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Municipal Consolidation and Organizational Realities: A Case from New York City

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Municipal Consolidation and Organizational Realities: A Case from New York City

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank all the ACS employees who volunteered to talk to us and provide us valuable information

Introduction

There are generally three arguments used to justify inter-agency merger. First, functional expedience argument, which seeks effective ways to provide public services in order to enhance interaction with the public. Second, the cost reduction argument, which aims to eliminate administrative and procedural redundancies. Third, the consolidation argument, which is usually deployed as a response to geographical or demographic shifts. In reality, however, each of these arguments can be trumped by the prevailing organizational realities that influence the three stages of merger: pre-merger, merging, and post-merger.

While the topic of inter-agency consolidation can be examined from public finance point of view, i.e. cost reduction argument, this paper focuses on service quality (functional expedience) from employees' perspective, an aspect that has been found to be lacking in previous studies (Maher, 2015). This particularly true about public inter-agency consolidation. The topic of quality service has been studied extensively from the customers' perspectives (Abernathy, 2012; Bushnell & Halus 1992; Wisniewski, 1996). With the hope to contribute to bridging this gap in the literature, this study explores inter-agency consolidation from employee's perspectives. As such, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to explain the forces that continue to shape employees' perceptions in the post-merger stage at the NYC's Administration of Children Services (ACS) and (2) to examine the influence of employees' perceptions their understanding of the agency's mission and mandates.

The story began in 2010 when NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed legislation officially merging the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) into the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). The result of the merger was that ACS created the Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ) to provide juvenile justice services, which used to be the domain of DJJ. However, after six years and a new mayoral administration employees still identify with their old divisions while dealing with contradictory policies and procedures at times. Looking at the mandates of both agencies, there were apparent overlaps. The two agencies had liaised with each other to ensure the welfare of children and juveniles. Overlaps of processes and activities made it reasonable to consider consolidating ACS and DJJ under one management. We speculate that employees continuing to identify with their old agencies after six years is an indicator that organizational change components (OCC) – culture, policies and procedures, and communication– were not addressed sufficiently during the merger process. At worst, this could mean incomplete mission alignment and consequently ineffective coordination of activities and services even though the primary reason for merging the two agencies together was to effectively align processes and eliminate overlaps.

Historically, agencies are created to fulfill certain mandates, respond to specific needs and provide identified public goods and services. With the involvement of public organizations and the constant changes in the provision of public goods and services, it is inevitable that there will be an overlap of activities among agencies. Municipalities are known to be keen on improving coordination among agencies as a way to improve service delivery. However, previous studies on municipal consolidation have long raised doubts about such optimism. On the contrary, approaching municipal consolidation without careful planning can create undesired organizational realities such as distorted views about the organization's mission. Freeman & Rossi (2012) presented an alternative approach to inter-agency coordination and warned from issues affecting the new shared regulatory space which will shape the new organizational realities. It is also reasonable to think of inter-agency consolidation as a type of organizational change. Research has shown that no matter how organizational change is designed, the results are likely to be meager compared to the enthusiasm with which leaders speak of the improvements to be reaped as a result of change (Denhardt, Denhardt & Aristigueta 2015).

Organizationally, this paper is divided into five sections. The following section provides review of literature on mergers in the public sector, focusing on organizational factors that determine consolidation outcomes. These factors include pre-merger status, power, culture and future continuity. The third section presents the methodology used to conduct this study, covering design, tools for data gathering and data processing. The fourth section provides findings and discussion, where we attempt to assign meaning to the tabulated data gathered through questionnaire and follow up interviews. In the fifth section, we close by giving concluding remarks and policy implications.

Merger in the Public Sector: Rationale and Challenges

Consolidation in public organizations is neither new nor uncontroversial (Fleischmann, 2000). A brief glance at the history of merging municipal agencies suggests that one of the driving forces for consolidating services is to reduce costs and enhance delivery of services. It might be noteworthy to point out earlier that most of the studies on consolidation focused on local government and municipalities not exactly a merger at inter-agency level within a city or municipality. Yet, despite the lack of evidence, there is a wide spread belief that efficiency in government can be improved by reducing the number of departments and agencies and combining them into a large one. Karcher (1998) argued that new government and locales are usually created for the benefit of small group of people not necessarily larger public interests, concluding that voluntary and mandatory consolidation can be a remedy for fragmentation. Making a similar point, Mabuchi

(2001) contended that consolidation is likely to increase the efficiency of municipalities and local government. This potential increase in efficiency is usually accompanied with confusion about narratives, artifacts, networks and power, leading to misconception about spaces and identities.

