From Disunited to Joint Action: Dialogue Reflecting the Construction of Organizational Identity After a Merger

Mönkkönen, Kaarina

SAGE Publications

info:eu-repo/semantics/article
© Authors
CC BY 3.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2158244015599429
From Disunited to Joint Action: Dialogue Reflecting the Construction of Organizational Identity After a Merger

Kaarina Mönkkönen¹ and Anu Puusa²

Abstract
Inter-organizational collaboration can be understood as a product of sets of conversations that draw on existing discourses. This article examines one public organization going through a fundamental organizational change. We describe the process of construction of organizational identity after a merger by using a model describing identified forms of interaction: (a) formally together, (b) unidirectional interaction, (c) juxtapositions, (d) construction of commonality, and (e) the state of joint action. There is a link between the construction of a more collectively interpreted identity and the way in which people communicate, create relationships, and network. This article highlights the relevance and meaning of conscious identity work in the process: The management’s ability and willingness to create forums for dialogue and social interaction creates potential for construction of a collectively interpreted organizational identity and promotes cooperation and collaboration.

Keywords
interaction, joint action, collaboration, organizational identity, dialogue, public sector, merger

Introduction
The role of social interaction and dialogue is highlighted in our modern-day information-, service-, and expertise-oriented society. Since the 1990s, it has been broadly recognized that knowledge and expertise create the basis for competitiveness in most organizations (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013; Tsoukas, 2009; Yankelovich, 2001). Similar to the private sector, the public sector is also facing the need for extensive structural changes, and due to the changes in the operational environment, there are major economic and political pressures putting emphasis on achieving better efficiency. The concept of New Public Management was introduced with the aim of improving quality, increasing customer orientation and customer satisfaction, reducing administrative costs, and increasing cost-effectiveness and productivity as a whole (Skålén, 2004).

In this article, we examine how a state of common understanding evolves via reciprocal dialogue in one public sector organization that went through a merger 1 year prior to this study. The organization operates under the Ministry of Economy and the Employment and consists of three, previously separate, governmental offices with different areas of expertise (employment and economy, transport, and environment). The head of the organization arranged a development project where the personnel and management could share their views and discuss the current situation. This process provided an opportunity for members of the organization and researchers to reflect on the merger of the organization together. For managers, it also meant that they exposed themselves to critique from the workers.

In this article, our focus is on the process of constructing the identity of an organization. According to Foreman and Whetten (2002), organizational identity has become an established means of analyzing several aspects of an organization. The momentum to study organizational identity also stems from the rediscovery of the relevance of meaning and emotion in organizational life (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000) that is particularly relevant in the times of fundamental organizational change such as a merger.

Instead of discussing the organization’s change, culture, or management in depth (Taskinen, 2011), we concentrate on analyzing the interactive processes of the organization, such as dialogue. For example, Scott and Lane (2000) argue that organizational identity emerges “from complex, dynamic, and reciprocal interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders” (p. 44). According to Corley and

¹University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland
²University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland

Corresponding Author:
Kaarina Mönkkönen, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Yliopistoranta 1, Kuopio, P.O. Box 16, Finland.
Email: kaarina.monkkonen@uef.fi
Gioia (2004), identity ambiguity occurs during organizational change: Organizational members are uncertain about what the organization stands for and where it is going. In other words, identity ambiguity implies multiple possible interpretations about which fundamental and core features should define the changed organization. As members cope with and try to manage the sense of ambiguity, they create meanings for the identity from the events, actions, and discussions within the organization, regarding what the organization is becoming, and this is reflected in their speech (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Thus, by using empirical data, we describe how members of the organization move from the separate groups and disunited practices reflected in their speech toward joint action and a more collective interpretation of their organizational identity. We ask, “How does dialogic speech evolve during the research process and how does speech reflect the construction of organizational identity?”

The theoretical viewpoint of this article is based on theories of organizational identity and professional interaction. The latter manifests itself in various ways that can be classified as different forms of interaction. Through our chosen conceptual framework, we want to clarify the role and significance of collaboration and examine dialogical interaction as a means of communication and relationship building, to outline its connection to the construction of organizational identity. The roots of the notion of a collective identity of an organization are based mainly in the theories of James Cooley, George. H. Mead, and Erving Goffman, on the theme of social identity (see Albert & Whetten, 1985). According to social identity theory, people have “a natural tendency” to categorize themselves and others into different categories, such as organizational membership, to help them define others in a somewhat systematic manner. This results in having to face issues such as individual autonomy, dependence, identity and belonging, and connection (Gergen, 2009). Identity and community present focal points of inquiry for social scientists interested in how we express ourselves and connect with others. Simultaneously, social classification also helps the individual locate or define himself or herself in the social environment where he or she operates (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). We argue that this tendency becomes particular noticeable in times of change.

Identity of an Organization

There are a very limited number of studies where the construction of identity would have been studied from a dialogue and discourse perspective. However, Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant (2005), who studied the relationship between discourse and inter-organizational collaboration, argue that inter-organizational collaboration can be understood as the product of sets of conversations that draw on existing discourses. While it is our understanding that it is not always possible or even desirable to achieve interpretations that are even somewhat similar across the organization, during major organizational changes, an organization can benefit from active, conscious identity work.

