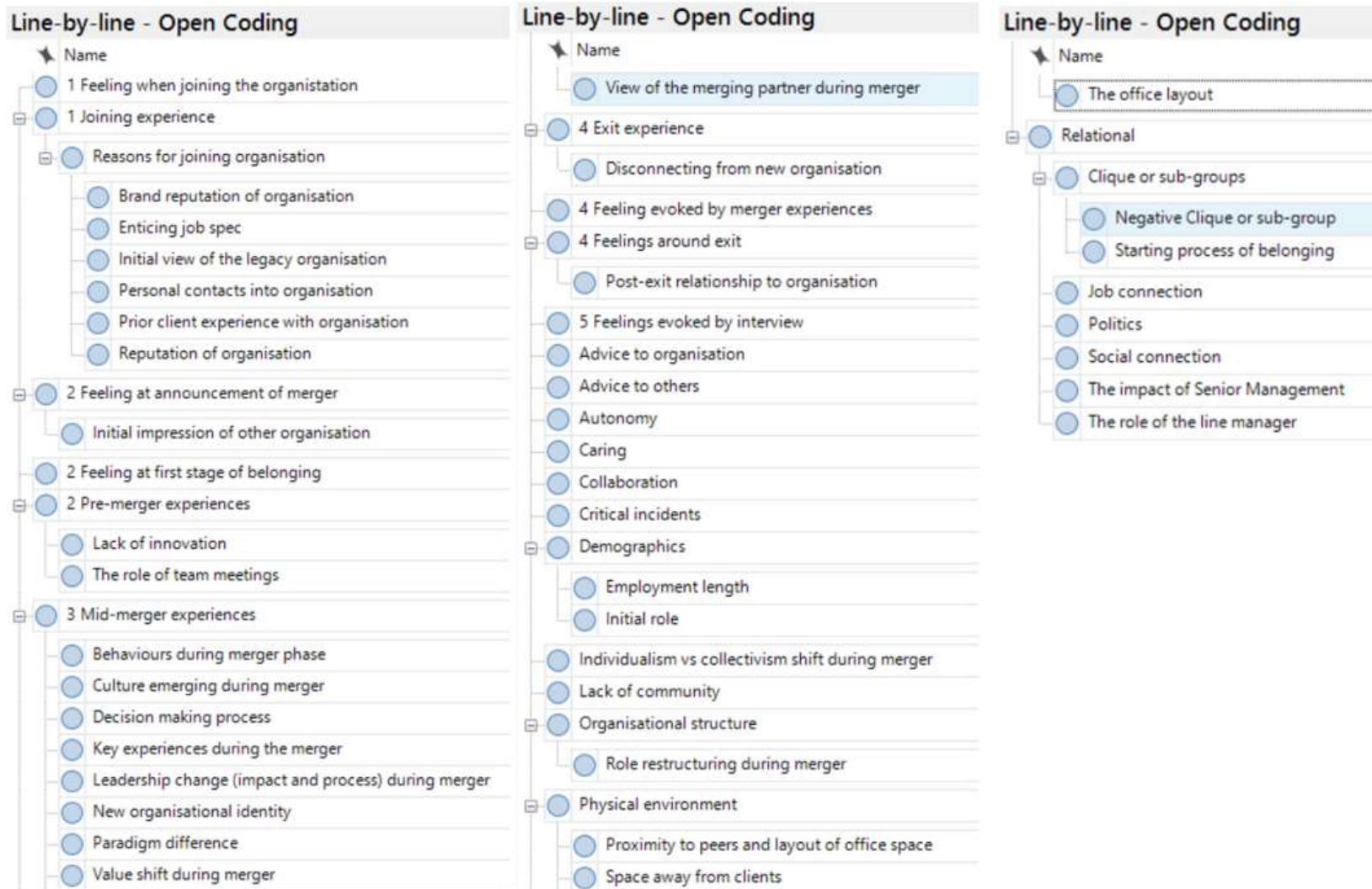
Specific structured methods for data analysis exist for phenomenological studies, for example, those postured by Moustakas (1994), in particular his modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Although I started the analysis phase with their first recommended step, i.e. a rich description of my own experiences of the merger, this mainly informed my memos, and later my critical reflecting on the duality of my role as both a researcher and employee. I also opted not to move immediately to their second recommended step of coding all the significant statements. Instead, I started my analysis by conducting line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014) of the four semi-structured interview transcripts obtained during stage one. Although line-by-line coding is not generally associated with a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013), I opted to start my engagement with the transcripts through this lens, to evoke more rigour, and potentially objectivity, into my inductive and subjective interpretation of the narratives. As such, I adopted a Grounded Theory approach to my data analysis phase (Charmaz, 2014) as a deliberate choice, based on my memos exploring my 'in the moment' emotional responses immediately following the interviews, and also noticing, after reading the first few transcripts that certain passages in the narrative held more relevance to me. Although I endeavoured to capture personal reflective memos exploring my conscious and unconscious awareness associated with these key moments, I felt that a more objective, line-by-line coding would be beneficial to me.

To help me structure my line-by-line coding process, I developed open nodes that categorized experiences according to 'thoughts' (cognitive experiences) and 'feelings' (emotional experiences), and I paid specific attention to the following five time-line frames:

- a) At joining
- b) Pre-merger
- c) Mid-merger
- d) After exit
- e) 'In-the-moment', i.e. during the interview.

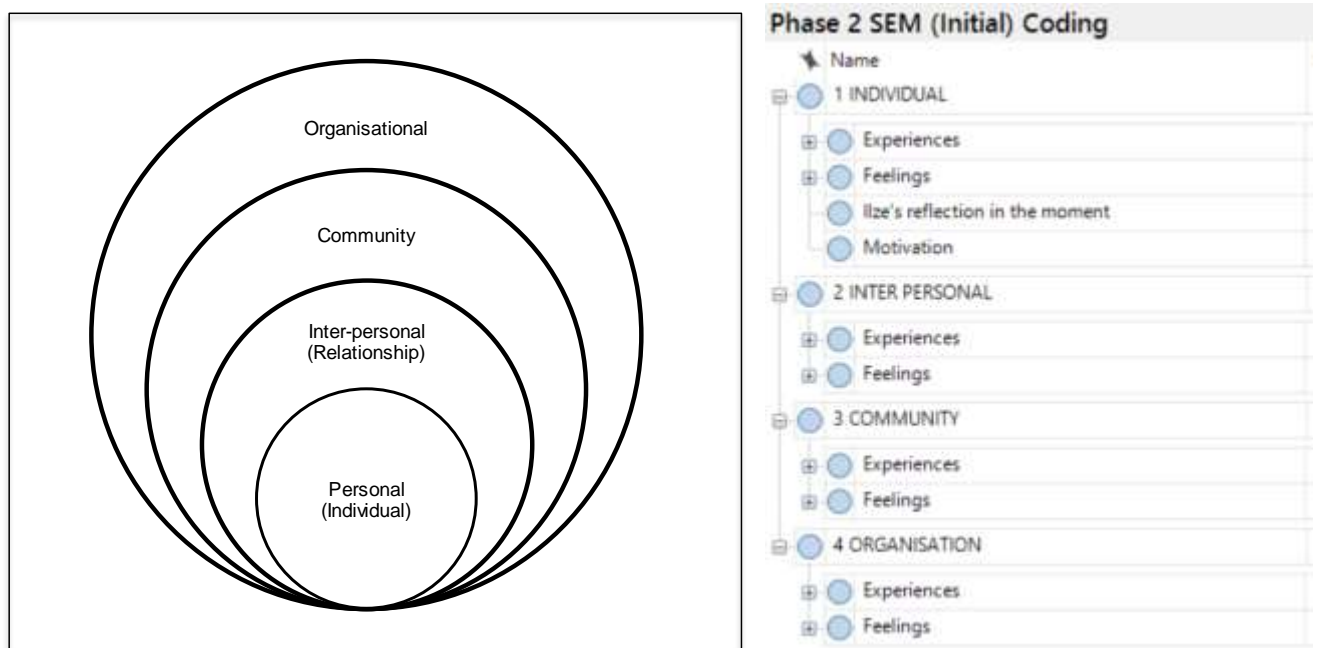
In addition to these open nodes, my coding also resulted in 11 other open nodes, three of which included several sub-clusters. I have included a list of the open nodes generated during this first phase of line-by-line coding, as illustrated in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Phase 1: Open nodes structuring of the initial line-by-line coding approach of Stage 1 interviews



Reviewing the open nodes generated by the line-by-line, and linear timeline manner of coding with a colleague, we noticed a pattern that enticed me to re-order and recode the nodes, this time using a four-level socio-ecological model (SEM) structure. The model seemed to fit well with the three-levels of leadership model (Schouller, 2013) that urges leaders to consider actions related to personal, inter-personal, and organisational/public realms. It seemed to provide a good way to classify or structure the complex interplay between personal (individual), inter-personal (relationship), community and organisational factors present in the data. Thus, I created four pre-set, i.e. deductive family nodes, based on this model, as illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Socio-ecological model framework applied to create Phase 2 SEM (initial) coding structure

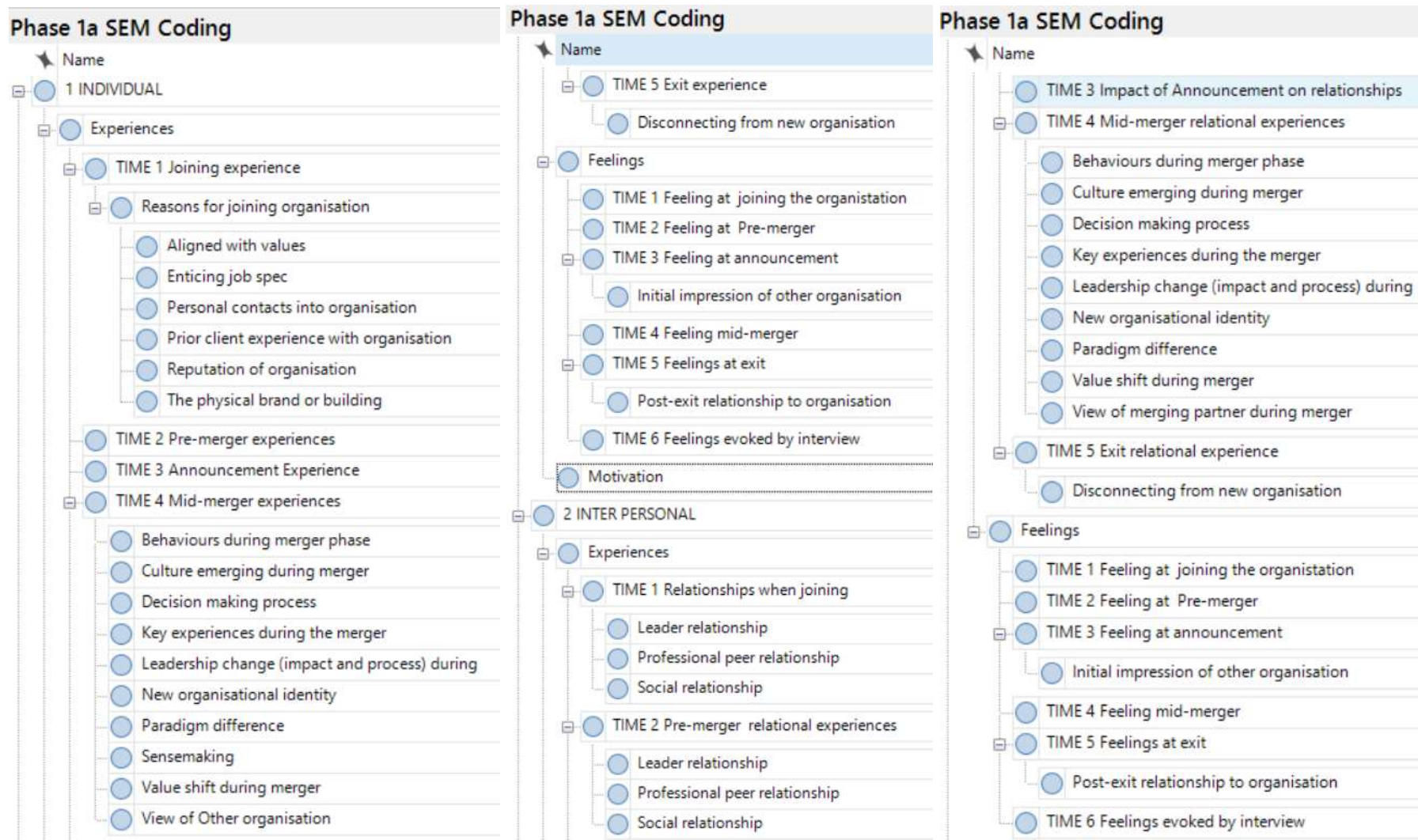


(Source: Author, 2018)

Once I had completed this classification, I realised that I could easily collapse the 'community' and 'inter-personal' nodes, as they overlapped almost fully. Thus, I ended up with only three levels of coding data. At this point, I did not attempt to code the data according to my pre-understanding of the literature, instead wishing to employ a more inductive data analysis methodology. I believed that a data analysis methodology more closely related to Grounded Theory would render a more objective data analysis. Reflecting on this approach, it became clear to me that I was influenced by my own bias for a scientific approach to research, resembling my earlier positivist philosophical leanings.

However, I soon found that attempting to retain the timeline structure within the SEM node families, resulted in a very complex coding structure. For example, once the secondary (and sometimes even tertiary) codes underpinning each of the SEM node families were expanded, I found that I had 113 individual codes to consider, as illustrated by the expanded SEM coding structure, in Figures 8 and 9 below:

Figure 8: Detailed extract of the Phase 2 SEM (initial) coding structure (part 1)



(Source: Author, 2018)





I realised that my approach to follow the narrative presented me with a *unitization problem* (Cambell, Quincy, Ossermand and Pedersen, 2013), in that in some instances the flowing narrative of the speaker meant that a single sentence could simultaneously apply to two or more codes in my coding structure. However, I noticed that I intuitively began to cluster sentences into larger units of text before classifying it to a node, and once I decided that I would not restrict myself to a single sentence as the unit of analysis, it became easier to code the text.

This was a turning point in my data analysis approach. I once again immersed myself in the transcripts, reading and re-reading them (accompanied by listening to the audio recording at least once more). This time I printed them out and used good old fashioned coloured highlighters and pens to search for significant statements that pertained explicitly to the lived experience of identity formation pre- and post-merger. Following this exercise, I realised that the data presented me with a rich description of a shared process and shared experiences common across all sets of the data. At this point, my data analysis methodology shifted. I adjusted my approach to resemble a meaning making approach to my analysis (Bruner, 1990). Specifically, I embraced an amalgamation of two forms of qualitative data analysis:

- a) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, as I sought to “*explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience*” (Smith, 2004, p.40)
- b) Thematic analysis approach, where I used a form of ‘template analysis’ (King, 2004) where I produced a list of codes which represented themes identified from the textual data, as well as sub-themes defined from a priori stemming from my pre-knowledge of OI and M&A themes. I discuss the construction of the thematic nodes in a later part of this section, but here it is worth noting that I modified and added to the emergent themes during my reading and interpretation of the transcripts.

Many phenomenological studies favour IPA aimed at describing “*the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon*” (Creswell, 2013, p.76). IPA sits within phenomenological psychology (Smith, Joseph and Das Nair, 2011), which generally means that data is analysed in an idiographic manner, i.e. one interview/case study at a time before data can be examined across various interviews/case studies. As IPA is generally only suitable for providing detailed, nuanced analysis in small sample groups of 5 to 10 transcripts (Smith, 2004), the seven co-operative inquiry group



transcripts, as well as the four individual interview transcripts proved to be a manageable set of data to which this approach could be applied.

Within IPA, I assumed an active role of balancing my phenomenological insider, or *emic*<sup>2</sup> position, with an interpretative outsider, or *etic* position (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005), as I attempted to understand the meaning of the shared experiences. In this way, I took care to notice my own reactions to the data, recognising my own subjectivity, which stemmed from my shared experience of the merger integration, whilst knowing that “*IPA permits the researcher to interpret, based on their own experiences and knowledge, the participant’s account*” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.10).

I viewed using template analysis as a form of thematic analysis as “*a set of techniques, rather than a distinct methodology, suitable for use within a range of epistemological positions*” (King, 2004, p. 256). I felt it appropriate given that my research was concerned with ‘discovering’ underlying causes of human behaviour during the merger process, whilst also seeking to establish objectivity and to demonstrate coding reliability (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Kent, 2000). Furthermore, I felt confident that template analysis supported my social constructivist position by offering a ‘contextual constructivist’ position linked to my assumption that multiple interpretations of our merger experience is possible (Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000). This meant that “*concern with coding reliability is therefore irrelevant; instead issues such as the reflexivity of the researcher, the attempt to approach the topic from differing perspectives, and the richness of the description produced, are important requirements*” (King, 2004, p. 256, cited in Cassel and Symon, 2004). I felt that using a template analysis was in fact very similar to IPA, i.e. both developed conceptual themes, clustered into broader groupings, which in turn led to identification across ‘master themes’ with their subsidiary ‘constituent themes’ (King, 2004). I am conscious that my analysis of the data, as well as my own experience of the merger and the co-operative inquiry groups, informed my conceptual themes. However, by introducing template analysis to my IPA approach, I was able to introduce priori codes in the subsequent constituent theme analysis, stemming from exploration of the literature. In line with IPA, I first analysed transcripts as

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<sup>2</sup> In social and behavioural sciences, *emic* and *etic* refer to different types of field research and viewpoints, i.e. *emic* implies from within the social group, and *etic* implies from outside.

'individual cases' in greater depth, an altogether more time-consuming process, before integrating my analysis across the full set of cases with the template analysis.

My analysis of the individual interviews, and co-operative inquiry group meetings yielded 223 pages of transcripts consisting of a rich description of the merger experience. I read and re-read the transcripts in full, whilst listening to the audio recording and noting long pauses and changes in tone during the first reading. I made notes, initially hand-written, on interview content, identifying key words and phrases and noting metaphors or conceptual comments that struck me from the data. I also paid close attention to expressed and non-expressed emotions within the transcripts during this phase. This generated 504 significant statements using NVivo 11 Pro software.

I then assigned meaning to the 504 significant statements and generated 45 meaning units, illustrated in Figure 10, using the NVivo Pro11 software package, by applying the systematic IPA and thematic template analysis methodology.

Figure 10: Meaning units emerging from data

2 - Meaning units	
Name	
Merger experience generating emotions	
Identification with the legacy - impact and outcomes	
Projected continuity - need for it- promised -delivered	
Regaining voice	
Regaining significance - purpose - meaning - value	
Regaining trust	
Loss of trust	
Break in psychosocial contract	
Survivor's guilt manifestations	
Sensebreaking examples	
Faking conformity - facades of conformity	
Engaging with the new	
Negative experience with engaging with the new	
The role of the leaders	
The role of community	
Shifts in levels of identification - examples and perceptions	
PRE-MERGER IDENTIFICATION IMPACTS RESPONSE	
CHOICES - TAKING ACTION	
Trying to make a difference	
RE-IDENTIFYING or RECONNECTING	
Sensegiving - selling - communication strategy	
BECOMING INSIGNIFICANT	
Suspicion - question intent	
What's in a name - Language	
RESILIENCE	

2 - Meaning units	
Name	
Cultural - Values differences of partner orgs	
Reframing - positive optimism	
The impact of rumours - informal communication	
Relentless nature of changes - impact and perception	
Secure attachment	
Becoming more transactional	
Autonomy and control	
Loss of voice - examples and perceptions	
Decision-making process and impact	
Replaceable commodity - being disappeared	
When merger became real	
Disengaging - becoming disconnected	
ITS NOT THE WHAT ITS THE HOW	
Individualism vs collectivism (Me vs Us)	
Politics and power	
Personal-organisation fit	
'Them and us'	
Identification - community - belonging	
SENSEMAKING PROCESS	
SAYING GOODBYE	

(Source: Author's NVivo coding)

As the illustration above highlights, I used capital letters to identify the meaning units, which I felt formed a cluster of associated meanings to represent an overarching theme.

Table 2 below, illustrates how I created the meaning units through an amalgamation of associated significant statements, stemming from the original line-by-line coding process.

*Table 2: Selected examples of significant statements from co-operative inquiry group meetings, from employees experiencing the merger integration process, and related formulated meanings.*

Significant statement	Formulated meaning – Meaning units
<p>I think it's like a searchlight. You know, these ones that sort of go round. [laughter – what like in prisons?] Yeah, like in prisons. [laughter] where it sorts of come back and get you. And it's that ... that sort of searchlight and you're thinking, it does feel a bit like a rabbit in the headlights. And then when it disappears again, you think, oh phew. And then it comes back round again and it's like "Oh, God"  <i>(Managers/Co-ordinator, Gr2M3 – May, 2017)</i></p>	<p>Merger experience generating emotions: anxiety, paralysis, dread</p> <p>Relentless nature of the changes</p>
<p>So you know, I can recognise all of that [referring to benefits of the merger], but I think some of the how things have happened is the bit that I am struggling with. It's not really the what that has changed, but the how.  <i>(KW – Sept, 2016)</i></p>	<p>'It's not the what – it's the how' (<i>In Vivo code</i>) – referring to the merger integration process.</p>
<p>I am always kind of sitting on the periphery with one foot in and one foot out. So I think <i>l</i>, if I take the question literally, I think that there were aspects of the identity that I shared and there were aspects that I rejected. And it felt quite problematic.  <i>(KW – Oct, 2016)</i></p>	<p>Shifts in levels of identification – identification and disidentification</p>
<p>Hmm, surviving. That's what I'm doing at the moment .... [still emotional and trying not to cry again] I think that's all I can do. Just try and get through every day and try and do as much as I can, and not piss people off if I haven't done what they've asked me to do and blah blah blah.  <i>(Managers/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017)</i></p>	<p>Lack of resilience – Something's gotta give</p>

*(Source: Author, 2018)*

This led to the creation of eight theme clusters, following another iteration of reading through the transcripts. Table 3 below illustrates how I combined the associated formulated meaning units into one of the eight themes emerging from this process. Beyond this, Table 4 lists the eight initial theme clusters in full.

*Table 3: Example of one theme cluster with its associated formulated meanings*

<b>Emergent theme cluster</b>	<b>Associated formulated meanings</b>
Becoming insignificant	Value lost/decreased: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Becoming a commodity, i.e. replaceable</li> <li>- Lack of appreciation and recognition</li> <li>- Lack of power and status</li> <li>- Lack of opportunities to do meaningful work</li> </ul> Voice lost/decreased: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Psychological safety lacking/lost</li> <li>- Culture of fear</li> <li>- Organisational silence emerging</li> <li>- Lack of openness, consultation and dialogue</li> <li>- Lack trust</li> <li>- Top-down decision making, lack of influence</li> <li>- Them and us</li> </ul> Vulnerability increased: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Psychological safety lacking/lost</li> <li>- Projected continuity and security lost</li> <li>- Culture of fear emerging</li> <li>- Valued colleagues 'being disappeared'</li> <li>- Value not recognised and/or appreciated</li> <li>- Them and us</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Source: Author's NVivo coding)</i></p>

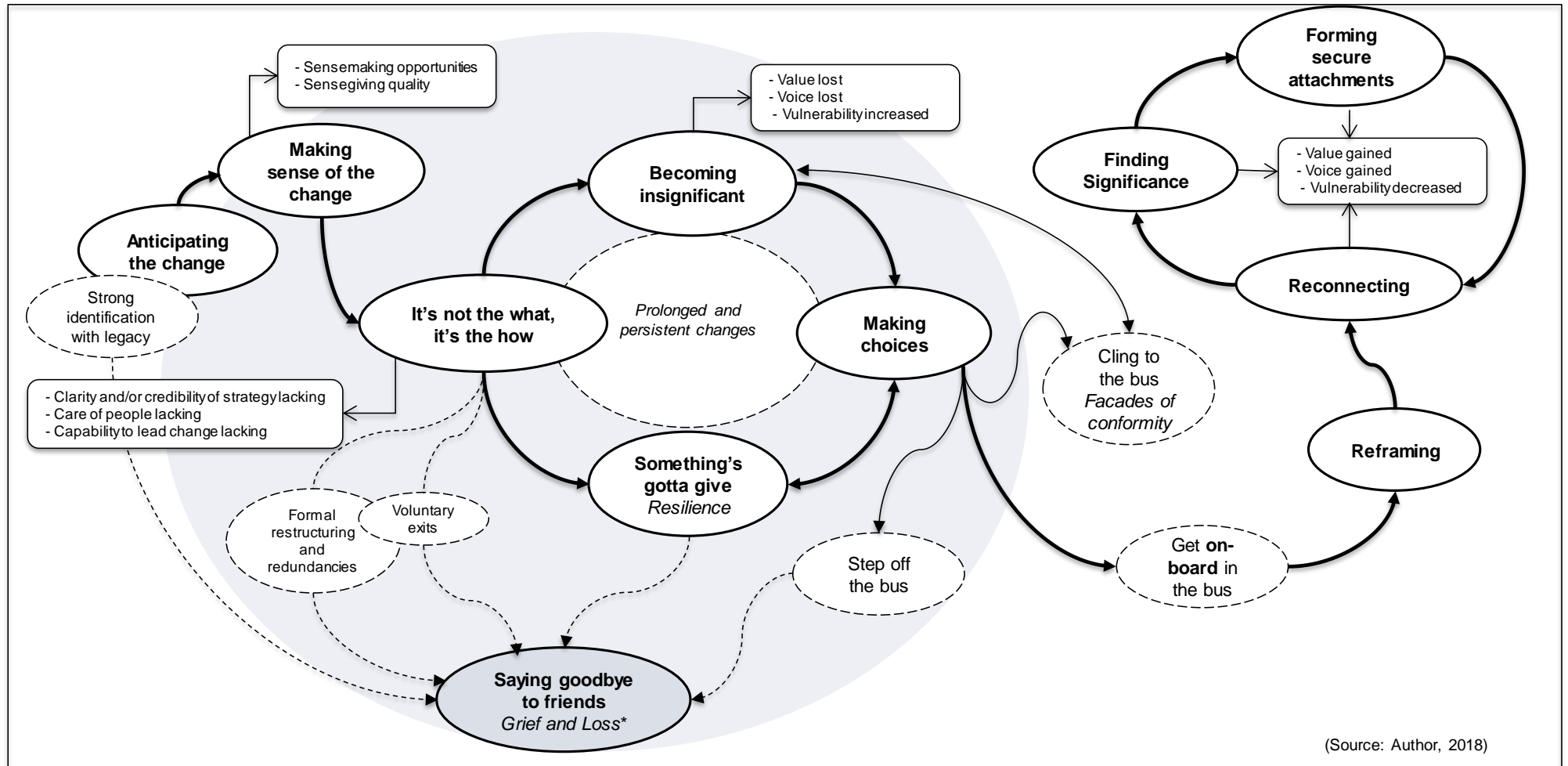
Table 4: Initial eight themes and sub-themes clusters that emerged from the data analysis

	<b>Emergent theme</b>	<b>Related sub-themes</b>
1	Pre-merger experience shaped identification experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity awareness</li> <li>- Identity claim</li> </ul>
2	The process of making sense of changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sensemaking</li> <li>- Sensegiving</li> <li>- Sensebreaking</li> </ul>
3	'It's not the what, it's the how'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clarity of intent/ communication/ sensegiving lacking</li> <li>- Care for people lacking/community lost/lacking</li> <li>- Capability/credibility to implement change lacking</li> <li>- Changes constant, unrelenting and rushed</li> </ul>
4	Becoming insignificant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Value lost/decreased</li> <li>- Voice lost/decreased</li> <li>- Vulnerability increased</li> </ul>
5	'Something's gotta give'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of resilience</li> <li>- Change fatigue</li> </ul>
6	Saying goodbye to friends and familiar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impact of emotions associated with merger</li> <li>- Impact of loss of talent and friends</li> <li>- 'Survivor's guilt'</li> </ul>
7	Making choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clinging to the bus</li> <li>- Sabotaging the bus</li> <li>- Getting on-board, in the bus</li> <li>- Being wrecked by a broken bus</li> <li>- Trashing the bus</li> <li>- Driving next to the bus</li> <li>- Getting off the bus</li> </ul>
8	Reframing and reconnecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regaining significance</li> <li>- Regaining purpose and meaning</li> <li>- Regaining voice</li> <li>- Regaining psychological safety</li> <li>- Regaining trust in post-merger organisation</li> </ul>

*(Source: Author's NVivo coding)*

The IPA and thematic template analysis constructed in light of my review of the literature informed these eight themes. As such, my understanding of the process of identity formation based on social identity theory, and sensemaking within an M&A context, influenced the development of these themes. Given the longitudinal nature of the research process, I also engaged in an attempt to capture the shared experience and the emerging themes, and the subcategories associated with each, as a conceptual process map, or rich picture, displaying the integration process experience. Figure 11 below is an illustration of one of my first attempts at capturing this conceptual process model, which also incorporates the eight emergent themes. Therefore, this conceptual process model also captures 'the way in which we made sense of who we were' during the merger integration process.

Figure 11: Initial pen-and-paper 'conceptual' process model and emergent themes



The illustration initially allowed me to discuss each theme ‘bubble’ and the related meaning units identified with each, as a story about our shared journey of meaning making and identification. It also enabled me to explore the perceived process arrows, indicating a felt cause-and-effect perception uncovered in the data. I was able to visualise and discuss the merger experience as three cycles with distinct emotions, needs and influencing factors affecting identification, which informs the latter chapters of this report. For the purpose of this chapter it is worth stating here that employees moved through the three cycles at different tempos, with some employees making an identity shift early on in the merger process, whilst others were still unable to fully reconcile their individual or legacy identity to the emerging post-merger culture and identity.

As discussed in Section 3.4.6, I used this conceptual process model to foster generative dialogue with members of the legacy organisation and leadership team, which also served the dual purpose of refining my interpretation of the data during the data analysis phase.

Because of the conversations and the feedback collected during this collaborative and participative exploration of the original conceptual process model, illustrated in Figure 11 above, it became clear that the themes resonated with every member of the organisation with whom I discussed the findings. I did not change any of the themes following their feedback; however, when discussing their response to my framing of our journey, they contributed to the expansion of the process model in six significant ways. Specifically, they:

- a) expanded the sub-themes related to the themes of ‘*it is not the what, but the how*’;
- b) expanded the *saying goodbye to people*, theme to highlight the anxiety of having to let go of the familiar as well;
- c) expanded on ‘*clinging to the bus – facades of conformity*’ by adding a sub-theme of ‘*trashing the bus*’;
- d) expanded on ‘*get on-board, in the bus*’ by adding a sub-theme of ‘*being made the driver of a broken bus*’;
- e) added a fourth-choice theme: ‘*driving alongside the bus in your own car*’, and highlighted the organisational risk regarding ‘*going off in your own direction*’, and;
- f) added a new theme relating to *oscillation* between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of the merger experience.



I integrated their additions to my interpretation into the initial conceptualisation to form the final conceptual process, which illustrates the foundations of the nine themes describing the process of our shared identity formation post-merger. I elected to use this revised model as the introduction to Chapter Four, where I set out to present the data associated with each of the nine emergent themes.

Identification of the initial eight emergent themes and their related sub-themes, and formulation of an initial conceptual process model, took six-months to complete. However, the final stages of the data analysis seemed to seamlessly morph my research process into the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle (adapted from Zuber-Skerrit and Perry's 2007 AR model), as discussed below.

### **3.4.6 The 2nd AR cycle – Introduction and data collection**

The data collected during this stage includes both qualitative and quantitative data. I was able to obtain the Employee Engagement Surveys (EES) for 2015, 2017<sup>3</sup> and 2018, which informed Chapters Four and Five of this report. In using the ESS data, I filtered the data in order to focus mainly on the knowledge worker and the management/co-ordinator population. Where needed, I widened the filters to include overall engagement scores for the entire BU, or legacy organisation.

In addition to this data, I was able to share my phenomenological interpretation of the data with colleagues in a number of sense-checking conversations, as a means of augmenting my analysis process. When comparing my actions to that of a traditional AR methodology, this phase of my data collection/data analysis resembled on-the-job working conversations, exploring together our understanding and interpretation of our current reality. For this, I adopted a generative dialogical approach where I first shared the conceptual framework with four members of Group 2 during a lunch-hour session, and then with two members from Group 1, during individual meetings, in order to check whether the themes, as well as the conceptual process model, resonated with them.

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<sup>3</sup> The organisation did not conduct an engagement survey in 2016.

In addition to discussing and sense-checking my interpretations with these members of the original data collection sample group, I also shared this conceptual process model with a variety of knowledge workers and manager/co-ordinator groups within our organisation, in a number of informal conversations, and one more structured, small group workshop. In this way, my qualitative inquiry resembled more closely an AR inquiry, as I deliberately involved more members from within the system, including senior leaders within the post-merger organisation. This cycle created an opportunity for us to co-create research findings, as well as to consider how we may affect and improve our post-merger context. In this way, the collaborative approach to sensemaking and sense checking of the data analysis, also marked the transition from stage two of my research approach, i.e. *project execution*, to the start of the third and final research stage, *project impact*.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle I set my mind toward accessing two further inter-level dynamics within my research (Cochlan, 1996; Rashford and Coghlan, 1994; Roth, 1996). At the outset, I sought to create bridges between the horizontal and hierarchical levels within the organisation through the co-created process allowing for collective sensemaking, with space with for negotiation, dialogue, diversity of social group perspectives and interpretative frameworks. This activity overlapped with the final project impact stage of my research approach, and will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Five. In parallel, I also sought to disperse learning by sharing the insights gained from the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, and introduce another method of data collection to this study, by using visual images (photographs) as metaphors to explore employees' experiences of the merger process.

