



# Gender segregation in the making of a merger

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Received 1 January 1999; accepted 1 May 1999

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## Abstract

Although recent literature on mergers and acquisitions (M&A) has looked exhaustively at a variety of issues embracing organizational systems, practices and people, it has ignored the gendered nature of merging. The aim in this article is twofold. First, to demonstrate how segregation according to gender is determined in the merger process by the organizational histories of the two merger partners. Second, to specify how gender operates in connection with certain integrative mechanisms developed by top management to coordinate and control the merger as it unfolds. A longitudinal, in-depth analysis of the making of the *Merita Bank* in Finland suggests that mergers represent a particularly well-defined arena for the reproduction of gender segregation, due to a complicated weave of intended and unintended consequences of managerial actions during its formulation and implementation. It is suggested that the gendered career implications of mergers represent a particularly timely theme for further research. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Merger; Gender; Organizing; Banking

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## 1. Introduction

Mergers and acquisitions are increasingly popular ways of facilitating transformations within and between business firms in volatile environments. Mergers were a distinctive feature of the 1980s, and the ‘merger mania’ has intensified in the 1990s (see e.g. Greenwood, Hinings & Brown, 1994; Holmes, 1995). Mergers are essentially dramatic events of reform that upset the organizational lives of a rapidly growing number of people (see e.g. Brunsson, 1989, on the concept of reform). This article focuses on a specific type of domestic merger: a horizontal, collaborative merger between two large established bureaucracies that are presented as equal partners in the arrangement (cf. Napier, 1989). The *gendered nature of merging*, a previously neglected aspect, is examined in detail.

A theme that has recently reappeared in the specific literature of mergers and acquisitions (*M&A*) is that mergers almost inevitably involve behavioural difficulties, and that this applies regardless of whether the mergers fulfil (or, more often, fail to fulfil) their objectives. Two intertwining sets of explanations for the success or failure of such undertakings are well covered. *First*, the problems that arise in harmonizing the systems, regulative mechanisms and organizational practices of the merging firms have been addressed (e.g. Shrivastava, 1986; Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991; Greenwood et al., 1994). This can be described in terms of a *central versus local dualism*: a question of obtaining a dynamic balance between central control and local autonomy as the merger unfolds. The dark side of this dualism is manifest in obstacles and hindrances to the creation of structural synergies as the merger is implemented.

*Second*, discussion has turned on the problem of inspiring groups of people from different organizational backgrounds to make a joint effort to fulfil the goals of the new organization (e.g. Buono, Bowditch & Lewis, 1985; Marks & Mirvis, 1986; Larsson, 1993; Ashkanasy & Holmes, 1995). This can be described in terms of an *us versus them dualism*, often presented as a question of organizational cultures. The dark side of this dualism is manifest in a mosaic of resistant, confused and demoralized employee attitudes and behaviours.

It is contended that successful mergers require *integration* (e.g. Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991) or *blending* (e.g. Greenwood et al., 1994) between the merging parties, not only on the physical and procedural levels, but — most problematically — on the socio-cultural level as well (Shrivastava, 1986). Managerial action is needed to moderate, coordinate or counteract the negative effects of the two dualisms. The typical normative advice given to managers is to attempt to accomplish as much as possible as quickly as possible (cf. De Noble, Gustafson & Hergert, 1988). Despite this, organizational issues in mergers frequently appear to have been undermanaged (Greenwood et al., 1994).

Other fundamental elements in the merging of business firms, however, have been noticeably neglected in the growing body of research on mergers and acquisitions. *Mergers are made* in a process of action and interaction. The silencing of gender in most of the literature does not indicate that mergers are gender neutral. The findings in other branches of organizational research suggest that this is unlikely.

For some time now the long-standing taken-for-grantedness of the gender neutrality of organizing has been exposed and criticized within several diverse feminist approaches to organization studies (for a review and categorization, see e.g. Calas & Smircich, 1996). In the present article the notion of *gender* is conceived in terms of patterned, socially produced distinctions between male and female, masculine and feminine, often signifying unequal relationships of power (cf. Scott, 1986; Connell, 1987; Acker, 1992). *Segregation according to gender* refers to the distribution of males and females over different tasks and positions in particular social units at particular times, and to the production and reproduction of this distribution (e.g. Acker, 1994).

I argue here that mergers represent a particularly well-defined arena for the reproduction of gender segregation. Two issues are addressed in detail: *first*, how segregation according to gender is determined in the merger process by the organizational histories of the two merging partners, and, *second*, how gender operates in

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