Identity stories can be regarded as narratives that are constructed to provide meaning and closure to different phases in organizational life (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). This notion is also supported by Albert and Whetten (1985) who argue that “normally” organizational identity seems latent, but when an organization faces a substantial need for change—such as during a merger—dimensions of organizational identity will become salient. Ashforth and Mael (1996) also point out that organizational identity is most likely to be explicitly discussed during, for example, major changes. According to Chreim (2007), the mainstream of studies dealing with mergers has focused on financial implications, adopting a managerial orientation, and emphasizing strategic decisions and undertakings. He continues, stating that studies have given much less attention to interpretive activities during mergers.

One of the aims of an organizational merger is to promote collaboration and find synergies. Therefore, at a practical level, the topic is relevant, as Hardy et al. (2005) argue, collaboration has the potential to produce powerful results, and collective identity is critically important in achieving effective collaboration. They elaborate that discursive conceptualization of collective identity helps significantly in facilitating understanding of the dynamics of collaboration, because it situates collective identity in the language in use in the organization. Hardy et al. (2005) continue by arguing that this approach shifts attention from the intentions and attitudes of individuals to their observable linguistic practices and the effects of those practices on social relationships and action. However, it is difficult to conceptualize and evaluate the mode of interaction needed and desired in a new situation. According to Chreim (2007), sense-making processes evolve in the organizational context, and their role is particularly highlighted during the processes of organizational change. How the members of an organization interpret issues related to change affects their commitment and their involvement in the merger process (see Puusa, 2009) and reflects in the way organizational members speak about the organization.

From the narrative point of view, the identity of an organization is constructed in different groups and different contexts (Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and it is affected by time, social interaction, and interpretations and reinterpretations by different parties. So, by nature it is complex, social, and changes with time. In organization studies, collective identity was predominantly first introduced by Albert and Whetten in 1985. According to them, identity in an organizational context can be understood by analyzing the characteristics the members of the organization perceive as central, distinctive, and enduring when the past, present, and future are taken into account (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The way these convergent beliefs are interpreted affects the way members feel and behave within the organization.
According to Scott and Lane (2000), organizational identity is dynamic, reciprocal, and interactive in nature. An emotional element describing the intensity of how strongly people believe in the unique and distinctive nature of their organization has also been identified as a characteristic of the organizational identity (Puusa, Kuittinen, & Kuusela, 2013).

Like many other researchers, we believe that identity of an organization is a socially constructed, intersubjective phenomenon. According to Ashforth and Mael (1996), organizational identity exists to the extent that people believe it does. They elaborate that while identity can be regarded as a socially constructed, intersubjective phenomenon, “the greater the consensus among organizational members regarding the perceiver organizational identity is, and the more confident are the members of the veracity of their perceptions, the stronger an organizational identity is said to be” (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p. 23).

However, at the beginning, the functionalist perspective dominated the conceptualization and research of organizational identity (Gioia, 1998), and identity research only took into account the perspective of the management. The basic assumption was that the members of the organization act consistently in relation to the organization’s identity. However, little by little, the perspective altered, and currently, organizational identity is most often conceived as a shifting, process-like, discursively formed phenomenon (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Puusa et al., 2013). Brown and Humphreys (2002) consider narratives to be the foremost means of working fragmented experiences into a comprehensible and coherent form. Discourses are then used as the main instruments of identity construction, and personnel can either adapt to or oppose, to differing degrees, the demands of their organization (Kuhn, 2006). According to Hardy et al. (2005), from a discursive perspective, a collective identity exists as a discursive object produced in and through conversations. In other words, organization members collectively engage in the discursive practices that produce and reproduce a meaningful identity for the group in question (Hardy et al., 2005). Albert (1998) suggests that identity cannot be measured with all the connotations of measurement. Instead, identity at both an individual and organizational level may be the last refuge of the qualitative in a world of invading armies wielding rulers and compasses. An identity may express a need for uniqueness and privacy: “It honors the ineffable” (Albert, 1998, p. 3).

The vast majority of researchers have adopted the view that organizational identity as a phenomenon has a collective nature. Organizational identity refers to the answers to the questions of “who are we really as an organization” or “who do we want to be” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Whetten, 2006; Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2012). According to Ashforth and Mael (1996), “the quest to answer ‘Who are we?’, is a quest for the soul of the organization, for meaning and justification” (p. 29). Similarly, it is our premise that identity is a negotiated, interactional accomplishment that can, but not necessarily will, be a construct of collective meanings and interpretations. Identity, therefore, is a volatile social construction that bases its existence and significance largely on the interpretative preferences of an organization’s members, who both shape and are shaped by their organizational membership through this dynamic dialectic process.

The notion of holographic identity describes a situation where there are a considerable number of shared interpretations and a significant degree of collective understanding of organizational identity across the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten et al., 2012). In ideographic organizations, in turn, individuals display subunit-specific identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). While the meaning and implications of it remain unresolved, the idea of multiple identity organizations has been presented by numerous organizational identity researchers (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Scott & Lane, 2000). Thus, as is typical for individuals, organizations, particularly developing organizations, can also acquire multiple identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Therefore, Ashforth and Mael (1996) argue that organizations are perpetually in “the process of becoming, occasionally in an uneven state of it” (p. 26).

As Bakhtin (1978) wrote, people create their notion of truth together with others via communication and social interaction processes where our experiences, new thoughts, and emotions are filtered through our surroundings. In addition, Shotter (1993) has argued that identity should not be dealt only as an individual information processing system without understanding its social context. This idea is highlighted in the concept of dialogue: In an organizational context, it emphasizes the relevance and meaning of reciprocal, multivoiced interaction. According to Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2000), there is still very little understanding of how organizations actually create and manage knowledge dynamically, or how the processes of constructing a shared understanding in regard to an organization’s defining characteristics take place and evolve (Jabri, 2004; Puusa, 2009; Risberg, Tienari, & Vaara, 2003).