My personal reflection following the third co-operative inquiry meeting of Group 2 triggered my decision to introduce images as a form of qualitative data collection seeking to explore metaphors. In my post-meeting memo, I noticed my perceived lack of progress or 'stuckness' in the process, and my growing frustration with the challenge of participants to reflect on the merger experience as a whole. I was reminded of the work we do with our own clients, using images as a form of metaphor, to help them express their visions for themselves, their teams or their organisations, and decided to use a similar technique as the final part of my data collection process. I define metaphors as follows:

*"Metaphors are analogies which allow us to map one experience in the terminology of another experience and thus to acquire an understanding of complex topics or new situations" (Vosniadou and Ortony, 1989. p.18).*

I therefore elicited explicit metaphors from my colleagues as part of my data collection, similarly to techniques used in market research (Deacon, 2000; Christensen and Olson, 2002; Zaltman, 2003). I offered participants the opportunity to use a range of pre-selected images I had compiled for this purpose, using publicly available images from the website 'Pixabay.com', or for participants to add any other image that they may have to describe their experience of the merger to date. I asked them to explain the personal meaning of each picture selected, and to share how it related to their experience of the merger.

I recognise that this methodology presents some limitations brought about by pre-determined metaphorical assignments of asking for visual metaphors, and offering a pre-selection of images. In addition, I limited my methodology by restricting the use of metaphors only to my data-gathering methods through the explicit elicitation of metaphors. I did not include metaphor analysis as part of my data analysis process. Therefore, I did not use the reconstruction of metaphorical concepts inherent in cognitive linguistics of my data (Schmitt, 2005).

I collected 15 images from a combination of small group and individual conversations with ten members of the organisation, using a picture pack of 50 images gathered from an online website<sup>4</sup> distributing royalty free images for public use, and two images, which participants sourced themselves. I presented each image as a metaphor and/or description of the merger experience, as perceived by a member of the legacy organisation almost 3-years after the announcement of the merger. I recorded, transcribed and anonymised the description of their images, with their informed consent, before uploading the transcripts to supplement the existing data already stored in the NVivo Pro 11 software folder.

### **3.4.7 The 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle – Data analysis methodology**

I once again engaged in the same blend of IPA and thematic analysis methodology used in the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, to review the transcripts that captured the descriptions of the images depicting ten merger experiences. As mentioned in the previous section, I did not specifically introduce a metaphor analysis stream inherent in cognitive linguistics into my data analysis methodology. However, in treating the picture as a metaphor, it was also my experience that

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<sup>4</sup> [www.Pixabay.com](http://www.Pixabay.com)

in talking about their pictures, new verbal metaphors came up which were also mirrored and explained their experience in depth (Schmitt, 2005). Most crucially, using this metaphoric transformation, I was able to get valuable and surprising narratives, which unlocked my sense of 'stuckness' in my research process. The metaphors were rich and together with the images, these rich descriptions inform Chapter Four, which offers a phenomenological reflection describing the shared merger experience of the members from the legacy organisation, over a 3.5-year period.

In considering the quantitative data rendered by the various ESS reports, I merely used descriptive statistics consisting of pre-calculated average and mean scores included in the ESS reports, which simply described what the data showed. I did no additional statistical analysis of the data, and I did not attempt to use inferential statistics to reach conclusions that extend beyond the immediate data alone, or to infer from the sample data what the population might think. However, I did use some of the qualitative data gathered in the open questions of the ESS surveys to explain some of the descriptive statistics used in my analysis. Given my social constructivist approach to this research, I feel this methodology for dealing with quantitative data is fitting and adequate for the purpose of exploring the shared experience and meaning making of our merger.

### **3.5 THE USE OF MEMOS DURING THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

Throughout the coding process, I made use of memos to capture my 'in-the-moment' thoughts and feelings, which I recorded directly after each data collection point. I did this in a conscious attempt to introduce an adaptation of two research methodologies on the emotive and personally significant sections within the transcripts, i.e. a five column-analysis and a key moment analysis approach (Reitz, 2015). In essence Reitz's five column-analysis makes an explicit attempt to incorporate any parallel process of thoughts and feelings the researcher experienced 'in the moment', whilst conducting the research and gathering data using a five column table. The five columns capture the following details:

- 1) Speaker's name
- 2) Significant statement from the transcript
- 3) Researcher's thoughts and feelings in the moment
- 4) Codes applicable
- 5) Final 'key' code chosen

The key moment analysis approach makes individual and/or collective reflection on key or crucial moments of 'shift' or 'impact' during the course of the longitudinal study explicit, and I coded specifically for key moments mentioned and/or experienced during the data collection phase. As I was using NVivo 11 Pro software for the coding, I used memos added to the relevant significant statements (including the key moment events) coded within the relevant themes as a modern adaptation to the five column-analysis and key moment approach.

In this way, I felt better equipped to critically reflect on certain parts of the transcripts where what was said triggered thoughts and emotions within myself. As I attempted to 'not go there' during the data collection phase, i.e. attempting to bracket my own thoughts and emotions and allow the participants' accounts to flow un-interrupted during the data collection phase, I used my memos to critically review my own subjective responses, both 'in-the-moment' and during my analysis of the data. Thus, through the use of memo writing I was able to examine my own felt response to what was said, as well as to reflect on my own recollection and meaning making of a shared significant key moment, for any clues or significant processes.

As an illustration of my own subjectivity, and my reflection on this, I have included a short extract in the form of my 'fifth column-analysis' memo in Table 5 below, which captures my initial emotional response and subsequent sensemaking of a significant statement from one of the earlier interviews. The statement was coded to the 'becoming insignificant' theme and was coded from the semi-structured interview with Alex (pseudonym), a colleague I had known for many years, and who had left our organisation due to restructuring in the early phase of the merger integration.

Table 5: Illustration of my critical reflection of my own subjective reactions during data collection and data analysis phase

Name	Significant passage	Memo to myself reflecting on my 'in-the-moment' response to this part of the interview	Initial time line and open coding	Final theme code
<p>Alex [Pseudonym] Semi-structured interview, post-exit [Sept 2016]</p>	<p>'My own leaving do was very emotional for me. I had to organise the whole thing, and frankly I told you didn't I – I didn't get a card. And <u>ahhh</u>, that made me feel, that made me feel ... I was gutted. I don't know, I was very close to falling apart on the day itself. Christ. Nobody could be, nobody, nobody, not even the people who I considered my friends here thought about getting me a card. Jesus. I didn't want a present, that does not matter, but a card is something I can keep and I can read those comments and it will be quite, hopefully quite meaningful. But I did not even get that. So <u>uhm</u>, so that was a big event for me.'</p>	<p>I feel just awful! How is it possible that I did not give this any thought? Why did I not give this any thought before now? It must have been so terrible – how do I look him in the eye knowing that I did not attend his leaving do, nor thought of saying something to him when I knew he was made redundant? Did I say something to him?</p> <p>I need to offer my apologies – or at least attempt to excuse myself and my oversight.</p> <p>I wonder how many other people I/we have hurt in this <u>way</u>? Why did we not pre-empt this and plan something?</p> <p>I did not go to his leaving do – wonder if I was out the country or whether it just slipped my mind? Or maybe I just avoided this one as well? When I think about it – I have stopped going to these leaving <u>do's</u>. Why? The last one I went to was Person X, and that was sad and awkward.</p> <p>This feels so awful and now I am actually quite angry and <u>upset</u> with myself but most with them [the management team] because surely someone should have taken better care of his departure experience!</p>	<p><u>Time line codes:</u> Feeling and experience: early merger</p> <p><u>Open codes:</u> Vulnerable increasing Lack of resilience Lack of care and containment Feeling insignificant /discarded Feelings not being acknowledged or considered</p> <p><u>Personal reflection codes:</u> 'Survivor's' sense of guilt, shame and anger at management Perceived lack of competence and care</p>	<p>Becoming insignificant – Early merger</p>

(Source: Author, 2018)

This discipline of reflecting on my own experience in the form of a fifth column-analysis memo, allowed me to retain my ability to remain critically reflective of my own subjective bias throughout the data analysis phase.

### **3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

I observed the strict ethical research guidelines set out by the University of Liverpool in designing and conducting this research study (see Appendix 5 for ethics approval). I obtained written informed consent from all participants who participated in individual interviews, and/or co-operative inquiry group meetings. I included a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) as part of my informed consent process. This document addressed the following topics:

- 1) It explained the aim and nature of the research study.
- 2) It informed participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could opt to withdraw from the interview/ co-operative inquiry at any time, without fear of any negative consequences for their professional/personal relationship with the researcher or the organisation.
- 3) It informed participants that all interviews and/or co-operative inquiry group meetings would be recorded and transcribed, and that I would anonymise the data and protect their identity at all times.
- 4) It informed participants that once I had transcribed and anonymised their data, it would form part of the study data and they could no longer ask for it to be withdrawn from the research.
- 5) They were told that that the outcome of the research from the 1st AR cycle would be used to inform the subsequent research cycle, and that the final objective was for the research to be published.
- 6) I offered participants the opportunity to receive an executive summary of the final research outcome.

See Appendices 4 and 5 for samples of consent and PIS forms for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research respectively.

In consideration of any potential adverse effects or risks arising from this research to any participant or myself, I felt that the research design as it was constructed would offer minimal risk to any one individual, or group of individuals, who participated in this study. However, in the final chapter I will spend some time reflecting on my own perceived psychological safety in conducting an IAR project, during a time of extreme turmoil and turnover, and the sense of anxiety and fear around the potential impact that the research process might have on my own career prospects within the post-merger organisation.

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, during the framing of this study, I had to seek formal approval from the incumbent CEO to engage in an IAR project focussing on the merger-integration experience within the legacy organisation. I did not seek permission from his line-manger, i.e. the President of the combined merged organisation because I limited my scope and my contact to the legacy organisation only.

Despite this, the incumbent CEO, who had recently replaced the legacy CEO, felt that this study presented a considerable risk to the organisation's reputation, brand identity and image, should the outcome of this study show the organisation in a negative light. In response to his raised concern, and given that the merger had already attracted negative social media publicity from former employees, the CEO asked me to mitigate against this risk by ensuring that I totally anonymise not only individuals, but also the organisations and the industry in which it operates, in order to ensure complete anonymity.

The organisation did not coerce me into excluding any information as part of their approval. However, I had to agree to remove any statements from the data that could identify the organisation, or the industry in which we operate for fear of identification. I have done this by supplementing specific industry specific terminology with generic management terminology where needed. Although I do not feel that this has diminished the outcome of the study, or the value of its contribution to the creation of actionable knowledge for both this organisation, and others, I regret not being able to be more specific about the context in which our merger took place. However, given that this study has taken almost three years to complete, it is not impossible to foresee a time in the future where I will be able to publish my findings without having to conceal the industry and/or context in which it took place.



### 3.7 IN SUMMARY

This chapter set out to describe the research process that emerged as the 3.5-year longitudinal IAR project unfolded. It provides a conceptual research model accompanied by a narrative that attempts to demonstrate the integration between theory and practice throughout the life cycle of the study, whilst also allowing my own authorial voice to demonstrate a critical reflexive thread throughout the writing of this report.

In this chapter, I describe the first two stages of my research approach, the *project definition* and the *project execution* stages, providing a comprehensive overview of the research process associated with each stage. This in turn sets the scene for the subsequent two chapters, which constitutes the findings and analysis in Chapter Four, followed by a critical reflection on the project impact, as well as my personal experience throughout the research journey, in Chapters Five and Six.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## 4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the nine themes that emerged from the data analysis in light of various theoretical lenses reviewed in Chapter Two. The chapter draws mainly on transcribed interviews and co-operative inquiry meetings, informal conversations, daily encounters and stories, as well as transcripts of metaphorical descriptions given of images that employees selected to describe their merger experience and refers to Employment Engagement Surveys (EES), conducted in 2015, 2017<sup>5</sup> and 2018.

Whilst presenting the themes, I also critically review the experience of members within the subordinate merger partner in light of the findings in the literature, thus providing a clear link between the data and the literature. At the end of each theme, and/or sub-theme, I summarise some of the key implications the analysis of the findings hold for leaders. It was a deliberate decision to keep the data presentation, the critical analysis in light of the literature, and the summary of the implications for actions together for each theme, within this one chapter. This chapter generated the most interest and traction within my organisation, and various iterations of this chapter informed the ongoing dialogue concerning our merger integration efforts during the write-up phase of this study. Therefore, it is my belief that presenting it in the way you find before you, is both interesting and comprehensive.

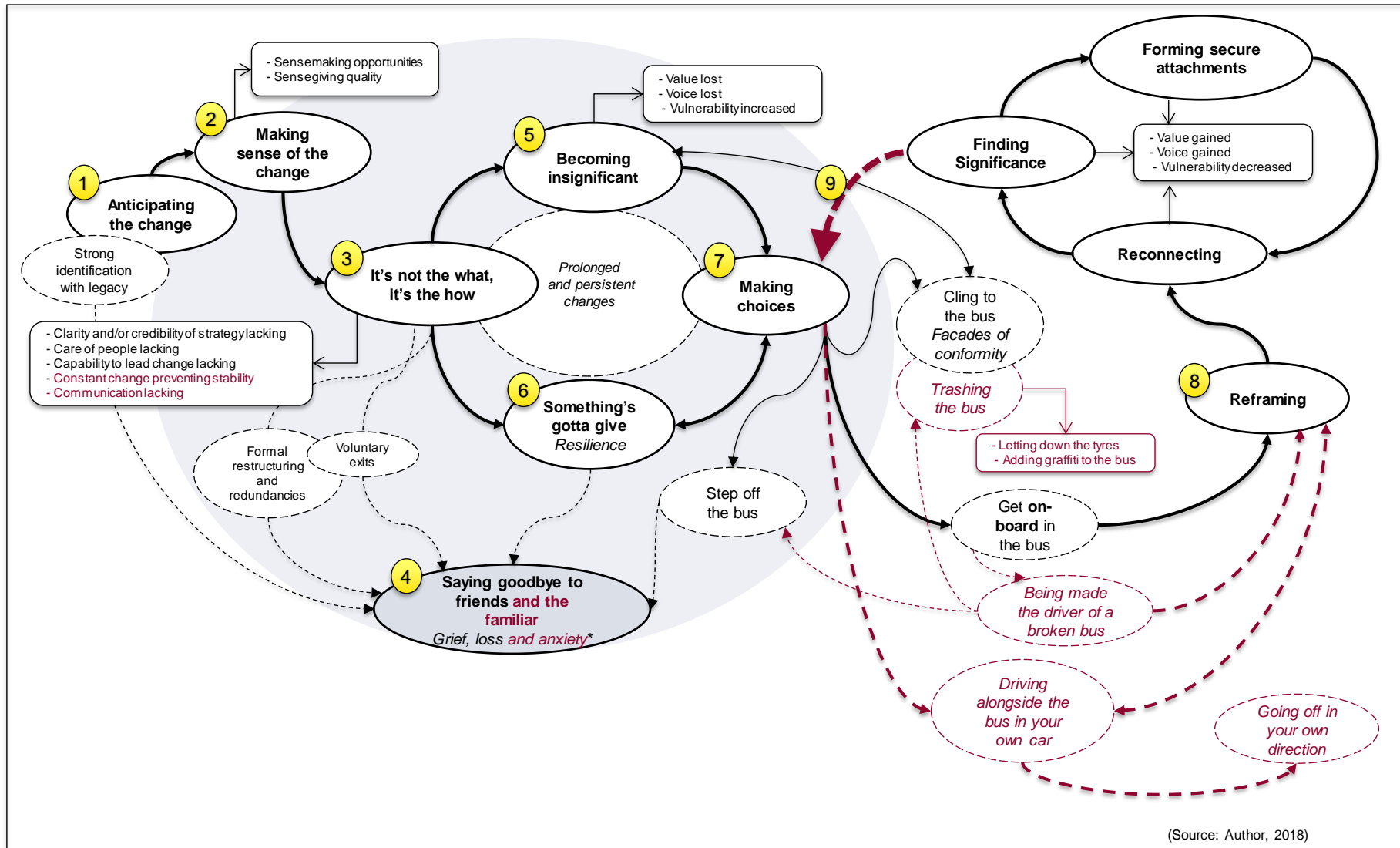
### 4.2 THE WAY WE MADE SENSE OF WHO WE WERE

As discussed in Section 3.4.7, the outcome of the data analysis phase during the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle was the creation of a nine-theme conceptual process model which illustrated the shared experience of sense making during our merger process. The nine themes presented in this section not only present a phenomenological description of the shared experience from the view of the employees, it also links to theoretical constructs concerning OI and M&As. Furthermore, the themes represent the process of sensemaking experienced by employees during the merger process, as illustrated in Figure 12 below.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2016, during the first year of the merger, the organisation did not conduct an engagement survey

Figure 12: A conceptual process model highlighting nine themes related to identification post-merger



#### 4.2.1 The anticipation stage of the merger shapes the identification experience

The data confirms the notion that the personalisation of the change, i.e. “What will the merger mean to me?” is indeed the first step that every individual goes through once a merger becomes a possibility (Isabella, 1990; Lewin, 1947). Importantly, the process of sensemaking and challenge of identification started with the very first rumours of a possible merger.

Furthermore, the data also supports the notion that individuals who were highly identified with the legacy organisation were the ones most impacted by the merger. In the case of the legacy organisation, individuals who held a very strong affiliation and identification with a set belief around the purpose and underpinning philosophical orientation of relational consulting in particular, found it very difficult to shift allegiance to a merging partner with whom they felt little/no resonance. A number<sup>6</sup> of highly-identified employees left during the early post-merger period, some voluntarily, i.e. reluctantly but resolutely, whilst others left involuntarily, and resentful towards the new merging partner.

This was a particular concern in the knowledge worker population, given that the success of the legacy organisation depended very heavily on their intellectual contribution and client relationships. The comment below illustrates the identity conflict experienced by a knowledge worker during the integration process, and the critical incident selected focuses on the rollout of the new staff handbook during the first month of the operational merger or integration process.

*“I think for me one of the most extreme examples actually is the staff handbook that has just come out. ... and the language in the handbook which I found very upsetting ... You know very punish, punishing. Very paranoid. Very litigious. Actually very little trust that people come to work because they want to do a good job and actually, yeah, that we are sort of human beings that need to be controlled. And I think even prior to that, some of the language around some of their [merging partner's] key values –the one I can think of at the top of my head, is ‘killer instinct’ which is not one that I can identify with at all in terms of language.” – (Knowledge Worker<sup>1</sup> (KW) – September, 2016)*

Thus, the data supports the notion that the specific characteristics, language and meaning associated with the core activities and/or purpose of highly identified social groups, moulded the context of the pre-merger social identities, which in turn shaped the sensemaking

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<sup>6</sup> I was not able to obtain specific data but by all accounts, it was a significant amount of the full-time knowledge worker population. This included some individuals who we considered central to the success of our client service practice.

narratives and initial responses to the merger (Corley and Gioia, 2004). It was clear that members of the legacy organisation defined themselves based on their individual characteristics, their interpersonal-relationships, and their sense of shared belonging to a group. Highly identified members especially felt a clear separation from the merging partner organisation, and as illustrated in a recollection from a knowledge worker in Group A below, the rumour of the merger was sufficient to illicit a strong response of resistance from highly identified employees.

*“Well the initial mention of the merger was really interesting because the colleagues in [Group A] rebelled. They used to have meetings and cabals and drinks in the evenings, or meet in pubs to kind of plot against this... It was basically an open rebellion with lots of interesting emails floating around.” – (KW – September, 2016)*

Thus, employee responses in anticipation of the merger, and during the early months, were subjective and contextual, and influenced not only by their own views, but also by the views of those members of the legacy organisation with whom they identified. In this way, the early merger experience supported theory proposing that organisational identities inform individual and collective action, and embed social discourse and communication within a specific organisational setting (Whitley et al., 2014).

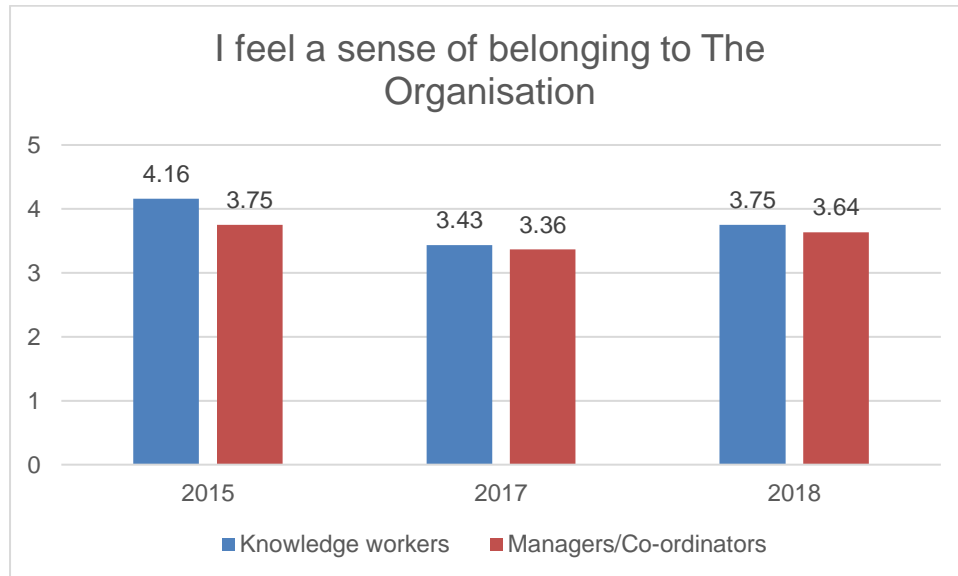
The earliest experiences also supported more recent merger studies, stating that it is not change *per se* that group members feel threatened by, instead it is the perceived threat of what might be lost (Jetten and Hutchison, 2011), as illustrated below:

*“If anything I noticed I got a much stronger attachment to [the legacy organisation] and [it’s] identity and what we stood for, than I did before [the merger]. I got much more invested in the sense of the uniqueness of [the legacy organisation] and the kind of fear of what might be lost... You know, I think any cohesive group partly maintains its inside identity in opposition to some other group.” – (KW – October, 2016).*

Certainly, the response to the announcement, with the subsequent exodus of talented individuals, which continued for the first two years post-merger, confirmed the importance of considering the ‘soft elements’, i.e. cultural, values and identity alignment, when planning and negotiating a merger (Haspelslach and Jemison, 1991). It confirms that organisational identity provides the existential ground on which the social self-stands (Lewin, 1948), and therefore, merger integrations need to help individuals make sense of change, in order to

navigate shifts in identity. As the data from the engagement surveys in Figure 13 below suggest, the merger most significantly affected knowledge workers<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 13: EES data: Sense of belonging



The data also suggests that three years into the merger, the level of identification with the post-merger context has not fully recovered.

#### *In summary*

This theme suggests that leaders need to respect employees' experience, as this is the basis of their current self-construct. The data confirms again the importance for organisational leaders who are considering M&A strategies to consider how to mitigate against the potential harmful impact differences in organisational values, cultures and status may have on the identification and engagement of employees, before the announcement of the merger. Leaders should seek to learn what legacy members value as central and distinct to their legacy identity at the outset of the merger, and be open to explore common ground around a future vision.

Secondly, the data also strongly suggests the importance of having a well-thought through and well-crafted internal communication strategy aimed specifically at ensuring valued

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<sup>7</sup> A reminder that the ESS scoring system is 1-5 and that the leadership team viewed any score below 4 as a point that needed action.

employees, in particular highly-identified employees, are reassured of a projected continuity in the core values most important to their pre-merger context.

#### 4.2.2 The process of making sense of changes

This theme explores important topics that underpinned the employees' experience of the sensemaking process, i.e. the quality of sensegiving and sensebreaking initiatives, and the opportunities for sensemaking and meaningful dialogue.

##### *i) Sensegiving quality*

At the outset of the integration, despite the financial and organisational pre-merger difficulties experienced by the legacy organisation, the merger still came as a shock for many employees. Some argued that this was a failure of the legacy leadership to communicate clearly the serious nature of the decline, which in turn led to employees resenting the merging partner's interference with their organisation.

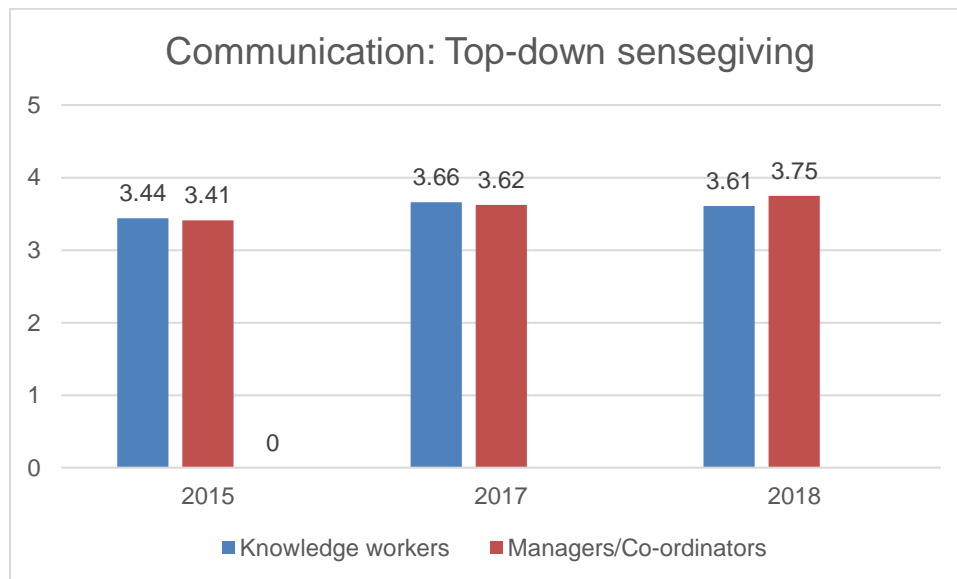
*"Maybe this is down to the previous [legacy] management as much as anybody else, they didn't flag why we needed to do what we did as effectively as perhaps they ought to have done." – (KW – March, 2018).*

Similarly, quantitative EES data revealed that top-down communication remained a concern for employees throughout the merger. The following two survey questions provide an indicator of top-down sensegiving activities: *"I am always kept informed of developments and news within the Organisation"* and *"I always know what is going on in my team / department"*.

Figure 14 below illustrates the amalgamation of these two question responses. As the scores remain below four throughout the merger, it indicates a greater need for the organisation to focus on the quality of the top-down sensegiving communication.



Figure 14: EES data: Top-down communication



During our merger, there was tight control enforced around the top-down sensegiving process allowed within the legacy organisation. At the onset, managers were informed first of the formal agreement by the incumbent leadership team, and language and messages were carefully crafted and monitored, as recalled by a former manager.

*“There was a sense to me that positive message wanted to be spun and told to staff and [knowledge workers]. And there was a lot of fairly selling the idea, a sense of investment, it means this, means that, and it was not really any space to kind of ... to talk about it frankly ... and the implications of it, or to meet with people from [the merging partner], to talk about what they were looking for and how it might work.” – (KW – October, 2016)*

During the subsequent restructuring, managers themselves felt challenged by the need to craft a positive and optimistic integration rhetoric to the employees, thus experiencing a sense of censure themselves. Managers also felt under pressure to show only positive emotions, despite their own misgivings, as illustrated by the metaphor in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15: Metaphor for emotional dissonance in sensegiving



Given the perceived lack of interest by key leaders in the legacy identity, the majority of top-down sensegiving events were uncomfortable and challenged employees' expectations. Employees felt that the new leaders were not interested in inquiry, or finding out anything about the legacy organisation, or what made the organisation unique and distinct, as illustrated by the reflective extracts below.

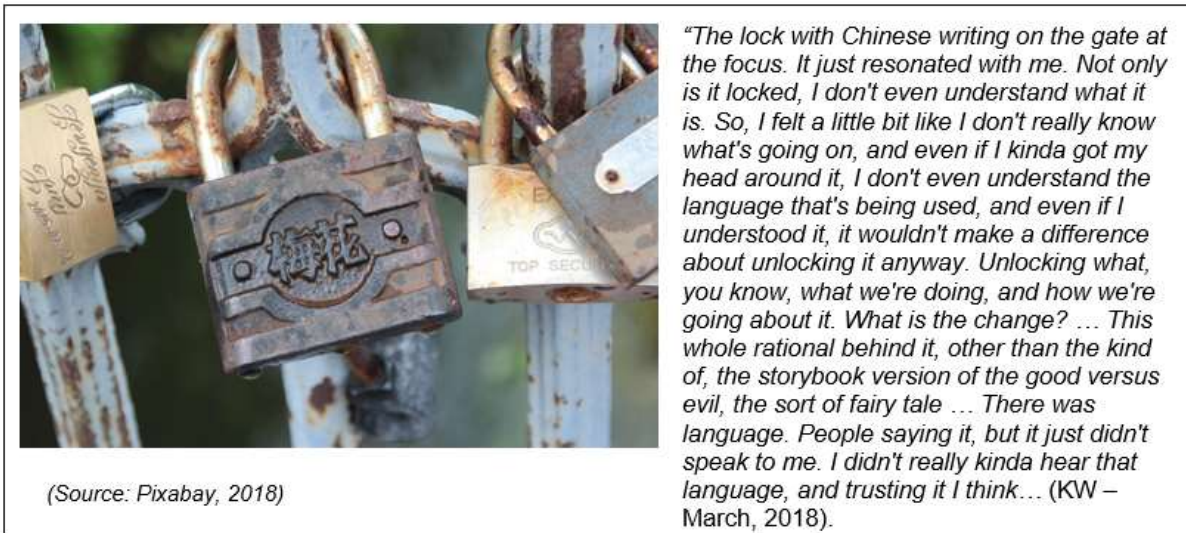
*"And then, it was the conversations with [a merging partner senior leader] which were not conversations, they were just monologues. ... we were all sitting there and we were thinking, well, when does he ask us what we would like, or what we think we do best? None of that. It was really, really shocking and I don't think ... they either don't understand, or they don't care, or possibly both." – (KW– September, 2016).*

*"In one of the meetings [a merging partner senior leader] had with staff, someone asked what did he think was unique and special about our [legacy] culture, and this was 18 months in, and he said 'well to be honest I don't know the [legacy] culture', or something like that. And I thought that was rather indicative really of my experiences of them not really showing much interest in trying to understand [the legacy organisation]. In fact, my experience of [him] speaking in that meeting is that he had a very clear idea in his mind of what he wanted [the post-merger organisation] to look like and where [we] fitted into that. And it did not really bear much resemblance to what [the legacy organisation] is. It was like he had a concept in his mind and everything needed to be done to [the legacy] to fit into that. So [the legacy organisation] was treated more like an object rather than a social system in a way." – (KW – October, 2016).*

However, senior leaders did make some effort to spell out what would not change, possibly in an attempt to emphasize historical continuity between the past, present and future (Jetton and Hutchison, 2011), in particular in areas that concerned the highly-identified knowledge

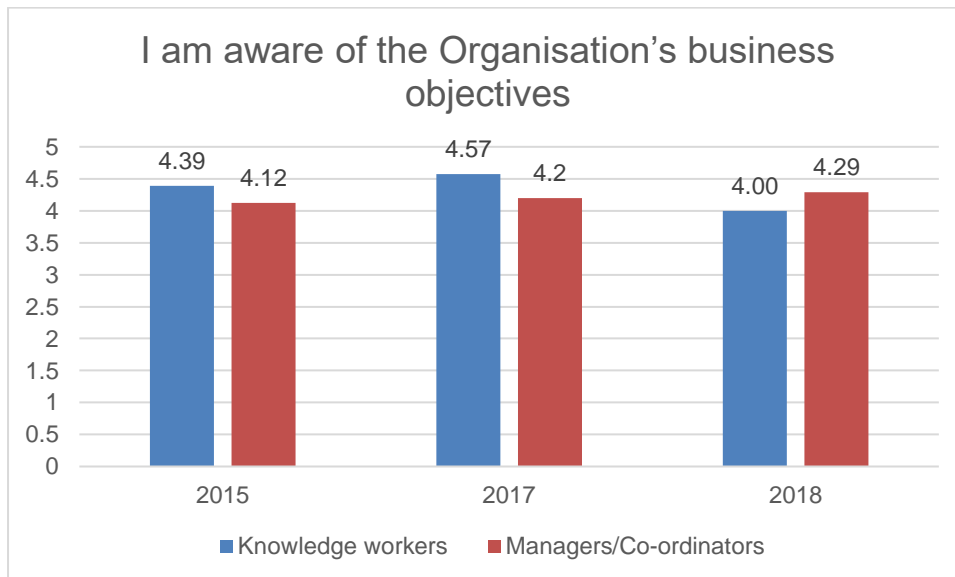
workers. They stressed that they would not interfere with client delivery which they recognised as our area of expertise, instead stated that they would control overall business practices. In their way they attempted to formulate a *transitional identity* (Clark et al., 2010) by providing an interim articulation of what the legacy organisation would become that was neither concrete nor definitive. One may argue that they attempted to keep it ambiguous enough to allow multiple interpretations, without becoming so ambiguous that it became threateningly unfamiliar. However, the articulation, for some, was unclear and/or unconvincing, and the language used unfamiliar, resulting in employees being left confused and experiencing identity ambiguity in the post-merger context, as illustrated by the metaphor in Figure 16 below.

Figure 16: Locks as a metaphor for lack of strategic clarity, credibility and trust



Interestingly, the ESS scores exploring this clarity of understanding concerning the organisation's business objectives, revealed scores above four, as illustrated in Figure 17 below. This would suggest that the leadership would consider employees to be clear about the organisational objectives, and thus, they would not have taken any action to address this issue. However, in light of the prevailing theme of uncertainty presented in the qualitative data, I would suggest that this ESS question may in fact not be measuring the extent to which people identify with, and 'buy-into' the transmitted objectives.