To a degree, the topic has been studied broadly and it remains a major area of interest for state and local governments as they strive to enhance services and curb costs. Political forces dealing with fragmented administrative work of government in multiple agencies have also been a driver for better coordination and alignment, which sometimes can be politically envisioned through inter-agency consolidation by political actors because “lawmakers frequently assign overlapping and fragmented delegations that require agencies to share regulatory space” (Freeman & Rossi, 2012, p. 1133). The political forces are understandable and so is their rationale but the deployed political solution in terms of consolidation is unlikely to solve the problems of modern fragmented governance, Freeman and Rossi concluded, recommending instead “stronger interagency coordination and improve coordination instrument” (p. 1133). Notwithstanding this, elected officials continue to push for inter-agency consolidation and more often than not they use the functional expedience argument as a rationale. In the following sections, we examine internal and external forces in pre-merger stage and how they contribute to organizational identification during merging and in post-merger stage, including arguments about efficiency as a conduit for politics.

Mergers and Identification: Benign forces with malignant outcomes

Aside from the planned and designed efforts during the merger stages, there are factors that contribute to the way employees may continue to identify themselves in the post-merger stage. Previous studies have documented that the perceived external prestige (PEP) and communication influence employees' overall organizational identification in post-merger stage (Kamasak, 2011). Bartels, Pruyn, and de Jong (2009) conducted a longitudinal study on employee identification and concluded that “pre-merger identification primarily influences post-merger identification at the same organizational level ... Internal communication climate is particularly important for employees' identification with their division. PEP affects employees' identification with the overall organization” (p. 113). The rationale for focusing on PEP is based on self-enhancement as a motive for organizational identification. Since ACS is the larger agency with a better prestige, one could have assumed that motivated by self-enhancement, DJJ's employees would quickly identify with the new agency. Unsurprisingly, that is not the case because there were other factors at play as well. Elstak, Bhatt, Van Riel, Pratt, and Berens (2015) explored the interaction between self-enhancement and the

uncertainty reduction motives in shaping identification during a merger. Their study found that the self-enhancement motive and perceived external prestige (PEP) continued to “influence identification during the merger. However, its effects are diminished when considering the effect of the uncertainty reduction motive” (p. 32). Elstak et al. joined the calls for thinking of organizational identification motives beyond self-enhancement, contending that multiple identification motives work during a major organizational change.

Consequently, the pre-merger sense of identity appears to remain intact despite attempts of mission realignment and coordination. It is interesting to ponder whether such persistence is part of human psychology, i.e. holding on to the past, or rather a result of insufficient efforts to create a new sense of identity in the post-merger stage. While this demand another line of inquiry, one can speculate that the answer is a mixture of both, for research has shown that there are specific determinants of employee’s identification during the merger stage. Using experimental case study comparing employees who were directly involved to those who were indirectly involved in a merger of police organizations, Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, and Pruyn (2006) tested five factors: (1) identification with the pre-merger organization, (2) sense of continuity, (3) expected utility of the merger, (4) communication climate before the merger and (5) communication about the merger. These determinants appeared to explain the difference in organizational identification, which is measured based on expected identification before the merger. Bartels et al. concluded that:

In order to obtain a strong identification with the soon-to-be-merged organization, managers should pay extra attention to current departments with weaker social bonds as these are expected to identify the least with the new organization. The role of the communication variables differed between the two employee groups: communication about the merger only contributed to the organizational identification of directly involved employees; and communication climate only affected the identification of indirectly involved employees (p. 49)

Another way to examine organizational identification during a merger is to use the social identity model as conceptualized in the work of Turner and Tajfel (1986) and Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987). The social identity model posits that people are similar in dress and behavior despite their presumed differences because “groups and situations seem somehow to submerge uniqueness in a sea of commonality, and the same person behaves differently as he or she moves from situation to situation and group to group” (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 7). Applying the social identity model to organizational merger, Giessner, Ullrich, and van Dick (2011) concluded that “levels of identification with the merged

organization are partly explained by status and dominance differences of the involved organizations, by motivational threats and uncertainties during the merger, and by the representation of the post-merger identity” (p.333).