Five Forms of Organizational Discourse

The dialogical aspect of workplace communication and management and the capacity for dialogical interaction are increasingly perceived to be important parts of work competence in the future (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2010; Isaacs, 1999). Dialogical interaction can be seen from two points of view: first, as a means of communication and a way to build common understanding with each other, and second, as a means of building collaboration and rapport (see Avtonomova, 1999; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Mönkkönen, 2002, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2012).

Sociologist Carl J. Couch’s (1986) theory of cooperative action is based on five elements of interaction, “acknowledged attentiveness, mutual responsiveness, congruent functional
identities, shared focus and social objective” (pp. 116-119), when focusing on behavior in small-group situations. Mönkkönen (2002, 2008) has reinterpreted and refined Couch’s theory in the context of working community places and client work, and renamed these elements the five hierarchical forms of interaction: presence in situation, social influence, game, cooperation, and collaboration. However, these forms should not be seen as fixed and permanent but as interactions that involve movement in different forms, and from time to time, some discourse may be more dominant than others (see Marková & Gillespie, 2007). As presented in this article, we have analyzed our data by using a modification of the forms presented by the first author and argue that in an organizational context, reaching “cooperation and collaboration” can be regarded as desirable and as an indicator of a form in which the construction of a more collectively shared understanding of identity has been reached through the process of dialogue.

In the first form, presence in the situation, people acknowledge the presence of others but have little to no contact with each other. People behave very formally, and do not share things or tasks with one another. This reflects a kind of culture where people work individually, groups work in separate silos, tasks are not shared with others, and a common goal is missing. In group theories, this form is not seen as group work at all. Individuals focus on their own tasks, rather than on the issues of the group or the organization (Engeström, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2012).

The second form is one-sided social influence. In this form, interaction can be unidirectional when one participant has power over a group or another individual in an interaction (Bakhtin & Emerson, 1993; Shotter, 1993). For example, the group leader determines the dynamics of the interaction while the others have the role of follower. In such a case, the communication is asymmetrical and the element of power is obvious, creating room for the element of unpredictability. According to Couch (1986), in power interactions, asymmetry occurs when the opinions of the others are only “counted” in. The relevance of good interaction and participation are recognized and dealt with in official discourse, but in reality, internal control and unidirectional interaction are what exist (Engeström, 1992; Tsoukas, 2009). Couch (1986) also brings up the fact that in a power relationship, there is an element of unpredictability, because the element of asymmetry of power is obvious. In the organizational context, strong critique of the traditional management of the organization is reflected in this form as well.

The third form of interaction is termed game. In this form, rivalry between people or teams is apparent. The participants do not have a shared focus, they compete for resources, and consequently, the idea of common organization does not exist or is lost (see Couch, 1986). Members of an organization may share a common goal, but they do not collaborate in achieving it. Instead, each party focuses on winning the game (Maxwell, 2002). In the context of organizational change, this can be detected in the form of different kinds of tensions, such as defense and frustration, and working in isolated silos (Yankelovich, 2001). Competition is often evident in the early phases of an organizational fusion process when a person’s role in the bigger corporation cannot yet be identified.

The fourth form of interaction, cooperation, differs from the previous ones due to its inclusion of shared focus and targets, which are achieved through mutual contracts between workers. In this form, the role of control is to ensure that the goals are achieved. This form has been described as team work, group work, or with the definitions of cooperation in general (Leonard, Graham, & Bonacum., 2004). This cannot yet be classed as collaboration because trust and common innovations are still lacking (Isaacs, 1999; Tsoukas, 2009; Yankelovich, 2001). According to Engeström (1992), in cooperation, challenges and targets are shared, and the workers, instead of promoting their own interests, start to share ideas and thoughts, as well as produce solutions to common problems. This approach has also been used to describe multidisciplinarity and multiprofessionalism (Mikkeli & Pakkasvirta, 2007). Multidisciplinarity gathers different disciplines together, and research focuses on the same theme. However, the disciplines still operate as traditional, separate disciplines. Interdisciplinarity, in turn, assimilates different perspectives and creates totally new approaches.

Finally, we argue that cooperation is a phenomenon that has antecedents that can be very ambiguous, complex, and abstract by nature. It is thus recognized that cooperation among participants, such as organizational members, cannot be secured, for example, through hierarchical authority or forms of control. Instead, it is dependent on the relationships among participating members. The relationships, in turn, are being negotiated on an ongoing basis throughout the life of the collaboration (Hardy et al., 2005).

The fifth form is collaboration. There are a variety of definitions for collaboration and thus among researchers there is little agreement as to how the concept should be defined (Hardy et al., 2005). In this article, the collaboration stage is associated with confidence, which diminishes the need for control. The discourse within the organization in general is also more future oriented. At this level, there is trust and commitment between workers, and every member of the team contributes to the overall whole (see Engeström, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2012; Maxwell, 2002). These aspects are outlined generally in a productive team-building process with a common task, cooperation, and team spirit, thus combining team productivity with personal productivity (see Johnson & Johnson, 2012). In the organizational context, we look at these points only in terms of how the informants describe their relationship with others. In this form, interaction is based on a genuine dialogue.