Figure 17: EES data: Clarity of communication



As the merger progressed, there were relatively few top-down, sensegiving opportunities created, particularly meetings involving leaders from the merger partner. Those that did take place, showed senior leaders from the merging partner making little effort to connect with, or to create a sense of projected-continuity for the legacy organisation. This was particularly relevant for various groups, for example, for Group A, Group C and some central functions.

To illustrate, at the first large-group sensegiving meeting following the merger announcement, the new organisational structure chart was revealed, with no mention at all of the words 'consulting' or 'organisational development', i.e. language and labels that were core to the strong identity of Group A in particular. When asked about this, the senior leader of the merging organisation abdicated responsibility saying, "...you call yourself what you want. I don't want to tell you what you should be called", and referred the question to the legacy CEO, who was still head of the newly merged legacy organisation. This CEO, who had been responsible for the restructure of Group AB pre-merger, was clearly not interested in defending the legacy terminology, and brushed over it in the meeting. Rumour has it that he changed the nomenclature without the knowledge and support of his full leadership team, suggestive of power and politics at play. Factors like this contributed to an early-onset of general distrust of the post-merger leadership team, as illustrated by the quote below.

*"I felt very let down by [legacy CEO], by the governors, and by the [Senior Management Team] around the whole merger process. I felt that they sold us out that they hadn't actually taken responsibility for trying to turn [the legacy organisation] around ... but that they sold us because it got them off the hook and got them out of a problem. And in a way what they have NOT done is protected the uniqueness and the identity of [the legacy]." – (KW– October, 2016)*

Many perceived the backhanded dropping of a name that for many defined '*who we are as an organisation*' as a clear signal that they were not valued. This perception, real or not, damaged their process of identification and engagement with the post-merger organisation. It also supports the notion that an organisation's name is intrinsically linked to the identity of its members, and to their willingness to identify with the merging partner (Hewtone and Brown, 1986; Horney and Hogg; Jetten and Hutchison, 2010).

#### *ii) Sensebreaking opportunities*

It can also be argued that changing the organisation's name and dropping the term 'consultancy' signified a crucial sensebreaking activity that was deliberately enacted given that the merging partner was faced with a legacy organisation consisting of highly identified individuals upholding an organisational identity which they felt was no longer fit-for-purpose. Given that the label 'consultant' had become a self-referential symbolic expression of the socially constructed identity of Group A, the focus on removing the labels used to express identity offered the new leadership a way to steer identity change. In this way, deliberately discarding a meaningful label caused an organisational disruption (Fiol, 2002) aimed at weakening identification with the legacy identity (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Oliver and Roos, 2007). Whether intended or not, this decision contributed to loss of meaning, associated with uncertainty and ambiguity, and manifested disequilibrium and pain, particularly for members of Group A, and ultimately contributed greatly to their disidentification with the post-merger organisation.

#### *iii) Sensemaking opportunities*

Throughout the merger, most employees expressed a need for meaning making, or sensemaking opportunities, as evidenced by below.

*"It is very, very hard to make sense of it [merger], because it doesn't feel as if there has been an awful lot of public kind of exploration of it. I don't, I've never really been able to sit down and talk to be people in [merging partner organisation] about what has happened. So there is a lot of unanswered questions and unknowns for me." – (KW – October, 2016).*

Employees expressed a reluctance to voice concerns, which they felt were labelled as complaints and resistance, and they felt unable to engage in sensemaking dialogues that were safe and supportive. However, much of the internal dialogue centred on historical divisions between the strong social identities of Group A and Group B, and the unhappiness and anxiety stemmed from the internal restructuring and renaming of Groups A and B. Thus, the leadership adopted a stance that we could no longer afford to dwell on past differences; instead, we needed to move on as a unified front with clients at the heart of all we do. The email extract from the incumbent CEO, which followed one week after a major restructuring of the Technology Division, highlights some of the issues the leadership team was having to deal with, and their attempt at quelling dissent and unifying historical divisions between legacy Group A and Group B members. The email extract illustrates the '*this ends here*' policy which personified in many ways the emergent culture around decision making, communication and the merging partner's approach to the merger integration process.

*"The only issue we have seems to arise internally from an historical us and them attitude. We combined all [knowledge workers] into one Department and renamed [Group AB] as Client Solutions to get away from historical issues. However it seems we cannot get over it. It also seems that my/our management style/decision making does not sit well with some people (no matter where they are from) and all the talk and discussion about this holds us back from making progress. We have to move quickly and make some decisions because they had not been made in the past and we do not have the luxury of talking about what to do anymore. Again - all these issues are internal ones.*

*These internal issues and continuing to talk about these internal issues end today. We need to focus our attention outward toward the clients and the future. Despite the general tone, I heard some great things in the [...] meeting from people from across the [client delivery team] about delivering great work with people from all affiliations working together. History should not matter and for those who cannot let that history go this may not be the place for you. For those of you who want to deliver great work for the clients and influence the way organisations succeed all over the world [...] - this will be a great fit." – (Internal email from Incumbent CEO, 21 March 2016.)*

Some employees applauded the direct sensegiving tone, seeing it as an encouragement that they will be able to find value, and be valued, in the new organisation, thus embracing the identity shift that was taking place. Others felt the tone confirmed their sense that the new organisation was moving in a direction with which they did not want to identify.

As the merger integration began to unfold, it became evident that the legacy organisation became more unified and the 'them and us' divide shifted from internal divisions, to labelling the merging partner as the 'them' and the whole legacy organisation as the 'us'. Crucially for the success of the merger, it seemed that the leadership team were also labelled as 'theirs' and not 'ours', and in so doing created/accentuated an additional hierarchical 'them and us' separation between the leaders and members of the legacy organisation.

As the extract from one of the co-operative inquiry group meetings almost one year after the 'it stops here' rule indicates, employees needed to process the emotions and the impact of the changes. Yet, they felt that the leadership did not enable or seemingly sanction this.

*"...it's reassuring for me to sit in a room with people who feel in the same kind of boat. Because there's this sort of professionalism that you put out which is very positive. You know, it's a challenge, but we'll get through it and, you know, we'll get through it. But actually it's really reassuring. ... Actually it's really nice to just talk to you lot, just to say it's not just me, you know, everybody's sort of struggling with it." – (Manager/Co-ordinator – Gr2M2, February, 2017).*

*"Well I think it's about helping people to process what's going on, which didn't happen here. I mean this is the first time we're sitting and processing, so there's no venting, there's no talking. People are just disappearing quietly. You just hear about the grave concerns, there's concerns and you pick up the pain in the corridors, there's still huge amounts of pain." (KW, Gr1M2 – February, 2017)*

During the first phase of the integration, some managers were able to provide safe, sensemaking opportunities for their teams, whilst others felt that as time went by and the process unfolded, they could no longer do this, as they themselves had lost faith with the system, as evidenced below.

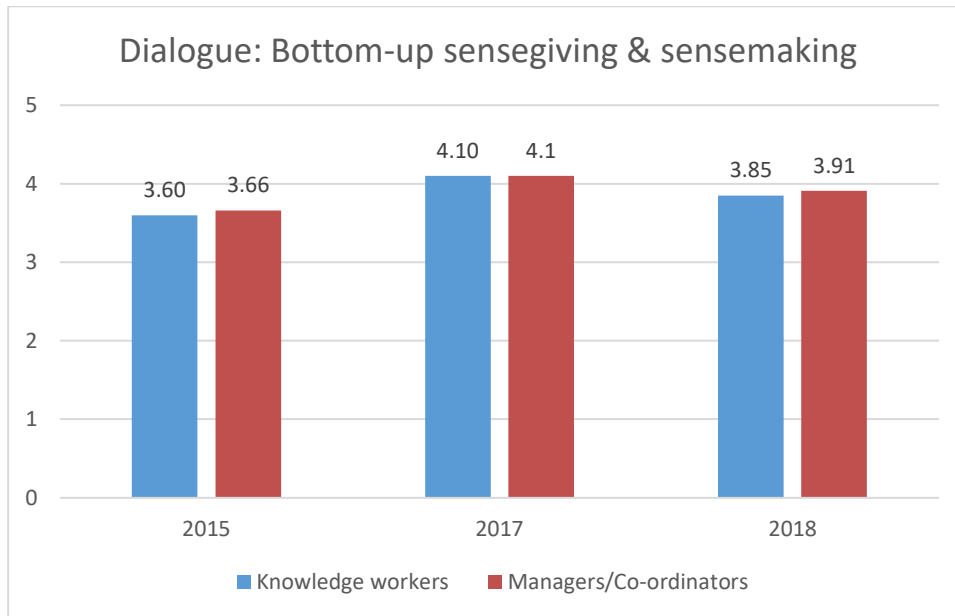
*"I think people were very worried, very apprehensive. My team were asking me lots of questions about what I knew. What it meant. In response to that I put on monthly phone calls where I said you just come and ask any questions you want and I will tell you what I know and what don't know. I noticed my colleagues in terms of management shared less and less. As a kind of middle manager I had limited information so there was a sense that not much is being shared from above but lots of people below me had questions and were very concerned. I think in one way it did help me create community, for us to come together as a department because people felt quite vulnerable. .... So there was a sense of kind of trying to mobilise people's anxieties to look after each other..." – (KW– October, 2016).*

*"One of the big things I used to do was pulling people together. I can no longer do that because I can't look somebody square in the face and say, 'I'm going to be here in three months,' or they are." – (KW– Gr1M1 – December, 2016).*



Figure 18 below reflects the combined responses to the questions: “My views are listened to and respected” and “I feel comfortable voicing my opinion”. Although the satisfaction scores improved from the 2015 pre-merger phase to above four in 2017, the fact that they decline again to below four in 2018 is worrying.

Figure 18: EES data: Sensemaking communication



These ESS scores support the findings within the qualitative data citing a lack of focus on the process of sensemaking during the merger. This suggests that in a merger, the leadership should continue to focus on creating meaningful, high-quality dialogue opportunities even beyond the third year post-merger.

*iv) Achieving a balance between sensegiving and sensemaking – towards a meaningful dialogue*

During the second year of the integration process, the leadership made a concerted effort to provide formal sensemaking/sensegiving events, i.e. they arranged site visits to the dominant partner’s offices, and a global summit event. The former provided an example of a senior leader skilfully using the process of sensegiving with persuasive or evocative language, and engaging discursive skills, to influence the sensemaking of employees towards his preferred redefinition of organisational reality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). This was particularly impactful for the new recruits who did not harbor dislike or distrust for the merging partner organisation, as illustrated below.



*"[the senior leader] came in and he gave a talk in the way that he does, and one thing really struck me, he said 'all of you here, you play a vital role to the organisation, this organisation, [legacy and merger partner] and the only way that we are going to beat the competition is if you are the best at what you do. That said, I can give you some sort of moving speech of how we need to be better in this, or bring us more money in, but if you are the best at what you do in your role, we are going to be better than the competition'. And I thought, yeah absolutely. For me that is the ethos of what they are about."* – (Manager/Co-ordinator, G2M2 – February 2017).

I would argue that the 2017 global summit event was an example of a sensegiving activity aimed at reducing identity gaps, i.e. a pain-relieving activity. Whether intentional or not, this event resulted in closing the Individual-Organisational gap, i.e. increasing the perception of homogeneity between knowledge workers from the legacy members and those of the merging partner (Park, 2014), and it may also be the reason for the increase in the quantitative EES scores noted in 2017.

*[Referencing the global summit, 2017] "I just met so many people who had interesting backgrounds and things they were working on, and ways of working... I think because we were outnumbered so much, it felt very different from the other kind of things I've been to up in London, and so on. It really felt like we were part of this much bigger organisation that people, all the people in there, felt good about. I started to look for what is it they're feeling good about and I guess part of my recognising, and I've known this for some time I guess, is that my kind of sense of the things that I experienced negatively, were actually things we should've been doing ourselves five years ago, in getting ourselves straight and more efficient. ... Going into it feeling like you were [legacy organisation] and then at the end of it, feeling that you belonged to [the merging partner]. The shift came I think from seeing who [the merger partner] is rather than what [the merger partner] is. So who [the merger partner] is, is hundreds and hundreds of these people."* – (KW, Gr1M2 –February, 2017).

In this way, the event supported the notion that "groups create a sense of belonging by motivating members to find and recognise the similarity among themselves" (Park, 2014, p.429), also demonstrating that self-categorisation theory underpins the similarity approach (Tajfel and Turner, 1985).

#### *In summary*

When considering the experience of employees during a long-term merger integration process, the data strongly suggests that it is the responsibility of the leadership to ensure that the merger process includes the following:

- a regular process of sensemaking opportunities, i.e. time and space for employees to discuss and process what the merger will mean for them, that continues beyond the third year post-merger

- regular, clear communication from the leadership, sharing common visions, goals and also parameters or constraints, whilst remaining open to direct and indirect feedback from employees on how their messages are being received
- a willingness to foster an open and constructive dialogue process that transcends hierarchical and cross-divisional barriers.

These actions imply a certain mindset or attitude on the part of leaders, i.e. the appreciation of cognitive diversity and challenge of assumptions.

Something else that struck me when considering the quotes pertaining to sensemaking was the link to critical sensemaking theory (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills, et al., 2010). Our internal sensemaking explored the issue of power, power relationships, links to power, privilege, and voice, resulting in an underlying theme of 'them and us' when referencing the merging partner. Yet, it is my perception that these narratives or stories were censored, either by ourselves and/or by our leadership, and that the topics related to status, power and privilege were never, or could never, be discussed in a 'safe' forum that involved members of the merging organisation.

This observation would suggest that another requirement to the sensemaking process includes:

- a critical awareness by leaders to be conscious about how they use/abuse their power, privilege, status and voice as this directly impacts the process of identification and engagement of the employees they lead.

#### **4.2.3 It's not the what, it's the how**

As the merger progressed, employees understood why the merger had to take place and were willing to engage with the new regime. However, the overwhelming sense within the data is that the way in which the merger integration was implemented was unpalatable, and that this prevented employees from wanting to identify with the post-merger identity.

Interestingly, this theme persisted for most, if not all, of the 3.5-years of this study, indicating that it was systemic to our merger experience. The phrase '*it's not the what, it's the how*' came from an in vivo coding process, as one of the significant statements taken from four different employees illustrates below.

*“So you know, I can recognise all of that [benefits of the merger], but I think some of the how things have happened is the bit that I am struggling with. It’s not really the what that has changed, but the how.” – (KW, Sept, 2016)*

Based on the data, this theme presents as four sub-themes in which the merger integration process itself was lacking, each of which I discuss in sub-section below.

i) *Clarity and/or credibility of strategic intent lacking*

The relatively persistent perception of a lack of clarity/credibility concerning strategic intent, evidenced in the qualitative data, is worrying, particularly in light of the quantitative data shared earlier in Figure 17 which suggests that employees are clear about the organisational objectives.


The qualitative data suggests that some attributed the perceived lack of clarity/credibility around strategic intent to a lack of inquiry, consultation, collaboration, transparency and unilateral decision-making. These behaviours also amplified the status and power differential between the merging organisations. Although employees from the legacy organisation did not form hostile relationships with employees from the dominant merger partner, the merger did contribute to employees from the legacy organisation distrusting the leadership of the dominant partner, thus, confirming the findings in the literature (Loh, Smith and Restubog, 2010). This distrust most likely also contributed to the reluctance to fully commit to, or engage with, the post-merger identity, as discussed later.

I would argue that the senior leaders fell prey to the force of *lifeworld colonisation*, which in turn inhibited organisational sensemaking (Giuette and Vandenbempt, 2017), given that *lifeworld colonisation* refers to the process where the leader is somewhat ‘grandiose’ or ‘aspirational’. This results in the use of integration discourse which, to some extent contradicts the lived experience of employees. This cognitive dissonance stemmed from: a) the leaders’ use of container terminology that did not connect with the practical activities of employees; b) the overemphasis on tools, databases and reporting requirements that did not align with operational tasks, and; c) the shifting of focus from people to tools, or relationships to transactions.

The data also demonstrates that until the third year of the integration process employees continued to feel that they did not really know and/or trust the strategic intent of the dominant partner during the merger integration process, as illustrated in the extract and metaphors below.

*"When I say "I don't trust it", it's not that I feel there's negative intention. There was negative, you know bad, just I personally didn't know what I was using as my data to trust, and so therefore, I couldn't get a trust angle for myself that resonated for me, but that's not to say I assumed bad intent to distrust. It was more just that I didn't know how to make sense, and trust." – (KW– March, 2018).*

Figure 19: Metaphor around strategic intent lacking credibility



- *"The reason I chose this is you don't know where it's going, it stops. Great, two things coming together, but where the hell are they meant to be going? No idea. There's no sort of long term vision." – (Knowledge Worker – March, 2018).*

(Source: Pixabay, 2018)

Figure 20: Metaphor around strategic intent



- *"...it's almost like, it makes me think of what they [merging partner] did to our product portfolio. We had all these products, somebody's come along, and it's not quite as bad as this makes it feel, but it's almost like you threw some darts at the dart board, those that stuck in, we'll keep. Those that don't, we'll get rid of, rather than it being some sort of well thought through process." – (Knowledge Worker – March, 2018)*

(Source: Pixabay, 2018)

Therefore, I would argue that the establishment of clarity and credibility of a post-merger strategy should include multi-faceted constructs. This means that especially during a merger, when two organisations with separate pre-merger strategies come together, it is of the utmost importance for the leadership to create a process for strategic dialogue that can embrace and harness plurality to the benefit of the whole. This would imply therefore, that leaders themselves need to view employees from both organisations as significant, i.e. with valuable contributions to make towards the success of the organisation's strategy. The leaders should be willing to shift their assumption about the management of the merger stemming from a position of control, towards more of an emergent and co-created shaping process. The latter, would require leaders to be aware of their own bias, and to be willing to challenge their assumptions and plans, in the interest of sustainable success.

ii) *Care for people lacking*

The organisation was flooded with stories about the lack of care for people experienced during the merger, resulting in countless discussions about how people were uncaringly 'pruned', 'pushed', or 'disappeared' from the organisation. One particular extract from the data highlighted below, summarised the depth of the lack of care experienced by members who experienced the process of redundancy.

*"My own departure was crap. My own leaving do was very emotional for me. I had to organise the whole thing, and frankly I told you didn't I – I didn't get a card. And ahhh, that made me feel, that made me feel ... I was gutted. I don't know, I was very close to falling apart on the day itself. Christ. Nobody could be, nobody, nobody, not even the people who I considered my friends here thought about getting me a card. Jesus. I didn't want a present, that does not matter, but a card is something I can keep and I can read those comments and it will be quite, hopefully, quite meaningful. But I did not even get that. So uhm, so that was a big event for me." – (KW– September, 2016).*

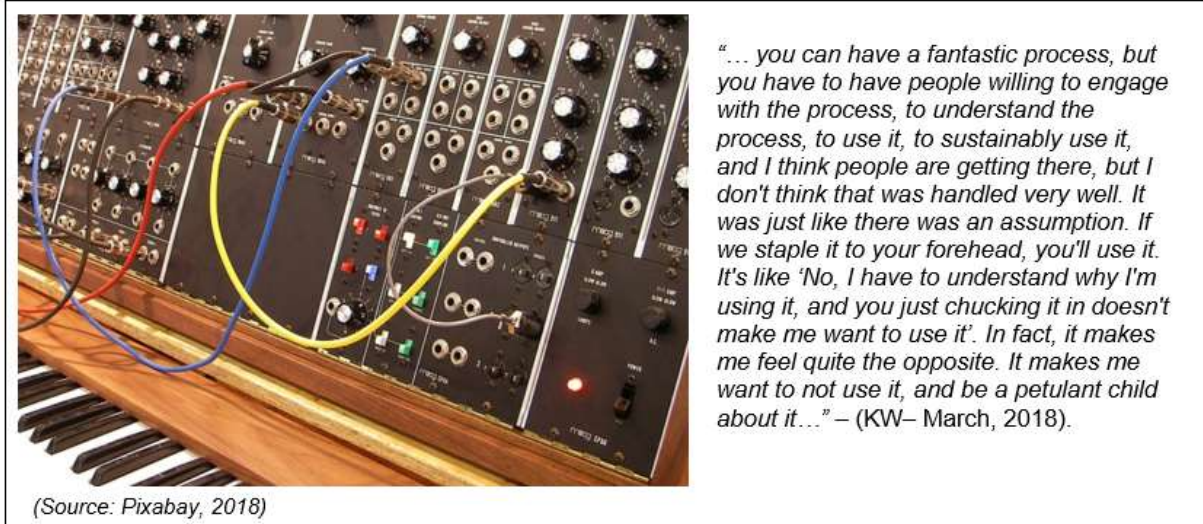
There were a significant number of similar heart-wrenching stories shared, all of which deeply affected the members who remained in the organisation. The experiences of those leaving directly affected the mood, emotions, and morale of the post-merger entity, and contributed to people feeling that they did not matter, and that the new post-merger organisation did not care. There was a growing sense that the post-merger culture was becoming purely transactional, displaying values that were incongruent with the legacy's relational culture, as illustrated below.

*"It was like there's a kind of ... 'we've bought this thing, now let's whip it into shape', rather than, 'we've bought this package, let's unwrap it and see what's inside'..." – (KW, Gr1M2 – February, 2017).*

*"And yet, we have people who had been forced out of here. Many of them had never worked in other places or, you know, they'd been here for long periods of time. They were given zero support. ... And that just, again, says it's purely transactional. You know? There's no real care for the people. If you look at their [merging organisation] 'Values' or staff handbook, for example, it might be in there somewhere and I haven't found it but I hadn't noticed the word 'loyalty' anywhere in the book. Anywhere in the staff handbook and values book. That's loyalty one way or the other, it is just not there." – (KW, Gr1M3b – June, 2017).*

Given the critical importance of the relational aspect of identity formation at personal, social and organisational levels (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007), magnifying transactional behaviour in favour of relational behaviour contributed to difficulties in identification and engagement with the new regime. Employees experienced an overwhelming sense that numbers, processes and measures were what mattered, instead of people and relationships, which in turn hampered the merger integration and engagement on their part, as illustrated in the metaphor shared below.

*Figure 21: Metaphor for merger integration lacking care*



In addition, employees in the legacy organisation felt unappreciated, with the merging organisation failing to take into consideration the circumstances in which they were operating, and that this basic lack of care and compassion meant that their efforts were unacknowledged, and their capabilities unfairly questioned. For example:



*"They [merging organisation] have never ever, ever thanked us for doing... I'm talking about the [merging organisation] machine. They've never acknowledged anything we've done. They've never thanked us for anything, and um, they believe there's a capability issue in our team and that there's a speed issue of delivering in our team. They just don't, they don't want to understand. They just believe that their machine has done everything and we're just sitting there going, 'La la la la la'..." – (Managers/Co-ordinators, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).*

This calls for leaders to embrace the practice of demonstrating care and compassion, and for appreciating the impact of the merger on individuals. Such actions should mitigate high levels of attrition. This leads to the third sub-theme, i.e. questioning the capability of the leadership to implement the changes required to make the merger a success.

*iii) Capability of leading the integration changes lacking*

This theme was more subtle. It appeared more in the informal conversations within the organisation, some of these conversations continuing almost four years into the merger. During informal conversations, employees were quick to point out perceived leadership failures, in terms of whether the leaders of the both the legacy and the dominant merger partner had the ability to lead the integration processes, rollout initiatives, motivate teams, connect and communicate with employees, formulate and execute strategy, etc. Yet, there were very few open challenges levelled at the perceived lack of leadership competence or credibility.

This should not be surprising, given that many of the leadership team were appointed by the merging partner, and were perceived to form part of an elite 'inner-circle' of power-brokers, with the clear mandate to implement the wishes of the merging partner. Frustration and disengagement stemmed from a perception that decisions affecting the lives of legacy employees resulted from incomplete consultation with appropriate stakeholders, as evidenced below.

*"... decisions are just being made totally without any input and they're just being relayed and you like them or you don't, so you just get on with it. People are just retreating back into their little burrows." – (KW, Gr1M1 – December 2016).*

The credibility of the leaders was undermined by the fact that leadership appointments were made behind closed doors, without any open recruitment process or transparency about agendas. An example of how appointments were perceived is illustrated in the extract from a co-operative inquiry meeting below.

*Speaker 1: "Someone said to me last week, 'why do you think [names the new CEO] took this job? And I said, no, it does not work like that ..."*

*Speaker 2: "Wrong question."*

*Speaker 3: "He was told, not asked." – (Managers/Co-ordinators, G2M1 – November 2016).*

Therefore, employees saw new senior leaders as the 'puppets' of the dominant partner, instead of advocates for the business division that was the legacy organisation. This made it difficult for them to gain the trust they needed in order to engage the legacy organisation. Some of the new leaders who were 'parachuted in' made almost no attempt to build relationships with members from the legacy organisation. Instead their behaviours fuelled the perception that they, and by implication the merging partner, would not welcome challenge, and more sinisterly, would not tolerate divergent views. The extract below refers to one particular leader who wielded a great deal of power, but whose leadership style was completely incongruent with that of the legacy organisation.

*"I had a conversation with [names head of department] my new boss, after my first meeting with him ... after everyone left I said to him, I was really scared coming to this meeting, people told me you are really scary, and without listening, you shout at people. And he said, ah, 'thanks for that, thanks for the feedback'. And he said 'If people aren't on board, they can just get lost'. And I was like, OK – that's his leadership style ... not sure I will engage with him." – (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M1 – November 2016).*

Thus, tolerance of poor leadership behaviours fed the already prevailing sense of organisational fear, and subsequently organisational silence turned to organisational ambivalence (Piderit, 2000). This calls for leaders to be transparent in their decision-making, and intentions, to role model best practice, and address poor behaviour in leadership.

iv) *Constant changes causing lack of resilience and identification*

Throughout the study, many major changes were being implemented, including restructuring, processes, policies and systems changes. It was openly acknowledged that experimentation, change and pace were the hallmarks of the merging partner's DNA, unlike the legacy organisation where decision-making had been refined to the art of procrastination. Although some welcomed decision-making, many people felt that the merging partner's style of rapid decision-making and constant change was undermining the potential success of the merger, a sentiment that was manifest even in this late stage of the merger, as the stairs metaphor below illustrates.



Figure 22: Stairs as a metaphor for constant change



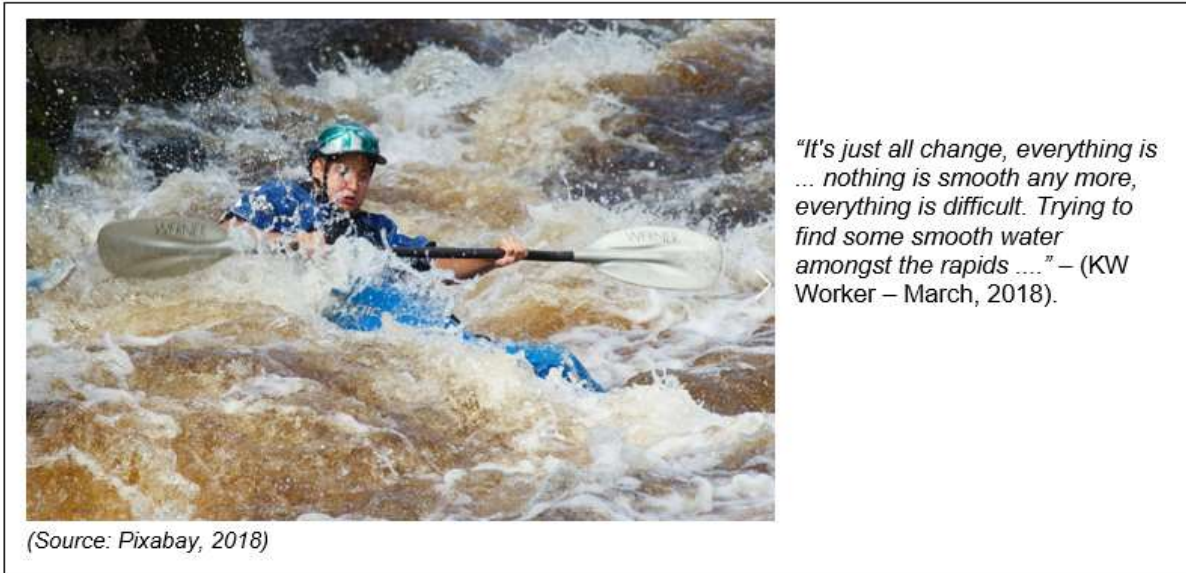
In this merger context, in addition to the changes being seen as continuous and ongoing, many of the changes were seen as ‘senseless’, ‘half-baked’, and ‘rushed’ resulting in repeated changes in processes, structures and roles. An unintended consequence of the rapid changes also meant that communication and clarity suffered, as illustrated by a manager’s comment below:

*“...well there's no point saying what's going on because it will change again tomorrow’. ... because the change was happening so fast, the communication almost wasn't happening .... It just felt like, ‘Well, there's no point in me telling you this or that we've done this because next week we might have done something different’. That's the speed that things were happening. It became so unclear about the ‘what’ it was that we were doing ....” – (Managers/Co-ordinators, G2M4 – February 2018)*

Over the duration of the merger, the relentless tide of changes stemming from the merging partner’s penchant for rapid improvement and experimentation resulted in ‘organisational change fatigue’ (Dedhia, 2010) which signalled the loss of resilience and accompanying sense of helpless frustration, as illustrated by both managers/co-ordinators and knowledge workers below:

*“And suddenly here we are, trying to implement a whole heap of new processes ...and I think people are getting really tired of that. You know, it happening once or twice is one thing. But the fact that it's just been relentless, and just as you think that you're kind of coming back and you're getting there, something else comes along and you're like, ‘oh my God. I'm not sure I can pick myself up from this again.’” – (Manager/Co-ordinator, G2M3 – May 2017).*

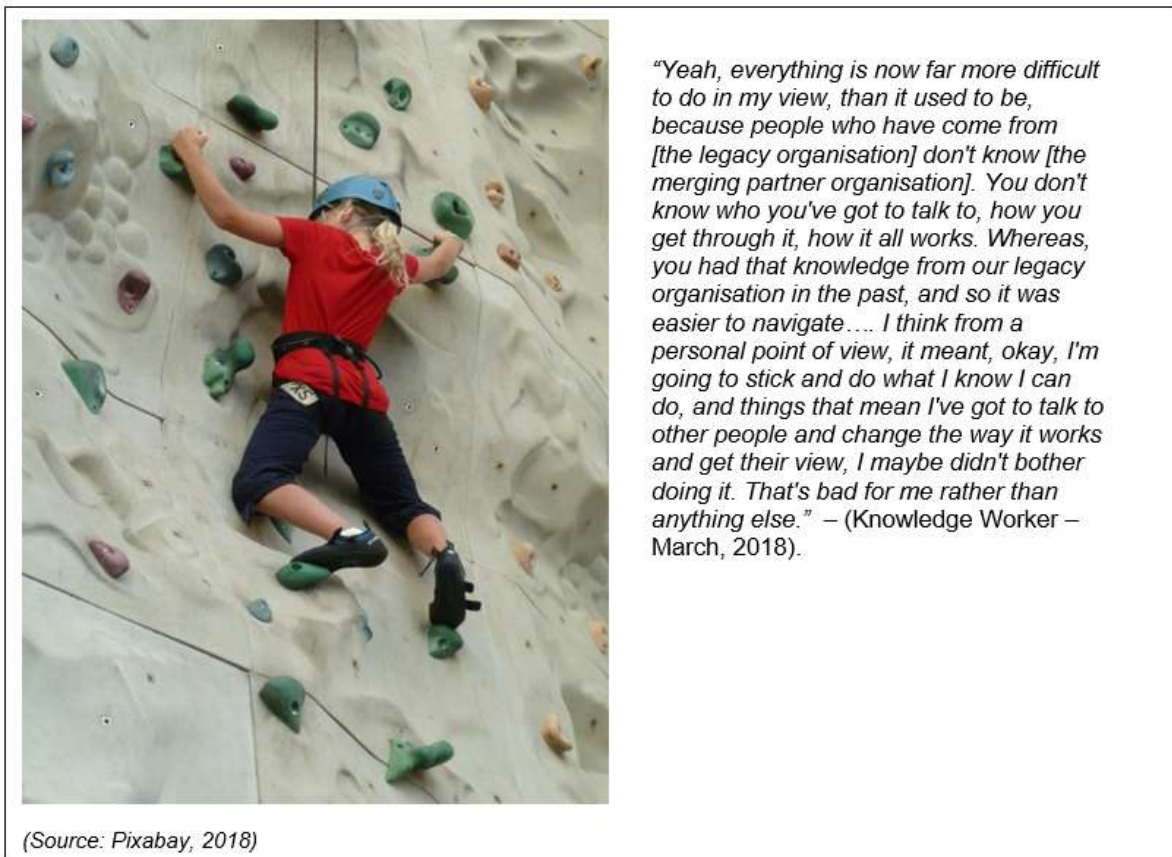
Figure 23: White water kayaking as a metaphor for our merger experience



Thus, the changes affected systems and processes, and involved frequent changes in the senior leadership during the first two years post-merger. As late as 2018 people were still asking the question *'who are the leaders anyway?'* Some of this uncertainty stemmed from the constant changes, whilst another contributing factor was the lack of transparency around who held the power and who were making the decisions.

Another unintended consequence of frequent changes in membership, roles and processes meant that employees found it difficult to know who to talk to, or how to gain access to the right people to involve and/or influence, making it harder for a sense of social affiliation and belonging to foster social identification. This contributed to more employees preferring to find strength in personal-identification versus social-identification, as illustrated by a knowledge workers explanation of a rock climber metaphor below.