Motivational threat can often be a matter of perception regardless of what is actually happening. This is exactly where the communication climate comes into play as discussed earlier. Rumors about the negative impacts of change such as layoffs and reorganization are usually rampant during mergers. What is unusual in the case of ACS and DJJ is that years have passed and uncertainties have been cleared but the pre-merger identification remains relatively strong. In post-merger stage, one can assume that networks—formal and informal— in pre-merger stage were not disrupted enough to open venues for a new coalition and a sense of identity. Status and dominance differences in the pre-merger stage appear to continue to affect values and assumptions as well as power dynamics. Particularly, power dynamics are likely to be at play during merging and post-merger stages.

In a study that directly examined the group power dynamics in pre and post-merger, Boen, Vanbeselaere, Brebels, Huybens, and Millet (2007) categorized pre-merger identification, pre-merger group status and relative representation into low/high scale and compared that to a new merger group. Their study revealed that “high pre-merger identifiers identified more strongly with the merger group than did low pre-merger identifiers, but only when the relative representation was high. Pre-merger status did not influence post-merger identification” (p. 380). Emphasizing the role of social identification process, Fischer, Greitemeyer, Omay, and Frey (2007) contended that mergers have a limited success because they focus on financial and legal arrangements while ignoring human factors. They used social identity theory as a framework to explain the failure of most mergers, assigning three different status groups (high, low and equal status groups) to thirty-six small groups. The experiment revealed that the members of low-status groups provided the most negative responses to the merger in terms of identification with the merger group, satisfaction with the merger, common in-group identity, group cohesion and controllability. Boen et al. (2007) concluded that “contrary to expectations, status was not related to the performance of the groups.” (p. 203). If one is to extrapolate from this result to the case at hand, low-status group (DJJ employees) should be the ones to respond more negatively to the merger. Equally true, employee with stronger identification with either DJJ or ACS should be expected to embrace the merger and become the merger group while status and rank were irrelevant in the post-merger organizational identification.

In a similar line of inquiry with slightly different implications, Lipponen, Wisse, and Jetten, (2017) argued that pre-merger status of merging partners relative to each other will impact post-merger identification because “relative pre-merger status determines employees' susceptibility to different aspects of the merger

process” (p. 692). They specifically argued that post-merger identification of employees from a high-status pre-merger organization will be influenced by pre-merger identification and the perceived change in the status. Employees of a low status pre-merger organization will be strongly affected by the perceived sense of justice about the merger process. The authors concluded that “the extent to which pre-merger identification, status change, and justice are important determinants of post-merger identification depends on the relative pre-merger status of the merger partners” (p. 692). It appears that the pre-merger identification, among other factors, can predict post-merger identification only at the same organizational level as pointed out by Bartels, Pruyn, and de Jong (2009). Pre-merger status of merging organizations can have a significant impact on employees’ identification to the extent that an individual’s pre-merger identification becomes almost irrelevant without taking in account the pre-merger status of merging organizations. This observation elevates the discussion about power beyond the individual and group status to organization’s status at the time of a merger. The pre-merger status can also influence the narrative about the merger itself and in turn narrative will influence perceptions about justice and identification.

Narratives about the merger, accurate or not, play a powerful role in the reconceptualization of space and identity. On one hand, separating a merger’s narratives from power dynamics, networks, and pre-merger status can be extremely complex. On the other hand, how narratives are constructed and disseminated can be traced and documented. In certain situations, narrative can be the single most influential factor in employees’ post-merger identification, for a narrative can be the reason for the perceived sense of justice or injustice. Study conducted by Gleibs, Noack, and Mummendey (2010) on in-group favoritism can shed light on how narratives can be crucial to identification. Gleibs et al. focused on the evolving dynamics of social identity processes during a merger at a university, showing that “pre-merger identification increased favoritism, but favoritism also increased pre-merger identification ... These results confirm that issues of identity change and compatibility are crucial aspects in understanding merger adjustment and support (p. 819).