The term dialogue originates from words “dia” and “logos,” and their combination is described as “joint accumulation of the world.” The theoretical background of dialogue research is based on the work of Mikhail Bakti and...
Lev Vygotsky. All researchers of dialogue share a view of intersubjectivity in human life and social interaction (e.g., Jabri, 2004; Shotter, 1993). Dialogue is a trust-building process with the aim of advancing collective understanding among an organization’s members (Puusa, Mönkkönen, & Hytti, 2014; Yankelovich, 2001). In this article, we will not be delving more deeply into the theoretical base of dialogue; instead, we will only be discussing it in regard to its role as an important part of collaboration.

In Table 1, we outline the interconnectedness of organizational identity and elements of interaction. In the section that follows, we take our theoretical analysis further using the empirical data.

### Method and Data

This is a qualitative case study in which the aim is to understand the target phenomenon by analyzing textual data (Brown et al., 2005; Flick, 2014; Yin, 2003). The methodological and therefore epistemological choices are premised on social constructionism, which emphasizes the idea that the social world is a subjective construction created by individuals who, through the use of language and interactions, are able to create and sustain a social world of shared meaning (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998; Shotter, 1993). Due to rapid transformations in work environments, social constructionism is a useful approach to investigate change in organizations. There have also been ethical implications that have caused a move away from expert-based, hierarchical, and result-focused studies, to more participatory, co-creative, and process-centered ones (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013).

Billig et al. (1988) have criticized studies that attempt to simplify people’s argumentation into a measurable attitude or an opinion, ignoring the context of the argumentation and looking only for universal patterns of thinking. There are many social phenomena that cannot be turned into statistical measures (Marková & Gillespie, 2007), in addition to which, organizations are very complex and phenomena should be seen more as “wicked” problems than “tame” problems, which are easily resolved after diagnosis (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Following the logic argued by Hardy et al. (2005), dialogue- and discourse-oriented studies of organizational identity focus on the processes through which a collective identity is produced via the creation of texts. The attention is focused on the constructive effects of conversations in which participants describe themselves as a collective. Therefore, we identified collectively shared discourses (if and when they appeared) in the data to describe the section regarding construction of organizational identity. Because organizations are polyphonic, the description and analysis of evolving narratives is relevant. We chose a narrative approach; the research departs from the notion that through free argumentation, the participants fumble their way toward an attitude (Boje, 2001; Creswell, 2013). A narrative approach can be broadly regarded as a way of knowing, a nature of knowledge, research data, analysis of data, or the practical meaning of research (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The data were gathered during a 1-year process, and the textual data were gathered five times during the year. Initially, we asked the participants to describe their experience of the previous organization (before the merger). After the analysis, we arranged the first joint seminar where the analysis was presented and then discussed openly. The dialogues between us as researchers and the participants were recorded and later used as a basis for the subsequent data collections. After the first stage, we collected four more sets of data and organized five seminars in between the data collections. The questions included themes on topics such as “who we are as an organization” and “where are we going.” Altogether, during 1 year, we analyzed 1,120 short texts written by the total of 224 organization members. The total number of employees was 190, and 24 to 70 individuals answered open-ended enquiries during each of the five phases of the research process. For qualitative study, the data are sufficiently comprehensive. The respondents were professionals, managers, and administrative personnel. On the basis of these free-form written comments, we examined how a merger is discussed in general terms. After this, we itemized the sections in the comments where various interactions appear, after which the

### Table 1. Interconnectedness of Organizational Identity and Interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction process for organization identity</th>
<th>Elements of interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socially constructed, intersubjective phenomenon, discursively formed collective phenomenon</td>
<td>Nonlinear process toward common understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is affected by time, social interaction, and interpretations and reinterpretations by different parties</td>
<td>Dominant discourse evolves into polyphonic discourse of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective nature</td>
<td>Identifying shared discourses from polyphony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dynamic, reciprocal, and interactive process across the organization</td>
<td>Dilemmatic argumentation moving between different forms of interaction (presence in situation, social influence, game, cooperation, and collaboration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifests itself at both individual and organizational level</td>
<td>Dialectical relationship between organizational-level discourses and individual interpretations and attitudes toward open dialogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
extracts were classified according to various forms of interaction. Due to the long process, combined with the participatory element, the research process featured many elements traditionally linked to action research (Graumann, 1992; Greenwood & Lewin, 1998).

When the identity of an organization is just forming, defense of one’s own territory and maintenance of different (structural or imaginary) borders are apparent, but as the process proceeds, the borders become less relevant and the sense of a mutual organization starts to dominate (see Puusa & Kekäle, 2013). According to Billig (1991), this could be seen as a natural part of constructing identity and argumentation. Common sense provides the individual with the seeds for contrary themes, which can conflict in dilemmatic situations. Based on this, we wanted to deal with the data as constructive, unfinished argumentation about their organization. Using textual analysis, we have outlined the construction process for collective identity through the five forms of interaction (Mönkkönen 2002, 2008), introduced previously.

In the following section, we describe how interaction with others is constructed just after the merger and how it evolves in time. We analyze, as previously framed by the first author, how the different forms of interaction—(a) formally together, (b) unidirectional interaction, (c) juxtapositions, (d) construction of commonality, and (e) state of joint action—are present in our data. Although these forms of interaction are described as linear steps, it is important to note that all forms of interaction were partly present throughout the whole process of the merger, due to the individual differences of the research participants.

The quotes are marked with the letter E, referring to an employee, or the letter M, referring to a manager.