Figure 24: Rock climbing as a metaphor for feeling disconnected



This shift towards a personal-identification has potentially negative consequences for the process of social identification which involves cognition through the self-categorisation process of ‘oneness’ with a group, in that some employees were no longer able to partly define themselves in terms of their group membership, as their referents for social identities continued to shift and change (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). I would argue that within the post-merger context, many individuals’ self-perception, and identity, became based on their individual attributes instead (Turner, 1985), due to the absence of social identities guiding collective behaviour. Thus, the post-merger context may have fostered personal identification (‘I’), over social and organisational identification (‘we’).

It is consequently not surprising to notice a theme concerning a perceived shift from ‘relational’ (or group-orientated) behaviour, towards ‘transactional’ (or self-orientated) behaviour that remains consistent throughout the merger experience. Although some knowledge workers in particular, argued that transactional behaviour was common, and even rewarded, in the pre-merger legacy organisation, managers/co-ordinators overall felt strongly that there was a shift in the culture post-merger, as the extracts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> co-operative inquiry meeting 15-months into the merger will demonstrate:

*"... now some people would just step over you, and I think that's literally true." – (KW, February, 2018).*

*"But, I'm just much clearer about why am I doing this [referring to the work], and some of the stories that I have told myself in the past about why I'm doing it. 'Oh, it's for the greater good, and it's for this and that. No, it's for me'." – (KW, February, 2018).*

Thus, this merger experience contributes to the evidence that negative moods and lack of resilience make it more difficult for individuals to demonstrate concern and support for others (Holloway, Tucker and Hornstein, 1977) and lead to greater self-centred and judgemental attitudes that are counter-productive to OI and engagement. Given that identification with socially distinct organisational groups also reduce uncertainty (Hogg and Terry, 2000), enhance overall well-being and general emotional satisfaction (Pratt, 1998), and increase job satisfaction (Riketta, 2005; Riketta and van Dick, 2005), we should maybe not be surprised that our post-merger experiences saw a great surge in absenteeism and employee attrition rates.

Therefore, leaders are encouraged to monitor the impact changes have on systems, processes and people by seeking feedback and being willing to adapt plans to ensure the integrity of the entire system. This calls for a strategic and reflective process and mindset, with a focus on more pro-active and less reactive integration responses.

#### *In summary*

This theme stresses that leaders need to pay close attention to how they and others execute the merger process. It implies a mindset and attitude that recognises that relationships matter and that leadership happens in every human interaction. It calls for leaders to role model the ability to create strong inter-personal relationships that respect psychological safety, and create strong psychological contracts. In essence, it stresses the importance of balancing the focus on both task and people during the merger integration process.

#### **4.2.4 Saying goodbye to friends and the familiar**

This merger experience supports the social identity theory supposition that forcing a person to separate from an organisation, or group with whom they shared a sense of identity, leads

to a deep existential loss (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). However, it also highlights the notion that those organisational members remaining within the system experience the same sense of loss, as their sense of 'oneness' becomes disrupted by the shared loss. The extract below expresses this loss experienced by a relatively new member of the post-merger organisation following yet another restructuring that resulted in the loss of one of the members of this co-operative inquiry group.

*"Well, I cried when I heard the news. [Visibly upset – fighting back the tears] because I care about the people that are going a lot, and about you Deidre, and I know that having friends that you work with, that you care about and value – that matters, and when they go it hurts. I know a lot of you already felt that already, so for me it's sad. Still is." (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).*

There can be no doubt that the merger challenged and shifted the referencing frameworks surrounding social identity affiliations for employees, and that this resulted in 'felt pain and disequilibrium' (Pratt and Barnett, 1997) particularly for members whose identities were defined in part by colleagues leaving the post-merger organisation, as illustrated below.

*"... people were just disappearing and it almost felt like, I don't know. Like a war time scene. Where you see people go off to war and they never come back, you know? So, it had a really big emotional impact that, actually, people I'd worked with for twenty years, just one day weren't there. And there was no chance to say goodbye." (KW – Gr1M3a – June, 2017).*

*"Then there's a whole load of grief and losses going on so I'm losing a member of my team every two weeks for the next month and a half...its shit. (Manager/Co-ordinator, March, 2018).*

Thus, this merger supports the notion that fundamental merger-related changes trigger intense emotions (Huy, 2002; Bartels et al., 2006). As demonstrated by the extracts below, it was not just sadness, grief and loss that were triggered, but anger, despair, worry, fear and uncertainty.

*"I think by losing the marketing team, it's another massive slap in the face, and another, sort of like, 'Okay, so now we're left with a shell basically'". (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).*

*"The talent that departed, like the ... I raised this already eight months ago and said, 'Every week, there's one dropping out' - yeah, or two. One at a time it's no big deal, but the cumulative impact is fucking massive. That's what is really worrying me. It really, really, really, really worries me. (KW, Gr1M2 – February, 2017)*

The first cycle of the merger especially, raised many negative emotions and it supports the proposition that felt emotions impact the reconstruction of the social frame of reference and shape the meaning-making process that leads to reframing of the post-merger context

(Corley and Gioia, 2004; Isabella, 1990). In one of the last co-operative inquiry meetings, a colleague presents the legacy organisation as a plant in need of a severe pruning. The extract below points to process of reframing that took place, to help make sense of the painful experience.

*“Well, it feels a bit like a hybrid tea rose that’s been hard pruned and new shoots are starting to grow from the prunings, and some older branches have managed to survive. They’re being kind of, perhaps, just like the weight of the flowers on them weighing them down. So they weren’t sticking up, it’s getting cut off. But it feels like, yeah, you know you’ve got to hard prune that. I mean, you have to do that with plants and you’ve got to do that with organisations, as well. In some ways you’ve got to do it with yourself, you know, in terms of keeping yourself active and kind of, you know, thinking about the future and you’ve got to let go of various things from the past in order to embrace new futures, you know?” – (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017).*

I would also argue that intensely felt emotions are valuable cues to leaders about how a change initiative is received and enacted (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010; Huy, 2002; Isabella, 1990), yet our experience seems to offer little evidence of felt emotions affecting the top-down implementation of the merger integration. This sadly supports the findings of M&A literature that ‘soft elements’ get little attention during most merger integration processes (Cartwright and Cooper, 1990). This is evidenced from a knowledge worker’s recollection of a response, to what was perceived as a rather naïve question about ‘*how the merger is going*’, from the merging partner’s HR person who was looking after the IT and other central function restructuring initiatives, during the first phase of the merger integration phase:

*“And I said it is pretty disastrous isn’t it and she said ‘what?’ and she was taken aback by my bluntness. And I said well, look at how you shut down [the two central teams]. You couldn’t have done, intentionally done an act like that? That would scare the life out of people. And she said ‘what do you mean?’ Uhm, I said ‘well you know, can’t you, don’t you understand how people would feel. Don’t you realise that these are people that we have known for ten years and they have just gone ...really?’” (KW – October, 2016).*

By not consciously considering the impact of employees leaving the organisation on those that remain, and by not announcing and planning their exists in a way that would respect the emotions their departure precipitates, the merger integration process failed to balance the need of employees over their need for closure or convenience, as illustrated below.



*“ ... the disappearing people and often not knowing people are gone until after they're gone. That was not easy... I guess, they're [merging partner] hoping not to have any kind of disruption or, you know what I mean? [...] it takes away the possibility for endings and saying goodbye to people that you know and sending people off in the right way, and so on. (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017).*

Consequently, by not creating a process that allowed employees to express concerns and felt emotions, I argue that the post-merger sensemaking process was impaired, and thus, trust and psychological safety remained unrestored long enough to damage the process of re-identification and engagement for members of the legacy organisation. The extract from a knowledge worker discussing the new branded office mugs with the logo of the merging partner, demonstrating the link between emotions and post-merger identification (Wegge et al., 2011), illustrates my argument.

*“And I went in to make myself a cup of tea and there were only blue mugs and there were a few chipped mugs lying about. I ended up picking one of the chipped mugs because I couldn't quite bring myself to make myself a cup of tea in a [newly branded] mug. Now, that's semi-psychological. So psychological because I wouldn't say I'm not loyal or I don't identify, but I could not make myself a cup of tea in that mug.” (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017).*

Therefore, a key insight from this theme was that within this merger process every employee experienced moments during the integration where they had to make a decision about how they wanted to relate to the post-merger organisation. There can be no doubt that the way in which the organisation responded, or failed to respond, to individuals' emotional needs, massively impacted the choices they made, which forms the basis of the seventh theme. With respect to lessons learnt, it is fair to say that all leaders should carefully consider a process that will allow themselves, their line-managers, and their employees to process the heightened emotions that are bound to accompany any merger process. Failing to do so will no doubt have a negative impact on the identification and engagement of employees across all hierarchical levels.

This also implies that leaders need to be aware of their own emotions, and open to the notion that others may experience the merger differently, without judgement and/or prejudice for any differences that may occur within the system. Leaders should practice empathy and compassion, treat people with respect and create a process to mark endings respectfully.

#### 4.2.5 Becoming insignificant

This theme centres on the notion that during the merger integration phase, knowledge workers in particular, felt that they lost their sense of self, i.e. their sense of belonging and their sense of purpose and meaning, which ultimately lead to them questioning their sense of significance in the new context. It incorporates three sub-themes, experienced at different and varying stages by employees: value lost/decreased, voice lost/decreased, and vulnerability increased.

##### i) *Value lost/decreased*

There was a general theme of '*becoming a number*', and a '*commodity*' which was separate from a more existential questioning, and which related much more to the way the merger was implemented. Some employees, perhaps pragmatically, ascribed the shift in significance experienced to the status differential of the merging partners.

*"... in every merger there's a dominant party and a less dominant party. If you were part of the legacy organisation pre-merger, you're insignificant." (KW- March, 2018).*

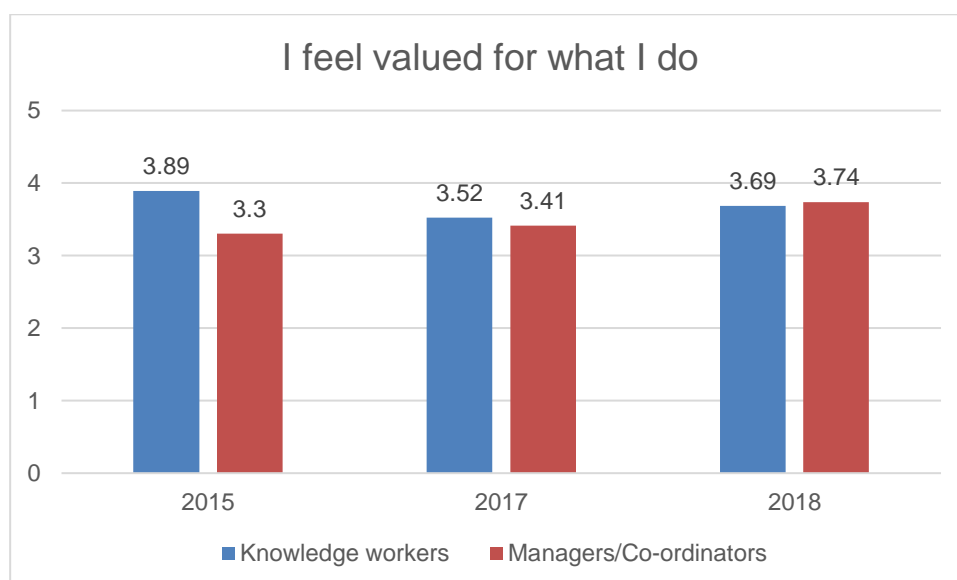
Others made links to attitude and behaviours:

*"I think there is something about how people were viewed and treated. So getting a sense that people who worked at [the legacy] being some sort of commodity, you know and particularly [knowledge workers], that you were just replaceable." – (KW, Sept, 2016).*

Therefore, there was a growing sense of '*becoming insignificant*', signalled in sentiments such as '*we don't matter to them*', and '*they don't value us*', which was also reflected in the ESS scores, all below four, illustrated in Figure 25 below.



Figure 25: ESS data: feeling under-valued



Interestingly, looking at the question, even the measure constituting ‘value’ relates to the transactional, and not the relational, *i.e.* ‘*I feel valued for what I do*’, as opposed to for ‘*who I am*’ or ‘*what I bring*’, suggesting an implicit focus on task over person. An increased focus on measures and control post-merger, resulted in systems that seemed to diminish the levels of autonomy and trust employees enjoyed pre-merger, thus making employees further question whether they were still valued, as illustrated below.

*“When I came here, I came here because I was sort of allowed to do a job and I was taken on because people believed that I could do it. And yet, I kind of feel that that’s sort of being taken away from me. That they [merging partner] don’t like what I do. They don’t trust in what I’m doing or they don’t have confidence in my ability to make decisions and things like that, all of that’s sort of being taken away.” (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017)*

In addition, the merging partner displayed a strong preference for hiring much younger, and arguably less experienced, employees into the new roles created and this created a perception that youth was valued above age/experience. For some, this contributed to a sense of diminished value, as illustrated by an older employee below.

*“I feel as though there’s a distinct lack of respect for experience and credibility. That we’re not people that they’re recognising.” (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017)*

This sense of not being valued, contributed to anxiety and resentment for those employees who had been loyal to the legacy organisation for many years. This was particularly prevalent in the professional manager/co-ordinator community, where the difference in age between the two organisations was particularly noticeable. However, employees were quick

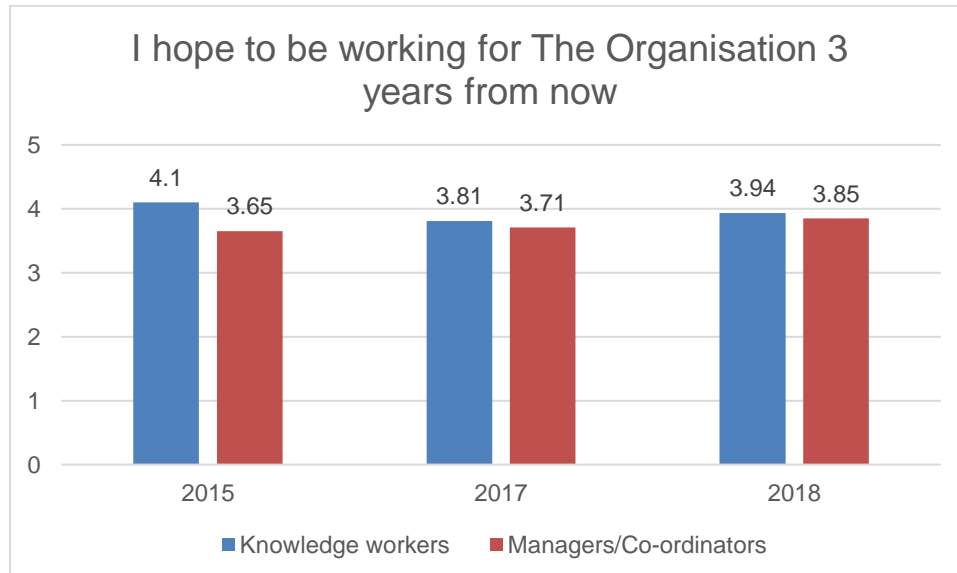
to point to social media rumours of the very high employee turn-over rates in the merging partner, which compared to the very low attrition rates pre-merger within the legacy organisation, led them to surmise that employees were not valued anywhere in the organisation by the merging partner, whom they started referring to as *‘the machine’*.

Colleagues described the new emerging culture to be *“purely transactional”*, *“not interested in the individual”* and a culture where *“everything can be sorted out with money”*. The unintended consequence of not feeling valued was that employees themselves became transactional, and/or ultimately disengaged from the organisation, as illustrated below.

*“Frankly nobody gave a shit whether I was here or not – that was the impression I got ... So I guess I became more and more disillusioned, and fed up and probably more focused on me.”*  
(KW – September, 2016).

The ESS scores reflected similar sentiments. Figure 26 demonstrates a decrease in reported confidence/commitment to remain with the organisation, which alarmingly remained low as the merger progressed.

Figure 26: ESS data: Moral commitment



Thus, I would argue that this shift from a perceived relational and autonomous culture, towards a more transactional and controlled culture, resulted in a decreased perception of significance/value and moral commitment to stay (Angle and Perry, 1981; Penley and Gould, 1988). Therefore, it seems particularly relevant that in times of mergers, the leadership makes an effort to address the concerns/fears of employees who may feel that their

significance in the post-merger context is diminishing. Failing to recognise that this is an issue, and/or failing to address this as an issue, may lead to overall disengagement and disidentification, and potentially the wrong employees leaving the organisation. Leaders also need to question their own assumptions about 'who is valued' as they may be biased by their own pre-understanding or pre-assumptions of the value of employees from the merging organisation in particular. Finally, because mergers are often associated with changes that have a negative impact on the self-worth of employees, it becomes particularly important for the success of a merger to create a culture of appreciation and respect, regardless of the ongoing changes.

ii) *Voice lost/decreased*

Sadly, as mentioned earlier, the merger accentuated a culture of silence and fear. Even pre-announcement and, by all accounts, to this day, employees do not feel able to openly voice concerns, or any contradictory view that could be perceived as criticism of the merger, or the merging partner. At the start of the merger, the more outspoken members of the legacy organisation were taken aside for a quiet word. Their managers would caution them to 'be careful' and encouraged them to toe the party line. In addition, the behaviour of senior leaders from the merging partner during their few visits to the legacy site did not still the growing sense of unease, as illustrated by the quote below.

*"... [merging partner senior leader] kind of sat on his chair like a king and told us how things were and again, you got the sense if you challenge openly you were on the next plane out of here. So there was definitely a kind of sense of fear, and people, you know, if even they saw something wrong, people are just going to shut up now. (KW – September, 2016)*

*"I think the people in [post-merger organisation] are scared to speak up now. And I think that is really, really terrible because when you are driving a culture of fear where people will not speak up, even when it is about things which they think will help. And I think [merging partner] really will need to listen and they need to be a little bit more humble. Otherwise I think they will regret it." (KW – September, 2016).*

I remain uncertain whether the leadership team ever recognised the growing sense of organisational silence, as my efforts to foster open, generative dialogue opportunities within the system did not receive much traction, especially during the first two years of the merger. To me, employees declared a lack of trust in the leadership, which they said, prevented them from wanting to speak-up, despite having many concerns they wanted to share and discuss.

When raising these observations in conversations with leaders, as I did in increasingly regular intervals as this study progressed, I got the impression that leaders/managers were defensive and/or in denial, and they seemed unwilling to create a safe space for open and transparent dialogue about how employees were experiencing the merger.

Sadly, this lack of opportunity for employees to express and discuss their concerns about their merger experience within the organisation, led to a number of employees turning to social media to express their dissatisfaction anonymously, and as the extracts from the public website, 'Glassdoor'<sup>8</sup> illustrates, what they had to say did not paint a pretty picture.

*"The management are appalling, bullying, victimising, stop at nothing to get you out if your face does not fit in, worst place by far I have ever worked, never encountered such bullies in my life!" (Anonumous – Glassdoor, 12 October 2017).*

Some employees felt that it was only through the power of social media, and the risk of a negative brand image, that the leadership made an effort to redress some of the concerns. Failure to give voice to employees, and/or using a power base to ignore concerns, from knowledge workers in particular, may also have contributed to the erosion of engagement, as illustrated below.

*"I had to learn to disengage and try and influence where I can but recognise that, actually, if [the president] wants it that way, that's probably not a battle to fight." – (KW – June, 2017).*

Thus, losing significance due to lack of power, influence and voice became a reality for employees, which in turn, influenced how they responded to the merger, as witnessed below.

*"The people who have got positions of power now, and who are making the decisions, are all [the dominant partner] people, or their hirees. Given where I am in my career, becoming insignificant is not an issue for me. For other people who are earlier on in their career, I could see that being an enormous issue." – (KW – March, 2018.)*

I would argue that for mergers to succeed in creating engagement and identification, leaders should actively seek to create a safe space for dialogue. Leaders should seek to surface

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<sup>8</sup> Glassdoor is a website where employees and former employees anonymously review companies and their management.

concerns, complaints, challenges and negative feedback pro-actively, in order to explore the root cause of the concerns and heightened emotions. Furthermore, leaders should be committed to act on feedback that has a negative impact on morale and engagement, and see this as a key to fostering identification with the post-merger organisation. This also implies that leaders should be mindful of practices that diminish the power and the voice of those they lead, and where needed, focus on giving courage and voice to those most likely to be silenced by the merger.

iii) *Vulnerability increased*

As already illustrated, there is much data to confirm that this merger experience overall made employees feel insecure and unsafe, including reference to rumours. For example, early on in the merger negotiation process, there were rumours that the legacy organisation would be 'shut down' and the building used for a different purpose. There was also a strong rumour that the leader of the merging partner had stated in a letter, something along the lines of "*if the [knowledge workers] are a problem then get rid of them and then we can start again*".

Although the new leadership repeatedly refuted such rumours, the fact that so many 'outspoken' knowledge workers left the organisation after voicing their concerns about the direction of the merger, left employees fearing for their jobs. Felt safety therefore, transcends a top-down re-assurance communication, as illustrated below.

*"... my sense of safety, yeah, you know the sense of whether there is certainty, or whether I have got a job here, or I have got a place here. I think that shifted."* (KW – September, 2016).

*"You would need to take away the fear. I know personally that I have, at any point in time, when my salary comes in every month, I say, "Oh, good. I've just got paid again. This is really good. I've got at least another month you know, before someone taps me on the shoulder."* (KW, Gr1M1 – December, 2016).

Overwhelmingly the sense was that the leadership failed to provide a sense of safety and support for employees, and that the new transactional way of being did nothing to create a secure attachment, built on psychological safety, as illustrated below.

*"There is no relational element to it whatsoever. Purely transactional. And you know, someone was either on the right side of the transactional formula, "You're okay." Soon as something happens then you slip to other side, you're gone." (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017)*

*"... that whole psychological contract is gone ... I appreciate the relationships with people that are left and my contract now is with them and not with the organisation ... because it feels very transactional and I know tomorrow that I could be gone." (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017)*

The manner in which knowledge workers received their new employment contract, was a prime example of the transactional behaviour that damaged psychological contracts. These contracts were fundamentally different to the previous ones in tone and intent, and the organisation sent them to employees by post, with no explanation or preamble, by people unknown to any of the knowledge workers. As the extract below demonstrates, this did little to foster a sense of OI and commitment to the new post-merger organisation.

*"I got this new contract, through the post, which, basically, said I'd have to go anywhere that my line manager wants me to go and they could change my salary at any time. So, ignored all my last contracts and was expecting me to sign up and it also had three pages of things that I couldn't do. You know, in terms of legalities but their commitment to me was nothing. It was just that I had to be prepared to go around the world and they could change my salary at any time. And I think, when I agreed to that and I wrote back and signed that whole contract, and didn't get a response, I just thought, "What? You know, where is the relationship in the place?" So, that has quite a significant impact. But I have realised, it's all about the people and I'm more aware that I need to look after myself. Which, I probably didn't think about myself before as much." (KW – Gr1M3a – June, 2017)*

I would argue therefore, that focussing on the inter-personal relationships, in particular on creating trust and respect that would foster strong psychological safety, should be a key focus of all managers/leaders in a post-merger environment. By creating inter-personal relationships, that provide strong psychological safety to both parties, much will be done to contribute to greater engagement and identification with the post-merger organisation. It implies therefore, that leaders need to accept the notion that lack of felt security will diminish employees' engagement and identification. Leaders in particular, need to hold themselves accountable for establishing trust and for creating psychological safety for all concerned, and for addressing rumours or behaviours that may destroy trust.

#### 4.2.6 Something's gotta give – the need for resilience

This merger, like most others, precipitated major organisational restructuring initiatives. We experienced a large number of voluntary and involuntary redundancies due to central functions such as IT and HR merging across the two organisations. Severe cost cutting, lasting well over two years, resulted in very lean teams. Ultimately, this contributed to employees feeling over-loaded, and a sense of being treated unfairly. Some felt the organisation made no attempt to provide a manageable work-life balance, for example:

*"I don't think it's so much that the role is changing. I think the role is being added to because change suggests some level of give and take. And at the moment I'm seeing no take. I'm seeing, 'Oh, there's something else to give you. There's something else to give you. We're going to get rid of them and we'll give that to you.' ..."* (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).

The growing sense that the organisation was not demonstrating regard, respect and appreciation for employees lead to two types of stress-inducing responses, experienced by some as *"I have this really overwhelming sense of feeling responsible for people ..."* and for others, it led to greater levels of disengagement, i.e. *"I've just checked out because I feel like it's not worth it"*. Furthermore, some employees did not physically leave, but distanced themselves emotionally from the organisation, which in turn, diminished their productivity, and compounded the stress in the system, as illustrated below.

*"There are a couple of people that have literally gone, 'what's the fucking point anyway, I'm going to be out soon'. So there are a couple that dipped in performance."* – (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M3 – May, 2017).

This, in turn, added further stress on employees' sense of well-being and ability to cope.

*"Hmm, surviving. That's what I'm doing at the moment. [still emotional and trying not to cry] I think that's all I can do. Just try and get through every day and try and do as much as I can and not piss people off if I haven't done what they've asked me to do and blah blah blah."* – (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).

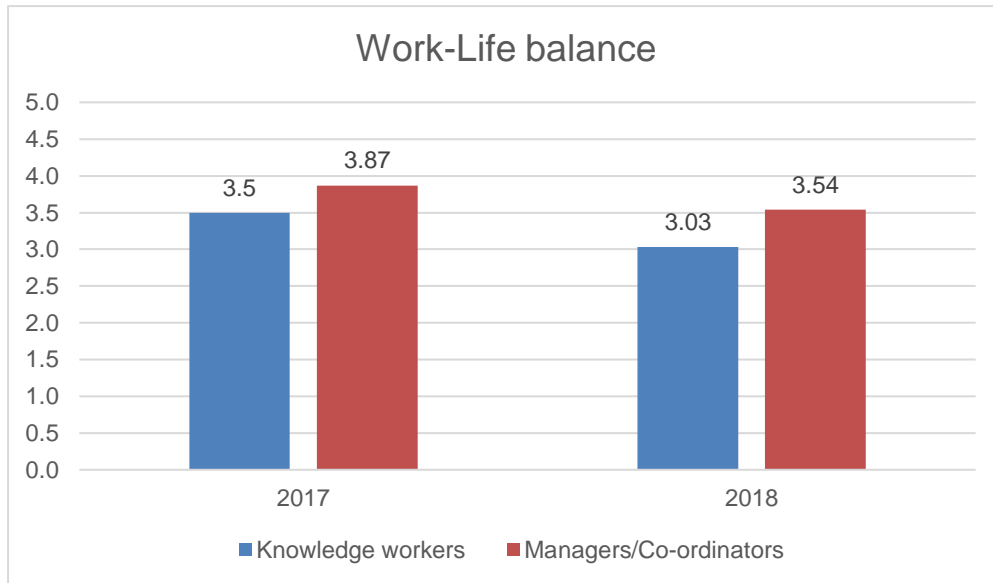
Both qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated the diminished work-life balance progressively worsened as the merger unfolded. Figure 27 below illustrates the combined response to the following two questions<sup>9</sup> *"I am able to achieve a sustainable balance*

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<sup>9</sup> These questions were only included in the 2017 and 2018 surveys.


between my work and non-work life”, and “I feel that I can 'unplug' during my time off (excluding potential emergency situations)”.

Figure 27: ESS data: Work-Life balance



These scores underline the increasing concern employees had about their own well-being and the ability of the organisation to respond to the post-merger stressors, with all the scores being below four, and declining year-on-year. The metaphor illustrated in Figure 28 below, shared during the last manager/co-ordinators co-operative inquiry meeting held 2.5-years after the onset of the merger, further accentuates this concern.

Figure 28: Metaphor for the sense of continued overwhelming



*“I can fully appreciate that if the merger hadn't happened none of us would have jobs today so I get that. I knew it would be tumultuous, knew it would be hard work, knew that at times it would feel like we were going under but we'd pop up and we'd actually come out at the end and when you get to the bottom of the rapids and everything would be sorted. Well, not everything would be sorted. It would be a smoother ride. Actually at the moment, I think we're personally I'm even more in the rapids that I was because of the redundancies and everything else that was going on.” – (Manager/Co-ordinator, March, 2018)*

(Source: Pixabay, 2018)



It is fair to say that our experience supported earlier findings that a decreased sense of resilience contributed to an increase in work-place stressors and an increase in health complaints, sick-days and burnout (Schaubroeck and Jones, 2000). In addition, I would argue that data supports the notion that the increased stress and lack of resilience also contributed to lower levels of job satisfaction, and less organisational citizenship behaviour, which also contributed to the greater willingness to leave the organisation (Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, Wecking et al).

When we discussed how employees were feeling during the merger integration, and what they felt they needed to help them cope better, there was a strong sense that they needed coping strategies to regain their balance: *“I’d like to learn how to cope with it better...just so that I can actually wake up without a headache every morning...”*. There was also a sense that they needed the organisation to experience some periods of stability, in order to help them regain some resilience: *“Some periods of stability, I think, would be useful. You just ... there needs to be some kind, some stability before the next thing.”* (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M3 – May, 2017).

The lack of resilience is a red thread that weaves its way through multiple themes that emerged over the course of the merger, often precipitated and/or accompanied by heightened emotional states. I would argue that mergers in particular call for a specific focus on the well-being of employees. This implies that leaders need to take a holistic view of the impact of the merger on processes; systems; employees; and job-roles; and that employees should be engaged in regular, open and frank conversations about their ability to deliver the tasks that befall them. Failing to do so will not only result in poorer performance, but more importantly, it may have lasting damaging effects on individuals’ health, morale, engagement, and identification.

#### **4.2.7 Making choices**

During the January 2017 global summit, a colleague made the comment that *‘you either get on the bus, or you get off the bus’* which stuck in my head when I was reading through the transcripts. This analogy helped me to make sense of the pattern of choices around identification and engagement I noticed emerging during the merger integration and within the transcripts.

The various responses to the merger reflected the expanded model of identification and the collective choices included evidence of identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification. Employees attempted to achieve a sense of self in relation to the post-merger organisation (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004), which I was able to articulate to the organisation through the analogy of *'either getting on the bus, or not'*.

Employees that were highly identified with the legacy organisation defined themselves as not having the same attributes or values as the merging partner, and thus actively disidentified themselves through active separation from the post-merger organisation (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Thus, they voluntarily or involuntarily *'stepped off the bus'*, and disconnected what they perceived to be negative aspects of the post-merger organisation from themselves (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Disidentification contributed to turnover, and fed into the cycle of negative emotions that was present during the merger.

*"I think that the merger has completely trashed the ... any ... my sense is that, that there does not seem to be any sense of belonging in this place now."* (KW, September, 2016)

On the other hand, despite the negativity and turnover, and a worry that the organisation was losing too many talented people, others held the opinion that the churn would be good for the organisation, for example:

*"...only by some of the ... I want to say 'deadwood' but that sounds really harsh, only through some people leaving, are then others able to grow and change. And then you've got new people coming in who bring in new ideas, and maybe it is an easier place to bring new ideas into now."* (Manager/co-ordinator, Gr2M1 – November, 2016).

There were also those who felt that the merger was the turning point and that it flushed out employees who were never truly engaged:

*"But I don't think they ever were engaged. So, I don't think it's the whole [merger] process that disengaged them. They were disengaged before. ... [the legacy organisation], for them, was something that allowed them to build another piece of their life, private work life, around work."* (KW, Gr1M3b – June, 2017).

Some employees were unable to 'psychologically merge' with the emerging identity, and this contributed to a more subtle, yet prolonged continuation of the 'them' and 'us' divide. Arguably, their response resembled a mixture of ambivalent identification and

disidentification. For example, some employees actively separated their sense of self from the emerging post-merger identity by declaring themselves as not having the same attributes and values as the dominant merging partner (Elsbach, 1999). Yet, despite this disidentification, they were unwilling, or unable, to leave the organisation, for a variety of reasons. One of these may have been *continuance commitment*, i.e. the perceived costs, or lack of alternatives associated with leaving the organisation that was driving this behaviour (Meyer and Allen, 1997).

This ambivalent type of identification resulted in behaviours I described as ‘*clinging to the bus*’, and in a way, this type of behaviour emulates that of ‘*facades of conformity*’ which is not an uncommon occurrence in organisations populated by knowledge workers, or rife with politics (Stormer and Divine, 2008). It would seem that this type of behaviour was far more prevalent during the earlier phases of the merger, and that it also precipitated more people leaving the organisation over time, as illustrated by the exit interview extract below, indicating that facades of conformity was not a sustainable position to assume over time.

*“Yeah. I think a lot of people started disengaging ... if we were having contact and communication, it was almost somewhat removed from [the organisation], it was taken out. It was maybe on the phone, or meet in London, it was just removed from the organisation. So I think the fact that I began to disengage was not a unique experience by me, I think other people started disengaging as well. And I think my communication with others and my work in the organisation became much more transactional and short term. I invested less time in those relationship, whereas before I would have done more. And I disengaged really from any kind of senior management. I kept my 1:1s with my line manager, told him how I felt but that’s, that was pretty much it. I did not kind of engage, contribute really to anything.” (KW – October, 2016).*

‘*Clinging to the bus*’ again raises the question of whether or not employees who remain within an organisation based on obligation or cost-avoidance factors, may in fact act in ways that denotes less commitment to the organisation (Hassan, 2012). This would certainly explain another pattern of behaviour, which in a conversation with colleagues, was described as ‘*trashing the bus*’. It denotes the choice of individuals to remain in the organisation, but instead of supporting the post-merger initiatives, adopting behaviours that are harmful to the post-merger organisation. For example, expressing negative views to other members or to clients about the merger, thus diminishing the morale and the brand value of the new organisation.