Within the social construction of meaning spectrum, narratives not only can evolve to take on a life of their own, but also can complicate things further for the new merger group. One can easily envision a scenario where employees from a high-status pre-merger organization utilizing their existing powerful networks, advancing their assumptions and values, maintaining their artifacts, and offering favors to members within their networks. On the other side of the aisle, one can also imagine employees from the low-status pre-merger organization congregating at the cafeteria, huddling in the hallways, sharing exaggerated details about who is appointed to lead the transition team, and constructing a deep sense of

victimization. By noon there is a wide spread sense of perceived injustice and organizational inequity, which requires a social response. One of the aggrieved proclaims 'we gave them the benefit of the doubt and we came with open hearts only to be ignored and marginalized'. Whether in-group favoritism is real or imagined or a natural result of how people in power pick who they trust, now it is a reality for some and necessitates a social action. The narrative is likely to be dramatized even more and the aggrieved will hold onto their pre-merger identification as a cause. The powerful group might interpret the attitude of the aggrieved, which is meant to be a protest, as a lack of cooperation or a sign of not being on board with the new direction. The old networks and alliances will carry on without disruption, creating even further misunderstandings and misinterpretations, hence a vicious cycle of mutual alienation is created and maintained.

There is also a possibility for creating and nurturing a different narrative, one that emphasizes bright future and downplays motivational threat and uncertainties. Many studies have shown that organizational identification is a key factor in predicting employees' behaviors during mergers. Employees from the subordinate partners are likely to maintain their old organizational identification in the post-merger stage. Examining projected continuity as a mediator between differential relationship in pre-merger and post-merger identification, Lupina-Wegener, Drzensky, Ullrich, and van Dick (2014), argued that projected continuity mediates the differential relationships, which means knowledge about one's future in the organization dictates one's attitude toward the merger process. Additionally, pre-merger identification positively relates to projected continuity in the dominant group but negatively in the subordinate group. Thus, a merger is likely to be more successful if pre-and-post merger identification is reduced or eliminated in the subordinate group because "a key challenge in merger integration is to support high identifiers in the subordinate group in developing a projected continuity or a focus on 'the bright tomorrow'" (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2014, p. 752).

Another component of narrative and power dynamics lies in the cognitive representations of mergers. Previous studies have indicated that cognitive representations of mergers affect intergroup evaluations in particular and performance evaluation in general. Giessner and Mummendey (2008) examined the cognitive representations of mergers by looking at how three groups with varying identification (one group, dual identity, and two groups) interact with performance feedback (success and failure) to affect intergroup evaluations. They concluded that subgroup salience only indicates pre-merger in-group bias if superordinate group salience is low. However, there is low levels of in-group bias after merger success. The major point is that the higher the identification in the subordinate group the more in-group bias in the pre-merger and the less in the post-merger. In a nutshell,

a sense of unity in organizational identification yields less biased performance evaluation.

As discussed elsewhere, mergers in private and public organizations are often predicated on functional expedience without much attention to the social costs in terms of identity, policies, procedures and alienation. Recently, scholars started to pay attention to the social impacts of organizational change process triggered by mergers. Using the social identity approach, Giessner, Horton, and Humborstad (2016) explored the impact of mergers and acquisitions activities on employees and their local communities. Their study highlighted the importance of identity reputation and continuity, intergroup structure, justice and leadership managing employee adjustment and identification during the mergers. The authors ultimately called for developing a review guideline for assessing social impacts of mergers.

Without attempting to identify the forces that contribute to post-merger employee's identification, which has been in the center of debates in recent studies on mergers and consolidation, Cho, Lee and Kim (2014) explored the relationship between employees' perceptions of relative deprivation –conceptualized as dissatisfaction with their jobs– during a merger process and their turnover intentions. Cho et al. concluded that “employee identification with the post-merger organization was found to fully mediate the relationship between egoistic relative deprivation and turnover intention” (p. 421). The positive correlation between job dissatisfaction and turnover intention is hardly a surprise. What is intriguing though is the role of post-merger identification, which is a result of multiple factors mostly associated with pre-merger status, communication and continuity. Such reality present post-merger human resources units with daunting dilemmas because some of the problems with employees' dissatisfaction appears to be a byproduct of the merger process.