**Results**

**Forms of Interaction**

**Formally together.** It was very apparent in our data that all the members who used to belong to different, “old” offices felt that communality and solidarity used to be better there. They also felt more satisfied with the management previously, and felt that the managers and employees used to be more tightly connected to one another. This was seen, for example, in the following ways:

The organization where we were before was an open community in which people shared common knowledge about what was going on. The meaning of the work was clear, and our work was respected. Administration was fluent, the unity of the organization was apparent without distinction between “us” and “them.” (E)

Our old organization was not as bureaucratic a community as the current one is, and there was an atmosphere where everyone had the opportunity to participate, and real democracy was implemented. It was a team-based organization with a low degree of hierarchy. (E)

The managers also had positive feelings on the previous organization. One manager, for example, stated that “the mission was clear and employees were motivated . . . now the future perspectives are much more unclear.” The comparisons with the new, current entity were presented in a very black and white manner: The old organization was perceived very positively whereas the new organization as a whole aroused confusion and suspicion. This phenomenon has been identified in prior studies: The past is seen in a romantic light. For example, Bakhtin (1978) wrote that the past is usually seen as a paradise where life was much easier and more natural; people feel the need to hang on to the past and protect the interests they feel might be under threat. The actual challenge is whether an organization is able to overcome this stage and direct efforts toward accepting and building a new organization.

According to the data, the members of the organization collectively felt a lack of common goals. This was due to not knowing others and the work they do. The new organization consisted of two previously separate offices with different areas of expertise; therefore, the connection between both issues and people was interpreted as being very shallow and formal. This became evident when analyzing comments that stated how members of the different units questioned the need for the organizational merger in the first place and regarded the new entity as artificial. There was “no common ground,” and the large physical distance between offices preserved that perception. A feeling of separation and being in their own silos, as well as a lack of a common goal were dominant in discourse at the beginning of the process.

We hardly know each other and what kind work is being done in the other offices . . . we have not been introduced to other people or the work they do. (E)

We still potter about in our own “foxholes.” Common interfaces have been sought in the area of substance, but none have been found as far I understand . . . we have conflicting goals . . . What is the common target then? (M)

It’s no use putting tasks together by force . . . I wouldn’t put all tasks in the same category. Flexibility is necessary from managers as well, not only workers. (E)

This stage as a whole was characterized by many juxtapositions between teams, units, and professional areas, as well as between the management and personnel, with a belief that what occurred was inevitable and could be explained by the organizational merger. Ashforth and Mael (1989) have argued that the salience, stability, and internal consistency of identity affect the internalization of it. According to our interpretation, organizational identity at this point was very fragmented (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). At the same
time, the personnel highlighted that a common organization can be created only when people get to know each other, understand and value what others do, and give up maintaining artificial boundaries based on prejudice and the old organizations.

**Unidirectional interaction.** In particular, at the beginning of the research process, the texts included a lot of critique toward the management and their “traditional management style.” The critique by the managers in turn was targeted to top management and the steering ministry. The amount and quality of administrative regulations were seen as a problem.

In the process of building a new organization, a lot of communication and different arenas for communication are needed. However, the organization members perceived collective meetings as a means for the management to give one-way information about current issues. The meetings were interpreted as having failed somewhat in making sense of the organizational merger, or creating trust between personnel and management or between different units. On the contrary, feelings of mistrust and control seemed to strengthen:

There’s a feeling that we are all doing our work without responsibility and there are many methods being used to control the personnel. (E)

We employees are afraid of making any decisions without the approval from our superiors nowadays. They announced to us that the change was taking place but we are the ones left carrying it through. Discussions with my superior are one-sided monologues where he sets the boundaries and timetables in a very authoritarian manner. There is no trust! (E)

All throughout the research process, there was criticism directed toward the traditional, control-based management style, which was also interpreted as a typical characteristic of public sector management. In addition to this, the participants felt that a constant reduction of resources while intensifying demands and expectations in terms of performance resulted in passivity, leading to a situation where workers only did the bare minimum. This was described, for example, in the following ways:

It’s micro-managing, small details are the focus, minor issues are being controlled. (E)

There are times when the demands and expectations from the management seem very unreasonable—Sometimes I feel like I’m in an army. (E)

Don’t keep the leash too tight . . . otherwise the workers do only the minimum. (E)

Along with the increasing element of control, the participants also felt that bureaucracy had increased. This discussion was interestingly dilemmatic (Billig et al., 1988). On one hand, top-down steering from management was criticized, while on the other hand, the need for common rules was accepted, as it was perceived as ensuring fairness and equity:

The number of new rules and regulations became overwhelming. In principle it is fine to have common rules, but no one can really read all of them. (E)

Why on earth should the bureaucracy be decreased? If bureaucracy means instructions and regulation, it can only be positive. It is good that someone has thought through the procedures already, if they are obeyed the chances of making mistakes are decreased. (M)

At the organizational level, there was no clear, common objective. This stage (and this line of discourse) is almost an inseparable and a natural part of an extensive organizational merger process at an early stage. People feel the need to hang on to the past and protect the interests they feel might be under threat. The actual challenge is whether an organization is capable of overcoming this stage and directing efforts toward accepting and building a new organization.