*“Terrible management/leadership style, lack of respect, overworked and expected to work beyond own capacity” (Anonymous – Glassdoor, 11 June 2018).*

In contrast, there were those employees who fully re-identified with the post-merger identity, thus, constructing their sense of self in relation to this new entity, and achieving a sense of belonging and purpose in the process. In essence, this group of employees '*got on board the bus*', and enacted the values and behaviours associated with the post-merger organisational identity. Thus, they fully engaged and identified by positively connecting aspects of the post-merger organisation to themselves (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). The choice of '*getting on board the bus*' refers to those employees who were able to shift their sense of belonging towards the post-merger identity, some directly, and others through a process of incremental steps, resembling a series of transient identities that felt comfortable and safe, until they found themselves comfortably identified with the post-merger organisation. This leads to a group of re-identified employees, as illustrated below.

*"I think the people who are left here want to make something, change it, try and, you know, make something of the business, and make it happen. So, in that respect, I think it's still an exciting, you know ... It's a great place to work". (KW, Gr1M3b – June, 2017)*

Unfortunately, given the experiences described in the theme '*It's not the what, it's the how*', some of these re-identified employees felt that they got onto a bus that was '*out of control*' or '*broken*' and thus, they found it impossible to '*steer the bus*', and reported feeling that they were being '*run over by the bus*'. Sadly, some elected to '*step off the bus*', in light of this experience. In this way, these employees moved from re-identification towards disidentification as the merger progressed, and joined in behaviours that were associated with '*trashing the bus*', or '*sabotaging the bus*'.

Employees related to this analogy, by giving examples of behaviours that worked against the common goal, and equated their experience of this phenomena to '*kicking off*', '*acting out*', '*pushing back*', '*walking away*', or '*letting the air out of their tyres*'. This should have been of particular concern to the leadership, as losing the support of individuals who were willing to commit, and who may even have been change agents, or role models of the merger, would be particularly damaging to the success and sustainability of the merger integration.

Finally, ambivalent identification was yet another choice enacted, and arose from employees who simultaneously identified and disidentified with aspects of the emergent post-merger organisation (Ashforth, 2001; Pratt and Douchet, 2000; Elsbach, 2001), for example:

*"I am always kind of sitting on the periphery with one foot in and one foot out. So I think ... I think that there were aspects of the identity that I shared and there were aspects that I rejected. And it felt quite problematic." – (KW, September, 2016).*

Interestingly, as this longitudinal study demonstrated, ambivalent identification tended to persist over long periods of time (Duckerich et al., 1998) that led to a mindset and behaviour I have labelled '*driving alongside the bus, in my own car*'. When discussing this trend internally with the leadership team, we debated whether this is necessarily something to worry about or not, particularly where the knowledge workers are concerned. As the emerging business model is shifting towards an 'associate model' versus a 'full-time employee' model, this type of ambivalent identification may play a general acknowledgment in favour of the post-merger organisation. Indeed, there were knowledge workers who selected to un-couple themselves from the organisation contractually but accepted associate contracts, whilst remaining quite invested with the post-merger identity:

*"What I've noticed actually is that I've tried to maintain the psychological contract that I had when I started as permanent. So now I come in and I do my work and I'll see the people that I like which is why I'm here and then I go again. And for me there's no challenge to that psychological contract because my psychological contract was based on an organisation that saw business organisations as complex social processes built around relationships. So, for me that hasn't changed."* (Associate KW, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).

However, when considering the manager/co-ordinator population in particular, there was evidence that the choice of ambivalent identification did drain cognitive and emotional resources from individuals, evidenced in employees who became unwilling to '*go the extra mile*' in the post-merger context. Reflecting on the merger, there was evidence that with time, employees '*clinging to the bus*' and '*driving alongside the bus*', began to experience isolation, stress, and negative emotions:

*"I started coming in less to [the office]. I mean it is a long commute for me anyway. Whilst before I would make an effort to be here, sit in our group office, just generally be more around, and attend meetings, I started avoiding going to meetings. .... It's almost like a lot of, it's almost like mentally I took my relationships out of [the post-merger organisation]. So I maintained good relationships with the colleagues that I was doing a lot of work with, sort of client teams, and started to focus much more on that, rather than actually feeling like I am part of an organisation. So it became much more individualistic, so client team focussed – where I was putting my energy."* – (KW, October, 2016).

Given the risk of such employees, particularly talented knowledge workers, becoming totally disengaged, it is important for the organisation to plan for ways in which to help these two groups identify stronger with the post-merger identity.

Therefore, I argue that during a merger integration, leaders need to be aware that employees will be making choices regarding their levels of engagement and commitment

from even before the announcement takes place, and for a very long time after the merger takes effect. Furthermore, leaders need to understand the choices available to employees, and actively seek to steer the right employees in the right direction. This may mean that some employees need to be encouraged to leave the organisation or their role, and as such, they should manage the exit well, and with respect. Others may need help to commit, and such leaders should not delay having the necessary conversations. Leaders should also take care of those who have committed and who have embraced new challenges, ensuring that they are not disengaged or disillusioned by poorly managed merger changes. If this occurs, leaders should address both the context and the individuals in questions quickly, to restore engagement and identification, and to keep the momentum and goodwill towards the merger going. Finally, leaders should also ask themselves where they are in terms of the choices available to them. If they themselves are not fully committed, engaged and identified, they should address this immediately, as their actions, intent and emotions inform the experience of others.

#### **4.2.8 Reframing and reconnecting**

When I asked knowledge workers what it was that led to them identifying so strongly with the legacy organisation pre-merger, they invariably cited a sense of common purpose, community and shared interest, as illustrated in this comment reflecting on the question of the source of their identification, for example:

*“It was more my peers than any, and the people I worked with, particularly on projects. You know you’d been working on projects together and you’d go away two or three days with clients and you are preparing it, yeah, and you’d very much be working at the cause – that, that gave me a real sense of belonging.” (KW, October, 2016).*

During the early merger integration phase, there was a sense that the leadership was not interested in community or social identity. Rather, they perceived the merger being all about efficiencies and cost saving. In the absence of leadership initiatives to protect and foster safe attachments and belonging, employees discussed the question about whether they as a group could create that sense of belonging independently of the leadership structure. This discussion became particularly pertinent following the changes in reporting lines affecting knowledge workers from Group A, and the extract below indicates the strong desire for some formal process/structure to foster belonging and identification.

*"I think you'll find it [a sense of belonging] probably ends up creating itself, and I was thinking of the last few months of the attachment that comes much more to project teams, around clients work, and it becomes self-forming little groups. But I don't think it gives you the same sense of containment and belonging than if you had a more formal structure. I think it pops up naturally in different parts of the organisation, if you don't provide it at all, but I think.... It can then become quite complicated and people can just go off and do their own thing. And people then become attached to other people rather than to the organisation if that makes sense. You know, and then it doesn't become at all about the organisation." – (KW, October, 2016).*

When asked, employees were quick to point out that they needed a platform to connect that extended beyond client work "...use our meeting times together and get people to connect and reconnect and work on things in the moment, and make sure you have lunch together and not just take off when it's done." (KW, Gr1M3a – June, 2017). Thus, focusing on shared purpose and passion. This expressed need for deliberate activities to establish or reinforce a sense of shared identity between members of an organisation resonates with the findings in the literature that such that such actions will have distinctly positive physical, mental and cognitive health and well-being (Cruwys, *et.al.*, 2014; Gleibs, Haslam, Haslam, *et.al.*, 2011; Gleibs, Haslam, Jones, *et.al.*, 2011; Haslam, *et.al.*, 2014). In fact, this merger supports this notion in that some of the earliest signs of knowledge workers noticing an identity shift occurred during the deliberate leadership intervention, i.e. the global summit.

In a way therefore, this event enabled leaders to build group interventions around the diverse social identities represented within the complex, post-merger, global organisation. As the reflection below illustrates, this event in one sense acted as the 'social cure' (Haslam, 2014) in that it demonstrated the therapeutic power of group membership because knowledge workers were allowed to self-identify with the groups they want to form part of, and thus embraced a greater willingness to reframe and connect with other groups.

*"I started feeling that this [event] was part of being part of the bigger organisation [...] Going into it feeling like you were [legacy] and then at the end of it, feeling that you belonged to [the post-merger organisation]." (KW, Gr2m2 – February, 2017).*

The physical changes in the old environment, with buildings and office spaces being renewed and updated, further enhanced the sense of reframing, i.e. "*What made the difference was physically we were in a new space.*" (KW, Gr2m2 – February, 2017). This therefore, illustrates the need for the organisation to pay attention to symbols of newness and change.

However, the day-to-day choices that people were making around reaching out and relating to each other fostered a sense of reconnecting and re-identifying with the post-merger organisation, as shared by a manager when discussing the impact of open-plan office space:

*“I make a habit of five minutes before whatever meeting I’ve got I have a wander around. But in that process I see some people and I can see and I say hello and I interact with them briefly and I get the opportunity to catch up with people I didn’t think to deliberately go and see. (Manager/Co-ordinator, Gr2M2 – February, 2017).*

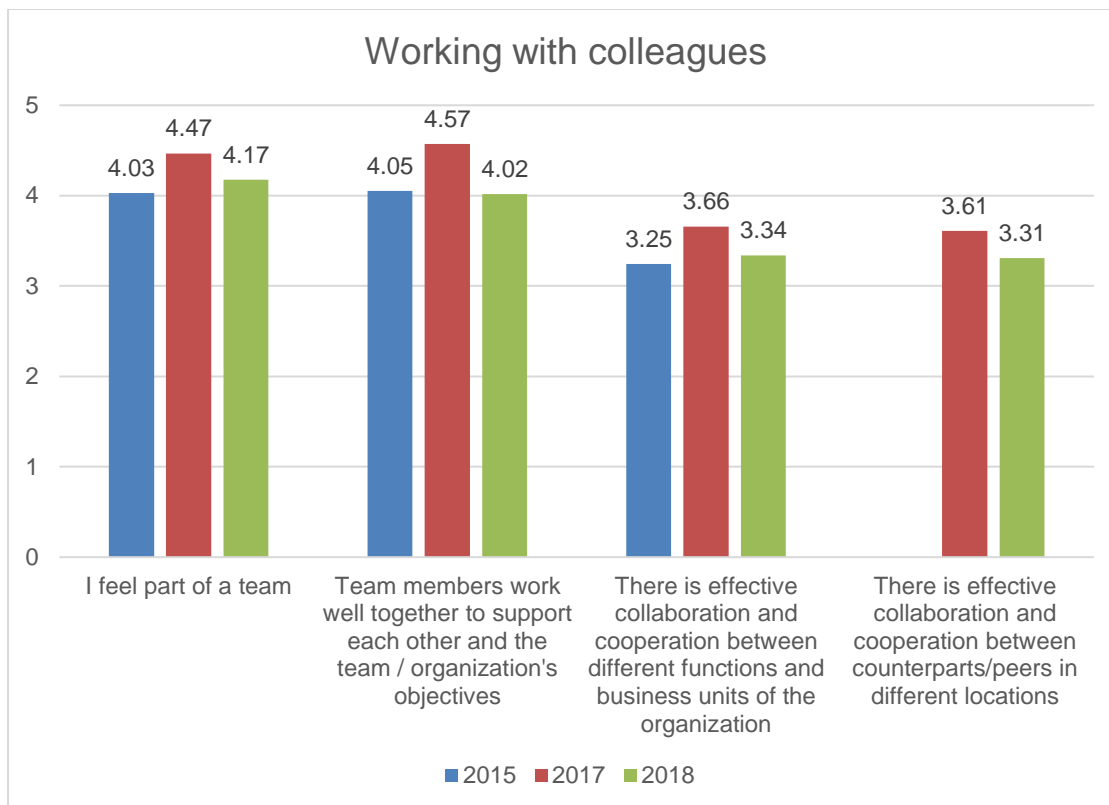
In fact, employees started losing patience with members who continued to talk about feeling disconnected, and started challenging the extent to which employees should assume personal responsibility for reconnecting, as illustrated by the extract below.

*“So, when people feel disconnected it’s about, actually, you’ve got to make the role to connect with yourself. Connect with your place at work. ... Yeah, that’s your responsibility. So I don’t feel any sympathy when you, kind of, say that [I feel disconnected] to anyone”. (KW, Gr1M3b – June, 2017)*

Moreover, line managers started challenging employees to go and talk to people: *“I’m not stopping anybody. You know, yes, this is a team and we’re trying to create something. But at the same time, we’ve all got to take responsibility to go and talk to other people”. – (Manager/Co-ordinator, G2M3 – June, 2017).* Thus, individuals assuming the responsibility to connect, to be present and positive, started having an impact, which facilitated the process re-identification/re-connecting post-merger.

Figure 29 below confirms employees felt part of a team and that they felt they worked well together to support the strategic objectives. The scores below four also indicate that the challenge was in fostering cross-team, cross-functional collaboration, and post-merger, collaboration across the wider global organisation.





Our merger experience demonstrates that employees need a sense of community and common purpose, as illustrated below.

*“The thing I cling onto was there's glimmers of people wanting to stay. But they're not there at the door yet. Now I'm getting emotional. [struggling to contain his tears]. I need the people around me, the reason why I keep going around and meeting with people is because I need to know that they also believe in something that is more, and just more than an institution. And if there's just enough that, once the canvas has been wiped clean again - that we can create something because we've got a hope, because we've got an ambition, because it matters to us. This [pointing at the people in the group] is what matters to me. Not the institution. That is what we make it. I know that sounds very grand and very, you know, that's [inaudible]. But you know, its people that can see an opportunity, something in what they do that they bring. And together we can make that into something. That's my hope. That's what I stick to.” (Manager/Co-ordinator – Gr2M2 – February, 2017).*

Thus, this merger supports the notion that social identity is relational, and saliency is constantly re-negotiated and re-established through the relational interactions between organisational members, their social-groups, and their stakeholders ((Whitley et al., 2014; Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Gioia et al., 2000). Leaders need to appreciate the power of positivity and good mood, the danger of negativity and low morale, and the need for people to belong to something they respect. Therefore, a key recommendation to leaders of merger integrations is to focus on establishing processes that will encourage and facilitate cross-

collaboration between people within the post-merger context. It seems prudent to seek for ways to remove divisions, real or perceived, between groups, teams, divisions, and organisational alliances, in order to foster collaboration and a sense of shared identity at the earliest possible opportunity. Where teams are in existence, it becomes crucial to ensure that they operate with a sense of connection to the overarching strategic vision and values, collaborating with others as part of the whole. Finally, leaders should seek to influence the reframing through use of language, meaning, symbols and rituals, as they foster a sense of purpose and enjoyment in the work people do.

#### **4.2.9 Oscillating between engagement and disengagement**

The quote below is an excellent illustration of this theme, and suggests that moving towards re-identification is by no means a permanent state.

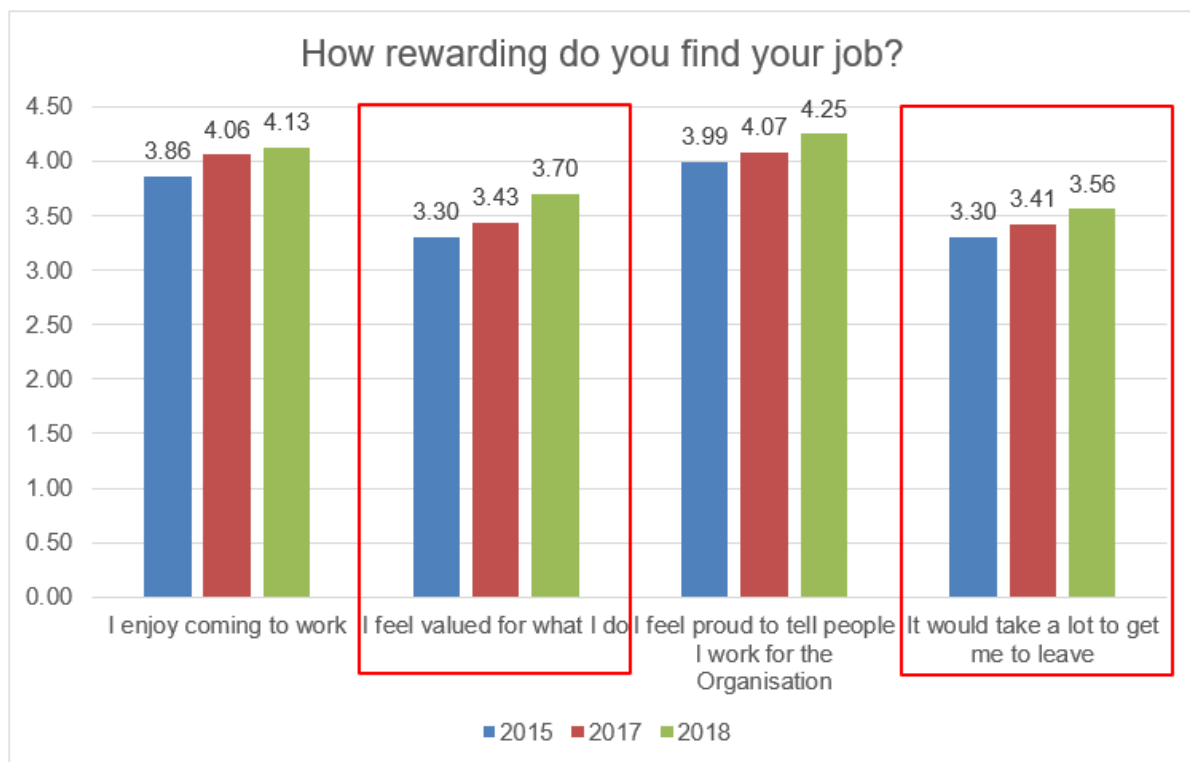
*"I'm constantly reframing in the moment to see where significance is for me. As I find it, things change and shift a little bit and how I perceive things and people and processes and my ability to do anything meaningful comes back to, let's have a look at those choices again and getting back on the bus, reframe and finding significance coming back. I'm not yet in the little part to the right [pointing to the positive cycle]. – (Manager/Co-ordinator – March, 2018)*

Thus, this final theme supports the preceding eight that stemmed from this longitudinal study, in suggesting that mergers that do not include a well-considered and well-executed integration process that also considers the soft elements associated with organisational identification and engagement, are likely to be less effective and less sustainable than those that do. It implies that leaders need to be patient and allow individuals to internally change at their own pace. Leaders should also notice the mood and energy of themselves and others, as they persist in fostering engagement whilst also encouraging performance. Given the long timescales associated with mergers, it is important to pace activities, not to get complacent, and to sustain behaviours that foster identification and engagement, whilst promptly addressing triggers for disidentification.

### 4.3 ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANISATION BASED ON ESS RESULTS

Considering that our leadership team uses the amalgamated EES scores when considering their next steps, I opted to explore data from the reports that pertains to my research. I included data from the entire BU, i.e. including central functions but excluding “facilities/estate/hospitality” teams, as I did not include these groups within the scope of my study. Figure 30 considers the four questions used by the organisation to determine whether employees find their jobs rewarding, and illustrates two areas for concern, i.e. with scores below four, both also highlighted in earlier sections exploring the qualitative data.

Figure 30: BU ESS data: Rewarding



Therefore, the leadership should be pro-actively addressing these two points of concern, to demonstrate that they are willing to act upon formal feedback. Failure to do so will further damage engagement and the willingness of employees to speak up and raise concerns. I would argue that their primary focus should be exploring why people do not feel valued. My intuition would suggest that it relates to a mixture of appreciation and recognition/reward, and that it will vary depending on who the individual is, and where they find themselves within the organisation. This implies therefore, that managers need to schedule time to have

individual conversations with employees, and feedback their insights to the leadership in order to highlight any system issues of concern.

Also, as discussed previously, and supported by the amalgamated data measuring '*understanding and commitment to the organisation's objectives*' illustrated in Figure 31 below, OI seems strongly linked to both feelings of value/significance and of moral commitment/willingness to stay, and therefore, supports the notion that OI is a key parameter to consider in merger integrations.

Figure 31: BU ESS data: Commitment



Figure 32: BU ESS data: Line manager review

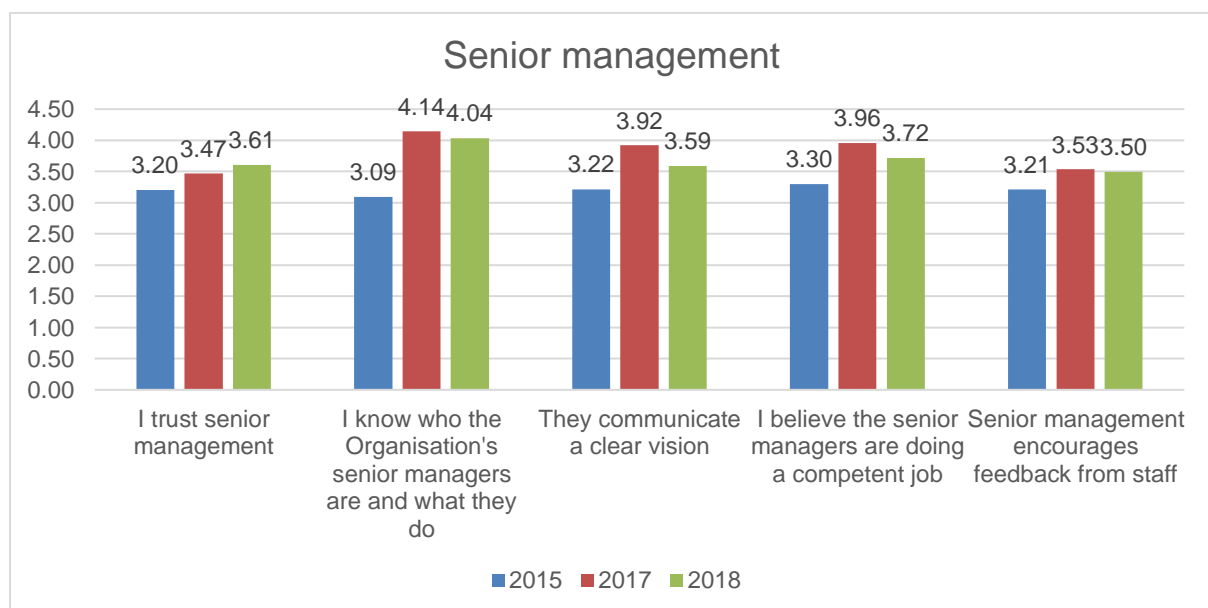


Figure 32 above, makes it clear that there were an abundance of parameters for line managers to consider, as all nine measures declined to near, or below a score of four in 2018. The data reveals that during the merger process, line managers were found particularly lacking in giving regular feedback, addressing poor performance and inappropriate behaviour, and also that more effort was seemingly made by line managers in the second year of the merger versus the third.

The qualitative data included in the ESS surveys alluded to the notion that line managers were not responsive in addressing reported unacceptable behaviours, i.e. dis-respectful, discriminatory and divisive behaviour. However, when I discussed these comments with line managers, some felt that they were ill equipped to challenge up-ward, and that the most challenging cases for them was when the poor behaviours were enacted by those more senior, or more powerful, than they. Therefore, I would argue that our formative context does not enable line managers to support their employees the way that is desired and needed.

This brings me to the role and responsibility of senior management, as the leaders who embody the identity of the organisation, and establish the culture and the rules that sustain the culture. As already discussed in the preceding themes, in this integration, the senior leaders still have a lot of work to do, as reflected by the overall BU ESS scores in Figure 33 below, where the majority of the scores are below four.

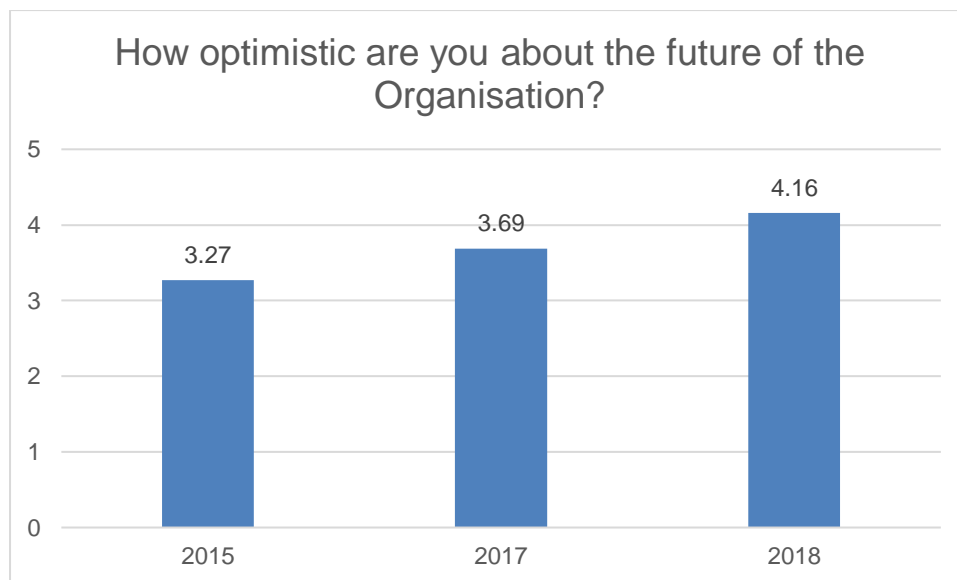
Figure 33: BU ESS data: Senior management



Although the senior leaders seem to be gaining trust and visibility steadily over time, they still need to improve their visibility, sensegiving communication, credibility/competence and inclusiveness/inquiry, signalling both attitudinal and behavioural actions required.

However, this study and the ESS data also confirms that the tide of despair and decline seems to be turning, and as Figure 34 below suggests, the BU that was once the legacy organisation in question, seems to be looking forward to a bright and better future.

Figure 34: BU ESS data: Overall optimism



Therefore, the ESS results in themselves also provide a rich source of data for the organisational leaders to consider. However, I would caution that when employee surveys are used, it becomes crucial for the organisation to demonstrate that they have act upon the feedback. Failure to do so will only further accentuate issues and diminish engagement and identification.

#### 4.4 IN SUMMARY

The findings confirmed the notion that mergers can be experienced as traumatic and emotional events, which may lead to ruptures in the social fabric that knits together the complex social identities that exist within a legacy organisation. It also confirms that a merger experience results in a process of identity shift and re-identification, supporting the



notion that OI is fluid and dynamic and that the process of identity transition is not without psychological pain and discomfort.

In addition, the nine themes representing the merger experience provide a rich insight into areas of concern for leaders and employees undergoing a merger integration process. The next chapter draws on the findings and analysis of this chapter, to suggest and summarise the practical implications of this research for leaders of organisations facing merger integrations.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## 5 REFLECTIONS: ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANISATION

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This AR study contributed to my organisation's post-merger integration learning by engaging directly in inter-level processes involving individuals, teams, inter-departmental groups, and the organisational integration process (Coghlan, 2001). It helped to shape the merger experience at individual, teams and organisational level towards a more positive and hopefully more sustainable merger integration outcome, both during the AR process, as well as in the future based on the learning during the AR process. Thus, this project contributed to the generation of three forms of research, i.e. third person/'for them', second person/'for us', and, first person/'for me' research (Reason and Marshall, 1987). This chapter reflects on the project's contribution to second and third person research, whilst the subsequent chapter focusses more explicitly on the first person research, as I critically reflect on my own leaning-in-action by considering how the AR process contributed to my own learning and development as action researcher and scholar-practitioner (Raelin, 2000).

### 5.2 SECOND-PERSON RESEARCH IMPACT: 'FOR US'

I argue that for learning to occur at team/group level, it is necessary for the group members to engage in dialogue on issues of relevance, i.e. how its members communicate among themselves, solve problems, and/or make decisions (Schein, 1999). The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle specifically provided such an opportunity in the form of two co-operative inquiry groups which facilitated a safe environment for members from two respective social groups to engage in an iterative process of collaborative sensemaking throughout the merger experience.

This mechanism also served to provide members with emotional support, which in turn had a positive impact on morale, and a sense of resilience, as the extract from manager/co-ordinator during their 3<sup>rd</sup> co-operative inquiry meeting demonstrates: *"Honestly it's like group therapy. It's wonderful"*. (Gr2M3 – June, 2017).

The explicit aim of the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle was to apply theory to practice in an attempt to positively impact the merger integration experience in a way that might address some of the themes raised during the phenomenological exploration conducted during the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle. This period incorporated mainly informal conversations and networking opportunities with a variety of decision-makers in both leadership and management roles, with the primary aim of establishing a process whereby I could share the nine themes and insights gathered, in order to influence the execution of the integration process. In a way, it represented a mini-cycle of iterative conversations focussed on creating a process for collaborative sensing, stimulating, strategizing and searching for practical implications and experiments.

This was a delicate process, particularly concerning 'sensing and stimulating activities', as there was a strong prevailing senior leadership view that the merger integration was complete, with a persisting undercurrent signalling that considering negative data/emotions was akin to 'dwelling on the past'. Throughout the AR project, there was an explicitly expressed desire for the organisation to focus on the positive, and on the future, i.e. '*from good to great*'. I was able to feed relevant data from the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle into a number of team meetings, and conversations, in order to point out that the period of positive reframing has not yet been successfully completed, as many professionals were still moving between 'finding significance' and 'making choices', thus highlighting some of the risks associated with not repairing some of the perceived merger transgressions. I was also able to raise awareness that the persistent low morale, and/or lack of resilience felt by some members within the organisation was significant, and that it impacted a sense of belonging and identification that puts the sustainability of our organisational success at risk, which was then discussed in these meetings and in others. In this way, the AR process was able to influence and affect various dialogues directly and indirectly. The section below provides a short illustration of the impact this had on the employees and the leaders within the organisation.

### **5.2.1 Impact at team-level and inter-personal level**

#### *Core values training example*

Following several informal conversations, the CEO invited me to join himself and the newly appointed COO and HR manager, responsible for recruitment, engagement and development, in a conversation to explore how I could tag my IAR insights onto some of their planned initiatives, and/or influence the continued merger process. As eluded to earlier, at

the time they did not buy-into my suggestion for a dialogic OD approach, instead they stated that they would “*really like to focus right now on other ways to engage staff, and hopefully create some positivity*”. To me this signalled their preference for a tactical approach over a sensemaking approach, confirmed by the project plan listing all of the various initiatives that were due to be rolled out over the next few months.

Sadly, due to work commitments, I was only able to collaborate on the core values training initiative, highlighting the role-duality challenge internal-researchers face (Coghlan, 2001). However, during my participation of the first Core Values training session, I was struck by the silence in the room, and the way in which ‘our core values’ were framed, without any regard to the collaborative work the legacy organisation did around identifying and articulating their own values prior to the merger. I remembered the notion of status and respect in the literature, and that individuals identify more strongly with groups in which they are afforded higher status (Tyler and Blader, 2003; 2002). Thus, I recommended to the new HR manager the need to adopt a relational approach that acknowledges and respects the history of the legacy organisational values, in order to prevent provoking negative emotions towards the process of rolling out ‘our core values’ which may subconsciously prime them to respond to her effort at sensegiving with criticism/negativity.

As an example, I shared my own, micro-rebellious response when I heard her use the acronym ‘ACCEPT’ to help us embed our core values. I inquired whether this was a deliberate choice of words that hinted at a veiled message, or was that my ‘baggage’? Her response to this question below, shared here with her express permission, was as follows:

*“I swear the “ACCEPT” thing came from an online acronym-maker, I never meant that to be a subliminal message. However, part of me is actually happy for that coincidence, because the fact of the matter is, as you’ve said, we do need to accept and move forward”. (Personal email correspondence from HR manager to author, 23 January, 2018).*

Becoming aware then of this intent to drive acceptance, the language used to support this intent, and a forward-looking design focus with a ‘nod to a shared heritage’ was a good second-person outcome. It resulted in an adaption of the intent, language and the design towards a ‘sensemaking opportunity’ rather than a ‘top-down sensegiving’ approach. From the email extract below, again produced with express permission, it is clear that this had a very positive impact on the subsequent rollout.

*"The 2<sup>nd</sup> Core Values workshop was much better than the first one. In both format and content.*

*It was a bummer you couldn't join us, because the group was SO positive. I started out by talking more sensitively about the history of the [Legacy] Core Values. Thanks to your help, Ilze, I was better able to explain where the values came from, and I acknowledged that it was probably super frustrating to have had their own values completely wiped out.*

In a subsequent email updating me on the fourth Core Values session, I was informed that the session was 'so-so', and that some members expressed a view that they just did not like the values, instead preferring values that relates more to *'treating everyone with respect'* and *'appreciating staff'*. This promoted ongoing conversations within the organisation that saw an explicit change in the way a number of leaders/managers started treating staff with more appreciation, and also led to the re-introduction of the 'staff appreciation board' in the staff canteen, where anyone could publicly express gratitude and appreciation for the wide-range of staff working on the premises.

In this way, it is possible to argue that the journey and the qualities of the IAR process such as the formal and informal engagement, participation, dialogue and shifting consciousness constituted a practice of learning and change, thus supporting the notion that simple and unnoticeable acts like "speaking differently" are considered as the *"chief instrument for cultural change"* (Reason 2006, p. 192).

#### *Leadership and Innovation Conference example*

Another key event that positively impacted organisational members, was the 'Leadership and Innovation Conference' hosted in June 2018, attended by full-time and associate knowledge workers, client relationship managers, and business developers, with an explicit aim of integrating associates more fully into the organisation. This was in response to overwhelming feedback from this group that they did not feel a strong sense of affiliation with the post-merger organisation. When considering associate knowledge workers, it felt that some may demonstrate neutral identification, i.e. accepting work, without really needing to identify or engage with the organisation beyond the transaction. It was questioned whether they were 'driving alongside the bus' and whether this loose identification presented a concern. There was a risk that some may metaphorically 'drive off in their direction', supported by the notion that neutral identification was particularly true for knowledge workers whose full-time contracts were rescinded during the initial restructuring initiatives, and/or

employees whose psychological contracts were damaged, i.e. 'once bitten, twice shy' (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004).

I could see the impact of the AR process during the final day of the event. The facilitation process mirrored my earlier suggestions around working with the pre-existing social identities to discover the issues and aspirations that matter to the members, as well as the barriers or obstacles that they experience within their post-merger reality model (Haslam, Eggins and Reynolds, 2011). In this way, the event demonstrated respect for historical continuity, whilst providing a mechanism for employees to co-create a sense of projected continuity, i.e. the event itself allowed employees to play an active role in shaping their projected future, and created a process that ensured the co-creation of a credible future road map (Lupina-Wegener et al. 2014).

### **5.2.2 Impact at organisation-level**

It would be difficult to say with certainty to what extent the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle and the resultant inter-level dynamics shaped and/or challenged the merger integration process. For example, I might argue that some of my recommendations set out in this report, informed some of the latter actions. One such suggestion relates to December 2017 when I made a request to the leadership team to embrace a dialogic OD approach, in particular to explore how 'we', i.e. leaders and teams, might apply the first three phases of the Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources (ASPIRe) model (Haslam, Eggins and Reynolds, 2011) in our post-merger context.

Although, at the time, the leadership team did not deem it appropriate to embrace a generative or appreciative OD approach, the dialogue to discuss the need to identify more closely with specific social groups within our organisation, including full-time and associate knowledge workers remained alive, directly and indirectly because of this study. Building on the initial conversations the Interim Director had with knowledge workers, including myself, he sent a group-wide email aimed at demonstrating appreciation, and building community spirit and engagement, as illustrated in the extract below.

*“I’ve had a chance to meet almost all of you in the past month. It’s been a real pleasure to get to know you a little, hear you speak about your work and your clients (with a lot of pride and ownership), to get a sense for some of the challenges we face (evolving processes, need for community), and brainstorm together. I am delighted to have a group of smart, kind, and mission-oriented colleagues.”* (Email correspondence from Interim Director, 28 March 2018).

In addition, this senior leader, from the merging organisation, demonstrated that he had listened to feedback by stating: *“Most of you have communicated wanting to spend more time in the company of your peers. To learn from each other, to explore open questions together, to benefit from synergy in your perspective and energies. Clearly a big theme with many facets”* and shared three activities to encourage community and best-practice sharing. These included:

- a) Re-creating a community lounge area in the hope that this will *“help encourage us to get together and have more serendipitous exchanges”*
- b) Designating *“Tuesday as ‘in-person connection day’ where the newly re-instated ‘Communities of Practice’ Discipline Leads will join the Product Team and [other] Leads in having drop-in sessions to share their work.”* The hope was to encourage knowledge workers to make an effort to come into the office, and to create opportunities for casual interactions and community building.
- c) Scheduling *“best-practice sharing (and open exploration) sessions on topics that are valuable”* to the knowledge worker community and asking volunteers to lead sessions that catered for both face-to-face and virtual participation to enable the broadest participation.

He also acknowledged that our processes have been in some flux, and that we needed the opportunity to give feedback on how these processes were affecting our lives. Thus, the leadership team introduced a set of cross-functional meetings with key members of the organisation to ensure that everyone was aware of process flows, adopting a shared language, and openly sharing feedback with leaders on processes to ensure we enhance our efforts in service of clients. In line with the recommendations flowing from this research, these initiatives created a safe space for shared sensemaking and sensegiving, in effect restoring voice to employees, fostering community, shared purpose, transparency and dialogue, all elements that members of the legacy organisation felt were lacking during the integration process, and which my research themes eluded to in particular. It is my belief that



these initiatives are contributing to the creation of a sense of belonging and engagement within the knowledge worker population, in particular.

However, the most exciting impact of this research project to date was the agreement from the CEO in June 2018, to begin a generative dialogical OD intervention process, led by one of our most experienced OD practitioners, that includes the Leadership Team and Discipline Leads. For me this was an opportunity to build on the strong relational network I had managed to form during the course of this research, in order to negotiate an appreciative OD process that might benefit the organisation going forward. It therefore resembled a mini-cycle of action research, which resulted in a practical outcome with the CEO agreeing to engage in an OD process to focus on the future, seeking help to articulate our purpose in a collaborative manner.

It is my deepest hope that this process will signal a shift in the culture of fear and organisational silence that occurred because of the merger integration process, thus, giving voice to all employees alike.

### **5.3 THIRD-PERSON RESEARCH IMPACT: 'FOR THEM'**

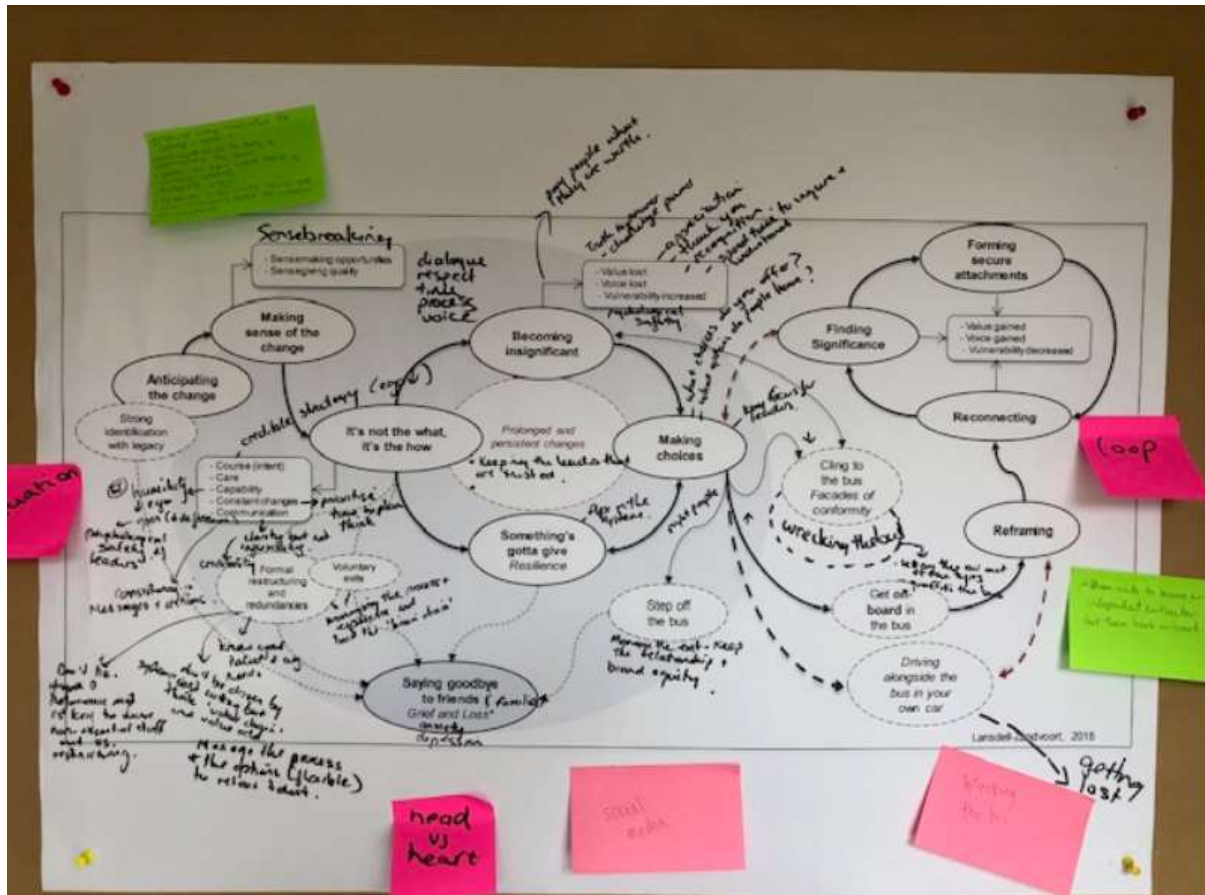
I believe that this research has already helped me in helping others think differently about mergers, and lead differently during integration and restructuring activities.

#### **5.3.1 Actionable knowledge**

Given my own context as client service delivery professional, I have been able to use all of the insights gained from the AR process to facilitate group conversations in an external organisational team environment. By sharing the Conceptual Process Model depicting our merger experience and the nine related themes, I facilitated conversations about the strategic focus, actions, behaviours and attitudes leaders should consider when planning and/or executing a merger.

Figure 35 below, provides an example of the poster we used to brainstorm implications for leaders and organisations, during one such workshop.

Figure 35: Illustration of workshop outcome



(Source: Author, 2018)

Based on my experience of sharing the conceptual process model with others in a workshop setting, I have developed two additional conceptual models, which I propose will assist those responsible for planning and implementing merger integrations.

### 5.3.2 The cyclical merger integration model

The first proposal builds on the conceptual process model, which illustrates the journey employees experienced during the merger, illustrated in Section 4.2, and recommends a three-step cyclical model that will encourage leaders to view a merger integration as a system of three inter-related cycles. Each cycle representing a specific focus and aim, with related actions leaders need to consider.

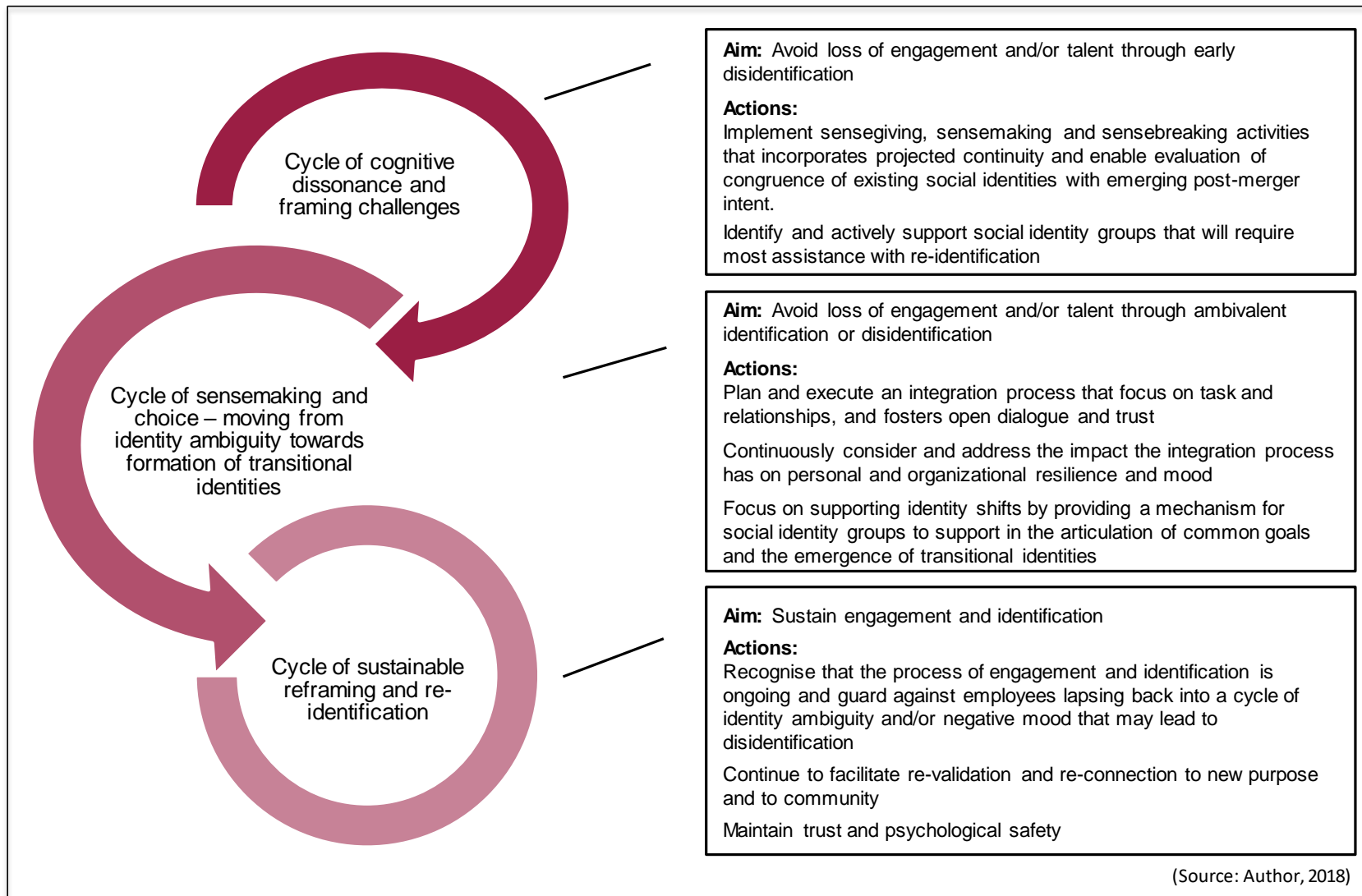
At the outset of the M&A strategy, the main aim of leaders should be to avoid loss of engagement and talent through early disidentification. Leaders should focus their actions on

establishing processes that will diminish cognitive dissonance and identity ambiguity. They can achieve this by focussing in particular on the quality of sensemaking and sensebreaking activities that incorporates projected continuity, and on the availability of sufficient sensemaking opportunities. Finally, they should identify and support social identity groups that will require most assistance with re-identification.

As the merger integration becomes a reality, leaders should shift their focus more towards moving employees from identity ambiguity towards the formation of transitional identities. The way in which the organisation executes the merger integration becomes key. Leaders should focus on providing continued sensemaking opportunities, whilst also designing a process that focus on both task and relationships. In particular, creating a culture based on trust, respect, care, dialogue and accountability is key, as leaders become the embodiment of the new post-merger identity that will determine the choices employees make around engagement and identification. This phase can take many years, and leaders must be careful to ensure a sustainable change agenda that realises merger synergies whilst retaining organisational resilience.

Finally, leaders should also acknowledge those employees who are ready to re-identify and engage with the post-merger context, and take care not to over-burden them with undue responsibility. Instead, leaders should focus on providing these members with sufficient support and encouragement. In this way, leaders should focus on ensuring that employees are able to find significance in the post-merger context, that they feel empowered, valued and safe by continuing to focus on creating high-quality inter-personal relationships, role modelling appreciation and accountability. Figure 36 below illustrates the three-cycle merger integration model.

Figure 36: The cyclical merger integration model



### 5.3.3 Four-level leadership framework for mergers

The second actionable knowledge proposal relates to a four-level leadership framework, or checklist, to support a merger integration process. I present this framework as a table with four columns: the first column presenting the nine themes stemming from this research and the remaining three columns represent three specific areas of leadership focus, i.e. public, inter-personal and personal. These three levels of focus were informed specifically by the Socio-economic Model (SEM) method of data analysis I adopted early on in my research process, and builds explicitly on the newer leadership theory that also propose three levels of leadership practice, i.e. public, private and personal (Schouller, 2011). In my earlier attempts at sensemaking, I presented the latter three columns as a three-level leadership model (See Appendix 7), however, in order to more accurately capture the depth of the findings associated with each of the emergent themes, I opted to replace my earlier model with the four-column framework set out below.

The four-level leadership framework urges leaders to consider the personal attitudes, inter-personal behaviours and public actions most likely to address each of the nine themes related to their employees' experience of a merger integration. I argue that the success of merger integration extends beyond organisational activities, or public actions, but that it includes in equal measures adopting the appropriate attitude and inter-personal behaviours as highlighted by this study. The literature supports these attributes, behaviours and actions, as does the data exploring our merger experience. As such, this framework presents a link between theory and practice that addresses the challenges associated with merger integrations.

The specific actions included in this four-level leadership framework constitutes the key insights and recommendations taken directly from the findings and analysis chapter of this report. In presenting my findings and analysis as a summarised framework, which I labelled as 'A four-level merger integration leadership framework', illustrated in Table 6 below, I provide leaders seeking to implement a merger integration process that results in engagement and identification, with clear guidance.

Table 6: A Four-level leadership framework for mergers

FOUR LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP FOCUS			
Focus	Personal attitudes	Inter-personal behaviours	Public actions
<p><b>1. The anticipation stage of the merger shapes the identification experience – particularly in highly identified employees</b></p>	<p>Respect people’s past, this is the basis of their current self-construct</p> <p>Accept that rumours are sufficient to start the sensemaking process</p>	<p>Seek to learn what legacy members valued as central and distinct to their legacy identity at the outset of the merger</p> <p>Be open to explore common ground around a future vision</p>	<p>Develop a well-thought through and well-crafted internal communication strategy aimed specifically at ensuring valued employees, in particular highly-identified employees, are reassured of a projected continuity in the core values most important to their pre-merger context</p>
<p><b>2. The process of making sense:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Sensegiving quality</li> <li>ii) Sensebreaking opportunities</li> <li>iii) Sensemaking opportunities</li> <li>iv) Achieving a balance between sensegiving and sensemaking – towards a meaningful dialogue</li> </ul>	<p>Appreciate importance of creating a shared vision, that also respects legacy identities and offer a sense of projected continuity</p> <p>Appreciate the importance of sensemaking opportunities, and embrace open and transparent dialogue</p> <p>Appreciate cognitive diversity and challenge of assumptions</p>	<p>Develop excellent narrative skills to inform, influence and inspire others</p> <p>Develop excellent inquiry skills</p> <p>Focus on creating psychologically safe inter-personal connections built on trust</p> <p>Don’t make promises you cannot keep</p> <p>Provide ‘emotional sustenance’ i.e. help others regulate their emotions: provide a process that enables employees to process emotions</p>	<p>Create and enact historical continuity very early in the merger process: clarify what aspects of the legacy identity will remain valued, and ensure this is role-modelled and supported in the integration process</p> <p>Plan and implement sensebreaking initiatives, i.e. provide clarity about legacy elements that will not be valued in future</p> <p>Manage the formative context that is being created for sensegiving and sensemaking and become aware of your role in it</p> <p>Challenge rules that negatively impact sensemaking and sensegiving</p> <p>Plan and implement opportunities for strategic dialogue that transcends top-down sensegiving; embraces a language that resonates with the organisational members; and establishes a true sense of collaboration</p> <p>Empower employees to feel that they are able to co-create the strategic intent, by actively encourage ongoing generative dialogues that allow for robust discussions</p>

Focus	Personal attitudes	Inter-personal behaviours	Public actions
<p><b>3. It's not the what, it's the how:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Clarity and/or credibility of strategic intent lacking</li> <li>ii) Care for people lacking</li> <li>iii) Capability of leading the integration changes lacking</li> <li>iv) Constant changes causing lack of resilience and identification</li> </ul>	<p>View employees from both organisations as significant, i.e. with valuable contributions to make towards the success of the organisation's strategy</p> <p>Embrace the assumption that management of the merger stems more from emergence and co-created shaping processes than from a position of control</p> <p>Accept that relationships matter</p> <p>Appreciate the importance of creating psychological safety, and strong psychological contracts with others</p> <p>Accept the need to focus on both task and people</p> <p>Seek to develop a strategic and reflective mindset, focussed more on pro-active integration responses</p>	<p>Establish trust: focus on establishing credibility, reliability, connection, visibility, believability</p> <p>Demonstrate care and compassion</p> <p>Understand and appreciate the impact of the merger on individuals</p> <p>Develop good inquiry and advocacy skills</p> <p>Be reflective, agile and able to learn from mistakes</p>	<p>Create a process for strategic dialogue that can embrace and harness plurality to the benefit of the whole. The latter, would require leaders to be aware of their own bias, and to be open to challenge their assumptions and plans, in the interest of sustainable success.</p> <p>Create and sustain a sense of community</p> <p>Implement robust and transparent group-decision making processes</p> <p>Think and consult before implementing change</p> <p>Avoid change fatigue</p> <p>Role model best practice and address poor behaviour in leadership</p> <p>Monitor the impact changes have on systems, processes and people by seeking feedback and being willing to adapt plans to ensure the integrity of the entire system.</p> <p>Develop/embrace/encourage organisational development skills within the organisation</p>

Focus	Personal attitudes	Inter-personal behaviours	Public actions
<b>4. Saying goodbye to friends and the familiar</b>	<p>Accept that the way we act have a direct impact on the way others feel</p> <p>Accept that people need to process emotions in a safe environment</p> <p>Respect the grief, loss, fear and anxiety that accompanies redundancies and restructures</p> <p>Accept that negative emotions have negative consequences on performance and people</p>	<p>Practice empathy and compassion</p> <p>Treat people with respect at all times</p>	<p>Create a process to mark endings respectfully</p> <p>Pro-actively provide support to those who may need it</p>
<b>5. Becoming insignificant</b>  i) Value lost/decreased ii) Voice lost/decreased iii) Vulnerability increased	<p>Appreciate that people need validation, appreciation and recognition, even if they need to leave the organisation</p> <p>Question own assumptions about 'who is valued?'</p> <p>Appreciate that power brings responsibility, and become mindful of own practices that diminish the power and the voice of those you lead</p> <p>Accept that lack of felt security will diminish employee's engagement and identification</p>	<p>Make an effort to address the concerns/fears of employees who may feel that their significance in the post-merger context is diminishing</p> <p>Surface concerns, complaints, challenges and negative feedback pro-actively, in order to explore the root cause of the concerns and heightened emotions</p> <p>Give courage and voice to those most likely to be silenced by the merger</p>	<p>Foster a culture of appreciation and respect</p> <p>Create a culture of 'speak-up' not 'shut-up' to prevent organisational silence: Create a safe space for dialogue</p> <p>Be committed to act on feedback that have a negative impact on morale and engagement, and see this as a key to fostering identification with the post-merger organisation.</p>



Focus	Personal attitudes	Inter-personal behaviours	Public actions
<p><b>6. Something's gotta give – the need for resilience</b></p>	<p>Appreciate that mergers induce intensely negative emotions</p> <p>Respect that physical, mental and psychological resilience matters</p> <p>Accept that it is not OK to tolerate unhealthy work-life balance practices</p>	<p>Check-in with people to find out how they are doing and if they are coping</p> <p>Proactively act on feedback that people are not coping</p>	<p>In consultation, consider the impact changes will have on work-load and people and plan accordingly</p> <p>Anticipate and mitigate against stress on teams before it has a negative impact of people and performance</p> <p>Take a holistic view of the impact of the merger on processes; systems; employees; and job-roles, and build in some flex in the system: Avoid overly lean teams</p>
<p><b>7. Making choices:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Clinging to the bus</li> <li>ii) Trashing the bus</li> <li>iii) Get on-board, in the bus</li> <li>iv) Run over by the bus</li> <li>v) Driving alongside the bus</li> <li>vi) Stepping off the bus</li> </ul>	<p>Be aware that employees will be making choices regarding their levels of engagement and commitment</p> <p>Recognise that without followers you cannot have leaders</p> <p>Accept that all actions have consequences – and your actions inform your reputation</p> <p>Accept that leadership is relational</p> <p>Accept that every encounter matters</p> <p>Be aware of where you are in your own journey and manage your own engagement and identification</p>	<p>Get to know your employees to understand the choices available to them, and actively seek to steer the right employees in the right direction</p> <p>Encourage feedback and act on it, to avoid people trashing the bus, or getting off the bus</p> <p>Stay close to those who are driving alongside the bus</p>	<p>Ensure you know who you need on the bus, and actively foster their commitment</p> <p>Treat the exit of all employees well and with respect</p> <p>Take care of your first followers – don't allow them to get run over by the bus</p> <p>Actively guard against ambivalence and aim to foster strong identification</p> <p>Question organisational rules/formative contexts that contribute to the wrong people getting off the bus</p>

Focus	Personal attitudes	Inter-personal behaviours	Public actions
<b>8. Reframing and reconnecting</b>	<p>Appreciate the power of positivity and good mood, and the danger of negativity and low morale</p> <p>Appreciate the need for people to belong to something they respect</p> <p>Appreciate the need for people to feel respected</p>	<p>Seek to engage heads, hearts and souls</p> <p>Pay attention to recognition and enactment of core values</p>	<p>Tap into social groups and communities to foster a sense of purpose and belonging</p> <p>Seek to influence the reframing through use of language, meaning, symbols and rituals</p> <p>Create a sense of unity by enabling an environment and/or opportunities for collaboration and cross-collaboration</p> <p>Foster a sense of purpose and enjoyment in the work people do</p>
<b>9. Oscillating between engagement and disengagement</b>	<p>Be patient and allow individuals to internal change at their own pace</p> <p>Notice the mood and energy of yourself and others</p>	<p>Persist in the focus to foster engagement whilst also encouraging performance</p> <p>Don't get complacent – check assumptions about engagement and commitment</p>	<p>Sustain behaviours that foster identification and engagement</p> <p>Address triggers for disidentification without delay</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Source: Author, 2018)</i></p>

### 5.3.4 Academic contribution

#### *How my work contributes to the body of knowledge*

This research contributes to the understanding of the post-merger integration context by exploring the experience of employees living through the merger integration process. It sheds light on the longitudinal and dynamic process of identity formation post-merger and explores the relationship between the stages of the merger integration and employees' sense of belonging and/or identification with the emerging post-merger entity.

Organisational researchers have predominantly explored the cognitive component of OI, whilst the evaluative and affective components received only limited attention (Hassan, 2012). Similarly, M&A scholars predominantly focused on the 'hard elements' of M&A success and failure, often resorting to quantitative measures to inform their research. More noticeable however is the focus of the researchers on understanding the M&A process from the viewpoint of the senior leadership team, with seemingly limited effort to broaden their lens to incorporate the view and/or experience of the employees affected by the mergers. This research therefore, fills this gap by offering a qualitative phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of employees affected by a merger integration over a period of 3.5 years that in turn contributes to clear recommendations for senior leaders responsible for planning and executing merger integrations.

In doing so, this study makes the following academic contributions:

1. **A conceptual process model highlighting nine themes related to identification post-merger.** This process model demonstrates that employees experience mergers as a messy and complex process of nine key phases that involve continuous sensemaking, shifts in identification and/or self-categorisation, and decision-making. It debunks the notion that mergers are experienced as a linear process, and draws attention to the fact that the merger experience of employees is non-uniform and that leaders should constantly be aware of where individuals are in terms of their identification journey as the merger unfolds.

2. **A cyclical merger integration model.** This model supports the view of others that mergers are a dynamic experience with *ex ante*, *in itinere*, and *ex post* phases (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but builds on it by proposing a cyclical merger integration model that stresses the notion that employees do not necessarily experience a merger as a linear process. Instead, it highlights to leaders the fact that employees experience a merger as three interchangeable cycles of sensemaking linked to their process of identification with the emergence of post-merger sub-identities. Core to their merger experience are deep existential questions asked by employees as they constantly evaluate whether or not they feel themselves aligned with the values, behaviours, characteristics and purpose of the unfolding post-merger reality.
  
3. **A Four-level leadership framework for mergers.** This framework has been developed specifically for leaders planning and implementing mergers. It suggests specific leadership attributes, behaviours and actions needed to support successful and sustainable merger integrations. I underpin this framework of personal, inter-personal and public leadership characteristics by the nine themes of the conceptual process model, and by the dynamic process model positioning mergers as a system of three inter-related cycles, with each cycle representing a specific state of sensemaking and emotions associated with the fluid process of identification. As such, the four-level merger integration model for leaders offers the basis for a rich self-assessment, and/or organisational leadership assessment to support merger integrations, and I will be continuing the development of this theory into an applied assessment tool.

#### *How my work fits and brings value to existing research*

This research sheds light on four under-researched areas within M&A literature, i.e. the role of power differences, speed and time frame(s) of integration, sensemaking/sensegiving processes, and trust (Stahl, et al., 2013). In working collaboratively with employees over a 3.5 year period, which started shortly after the announcement of the merger, this research successfully responds to the call for longitudinal and non-linear dynamic epistemological research designs within the OI and M&A literature (Gioia et al., 2013; 2000; Stahl et al., 2013; Goodman et al., 2001). The nine themes explored within this report contribute to the

literature exploring antecedents for OI and engagement, as well as confirming a number of claims posited within the sensemaking literature, for example, the role of language and meanings in shaping OI. The findings support the expanded model of identification, including disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004), by evidencing how employees within this merger context defined themselves in all of these ways.

My research supports the notion that organisations contain multiple identities (De Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015; Pratt and Corley, 2007) and that this is not necessarily a bad thing or an issue to resolve. Instead, I argue that in post-merger environments in particular, the existence and propagation of multiple social identities with which employees can identify contribute to greater degrees of identification and engagement post-merger.

This study contributes to the academic debate on insider action research by offering an example of a successful IAR process conducted by an employee from within a peripheral non-traditional leadership position. It provides a rich description of the journey of a 'tempered radical' (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) by illustrating my own struggle to succeed in an incongruous post-merger organisational culture by finding ways to live by my (our) values and identity(ies) through a collaborative research approach that gently pushed back against the way the merger was being executed. Thus, this research also highlights the importance of political entrepreneurship (Björkman and Sundgren, 2005) in establishing an effective collaborative research approach to bring about changes to the way leaders execute, and employees experience a merger integration process.

#### *Overall reflection*

This research makes a rich academic contribution, not only by building on existing research and by addressing a gap in the literature, but also through the articulation of the three conceptual models discussed above. In summary, I propose that in a post-merger environment employees are constantly asking themselves three main questions, and that these questions are not time-bound or time-specific, but that they continue to have relevance long after the merger may be deemed 'complete' by leaders. The questions employees ask are: '*Is this a place I want to belong to?*'; '*Is this a place I can survive in?*'; and; '*Is this a place I can thrive in?*', and merger integration efforts that enable employees to answer

positively to all three these questions are the ones that will succeed in releasing the intended merger synergies.

## **5.4 IN SUMMARY**

This IAR process embodied a process of shared inquiry and reflection, which enabled a questioning of our merger experience that extended beyond the boundaries of the initial co-operative inquiry groups. It challenged personal, inter-personal and organisational assumptions concerning our journey of identifying with our post-merger reality, and provided a platform for reflection. It also gave voice to those who shared in the experience, and brought about co-created changes.

I believe that the research process, as well as the insights, conclusions and outcomes generated by the study made valid contributions to both second- and third-person research. Chapter Six expands on the first-person research contribution in more depth, as I reflect on my journey as action-researcher.

# **CHAPTER SIX**



## 6 MY JOURNEY AS A SCHOLARLY-PRACTITIONER

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### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on my own growth and development as a scholar-practitioner throughout my DBA journey, providing an overview of my learning and development, with a particular focus on linking my learning background to this particular AR process. Although I have already discussed the actionable knowledge and implications for the organisation and its members in the preceding chapter, in this chapter I reflect on the first person research, i.e. what this AR process meant for my personal learning and change.

### 6.2 MY JOURNEY TOWARDS AN IAR APPROACH

The literature defines AR as ‘Inquiry from the inside’ and describes it as research that is *“characterised by the experiential involvement of the researcher, the absence of priori analytical categories, and an intent to understand the particular situation”* (Evered and Louis, 1981, p. 385). In particular, authors broadly position AR as an extremely useful modality for exploring organisational phenomena and for generating insights and conclusions that directly benefit organisations. Despite this, there have been remarkably few AR studies exploring M&A activities, notwithstanding the question concerning the practical usefulness of traditional scholarly M&A research in helping managers understand how to manage merger integrations (Canterino, Shani, Coghlan, and Brunelli, 2016). Two such AR studies inspired my planning of study. The first, a practical AR-based case study approach, challenged me to position myself in a steering and/or moderation role throughout the merger integration phase (Kernstock and Brexendorf, 2012).

In this way, I viewed all group meetings and events as a dual opportunity for collecting data and for influencing the merger integration experience, and my DBA thesis remit gave me the perfect opening to position myself openly in these meeting in my dual role as scholarly-practitioner. My colleagues and the organisation were aware of my dual role, which made it easier to assume the moderation role where applicable. Practically, this meant I was able to share insights gained from the data analysis phase concerning the experience and effect of



the merger organisation on individuals and teams and to steer and/or sense-check the conversations in the room. This affected the quality of the discussion, opened up options for consideration, and in so doing, influenced the conclusions and decision-making in those settings in a very natural manner.

The second study introduced me to the concept of Collaborative Management Research (CMR) as a modality of AR (Canterino et al., 2016), and challenged me to find ways to frame this AR process as an Organisational Development (OD) process, by closing the gap between theory and practice through a process of collaboration. This challenge is something that I reflect on throughout this report as I discuss my own journey as action-researcher. Given that my role as employee-researcher meant that I too was a recipient of the post-merger integration process, with no mandate to steer or moderate the merger integration, it made sense to position this study as a means to give voice to the shared experience of employees like me. In this way, my research approach can be understood as engaging in 'appreciative' and 'dialogic OD', seeing that the intention is also on "*surfacing, legitimising and learning from multiple perspectives and generating new images and narratives on which people can act*" (Canterino et al., p.160). Furthermore, I feel that the dialogical view of AR (Sanberg, 1985) most closely represent my research relationship with my colleagues, and supports the social constructivism philosophy underpinning my approach.

Thus, my IAR process aspired to establish an emergent collaborative inquiry practice aimed at bringing about actionable knowledge to enhance OI, and subsequent engagement, within the post-merger context. In particular, in selecting to use co-operative inquiry groups in the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, I attempted to create a safe space for dialogue and sensemaking in order to bring "*people together around shared topical concerns, problems and issues ... in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do*" (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100). In addition, the aim of the co-operative inquiry dialogues were to "*promote a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change*" (Grundy, 1987, p. 154). Thus, supporting the notion of critical sense making (CSM) as discussed in Section 2.6.2 (Thurlow and Mills, 2010), and AR as a process of collaboration conducted *with* members from the organisation, rather than *on* or *for* them (Coghlan and Shani, 2014; Shani and Pasmore, 1985).

### 6.3 MY PROCESS FOR EMBEDDING REFLEXIVITY INTO THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Action-researchers need to engage in a process of reflexivity in order to ensure legitimacy of insider research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Thus, by implication researchers need to maintain a high degree of self-awareness, as well as a method that ensures reflexivity, in order to integrate their role of researcher and practitioner throughout the research phase (Eden and Huxam, 1996). This becomes especially relevant when the researcher has personally experienced the topic under investigation that may help and/or hinder them in their investigation (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Haynes, 2006; Woodthorpe, 2009). Given that I shared the turmoil of the changes the merger wrought on us as an organisation, it meant that my own relationship with, and emotional reactions to the ongoing research process required several of the five critical variants of reflective practice described in the literature (Finlay, 2003), i.e. introspection; intersubjective reflection; mutual collaboration; social critique, and; ironic deconstruction. To some extent the study shifted between all five of these practices, as some of the examples from my data shared below, will illustrate.