**Juxtapositions.** In addition to the lack of solidarity and team spirit, we also detected a competitive setting between different teams and units. There was talk of “us” and “them” detectable between groups or teams, between different regions and units, between professional fields, and between the personnel and management. In the comments, the participants felt that both administrative and professional boundaries were easily identifiable. It was also acknowledged that this weakens the atmosphere, and therefore, the members of the organization expressed a strong desire for a merger in attitude regarding the matter. It was described, for example, as in the following:

We should lower the barriers between different units. (E)

Within our new organization, the old ones still exist. (E)

The organization’s elements of friction can be seen and heard inside the company: Unfortunately, similar messages are also coming from outside the organization. This sort of flailing around is also seen to a regrettable large extent as personnel motivation problems and fears, as well as general dissatisfaction with the organization’s operations. (E)

The rivalry was not malevolent but as a consequence of uncertainty and established organizational processes. At the beginning of the change process, it seemed difficult to see any congruence in tasks with other professionals while it seemed easier for staff to identify with and relate to their own professional group. The basic tasks of different units were interpreted as being very different, even incompatible.
The tasks in the different units are far too different. Sometimes the interests of business and the environment collide. (M)

Based on the above, we conclude that, at this stage, the speech reflects the existence of multiple, conflicting, and/or competing identities (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). There seem to be many contradictions and conflicts that arise, among other things, from competing identity claims and overall identity ambiguity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). However, despite the rivalry, suspicion, and the lack of a common goal, a unifying element across the new organization, according to the data, seemed to be professional pride and customer orientation.

Constructing Communality

The bigger picture becomes clear. In the data, expressions highlighting the need for cooperation became more evident and common with time. A sense of community and interactivity came to the fore in all the data, and themes were segmented from many perspectives. This can be interpreted to mean that interactive understanding was something multiple different parties wanted: The personnel were trying to consider and understand matters not only from their perspective but also from the perspective of management, and at the same time, the personnel had a strong need to feel appreciated and understood by the management, especially regarding their experiences of the merger. Management, however, should position itself and its operations in relation to the control system: In other words, they should bring up different aspects, their grounds, and the assigned boundary conditions connected with the transition concerned more effectively and more often.

As our research project continued, the strong confrontation and critique directed toward management that had emerged at the outset began to gradually change. Empathy was shown toward management, and people started to consider the existing skills among direct subordinates, as well as personal roles in supervisor/subordinate interaction and, in the same vein, the impact of their own attitude and behavior on management behavior.

The fourth form of interaction manifested itself in our textual data in the form of comments where the members of the organization started talking about shared challenges, where they expressed their desire to collaborate or reflect on the distribution of work in the context of common goals and a common organization. As we argued earlier, this form differs from the previous one due to shared focus and targets, which are achieved through mutual contracts between workers. Talk of a common organization and common areas started to increase, as did the desire to do things together.

Cooperation over the boundaries of units has increased. (E)

Everyone should have an open mind when viewing what others do, everyone should have curiosity and I mean it in a positive way—being interested in others and what they do, showing appreciation, and helping others when needed. (E)

In the relations between personnel, there was also a desire for improvement in the spirit of interactivity and community, for example, between various areas of responsibility or work tasks.

All of us should be able and willing to break away from familiar social—and coffee—groups, let’s sit at a strange table, and no one should have a negative attitude towards a plucky person like that! On the contrary, one should be glad and make sure that the newcomer is included in the discussions and enjoys him/herself. It all starts with small gestures and expressions. (E)

The feeling of pulling together, working together towards a common goal. There is no jealousy over another unit’s business. People are not jealous about other people’s things. (E)

Collective appreciation. As demonstrated earlier, the data included descriptions of how solidarity and team spirit had evolved alongside with the attitudes of personnel.

Let’s try to achieve a common organization and give up going on about old units . . . we should talk about us . . . there is only one organization. Individual employees sit where they sit, do whatever needs to be done, some might be teleworking, some in a different unit, but at the end of the day, the end result is quality, professional work and results. (M)

In the descriptions concerning collaboration or the need for it, the collective view was to perceive work as a united entity—The perspective seemed to evolve from the individual form to the form of teams and the entire organization. The development, which according to the respondents had taken place, was described as the evolution of appreciation and trust. The words “we,” “us,” and “ours” appeared more often in the comments.

It’s important to adopt the idea that the work that is being done is the work of our organization. It is not mine or yours, it is ours. I’m calling for adjustment, acceptance and appreciation. (E)

We all should acknowledge that other important tasks exist in the world, and that our own ones are not the only ones. We all should adopt an appreciative attitude towards the work others do and appreciate their professionalism. We should learn to identify with others, to put ourselves in another’s shoes, including the administrative personnel. Everyone’s effort is needed, not only the supervisors’. We all work for the whole, which cannot be whole if a part is missing. Management needs to advance the culture of communality. (E)

Removing professional boundaries. Little by little, the focus broadened from individual form reflections toward considerations for teams, units, and the entire organization. Many people wrote about the need to cross and eventually eliminate the existing boundaries:
goals were described as a joint problem-solving mentality and cooperation and more efficient operations. Shared future atmosphere characterized by trust, which is also related to achieving it. This form of communication shows a positive change—showing appreciation—as a “tool” for achieving.

In the third study, we asked about the overall expectations concerning the management and the organization as a whole. In these data in particular, the collectively shared agenda seemed to be the need to lower the boundaries and to enhance the sense of common organization, unity, and togetherness. However, although the need was clearly expressed, at this point in the change process, only very few were able to suggest concrete activities or new ways of doing things to achieve the desired goals. At both practical and attitudinal levels, many expressed skepticism toward the possibility of actually finding common ways of working together even though it was perceived as ideal. In addition, although these voices faded toward the end of our study, some wrote about their doubts throughout all data. Another important notion at this point was that the reflections concentrated more on the future instead of the past. It seems that in the context of merger, the question “who do we want to be” becomes more relevant, and the construction of a consensual answer to the question requires active, conscious identity work.