The process of critical self-reflection, or introspection, pervaded throughout the entire process. I experienced it as most pronounced during the data collection phase, in terms of memo writing, and during the writing-up phase. Intersubjective reflection featured most prominently during the data collection and analysis phases, when I focused on negotiating my own meaning making of the nature of the situated context shared with me. I engaged in cycles of mutual collaboration in the purposeful design of the co-operative inquiry group meetings, as well as the subsequent sharing and discussing of emerging research themes, all aimed at bringing multiple perspectives to a shared meaning-making dialogue. Despite not being the focus of the research, the co-operative inquiry groups did to some extent provide a rich foundation for social critique, as together we reviewed and critiqued the socio-political context we found ourselves situated in during the integration period. Finally, we also engaged collectively in deconstructing our shared stories and reflections concerning our sense of belonging to, or identifying with, both our legacy and our post-merger organisational identity, thus enacting a mild form of ironic deconstruction.

Since theory, process, data and reflexive dialogue have all been active and fluid in the generation of knowledge of this research study, my authorial voice spins a critical reflexive web throughout this report.

In summary, this IAR process is rooted in a social constructivist interpretative framework, which, as discussed earlier, influenced epistemological choices underpinning this study. By emphasising the subjective construction of OI with a social context, I acknowledge my own role in actively contributing to the inter-subjectively shared meaning making process enacted by this research process, and now turn my attention to describing the enactment of the research process.

## **6.4 MY EXPERIENCE OF THE PROJECT DEFINITION PHASE**

I experienced cognitive dissonance, or 'breakdown in diagnosis' (Van den Ven, 2007) between our espoused views on change, and our lived enactment of internal changes, which informed my initial framing process. For me, this dissonance was particularly pertinent because I practice within a professional services context where we largely focus on helping others enact organisational change in a way that fosters trust, relational awareness, constructive dialogue, cognitive diversity and inclusion to promote effective decision-making and engagement. Yet, within our own post-merger context, very little of this was evidenced at the time.

Upon reflection, beyond seeking permission to initiate this IAR, I shied away from any explicit attempt to create a role for myself as internal OD consultant or influencer throughout most of this study. In fact, for almost the first year, I deliberately kept myself, and my research, 'below the radar'. My reasons at the time were complex. However, I can distil it down to: a) a lack of self-confidence and self-belief in my ability to assume a credible OD role within our professional services context, and; b) fear for my job-security. My lack of trust that the emerging merger-wide leadership would support an IAR process that sought to encourage openly and honest exploration of the shared merged experience with employees, compounded my fear.

Looking back, my reasoning was highly subjective, and influenced early on by the legitimisation/framing conversations with the incumbent CEO. When asked to sign the 'Employer Information and Consent Form' (Appendix 6) the CEO instructed me to remove the following statement from the participants' consent form, "*One of the problems we face is*

*dealing with low morale and identity dissonance (or identity confusion) in the rapidly changing post-merger work environment*". He informed me that it may create a negative impression of the merger, and that I should seek to protect the reputation of the organisation.

This struck me as particularly significant and signalled a need to tread carefully in the inquiry, as I was aware of my own, and others' low morale and negative emotions. Also, I was surprised by the apparent denial of this claim, given that the 2015 engagement survey which was conducted shortly before this conversation revealed significant issues around a sense of belonging and employee satisfaction in the post-merger environment, as illustrated earlier in Chapter Four. Hence, it was common knowledge that employees were not overly positive, and I was surprised that the CEO was not open to acknowledging the emotions and mood in the current context. I rationalised that he was trying to suppress the identity conflicts that existed between Group A and Group B members, but felt that the merger had in fact brought different identity conflicts to bear that needed exploration, interpreted internally as 'cautious exploration'.

Thus, despite my conviction that a dialogic OD-type approach was needed, I refrained from pushing this agenda, instead adopting a more 'theoretical' AR inquiry approach that would still enable us to collaboratively explore the somewhat 'messy' and 'complex' merger experience, whilst positioning it in a way that the management may view as more 'tolerable' and 'credible'.

In my experience, the problem definition and framing stage experience of this research echoed the sentiment of Abbott (2004, p. 83) who states:

*'We often don't see ahead of time exactly what the problem is; much less do we have an idea of the solution. We often come at an issue with only a gut feeling that there is something interesting about it. We often don't know even what an answer ought to look like. Indeed, figuring out what the puzzle really is, and what the answer ought to look like often happen in parallel with finding the answer itself.'*

Upon reflection, my experience of situating, grounding, and diagnosing (Van den Ven, 2007) the initial research problem I so glibly defined early on in my research supervision discussions as '*How is organisational identity formed post-merger?*' fundamentally shaped my approach throughout the research process (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007). Framing conversations with my supervisor and organisation helped me to articulate and shape a

research question that would address our merger experience. The merger also provided me with opportunities for both effective action and learning and thus, contributed to the development of insightful theory of how employees really experience a merger integration. In this way, the following research question came into being at the start of the project definition stage:

*'What lessons can we learn from our merger integration experience to help legacy members identify and engage with the new post-merger identity?'*

This question rests on the understanding of the process and experience of OI formation post-merger, as experienced by a group of employees in a professional services organisation my interpretation. Therefore, I was keen to capture the essence of this research in a report title that would resonate with anyone who has lived through a merger, which resulted in the report title of *'How do we know who we are as the dust settles?'* In this way, I feel that both the report title and the research question stemmed from my own existential anxiety, and my need for support and reassurance from the organisation, which was heightened at the onset of the merger process.

## **6.5 MY EXPERIENCE OF THE PROJECT EXECUTION PHASE**

As discussed in Section 3.4.5. I paid careful attention to how I positioned myself within this 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, and within the co-operative inquiry meetings in particular. During the meetings I was aware of balancing the roles of being a phenomenological insider-researcher, in positioning myself as both part of the group by actively participating in the conversation and sharing my own emotions and thoughts alongside the others, whilst also being aware of my role as researcher, outside of the group of practitioners. The latter role featured more predominantly during the periods of data analysis, which occurred in between the various co-operative group meetings, and again, I noticed how much I enjoyed the scholarly aspect of this study.

I noticed also how I was becoming more reflective about my actions and my thoughts, and how I attempted at personal meaning making in order to gain insights. I captured a memo following the third co-operative group meeting for the knowledge workers, which coincided

with an enjoyable conversation about my own role with our CEO, to illustrate my own journey.

*"When I reflect on how I felt about belonging to the new regime and whether or not I identified with the new [merging partner] business, I realise that I do not really care about the bigger picture, as long as I can do meaningful work (to me), and as long as I feel valued and worthy. Thinking of what [knowledge worker] said in our meeting about a number of senior players in the who business are playing games, i.e. protecting their turf and their own domains, part of me can understand this, given my own willingness to 'conform' when I was given reassurance that I could do something I enjoy and something I will be valued for (and not having to fear being fired for not meeting the requirements of the balance scorecard). I wonder if that makes me fickle or self-serving?" (Extract from reflective note by Author, 09/06/2017).*

Entering into the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle, I was acutely aware of my own lack of AR and OD experience, and for me it took a long time to really appreciate the multiple ways in which AR can be enacted within my own contextual setting. In many respects my own sense of self evolved in the last year of this study, where I noted how the AR process itself began to change the conversations within the organisation, and how this shaped my engagement with the research process. The enactment of the multiple conversations, meetings and dialogues discussing our merger experience, and our response to the merger experience, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle itself began to influence language, perception, attitudes and actions within the organisation. This fuelled my interest and my confidence, and a growing sense of security and self-belief in my ability as insider-researcher to pursue opportunities to influence the merger integration process. This signalled a shift in self-categorisation and personal identification towards becoming an action-researcher and mirroring on a personal level the process of identification I was exploring at an organisational level.

## **6.6 MY EXPERIENCE OF THE WRITE-UP PHASE**

I am not a stranger to academic writing; in fact, I have successfully completed two Masters degree programmes and gained a professional Doctorate in Chiropractic. I knew that AR was different to my more traditional and positivist understanding and experience, and I was adamant that I wanted to achieve rigour, relevance, validity and excellence in this new form of research. Yet, despite having produced various Critical Action Learning reports during the course of the DBA taught modules, I found it incredibly hard to produce the layout you see before you.

Despite reading numerous articles explaining the nature of AR and the writing-up of AR research, or maybe because of the volume of literature considered, I was utterly at sea in how to approach this task. This resulted in months of paralysis, where I literally could not get going.

Re-reading my initial drafts are painful. I now realise how much of my earlier attempts at writing was in fact part of my own emotional and cognitive processing as I struggled to embrace a shift to AR. For example, one of my earlier Introduction chapter versions exceeded 12,000 words, much of it reflecting my own anxiety and insecurity in my scholarly-practitioner journey.

## **6.7 MY KEY REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING AND CHANGE AS SCHOLARLY-PRACTITIONER**

Reflecting on the completed IAR project before you, I would argue that my approach incorporated all of the seven fundamental dimensions/principles associated with AR, as set forth in the literature (Evered and Louis, 1980), as illustrated below. As an employee-researcher, I was:

- i. fully immersed in the research setting;
- ii. contributing to my research knowledge from my own, and our shared, experience, “... *which is inherently continuous and non-logical, and which may be symbolically representable*” (pp. 389);
- iii. an active participant (and also actor) in the research setting;
- iv. aware that the factors that influenced/shaped this research were emergent, and identified through an iterative process of interpretation which consisted of a variety of interactive experiences including a range of participants from within the system;
- v. able to guide the inquiry in a way to establish situational relevance;
- vi. able to acquire knowledge that was specific, idiographic and practically relevant to the research setting;
- vii. ensuring data and meaning were interpretive and contextually embedded, and the process of meaning-making was collaborative, and informed by the context.

I also realise how much I have learnt about my practice and myself. The section below captures some of the key insights gained, and how this shaped me during on this journey.

### 6.7.1 My evolution of self: Traversing role-duality

One of my key insights about my own developmental journey relates to the practice-mediated stream of the framing stage. I was struck by how difficult it was to 'use the inside' (Björkman and Sundgren, 2005). Not in the sense of enthusing colleagues inside the organisation to engage with a process of exploring our merger experience, but I resisted 'to put myself out there' as an OD practitioner, limiting my effectiveness in negotiating and securing a steering and/or moderation role (Kernstock and Brexendorf, 2012) that would see me take a more active/influential role in shaping the merger.

Upon reflection, I feel that greatest limitation on my ability to make a greater impact on the organisation was my own lack of confidence and limiting self-perceptions concerning my ability to excel in an OD role. For some very personal reasons, the onset of the merger coincided with a period of deep and crippling personal and professional self-doubt, which led to tremendous insecurity on my part. Added to this was the onset of the merger, which left me feeling fearful of my future role within the evolving organisation. I realise now that I found my solace and my self-esteem in my ability to engage with the theory mediated stream of actions throughout the AR process, especially during the earlier years. In my own way, I spent the first part of this research process building my credibility and confidence in the new context, and seeking to form a basis of influence to help me achieve the practice-centred outcome needed.

Reflecting back over the course of this DBA, I am struck not only by the shift in my confidence and expertise, but also by a shift within my own identity. When I considered this shift in myself in relation to my position within the organisation, I realised that I originally viewed myself as 'marginal' to the organisation because I did not consider myself as someone with influence and/or power. Thus, I viewed the boundaries between the organisation and myself as 'discontinuities', signifying inclusion/exclusion that resulted in my IAR participation being unconsciously framed and enacted as problematic (Wenger, 2008). Upon reflection, this may account for the resistance and downright resentment I experienced at times with having to embrace an IAR approach, as illustrated by an extract from a personal reflection early on in the 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle.



*"Why on earth did I not just opt for a PhD? It would have been so much simpler to conduct a phenomenological research project exploring a merger experience, or such like. I feel really out of my depth! [...] I can't quite put my finger on what is going on with me. I understand the theory of conducting AR but why is it that I cannot just get on with it?" (Extract from reflective note by Author, 18/06/2017)*

However, during the research process, and though the lens of social identity theory, I expanded my view of the organisation from one entity, towards seeing it as a number of community of practice groups. A community of practice is defined by the convergence of competence and experience (Wenger, 2000), and, as such, one joins such a group either by gaining the 'competence' defined in the community, or by expanding the competence of the community as a result of one's experience. I became conscious that given my own competence and experience, I did not view myself firmly affiliated with any of the communities of practice groups. Instead, I felt myself on the periphery of a few spanning across the organisational structure, as I saw 'areas of overlap and connections' (Wenger, 2008, p. 120.) In this way, I began to consider my position as 'peripheral', and no longer marginal, thus, I was able to re-frame and enact my participation as enabling. I recognised myself in the quote below:

*"...certain individuals seem to thrive on being brokers, they love to create connections ... and so would rather stay at the boundaries of many practices than move to the core of any one practice ... brokering knowledge is delicate. It requires enough legitimacy to be listened to and enough distance to bring something really new." (Wenger, 2008., pp. 235-6).*

This was a significant shift in perception and awakened in me a sense of possibility instead of limitation that shifted my mood and my confidence. Thus, as an insider-researcher, I now see myself in an enabling role, expanding and bridging boundaries between existing social groups, as well as creating spaces for dialogue between boundaries and connecting identities within the post-merger context, by working collaboratively with those who are willing.

Significantly, therefore, the research journey saw me experience a shift in my own identity from an employee unable to influence the merger, i.e. a victim of change, towards a person that can shape and influence the merger experience, i.e. an agent of change.

### **6.7.2 My relationship with pre-understanding**

Pre-understanding, i.e. my knowledge, understanding, experience and insights concerning our pre- and post-merger context, brought both advantages and disadvantages to my relationship with this research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Certainly, my pre-understanding of politics, language, meanings, critical events, mood, culture and gossip allowed me to develop deep insight into the context, and to gain access to multiple informal informative situations that contributed to the rich data obtained from direct interaction with the research process. Conversely, experiencing the merger from the position of lower-status merging partner, meant that I too found myself experiencing loss of status, power, influence, voice and security, resulting in my own heightened emotions, and prejudice within the merger context.

I feel that I was able to negotiate the perils of pre-assumptions by consciously engaging with the various processes of establishing critical reflexivity in my own practice as action-researcher, discussed in Section 6.3. However, I realise now that although I may have been able to traverse functional and hierarchical boundaries within our legacy department (i.e. organisation), I never actively sought to gain access to the merging partner organisation. It is true that in some respects, my role evolved to give me access to members from across the merger boundary, but this occurred spontaneously.

Upon reflection, I feel that my pre-understanding of the merger context prevented me from extending the boundaries of this AR project to include the merging partner and its members sufficiently. This may also signal my own inability to develop and display the necessary skills to manage organisational politics.

### **6.7.3 My ability to manage organisational politics**

There can be no doubt that of all the challenges internal-action researcher face, the need to balance organisational politics has been the most difficult element of my own journey. For most of this project's lifespan, I felt that my research may very easily be perceived and/or positioned as 'subversive' (Weinstein, 1999). This is because the project aimed to examine every aspect of the merger experience, both positive and negative. It sought to encourage inquiry and empathy; to foster courage to speak-up; to challenge; and to change attitudes,

behaviours and actions. Furthermore, my peripheral role also meant that I was not seen as a threat, or 'one of them', which meant that this AR process resulted in honest reflection and democratic participation, giving voice to a population of professionals who felt silenced within the merger context, i.e. *"I'll say this to you, but not to them."*

I soon recognised the truth of the notion that what constitutes valid information to inform and/or challenge decisions, is intensely political (Kakabadse, 1984), which led to me favour developing the political entrepreneurial skill of *'back-staging'* over *'performing'* (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992). For example, I realised that I shied away from seeking a public role of being active in the merger process and pursuing a change agenda rationally and logically, because I did not trust that my intent would be trusted, nor my contribution valued. Instead, I focused on developing and honing my skills in influencing, justifying, legitimising and role modelling, in order to intervene unobtrusively in the post-merger political and cultural systems.

#### **6.7.4 My next steps**

At the start of my DBA journey, I was deeply unhappy in my role within the legacy organisation. I felt myself to be limited, constrained and denied the opportunity to use my skills, expertise and experience to benefit both the organisation and myself. I opted to enrol on the University of Liverpool's DBA programme because it offered nine taught modules, which I felt would further deepen my knowledge and understanding of business and research. I also hoped that it would open up new possibilities for personal and career development. I was not wrong.

In the past six years, I have changed roles, assumed new responsibilities, and expanded my client base and area of expertise year-on-year. I survived the merger, where many of my colleagues did not, and I now find myself in a place where I feel valued, appreciated and respected for who I am, and what I bring to the organisation. It feels good. It feels ... too good?

I ask myself whether I am getting too comfortable? Whether I may need a bigger, or a different challenge? I worry about becoming 'institutionalised', or maybe I worry about not

making the most of what the world, and my time left in it, has to offer? Whatever it is I worry about, the reality is that I am open to change. I am open new challenges. I am not sure whether this will be within my current organisation or somewhere new. I am excited to find out.

However, regardless of where I find myself in the future, I do know that I will continue on my journey as scholarly-practitioner. My immediate focus will be on developing the scholarly side of my practice further, by foraying into the world of academia, i.e. research publication, and/or conference participation/presentation. This is something I have been hoping to do for a long time, but for which I have not had the time. Now that my DBA journey is coming towards an end, I hope to use the time, the experience, as well as the rich data I have accumulated over the past years, to publish a paper that will hold the interest of both scholars and practitioners alike. In this way, I hope to close the gap between theory and practice.

This will be a completely new learning curve for me. I am even more excited to give it a go.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

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### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This AR project took place during the first four years of a merger integration between our legacy client services organisation, and our new, more dominant and higher status, global merging partner. It was born out of an emerging sense of individual and collective existential angst concerning the extent to which the current group identities will survive, most likely precipitated by increased levels of anxiety and uncertainty experienced across the different social groups within the legacy organisation. This chapter provides a short overview of the research process, findings, impact and implications for actionable knowledge. It also addresses the validity and limitations of the study, before offering final closing remarks and conclusions.

### 7.2 RESEARCH PROCESS OVERVIEW

The overarching research question was to explore how the merger integration experience affected the way members of a legacy organisation identify and engage with the new post-merger organisation, and to find ways in which to influence and shape the integration process implementation. I positioned the project as a collaborative process of sensemaking focused on exploring and positively influencing the impact of the integration process on employees' sense of self and sense of engagement with the emerging post-merger culture.

I planned the research as three distinct phases, i.e. Project Definition, Project Execution and Project Impact phase, yet in reality the latter two phases overlapped as it unfolded over two AR cycles and the thesis write-up phase. Throughout the research, there was integration between theory-mediated actions and practice-mediated actions, which contributed to the overall richness, insights and impact of the AR process.

The 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach which was conducted through semi-structured interviews and two sets of co-operative inquiry groups which each met three times over an eight month period. It provided a voice to lower status

members within the merger, as well as a safe space to process emotions and concerns, and thus, affected the merger integration subtly and informally from a peripheral position within the organisation.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> AR cycle adopted a dialogic OD approach which constituted using every engagement opportunity as a process for shared action learning and sensemaking. It constituted numerous formal and informal dialogue opportunities with individuals, small groups and as part of large group meetings and events. Throughout this stage, I continued to share, discuss and augment the nine themes, which emerged from the phenomenological and thematic exploration during the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle, and also introduced imagery and metaphors as means of giving voice to individuals' experience of the merger integration.

### **7.3 RESEARCH AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE**

This study successfully addressed the research question, which was to understand and articulate the experience of legacy members during a merger integration process. The research resulted in a conceptual process model, explaining the employee experience in terms of nine themes. Together these represent a cyclical process of emotional and cognitive dissonance, sensemaking, and a shift in OI and engagement, as social references of the post-merger context evolved. The insight gained from this process, together with the interactive and participative approach adopted during the AR cycles, contributed to the informal influencing of the integration process, which resulted in a more positive experience for employees, and hopefully an even more positive and sustainable merger outcome.

The findings from the interpretative phenomenological and thematic template analysis during the 1<sup>st</sup> AR cycle highlighted that mergers are experienced in three relatively distinct cycles, each of which presents employees with specific cognitive and emotional challenges to overcome, in order to make sense of their evolving post-merger context. Therefore, implying also that management needed to consider a merger approach that will facilitate the smooth transition from one stage to the next, in order to foster and sustain effective reframing of individual and collective identity and inter-organisational connections.

Based on this, I have developed a leadership framework for merger integrations, which includes four levels of focus for leaders, based on the rich description of the nine themes stemming from this research. Taking employees experience of the merger into account, this framework urges leaders to consider nine elements or focus areas, and for each to adopt specific leadership actions. These recommended leadership actions in turn, build on Schouller's (2013) three levels of leadership focus, i.e. personal attributes, inter-personal behaviours, and public actions.

It is my experience that this framework work well, both in terms of fostering a dialogue within organisations planning/experiencing a merger, and as a 'check-list' of activities for leaders to consider. My intention is to develop a virtual merger integration simulation that will develop this framework into an experiential simulation, which will assist leaders to develop visceral and cognitive experiential awareness of the key insights and recommendations contained with the framework itself.

#### **7.4 REFLECTIONS ON THE ACTION LEARNING AND THE IAR PROCESS**

I have found that AR as a methodology can be very impactful and beneficial to an organisation needing to surface and address a complex systems issue. Not only does the collaborative approach between researcher and employees provide a platform and process for co-creation of knowledge and action, it also enables the research to capitalise on the pre-understanding the insider-researcher brings to the process.

This study has demonstrated that it is possible for an internal action researcher to stimulate personal and organisational learning, and also impact the organisational issue from a peripheral position, thus, supporting the notion that internal-researchers can be found anywhere in the hierarchy. However, it is my belief that an IAR project may be even more beneficial to the organisation when it enjoys the support and legitimisation of the senior management up-front, and throughout the process. In this way, insider action researchers may be less constrained by their role duality as scholarly-practitioners, and the research process may generate many more tangible outcomes.



Nonetheless, it is clear that IAR requires the action researcher to navigate organisational politics, and it is my belief that regardless of the issue, or the level of support, successfully managing both performing and back-staging activities associated with political entrepreneurship remains of the utmost importance in IAR.

## 7.5 REFLECTIONS ON VALIDITY OF THE STUDY

I would like to offer two validity frameworks for assessing the validity of this AR study. The first include five criteria: a) significance and social relevance of the types of questions inquired into; b) collaboration and ethical consideration for others; c) practical usefulness of outcomes; d) emergent nature of 'truths', and; e) the variety of voices and ways of knowing (Reason, 2006, p.190). The second measure of validity I would like to propose for this inquiry is 'crystallization' which proposes that there are many perspectives from which we see 'things', i.e. *"what we see in a crystal depends on where we are looking from"* (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, p. 963). This framework suggests validity criteria that include: a) delivering a substantive contribution to the understanding of social life; b) having aesthetic merit, implying text that is not boring; c) demonstrating critical reflexivity by the author, and; d) and offering impact that affects the reader on an emotional and cognitive level (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005., p. 964).

On both scores, understanding how the integration process affects employees' ability to make sense of shifts in their identification and engagement are of tremendous social relevance. Thus, this study contributed to the understanding of our shared experience. In addition, I believe this study demonstrated ethical collaboration with employees and with the organisation in the co-creation of this research report, and that the report itself offers a rich, textured and reflexive description of our lived experience. I hope that both the narratives and the metaphors reflected in this report will have a visceral and cognitive impact on readers. Most of all I would like to reiterate that it is the actual attributes of the AR process, i.e. the participation, critical reflection and collaboration, rather than the end result, or this report, that constituted a practice of identification and engagement in our post-merger context. This process enabled the creation of a relational and collaborative space that allowed us to change our language, and our labels, and to speak and to feel differently about our past, our present and our future, as we collectively reframed our connection to each other and to the emerging organisation context. Therefore, it is my hope that this research satisfies the validity criteria of what constitutes good AR.

## **7.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

When considering limitations of the study, the questions of rigour undoubtedly emerge. Some may argue that the steps taken to ensure rigour into the data analysis phase were limiting in themselves. For example, using co-operative inquiry groups over interviews. Yet, by adopting co-operative inquiry groups as the basis for data collection as a means to embrace both social constructivist and social identity theories, it created a process of shared sensemaking. To mitigate against subjectivity of the researcher and co-researchers, I attempted to remain “methodological self-consciousness” (Finlay, 2003, p.4) by shifting between reflexive positions; surfacing multiple reflexive voices; and by reflecting constantly moving within the timeframe of the merger and the data.

Furthermore, in my desire to find a robust data analysis methodology, I first explored constructivist grounded theory, which led to a coding process that was too complex and too time-consuming for my context. Thus, I adopted an amalgamation of IPA and template analysis approach, which I allowed the research cycles to continue more quickly, whilst enabling me to retain analytical rigour. In this way, my approach demonstrated pragmatism.

One of the most limiting constraints that affected this research was my own role-duality, and in particular my lack of time. I completed this study, parallel to a very busy schedule, which took me out of the office for almost five months of every year. This meant that the AR cycles lost momentum at times, and I found myself spending more time in the theory-mediated activity stream. However, I believe this may have served to increase the academic rigour of my reflections, and benefited me in my practice.

## **7.7 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AND FOR MY FUTURE?**

Living with this research over such a long period, consumed most of my spare time, and thus, shaped both my personal and professional journey, and my own identity. It also enabled me to use the insights gained from this journey to inform my client interactions, to improve my practice, to benefit the organisation and myself. My career progression has been steadily marked by an increase in autonomy, credibility and advancement, underpinned no doubt by the confidence, knowledge and skills this process developed in me. I find myself on

the precipice of new possibilities, and this time, I feel secure in my sense of self, my worth, and my identity as scholarly-practitioner.

However, this experience has also shown me how much more I have to learn and develop, particularly concerning my own OD skills and practice, not to mention my ability to work power and politics. My personal development plan going forward is to enrol on an Organisational Development and Change Open Programme, to challenge myself further in my own practice, and to publish an account of this research that will inform both academics and practitioners. The latter is a completely new realm of practice for me, and thus, I will be seeking the support of others to help me explore how to build my academic career in this regard.

## 7.8 CONCLUSION

It is difficult to summarise succinctly all the richness, and the depth, contained within this journey, and to capture the essence of the insights gained. Upon reflection, I would conclude that leaders and managers who are seeking to plan and implement successful mergers, would need to transform their own style of leadership to cope with the complexity of the task. They need to accept the notion that a merger represents far more than systems and process integrations, branding and brochures, or even firing and hiring. Mergers succeed when leaders create an environment that captures the hearts, minds and souls of those they are trying to unite towards a common goal, and the responsibility for creating the process, and the space, for this rests firmly with them. They need to look inside themselves and master the ability to engage safely with others in uncovering bilaterally held assumptions and core values, thus, coming to terms with what it the merger really means to 'me', to 'them', and to 'us'.

In summary, employees identify with people, not with brands, and as such, leaders and managers will be wise to remember, *"It is not what the organisation is that counts, but who the organisation is that matters."* (Author, 2018).

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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# CHAPTER NINE

## 9 APPENDICES

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### 9.1 APPENDIX 1: PHASE 1 - PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM



#### Committee on Research Ethics

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#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM: Phase 1 Data Collection

**Title of Research Project:** How do we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process of organisational identity evolution post-merger.

**Researcher:** Ilze Zandvoort

*You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before considering your responses at the end of this document. Feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.*

#### 1. What is the purpose of the study?

This study is being conducted as the final requirement for a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Degree at the University of Liverpool. Accordingly, the research intervention is obliged to work towards understanding and solving an identified, organisationally-based problem. My intention is that this study will enable me to collaborate with [knowledge workers] and [managers/co-ordinators] of [Group AB] and the [Group C] in shaping our post-merger organisational identity(ies) to what we collectively regard as desirable in order to enable us to become a sustainable and competitive entity. At the same time the research will also endeavour to contribute to theory as we collectively reflect on the notion/process of organisational identity evolution post-merger

The study itself is broadly designed to do two things:

1. to look back, i.e. to reflect on how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are', and

2. to follow our post-merger strategic progress over the next six- to eight-months, i.e. a longitudinal study designed to monitor if and how our future sense of identity evolves or shifts.

You have been recruited to take part in the first phase of this research.

**2. Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been selected to take part in the first phase of data collection for this study, which means that you are being asked to agree to participate in a once-off in-depth interview with the researcher. In particular, you have been recruited because you meet the selection criteria for this part of the study, i.e. a former [knowledge worker], or member of the leadership team, who exited the organisation in the 3-month period leading up to this study and who reported a perceived identity dissonance or identity mismatch with the current post-merger organisation (either to me in person or publically in an open format).

**3. Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary and you should feel under no obligation to participate. You are also free to withdraw your participation at any time, without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

**4. What will happen if I take part, and will my participation be kept confidential?**

If you agree to take part, I would like to conduct a 60-90 minute 1:1 in-depth interview with you, where I will be asking you a number of exploratory questions around your experience leading up to and including the early part of the recent strategic alliance/operational merger. I may also like to use images in our conversation, and you may be invited to look at a number of images to refer to in our conversation, if you so wish.

In addition to the initial 1:1 conversation, I may also seek an additional short follow-up conversation (max 30 minutes) with you to clarify a particular point or theme raised during our initial conversation.

However, you are not obliged to participate in either of these conversations, and your participation in the study will always remain fully voluntary. If you do however choose to participate, all I ask of you is to be as open and as honest in your responses as possible. I

envisaged that the data collection phase of the study will take place at Ashridge or on the phone, between July and August 2016.

To help me in my research methodology (i.e. to conduct good research), all conversations will be recorded and the recordings will be transcribed by me to allow me to conduct line-by-line coding. It is important to note that I will use a coding procedure which means that in the transcriptions all participants will be anonymised, which means that you will not be identified by name, title or any other description that will make it possible for your identity to be recognised. The original MP3 files of the recordings will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on my personal external hard drive for a period of five years, after which it will be permanently deleted.

The transcripts of the recordings will be fully anonymised and I will ensure that any reference to specific roles or events which can lead to you being personally identifiable will be altered in order to protect your identity. To further ensure confidentiality of all participants all data will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on a personal external hard drive. The anonymised transcripts and subsequent data analysis files will also be kept for a period of seven years, at which point it will be permanently deleted.

I am conducting the research by myself and will be supported by two Doctoral Supervisors appointed by the University of Liverpool. It is important to note that the supervisors will only have access to anonymised data and thus your identity will not be recognisable at any point following our conversation.

The data will be used to compile the final DBA Thesis for which it has been collected, and it is also my intention to use the data for further publications in the future, which may include journal articles and/or non-journal research led publications.

## **5. Expenses and/or payments**

I do not foresee that you should have to incur any expenses (i.e. travel or refreshments) whilst participating in this study. If we agree to conduct any conversations by phone I will ensure that I bear the cost of the call. No one will receive any payment, gift or reimbursement to participate in this study. Please note your participation will be purely voluntary and your time contributed to this research will not formally be rewarded or recognised by the organisation.

## **6. Are there any risks in taking part?**



I do not foresee that there will be any disadvantages or risks involved in participating in this study. However, it is possible that you may find talking about your experience of the strategic alliance/operational merger upsetting, and therefore I would like to reassure you that you may stop the interview at any time.

**7. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There are no explicit benefits to be obtained by taking part in this study. However, it is my belief that an internal action research project of this nature will result in changes within the organisation, both during and after the research process. It is my hope that the conversations we have will benefit your former organisation as a whole as we move forward and implement our strategic objectives.

**8. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?**

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me directly via email at [ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk) or on my mobile at: 07921 389117 and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at [ethics@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liv.ac.uk). When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

**9. What will happen to the results of the study?**

Results of the research will be made available to you in the form of an executive summary of my DBA Thesis. The aim will be to publish the research in a variety of formats, including scholarly and non-scholarly publications (for example, news articles) with the full approval of Ashridge. In all publications your identity, as well as the identity of the organisation, will be protected, given that all the raw data will be anonymized and individual participants will be assigned a special code – which will not be recorded with your name on any of the research study data and/or publications.

**10. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

You can withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation. Data obtained from you may only be withdrawn from the study prior to anonymization, i.e. you may only request the



destruction of recordings of interview(s) that have not yet been anonymously transcribed. Once your raw data has been anonymised and transcribed, it will not be possible to remove it from the study despite your withdrawal from the study, and a record of our conversation will therefore be included in the findings of the study.

**12. Potential for conflict of interest**

I will be conducting this research study internally within our organization whilst still continuing to deliver in my professional role as [knowledge worker] but I do not foresee any potential conflict of interest, given that I do not have a vested interest in a specific outcome or political agenda. Also, I have not been asked by anyone in the organization to conduct this research with specific objectives, and have selected this theme because of a personal interest stemming from my own experience of the merger.

**13. Who can I contact if I have further questions?**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study you are invited to contact me using the contact details provided at the end of this consent form.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this. In order to consent to participate in the study, please complete the section below before signing at the bottom of this form.*

## Committee on Research Ethics

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### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: Phase 1 Data Collection

**Title of Research Project:** How do we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process of organisational identity evolution post-merger.

**Researcher:** Ilze Zandvoort

Please  
initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 29 May 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of non-anonymised information (i.e. recording of the interview) if I wish. I also understand and agree that once the recording of my interview has been transcribed it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my interview data beyond this point. Thus, after transcription record of my responses will be included in the final analysis and write-up of the study.
4. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for the researcher and supervisors to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the

research, unless I provide explicit permission for this in an additional addendum to this consent form.