Workers in different professions made a conscious attempt to understand each other’s work and way of thinking. In the process of renewing organizations, the best outcome is achieved when the organization’s new collective identity is constructed through dialogue. We placed this kind of discourse in the fifth form of interaction, which we outline below.

**State of joint action.** As our research project proceeded, we identified strengthening narratives that illustrated the fifth form of interaction. The content of the description included sections highlighting cooperation and communal spirit. The informants do not present themselves as ideals, but cooperation, communal spirit, and open dialogue exist, and operations are characterized by a future-oriented mind-set instead of the limitations of old organizational structures. Organizational identity stems from when an organization’s core functions, which are interpreted as shared—earlier separate—parts of the organization (units, areas of expertise, teams, and individuals) seem to be amalgamating or are at least seen as a crucial part of one whole.

Earlier, we described how a good atmosphere was called for and how members of the organization perceived an attitudinal change—showing appreciation—as a “tool” for achieving it. This form of communication shows a positive atmosphere characterized by trust, which is also related to cooperation and more efficient operations. Shared future goals were described as a joint problem-solving mentality where responsibility is perceived in a collective manner:

We work together as a team, as well as facing challenges together and solving problems as a team. (E)

Team spirit and polyphony manifested themselves in descriptions where joint action was perceived as meaningful. Different views are perceived as opportunities instead of threats.

Good team spirit at the workplace has always being important to me. It gives meaning to work . . . collaboration and cooperation. (E)

. . . Readiness and enthusiasm to face and listen to other people who do something different or do something differently. (E)

The speech on the topic of collaboration strengthened after two things: First, it required experiences of doing actual, concrete work together, and second, the opportunity to reflect on their work not only individually and with close colleagues but also with a larger group. The management, at the minimum, sped up the adaptation process by agreeing to this participative research project and by creating forums and arenas for the personnel to express their feelings and thoughts in a structured manner, individually via the comments and collectively (the seminars).

While doing so, management did not shy away from criticism directed toward them. By allowing and encouraging multiple voices and views to come out, management enabled the construction of a more coherent and collective identity, which seemed to play an important role in breaking the pattern of holding on to the past and to old groups.

Despite the uncertainty of the future, we commit ourselves to working for the benefit of our joint organization. We really need to think about how we can advance and move forward. It starts with everyone committing themselves to doing their core tasks with care. It is also about understanding that the core can change while the organization is changing. (E)

An illustrative example of an element of common identity was seen when one member of the organization stated,

Of course conflicts of interest may occur, people interpret things from their own perspectives. It’s compromising, but my point is that all of us should be willing to have an open mind, to broaden our perspectives to include the whole instead just our own. The bigger picture is that we aim for the well-being and vitality of our region. To achieve that task includes all of our areas of expertise . . . we should all work together towards a common goal. (E)

The idea of collective identity is grounded in a variety of traditional sociological concepts addressing the “we-ness” of a particular group (Hardy et al., 2005). Next, we sum up the results of data.

**Conclusion**

During the first stage of our research process, the members of the organization described an interaction that can be regarded
as very formal and devoid of acts of collaboration, which we interpret as the first form of interaction. In the second form of interaction, the interplay was determined by hierarchical interaction. In other words, it was less spontaneous and collegial and more one way in nature, where one is a sender and the other a mere receiver. In this form, interaction and communication are one sided and scarce except between close colleagues. When interaction and genuine dialogue exist only between a select few individuals or groups, it is inevitable that identity-related interpretations at organizational level will remain very fragmented, whereas wide-ranging dialogue allows a consensus to be reached (see also Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott & Lane, 2000).

In the third form, the members of the organization described the prevailing tensions between units, teams, positions, and individuals. The atmosphere was characterized by doubt, rivalry, and mistrust. Collaboration was faint, but at the same time the desire to find common ground increased significantly. This stage seems to be an important adaption phase where members of the organization slowly started letting go of the past and considered the possibility of partaking in building and identifying with something new. In the fourth form of interaction, the perspective broadened, and the organization was perceived as a whole. The desire to work together and advance the construction of a positive organizational atmosphere that was identified earlier slowly became concrete. There was willingness to cross, for example, administrative and professional borders. Finally, in the fifth form of interaction, the texts embody a strong sense of working as a team, characterized by open dialogue, trust, and joint action. Our findings concur with the study conducted by Hardy et al. (2005). They also concluded that organizational identity plays a fundamental role in achieving collective, or as we call it, joint, action in the context of collaboration. They argue that “the discursive construction of a collective identity enables participants to construct themselves, the problem, and the solution as part of a collaborative framework in which the potential for joint action is both significant and beneficial” (Hardy et al., 2005, p. 63). We argue that if the members of an organization cannot get past the first three stages of interaction, organizational identity will inevitably remain fragmented (Albert & Whetten, 1989; Brown et al., 2005; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Puusa, 2009).

In Figure 1, we summarize the forms of interaction described (see Mönkkönen, 2008).