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of data would incur the same anonymity and confidentiality considerations covered here.
6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of, and consent to, the use of these recordings for the following purposes: transcription of audio recording to be anonymised and then to be used thematic analysis or coding practices by the researcher.
7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
ILZE ZANDVOORT		
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
ILZE ZANDVOORT		
Researcher	Date	Signature

Student Researcher: Ilze Zandvoort  
 Work Address: [REDACTED]  
 Work Telephone: [REDACTED]  
 Mobile: 0044 (0) 7921 389117  
 Email: [ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

## 9.2 APPENDIX 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE



### Phase 1 - Data Collection: In-depth individual interview guideline

Participant Code:

Date:

Place/Interview Mode:

Start time:

End time:

Informed consent agreed? Yes/No

Permission to record session obtained? Yes/No

Any specific contextual/situational notes related to this session?

Background information to provide to the participant:

I am conducting an internal action research study as the final element of my DBA degree at the University of Liverpool. In essence I will be exploring how the merger between our legacy organisation and merging partner affected current and former employees of both Group AB (the recently restructured merger of Group A and Group B) and Group C, as we are now known, in relation to our collective and individual sense of identity or belonging.

The study is designed to do two things:

- 1) to look back, i.e. to reflect on how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are', and
- 2) to follow our post-merger strategic progress over the next six- to eight-months, i.e. a longitudinal study designed to monitor if and how our future sense of identity evolves or shifts.

This interview with you forms part of the first stage of the data collection phase, and the themes gathered from this interview with you, and other member of the legacy organisation who recently left the organisation, will be used to help shape the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the data collection, which will be conducted via a series of co-operative inquiry groups with current client delivery professionals and manager/co-ordinator professional members within Groups AB and C over the next 6-8 months.

Reiterating informed consent principles:

For the purpose of obtaining a record of your informed consent, I would like to record the next bit of our conversation but you can stop the recording at any time. Is that OK?

***Note to self: If yes – START RECORDING. If no – continue to see if they will agree after the information – and then RECORD A QUICK SUMMARY OF THEIR CONSENT***

I would like to stress again that your participation in this interview is voluntary and that you can opt to withdraw at any time, without fear of any negative consequences to our professional/personal relationship. I

Student Researcher:

Phase 1 Interview Guideline 1

Ilse Zandvoort

18 May 2016

would also like your permission to record our conversation and to have it transcribed either by myself or by a professional firm. In turn, I assure you that all of your responses and data will be anonymised and your identity will be protected at all times. It is important to note and agree that once your responses have been transcribed and anonymised it will form part of the study data and you can then no longer ask for it to be withdrawn from the research.

Do you have any questions?

Do you give your consent to continue with this interview in light of what we have just discussed?

Yes/No

***Note to self: If you have not yet started recording and they respond yes – START RECORDING and capture a short synopsis of their consent.***

The final outcome of the research study will be published as DBA thesis and hopefully also disseminated in the form of academic and practitioner articles. If you like, I would be happy to send you a copy of the executive summary of the thesis and I will also be happy to inform you of any subsequent publications that result from this study.

Is this something that you would like to receive: Yes/No

#### Initial open-ended questions:

1. Prior to your leaving, how long have you been at the legacy organisation?
  - a. In what capacity (role) did you join the legacy organisation?
2. Can you remember what it was about the legacy organisation or your job offer that enticed you to join?
  - a. Explore whether there was any conscious identification with the 'identity' of the legacy organisation or the identity of the 'role' they joined?
  - b. Tell me about what you noticed / what happened [or how you came to ... ]?
  - c. Explore whether this was an individual phenomenon or whether they were aware of others who shared a similar experience/perception.
3. When, if at all did you first experience a sense of shared identity with the organisation?
  - a. What did you notice? Who did you feel this shared sense of connection/belonging/identify (use their words) with?
  - b. [If so] what was it like? [If not, what did you notice instead?]
  - c. If you recall, what were you thinking then? And feeling?
  - d. Who, if anyone, had an impact on your sense of 'shared identity' (use their words)? Tell me about how he/she/they impacted your sense of .....

#### More specific open-ended questions:

Student Researcher:

Iize Zandvoort

Phase 1 Interview Guideline 1

18 May 2016



4. Thinking back of the period before the strategic alliance (or operational merger) with the merging partner was announced, can you remember how you viewed yourself in relation to the organisation?
  - a. Did this ...[your sense of organisational/self-identity/belonging – use their words] ... change during any the course of the strategic alliance and eventual operational merger?
  - b. At what particular time during the pre-merger or initial merger phase did you experience ... / did this occur ...?
  - c. How, if at all, has your view of yourself in relation to the post-merger organisation changed?
5. Focussing now on the operational merger which was announced and then implemented, I would like to ask you about how you experienced this merger phase. What (if anything) struck you about your experience, or the experience of others?
  - a. Do you have any examples of how the merger has impacted you? Your sense of belonging? Your sense of who you are/what you do?
  - b. What do you think contributed (not contributed) to these experiences?
  - c. Who do you think contributed to these experiences?
  - d. Could you describe the events which led up to ....
6. What did you think about the strategic alliance/operational merger when it was first announced?
  - a. Has your thoughts about the merger changed over time?
  - b. How?/Why?/Examples?
7. What did you feel about the strategic alliance/merger as it first started happening?
  - a. Has your feelings shifted over time?
  - b. How?/ Why?/ Examples?
8. How did you initially respond to the strategic alliance/merger? What did you do/not do?
  - a. Has this changed over time?
  - b. How? / Why? / Examples
9. When you think back about the impact the merger has had on you personally, and on your part of the organisation, what do you notice?
  - a. Can you give specific examples of ....
  - b. What do you think contributed to what you observed or felt?
10. What (if anything) did you noticed changed about the way others behaved after the merger?
  - a. Can you give a specific example?
  - b. What do you think contributed to what you observed?
11. Where there any key moments during or after the merger that stands out for you?
12. Is there anything about the merger or the impact the merger had on you personally that struck you during this interview?

Ending questions:

Student Researcher:

Iize Zandvoort

Phase 1 Interview Guideline 1

18 May 2016

These will be adapted depending on who the interviewee is. For example, if they moved onto a more positive work-experience or new role – I will be exploring the positive aspects of their new experience. Or if they have left the organisation I will explore with them some of the more positive experience they have had, or are planning.

I will end the interview with an exploration of some of their best memories about working with colleagues and friends in the legacy organisation.

1. How has your sense of self developed since you left the organisation?
  - a. Tell me about what you most value about yourself now?
  - b. What do others most value in you?
2. What advice would you give to anyone else who is struggling with a sense of belonging following a merger or restructure?
3. Is there something else you think I should understand .... Better?
4. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

End by thanking the interviewee for their time.

End recording only AFTER they hung up, or leave the room.

Capture your immediate experiences/feelings and thoughts in a memo to inform the column 5 exercise methodology of reflection during the analysis phase.

Reflective questions for me to use during analysis phase: (Charmaz, 2014)

1. From whose point of view is a given process fundamental? From whose point is it marginalised?
2. How do the observed social processes emerge? How do participants' actions construct them?
3. Who exerts control over these processes? Under what conditions?
4. What meanings do different participants attribute to the process? How do they talk about it? What do they emphasize? What do they leave out?
5. How and when do their meanings and actions concerning the process change?

## 9.3 APPENDIX 3: PHASE 2 PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM



### Committee on Research Ethics

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#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM: PHASE 2 DATA COLLECTION

**Title of Research Project:** How do we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process of organisational identity evolution post-merger.

**Researcher:** Ilze Zandvoort

*You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before considering your responses at the end of this document. Feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your colleagues, friends and line-manager if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.*

#### 1. What is the purpose of the study?

This study is being conducted as the final requirement for a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Degree at the University of Liverpool. Accordingly, the research intervention is obliged to work towards understanding and solving an identified, organisationally-based problem. It is my intention that this study will enable me to collaborate with [knowledge workers] and [managers/co-ordinators] of [Group AB] and [Group C] in shaping our post-merger organisational identity(ies) to what we collectively regard as desirable in order to enable us to become a sustainable and competitive entity. At the same time the research will also endeavour to contribute to theory as we collectively reflect on the notion/process of organisational identity evolution post-merger



The study itself is broadly designed to do two things:

- 1) to look back, i.e. to reflect on how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are', and
- 2) to follow our post-merger strategic progress over the next six- to eight-months, i.e. a longitudinal study designed to monitor if and how our future sense of identity evolves or shifts.

You have been recruited to take part in the second phase of this research.

## **2. Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been selected to take part in the second phase of data collection for this study, which means that you are being asked to agree to participate in this study by attending six separate group sessions over a 8-10 month period. In particular, you have been recruited because you meet the selection criteria for this part of the study, i.e. you are a current [knowledge worker], or a current member of management or of a support/central function, currently working for [Group AB] or [Group C].

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this study is purely voluntary and you should feel under no obligation to participate. You are also free to withdraw your participation at any time during the course of this study, without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

## **4. What will happen if I take part, and will my participation be kept confidential?**

If you agree to take part, you will be invited to participate in six group meetings, called 'co-operative inquiry group' meetings, over a 8-10 month period. Each co-operative inquiry group meeting will last between 90-120 minutes, and will be scheduled well in advance. I would very much like to you to attend all six meetings.

In addition, I have procured the support and permission of all the senior leaders within AEE and AQ to conduct this research and to involve you and others in the study and we will attempt to minimise the impact of participation on normal working hours. Participation is purely voluntary and will not be formally rewarded or recognised by your line manager, and you will need to ensure your participation is not prioritised over and above your formal role requirements.

The co-operative inquiry group will consist of 6-8 participants, all of whom are current employees of Groups AB and C. The format of the co-operative inquiry group meetings is to have exploratory conversations around a number of themes which I will introduce during each meeting, concerning our individual and collective experience of the recent strategic alliance/operational merger. I may also like to use images in our conversations, and you may be invited to look at a number of images to refer to in our conversations, if you so wish.

However, you are not obliged to participate in these co-operative inquiry group meetings, and your participation in the study will always remain fully voluntary. If you do however choose to participate, all I ask of you is to be as open and as honest in your responses as possible. As part of the co-operative inquiry group process we will also contract with each other around ensuring confidentiality, and an open and honest support and challenge environment for collaborative sharing and exploration of the themes under discussion.

I envisaged that the data collection phase of this part of the study will take place at Ashridge on six separate occasions between October 2016 and July 2017.

To help me in my research methodology (i.e. to conduct good research), all group conversations will be recorded and the recordings will be transcribed by me to allow me to conduct line-by-line coding. It is important to note that I will use a coding procedure which means that in the transcriptions all participants will be anonymised, which means that you will not be identified by name, title or any other description that will make it possible for your identity to be recognised. The original MP3 files of the recordings will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on my personal external hard drive for a period of five years, after which it will be permanently deleted.

The transcripts of the recordings will be fully anonymised and I will ensure that any reference to specific roles or events which can lead to you being personally identifiable will be altered in order to protect your identity. To further ensure confidentiality of all participants all data will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on a personal external hard drive. The anonymised transcripts and subsequent data analysis files will also be kept for a period of five years, at which point it will be permanently deleted.

I am conducting the research by myself and will be supported by two Doctoral Supervisors appointed by the University of Liverpool. It is important to note that the supervisors will only have access to anonymised data and thus your identity will not be recognisable at any point following our conversation.

The data will be used to compile the final DBA Thesis for which it has been collected, and it is also my intention to use the data for further publications in the future, which may include journal articles and/or non-journal research led publications.

#### 5. Expenses and/or payments

I do not foresee that you should have to incur any expenses (i.e. travel or refreshments) whilst participating in this study. No one will receive any payment, gift or reimbursement to participate in this study. Please note your participation will be purely voluntary and your time contributed to this research will not formally be rewarded or recognised by the organisation.

#### 6. Are there any risks in taking part?

Given our flat hierarchical structure, it is possible that you may find yourself in a co-operative inquiry group with a current and/or former line-manager. However, I am confident that with our process of rigorous contracting about how we work together to encourage open and honest dialogue in the co-operative inquiry group meetings, this will not result in any conflict of interest or professional/economic/emotional risk to individuals.

Thus, I do not foresee that there will be any disadvantages or risks involved in participating in this study. However, if you should experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of the research you are requested to make me aware of it immediately. Plus, you can withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason and without any fear of negative reprisal.

#### 7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There are no explicit benefits to be obtained by taking part in this study. However, it is my belief that an internal action research project of this nature will result in changes within the organisation, both during and after the research process. It is my hope that the conversations we have will benefit the organisation as a whole as we move forward and implement our strategic objectives post-merger.

#### 8. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting me directly via email at [ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk) or on my mobile at: 07921 389117 and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at [ethics@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liv.ac.uk). When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

**9. What will happen to the results of the study?**

Results of the research will be made available to you in the form of an executive summary of my DBA Thesis. The aim will be to publish the research in a variety of formats, including scholarly and non-scholarly publications (for example, news articles) with the full approval of Ashridge. In all publications your identity, as well as the identity of the organisation, will be protected, given that all the raw data will be anonymized and individual participants will be assigned a special code – which will not be recorded with your name on any of the research study data and/or publications.

**10. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

You can withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation. Data obtained from you may only be withdrawn from the study prior to anonymization, i.e. you may only request the exclusion of your contribution to the co-operative inquiry group meeting prior to the recording of the meeting having been anonymously transcribed. Once your raw data has been anonymised, it will not be excluded following your withdrawal from the study, and it will be included in the findings of the study.

**12. Potential for conflict of interest**

I will be conducting this research study internally within our organization whilst still continuing to deliver in my professional role as knowledge worker but I do not foresee any potential conflict of interest, given that I do not have a vested interest in a specific outcome or political agenda. Also, I have not been asked by anyone in the organization to conduct this research with specific objectives, and have selected this theme because of a personal interest stemming from my own experience of the merger.

**13. Who can I contact if I have further questions?**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, at any time following the start of your participation, you are invited to contact me using the contact details provided at the end of this consent form.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this. In order to consent to participate in the study, please complete the section below before signing at the bottom of this form.*



## Committee on Research Ethics

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### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: Phase 1 Data Collection

**Title of Research Project:** How do we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process of organisational identity evolution post-merger.

**Researcher(s):** Ilze Zandvoort

Please  
initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 29 May 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the exclusion of non-anonymised information (i.e. my part of the conversation prior to the recordings having been transcribed and anonymised) if I wish. I also understand and agree that data taken from anonymised transcripts will form part of the analysis phase and will no longer be able to withdraw my data from the study beyond this point.
4. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for the researcher and supervisors to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research, unless I provide explicit permission for this in an additional addendum to this consent form.

5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research and understand that any such use of data would incur the same anonymity and confidentiality considerations covered here.
6. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of, and consent to, the use of these recordings for the following purposes: transcription of audio recording to be anonymised and then to be used thematic analysis or coding practices by the researcher.
7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
ILZE ZANDVOORT		
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
ILZE ZANDVOORT		
Researcher	Date	Signature

Student Researcher: Ilze Zandvoort  
 Work Address: [REDACTED]  
 Work Telephone: [REDACTED]  
 Mobile: 0044 (0) 7921 389117  
 Email: [ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:ilze.zandvoort@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

## 9.4 APPENDIX 4: PHASE 2: INITIAL CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY GUIDELINE



### Phase 2 - Data Collection: Initial co-operative inquiry guideline

**Co-Operative Inquiry group meeting number:**

**Date:**

**Individual codes for participants/collaborators:**

**Place:**

**Start time:**

**End time:**

**Individual informed consent agreed? Yes/No**

**Permission to record session obtained? Yes/No**

**Contracting about co-operative inquiry process performed? Yes/No**

**Any specific contextual/situational notes related to this session?**

**Background information to provide to the participants at the first co-operative inquiry meeting:**

I am conducting an internal action research study as the final element of my DBA degree at the University of Liverpool. In essence I will be exploring how the merger between our legacy organisation and merging partner affected current and former employees of both Group AB (the recently restructured merger of Group A and Group B) and Group C, as we are now known, in relation to our collective and individual sense of identity or belonging.

The study is designed to do two things:

- 1) to look back, i.e. to reflect on how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are', and
- 2) to follow our post-merger strategic progress over the next six- to eight-months, i.e. a longitudinal study designed to monitor if and how our future sense of identity evolves or shifts.

The first stage of the data collection phase consisted of 4 number of in-depth interviews conducted with former leaders, faculty and/or associates who left the organisation in the three months prior to the start of this study and who report(ed) a sense of identity dissonance or identity mismatch with the post-merger organisation.

**Student Researcher:**

Ilze Zandvoort

**Phase 2 Co-Operative Inquiry Guideline 1**

29 May 2016

The themes gathered from these will be used to help shape the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the data collection, which you all form part of, and which will be conducted via a series of co-operative inquiry groups with current client delivery professionals and manager/co-ordinator professional members within Groups AB and C. Both co-operative inquiry groups will be meeting 3 times over the next 6-8 months.

**Reiterating informed consent principles:**

For the purpose of obtaining a record of your informed consent, I would like to record the next bit of our conversation but you can stop the recording at any time. Is that OK?

***Note to self: If yes – START RECORDING. If no – continue to see if they will agree after the information – and then RECORD A QUICK SUMMARY OF THEIR CONSENT***

I would like to stress again that your participation in this co-operative inquiry group is voluntary and that you can opt to withdraw at any time, without fear of any negative consequences to our professional/personal relationship. I would also like your permission to record our conversations and to have it transcribed either by myself or by a professional firm. In turn, I assure you that all of your responses and data will be anonymised and your identity will be protected at all times. It is important to note and agree that once your responses have been transcribed and anonymised it will form part of the study data and you can then no longer ask for it to be withdrawn from the research.

Do you have any questions?

Do you give your consent to continue with this interview in light of what we have just discussed?

Yes/No

***Note to self: If you have not yet started recording and they respond yes – START RECORDING and capture a short synopsis of their consent.***

The final outcome of the research study will be published as DBA thesis and hopefully also disseminated in the form of academic and practitioner articles. If you like, I would be happy to send you a copy of the executive summary of the thesis and I will also be happy to inform you of any subsequent publications that result from this study.

Is this something that you would like to receive: Yes/No



### Initial contracting conversation:

Guide the conversation to contracting agreement for how we work together. Obtain clarity and agreement on issue of confidentiality and support and encourage openness and trust to facilitate sharing.

### A reminder of the In-depth Individual Interview guideline below:

1. How long have you been at the legacy organisation?
  - a. In what capacity (role) did you join the legacy organisation?
2. Can you remember what it was about the legacy organisation or your job offer that enticed you to join?
  - a. Explore whether there was any conscious identification with the 'identity' of The legacy organisation or the identity of the 'role' they joined?
  - b. Tell me about what you noticed / what happened [or how you came to ... ]?
  - c. Explore whether this was an individual phenomenon or whether they were aware of others who shared a similar experience/perception.
3. When, if at all did you first experience a sense of shared identity with the organisation?
  - a. What did you notice? Who did you feel this shared sense of connection/belonging/identify (use their words) with?
  - b. [If so] what was it like? [If not, what did you notice instead?]
  - c. If you recall, what were you thinking then? And feeling?
  - d. Who, if anyone, had an impact on your sense of 'shared identity' (use their words)? Tell me about how he/she/they impacted your sense of ....?

### More specific open-ended questions:

4. Thinking back of the period before the strategic alliance (or operational merger) with the merging partner was announced, can you remember how you viewed yourself in relation to the organisation?
  - a. Did this ...[your sense of organisational/self- identity/belonging – use their words] ... change during any the course of the strategic alliance and eventual operational merger?
  - b. At what particular time during the pre-merger or initial merger phase did you experience ... / did this occur ...?
  - c. How, if at all, has your view of yourself in relation to the post-merger organisation changed?

5. Focussing now on the operational merger which was announced and then implemented, I would like to ask you about how you experienced this merger phase. What (if anything) struck you about your experience, or the experience of others?
  - a. Do you have any examples of how the merger has impacted you? Your sense of belonging? Your sense of who you are/what you do?
  - b. What do you think contributed (not contributed) to these experiences?
  - c. Who do you think contributed to these experiences?
  - d. Could you describe the events which led up to ....
  
6. What did you think about the strategic alliance/operational merger when it was first announced?
  - a. Has your thoughts about the merger changed over time?
  - b. How?/Why?/Examples?
  
7. What did you feel about the strategic alliance/merger as it first started happening?
  - a. Has your feelings shifted over time?
  - b. How?/ Why?/ Examples?
  
8. How did you initially respond to the strategic alliance/merger? What did you do/not do?
  - a. Has this changed over time?
  - b. How? / Why? / Examples
  
9. When you think back about the impact the merger has had on you personally, and on your part of the organisation, what do you notice?
  - a. Can you give specific examples of ....
  - b. What do you think contributed to what you observed or felt?
  
10. What (if anything) did you noticed changed about the way others behaved after the merger?
  - a. Can you give a specific example?
  - b. What do you think contributed to what you observed?
  
11. Where there any key moments during or after the merger that stands out for you?
  
12. Is there anything about the merger or the impact the merger had on you personally that struck you during this interview?

### Ending questions:

These will be adapted depending on the tone of the co-operative inquiry meeting and the personal circumstances of those in attendance. For example, if someone has moved onto a more positive work-experience or new role in the post-merger organisation we will be exploring the positive aspects of their new experience. Or if they are about to leave (voluntarily or involuntarily) we will

Student Researcher:

Phase 2 Co-Operative Inquiry Guideline 1

Iize Zandvoort

29 May 2016

explore with them some of the more positive experience they have had, or are planning going forward.

We will end each co-operative inquiry meeting by checking-in how everyone is feeling now (i.e. in-the-moment reflection), and where possible explore some of the positive comments about working with colleagues and friends in our current post-merger reality, to ensure that we leave the room on a positive note.

After each co-operative inquiry meeting, capture your immediate experiences/feelings and thoughts in a memo to inform the column 5 exercise methodology of reflection during the analysis phase.

**Reflective questions for me to consider during analysis phase: (Charmaz, 2014)**

1. From whose point of view is a given process fundamental? From whose point is it marginalised?
2. How do the observed social processes emerge? How do participants' actions construct them?
3. Who exerts control over these processes? Under what conditions?
4. What meanings do different participants attribute to the process? How do they talk about it? What do they emphasize? What do they leave out?
5. How and when do their meanings and actions concerning the process change?

## 9.5 APPENDIX 5: ETHICS APPROVAL

Dear Ilze Zandvoort,

I am pleased to inform you that the DBA Ethics Committee has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below:

**Committee Name:** DBA Ethics Committee

**Title of Study:** *“How will we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process organisational identity evolution post-merger”*

**Student Investigator:** Ilze Zandvoort

**School/Institute:** School of Management

**Approval Date:** 27 July 2016

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

- The researchers must obtain ethical approval from a local research ethics committee if this is an international study
- University of Liverpool approval is subject to compliance with all relevant national legislative requirements if this is an international study.
- All serious adverse events must be reported to the Sub-Committee within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the Research Integrity and Governance Officer ([ethics@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liv.ac.uk))
- If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Committee of the amendment.

This approval applies to the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Committee should be notified.

Kind regards

DBA Ethics Committee

University of Liverpool Management School in Partnership with Laureate Online Education

## 9.6 APPENDIX 6: EMPLOYER INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM



### Committee on Research Ethics

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#### EMPLOYER INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Title of Research Project:** How will we know who we are as the post-merger dust settles? The process organisational identity evolution post-merger.

**Researcher:** Ilze Zandvoort

*You have been asked to sign a consent form as part of my formal ethics approval process at the University of Liverpool, pertaining to the thesis element of my Doctorate in Business Administration.*

*As discussed, this research will constitute an internal action research project, which will require me to engage and collect data from current employees across both [Group AB] and [Group C]. In particular, you are being asked to consent to this research and to give participants from within the organisation permission to participate in the study during working hours without any fear of reprisal or discrimination. Participants will be made aware of the fact that time spent participating in the research is purely voluntary and not subject to any form of remuneration or recognition and, that it remains subject to approval from their line-managers regarding scheduling and prioritization of time commitments*

*Below is additional information regarding the research, which you need to be aware of, in order to provide me with your consent to conduct the action research thesis, and to provide participants with your consent to participate in the data collection phase.*

#### 1. What is the purpose of the study?

This study is being conducted as the final requirement for a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Degree at the University of Liverpool. Accordingly, the research



intervention is obliged to work towards understanding and solving an identified, organisationally-based problem. One of the problems we face is dealing with low morale and identity dissonance (or identity confusion) in the rapidly changing post-merger work environment. Hence, my intention is that this study will enable me to collaborate with [knowledge workers] and [managers/co-ordinators] of [Group AB] and [Group C] in shaping our post-merger organisational identity(ies) to what we collectively regard as desirable in order to enable us to become a sustainable and competitive entity. At the same time the research will also endeavour to contribute to theory as we collectively reflect on the notion/process of organisational identity evolution post-merger.

Therefore, the data will be used to compile the final DBA Thesis for which it has been collected, and it is also my intention to use the data for further publications in the future, which may include journal articles and/or non-journal research led publications.

However, at the outset it is important to note that for the purpose of my DBA thesis, all information regarding this research study will be strictly confidential, and the University of Liverpool (and Laureate Education) will be subject to a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) which means that they will not be sharing or discussing any of my work with anyone other than my academic supervisors and examiners, for a period of 5 years after the thesis submission. For any Intellectual Property Development (i.e. [client delivery] material) and/or research output, i.e. academic and/or non-academic publications related to this thesis, I will revert to working with the full approval of the [organisational] Ethics and Research Committee to ensure that protection of both our organizational identity and brand.

The study itself is broadly designed to do two things:

- 1) to look back, i.e. to reflect on how the merger and restructuring events impacted our individual and collective sense of 'who we are', and
- 2) to follow our post-merger strategic progress over the next six- to eight-months, i.e. a longitudinal study designed to monitor if and how our future sense of identity evolves or shifts.

## **2. Who from the organisation will be selected to participate in phase 2 of the research?**

[Knowledge workers], and members of management or of a support/central function, currently working for [Group AB] and/or [Group C] will be approached to participate in two co-operative inquiry groups. Each group will be taking part in a longitudinal study consisting of six separate group sessions (each lasting 90-120 minutes) over a 6-8 month period. Participation is purely voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any point during the study without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage. Also, participation in all six meetings are not mandatory, but would be encouraged to help with good quality data collection.

I envisaged that the data collection phase of this part of the study will take place at [the legacy organisation] on six separate occasions (per group) between September 2016 and April 2017.

To help me in my research methodology (i.e. to conduct good research), all group conversations will be recorded and the recordings will be transcribed to allow me to conduct line-by-line coding. It is important to note that I will use a coding procedure which means that in the transcriptions all participants will be anonymised, which means that participants will not be identified by name, title or any other description that will make it possible for their identity to be recognised. The recordings (or raw data) will only be shared with the professional service organisation doing the transcription, via a secure Dropbox account from where it will be deleted as soon as transcription is completed. The transcriber will not have access to participants' names, as this will not be included in the audio files sent to them. The original MP3 files of the recordings will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on my personal external hard drive for a period of seven years, after which it will be permanently deleted.

The transcripts of the recordings will be fully anonymised and I will ensure that any reference to specific roles or events which can lead to participants or other members of the organisation being personally identifiable will be altered in order to protect individual identities. In addition, any reference to the organisation will also be anonymised in order to ensure that our brand and organisational identity be protected at all times. To further ensure confidentiality data all data will be stored securely in an encrypted folder on a personal external hard drive. The anonymised transcripts and subsequent data analysis files will also be kept for a period of seven years, at which point it will be permanently deleted.

I am conducting the research by myself and will be supported by two Doctoral Supervisors appointed by the University of Liverpool/Laureate Education. It is important to note that the supervisors, and examiners will only have access to anonymised data and thus no personal identities of participants will be recognisable at any point following meetings.

### **3. Expenses and/or payments**

I do not foresee that participants should have to incur any expenses (i.e. travel or refreshments) whilst participating in this study. No one will receive any payment, gift or reimbursement to participate in this study. All time spent in participating in this research will be done on a purely voluntary basis by participants (with permission from their line-managers) and not recognised or rewarded in any way

### **4. Are there any risks in taking part?**

Given our flat hierarchical structure, it is possible that participants may find themselves in a co-operative inquiry group with a current and/or former line-manager. However, I am confident that with our process of rigorous contracting about how we work together to encourage open and honest dialogue in the co-operative inquiry group meetings, this will not result in any conflict of interest or professional/economic/emotional risk to individuals.

Thus, I do not foresee that there will be any disadvantages or risks involved in participating in this study. However, if participants should experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of the research they are requested to make me aware of it immediately. Plus, they can withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason and without any fear of negative reprisal.

**5. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There are no explicit benefits to be obtained by taking part in this study. However, it is my belief that an internal action research project of this nature will result in changes within the organisation, both during and after the research process. It is my hope that the conversations we have will benefit the organisation as a whole as we move forward and implement our strategic objectives post-merger.

**6. What will happen to the results of the study?**

Results of the research will be made available to participants (and the organisation) in the form of an executive summary of my DBA Thesis. The aim will be to publish the research in a variety of formats, including scholarly and non-scholarly publications (for example, news articles) and as stipulated earlier, any such publications will be subject to approval from our internal Research and Ethics committee in order to ensure that the identity of the organisation and participants and actors within the organisation will be protected.

**7. Potential for conflict of interest**

I will be conducting this research study internally within our organization whilst still continuing to deliver in my professional role as [knowledge worker] but I do not foresee any potential conflict of interest, given that I do not have a vested interest in a specific outcome or political agenda. Also, I have not been asked by anyone in the organization to conduct this research with specific objectives, and have selected this theme because of a personal interest stemming from my own experience of the merger.



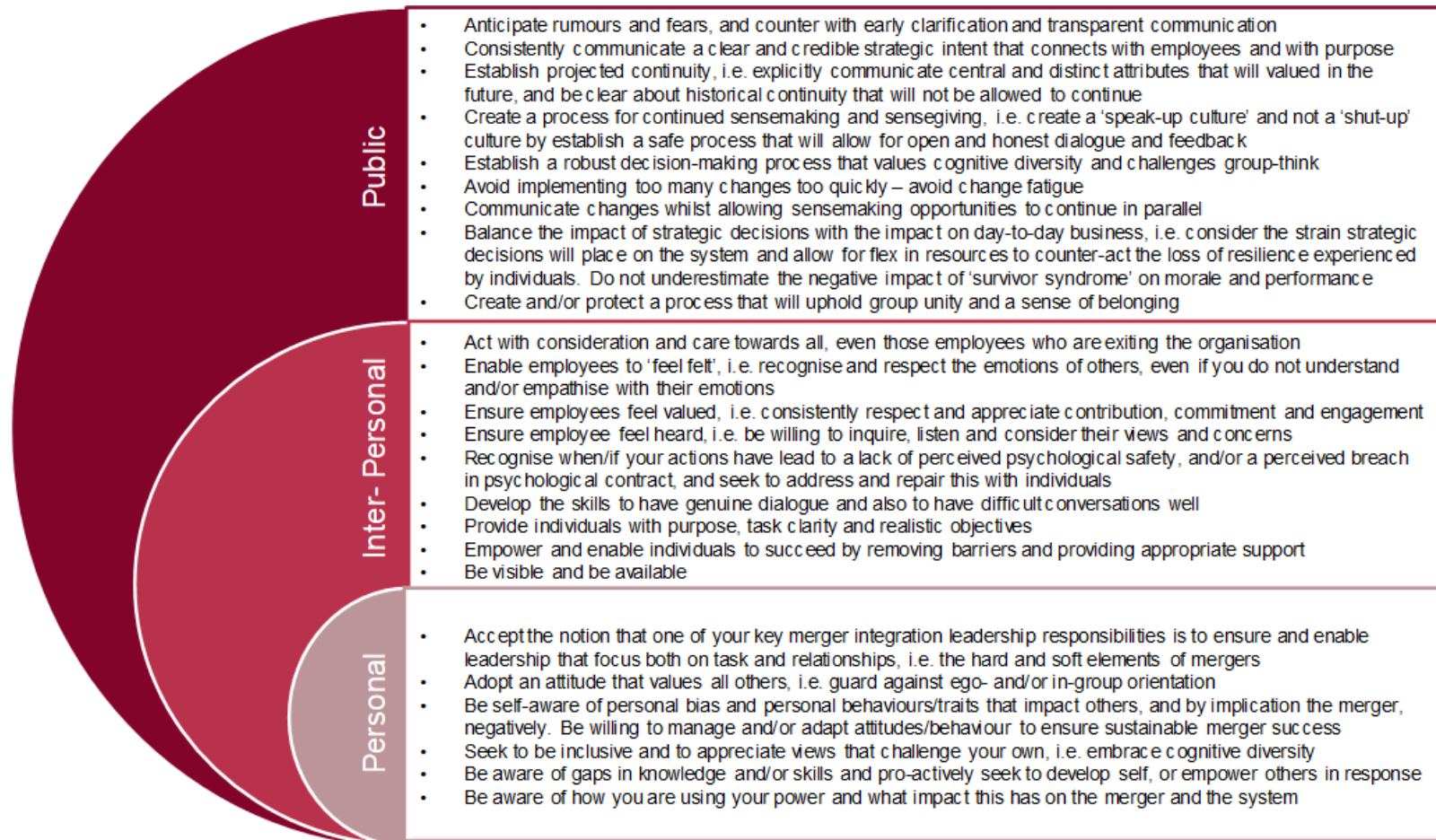


*Thank you for taking the time to read this. In order to provide your consent for me to conduct this study, and for current employees to participate in the study, please complete the section below before signing at the bottom of this form.*



## 9.7 APPENDIX 7: INITIAL THREE-LEVEL LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR MERGERS

Figure 37: Initial three-level leadership framework for mergers



(Source: Author, 2018)