**Discussion**

In our article, we have examined how a state of common understanding evolves via interaction in a public sector organization going through a merger. With the help of our empirical data, we have discussed texts that illustrate different forms of interaction, simultaneously highlighting how construction of a collective identity evolves after a merger. In addition to this, feelings of uncertainty, skepticism, and cynicism can bring about active resistance to change (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997; Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2000).
The development of organizations is not merely a matter of progress from one stage of development to another. Conversely, people look for change in their thoughts and attitudes, and interaction is built with dialogue as well as within the tensions between doubt and inspiration, independence and community. Corley and Gioia (2004) argue that all changes involve processes of “moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity that resolves into an altered form” (p. 174). This seemed to be the case in our study as well.

According to Harré and Van Langenhove (1998), people create positions that deviate considerably from each other in various situations, and these may vary within the same circumstances or within the same discussion. This interactive dynamism does not, however, exclude the fact that more permanent development is also recognizable in the development of groups in the direction of an integrated group, and this is clearly discernible particularly in transitions affecting organizations. In uncertain situations, it is natural to be on guard, but by doing things together, those borders gradually begin to erode. In changes affecting large public organizations, however, this may take several years (Buhanist, Haramo, Kallio, Kostamo, & Talja, 2010).

In an organizational merger, the method of management is important, but the kinds of forms the joint effort takes are also important. Awareness of the fact that personnel should be encouraged to work for change is already growing. Participation assumes various formats: It may be formal, built on acknowledgment of matters, or it may be a game or advancement toward common goals. Participation is not just a matter for management: Rather, personnel also have many active means at their disposal with which to address passivity. Some actors may remain in the same position in their own specialist area, without expanding the frame of their work to suit the form of the joint group. As Shotter (1993) has argued, if we see realities as socially constructed, everyone should have a voice in the process of the construction of said realities, as well as the right to be taken seriously, and responded to in a practical manner. From an organizational identity point of view, in many cases, the fact that those identity-related socially constructed meanings often come from the top down is still withheld (Corley & Gioia, 2004). However, in our case, it can be stated that they emerged in a bottom-up fashion or even in dialectic processes between organization members, regardless of position.

Prior research has recognized that common knowledge and shared views are constructed via the following process: first identifying distinctive differences, then building new combinations, and finally, giving new meanings to old things that, during the process, have become new (Tsoukas, 2009). It seems that organizational identity also constructs itself through a similar process after a merger: Characteristic of the early stages of a new organization is the highlighting of differences and distinctions. In time, the new organization starts to appear as a (new) whole that an individual can identify with. Corley and Gioia (2004) also argue that if the meanings provide a coherent sense of collective identity, then stability can emerge in members’ perceptions, ambiguity will subside, and some new form of “identity clarity” (p. 200) or resolution can result.

We argue that it is highly likely that after a fundamental organizational change such as a merger, identity interpretations are fractured. However, it is not self-evident that, even in time, the identity interpretations become collective. Our research thus highlights the relevance and meaning of conscious identity work. In this case, it was particularly relevant that management promoted conscious identity work by providing a forum for open discussions and social interaction. While doing so, the management also demonstrated willingness to receive and handle criticism and polyphony.

According to Hardy et al. (2005), a collective identity is a resource for future references too: Among other things, it can help with addressing internal conflict situations or in resolving differences in organizational interests that might otherwise jeopardize the collaboration between organization members. It also contributes to the continuance and success of the newly found basis for collaboration, with Hardy et al. (2005) stating that collective identity helps individual participants “in the collaboration attach importance to an issue, collectively invest time and energy in it, commit to any compromises involved in tackling it, take collective risks, and secure support from their respective organizations” (p. 63).

According to Bakhtin and Emerson (1993), the conception of what constitutes “truth” is created via communication and social interaction processes with others. It is a shared, common story despite all its polyphony. When cooperation and collaboration increase and the organizational culture increasingly includes elements of trust and mutual appreciation, reaching a common understanding and collective interpretation regarding the organization’s central and distinctive features becomes a possibility.

In conclusion, we argue that the possibility of reaching a common understanding is heavily dependent on the state and type of the communication culture prevalent in the organization. The basic dichotomy is one-sided communication or genuine dialogue. Based on our empirical data, we state that the evolution of a communicational culture after a major organizational merger is dependent on attitudinal, informational, and behavioral changes that evolve over time. The process presumes at least the following stages: first, a
“grief-work” and mourning period during which individuals and teams reflect on the past and the old organization, which, in many cases, is perceived in a particularly romantic light. Second, evolution requires desire and concrete activities that further the process of people becoming acquainted with one another. Finally, after gaining awareness, it requires appreciation that manifests itself in attitude and behavior. Based on this, we conclude that the process is dependent mainly on intangible issues stressing the importance of time and attitudes. People either allow and advance change or prevent it.

In other words, reaching a state of collaboration characterized by reciprocal dialogue requires intangible capital such as dialogue, cooperation, and collaboration. The role and acknowledgment of intangible capital are particularly relevant in the context of a professional organization.

Acknowledgments
We thank the Finnish State Treasury and Ministry of Employment and the Economy for supporting this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: The data collection was funded by the Finnish State Treasury and Ministry of Employment and the Economy.

References


**Author Biographies**

**Kaarina Mönkkönen** is senior lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland. Her main areas of expertise are dialogical interaction and multiprofessionality in client work, work places and organizations. She has published several journal articles and textbooks on these themes.

**Anu Puusa** is an associate professor at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research interests are organizational change, cooperatives, organizational identity, paradigms and qualitative methodological questions. Puusa has published many journal articles and written four textbooks.