To this end, perhaps the broader question that organizational theorists might want to examine is whether organizational identification is all that good and welcomed given the need for constant organizational change in response to recurring technological and societal changes. This question raises doubt about organizational identification in the private sector which have been sold as all positive and good in increasing employees' productivity, commitment, morale and loyalty. Even public organizations jumped into organizational identification and social branding. The push for identification is extended to customers and consumers as well. Speaking to this point, Conroy, Henle, Shore, Stelman, (2017) argued that research on organizational identification has generally suggested that organizational identification is good for individuals and organizations. The authors contended that there could be a negative side to the underlying social identity processes that govern organizational identification, concluding with the notion that:

Organizational identification can lead to unethical behaviors, resistance to organizational change, lower performance, interpersonal conflict, negative emotions, and reduced well-being. Conditions facilitating these undesirable outcomes include situation factors (e.g., identity threats, work characteristics) and person factors (e.g., morality, other identifications) (Conroy et al. 2017, p. 184)

While the findings of Conroy et al aimed at bringing a balanced view about organizational identification, they nevertheless indicate that there is an available intellectual space for a whole new theoretical conceptualization of organizational identification in the age of inevitable, fast-pace changes. In this study, we primarily set out to explore the forces that drive employees' perception of identification in the post-merger ACS. After a deep dive in the literature on employee identification, we arrived at a point whether organizational identification is all that good, warranting a push for uniformity. These points are likely to be the subject of future theoretical debates. In the meantime, there are still other external forces that might continue to shape employees' organizational identification beyond networks, status of individuals and merging partners, assumptions and values, and artifacts. There is no need to emphasize how far external factors can influence internal dynamics, however looking at external factors as stand-alone forces remain imperative for understanding the context, condition, and climate of mergers.

Political Forces and Mergers: Cost and Quality as a conduit for Politics

The general agreement among scholars is that municipal consolidation does not reduce costs. Maher (2015) concluded that "for communities that consolidated services, overall expenditures increased in some circumstances and expenditure reductions were only associated with one service: capacity management" (p 393). Moreover, Jimenez and Hendrick (2010) confirmed that municipal consolidation does not reduce cost. Focusing on officers' perception of organizational justice, Grant (2011) studied the consolidation of Louisville and Jefferson County police departments. While the juxtaposition of law enforcement and social services is highly intriguing because historically they have been on opposing perspectives, Grant's research focused on the drivers of differences in officers' perceptions of justice and their professional reaction. One could safely now assume that these perceptions were likely to have everything to do with pre-merger status, projected continuity, motivational threat, uncertainties and communication climate. The reality is that all these elements are mediated and influenced by politics in any given public municipal consolidation.

Another study about Louisville and Jefferson consolidation by Reed (2013) focused on Organizational Change Components (OCC): culture, policies and procedures, communications, collective bargaining contracts, and re-defining patrol division boundaries. Reed concluded that “officers' perception of the complexity of merging OCCs was a significant predictor of current support for consolidation...officers' prior support for consolidation and officers' satisfaction with the results of the merged OCCs were also significant predictors of current support for merger” (p.1). Just like officers’ perception of justice, it was reasonable to assume that OCCs were also likely to be influenced by politics and political motives. This study examined OCC, linking their role in creating conducive conditions for service quality.

It is often argued that consolidation is about quality of service. Political motives sometimes work miracles behind the scene while an economic rationale would be used to justify presented notions. In consolidating municipal governments, there is always going to be a tension between financial and political consideration (Sorensen, 2006). The same can be said about inter-agency merger within the same municipality. Commenting on the tension between political consideration and finances in consolidation, Gamrat and Haulk (2005) reviewed mergers in local governments and concluded that:

Proponents claim that by merging the two entities, duplicative services can be consolidated resulting in a leaner more cost effective government. They point to the success of two previous city-county mergers: Metro Louisville and Indianapolis UniGov. However the evidence from these mergers does not create optimism that cost savings or faster economic growth will occur. (p. 3)

Vojnovic (1998) found that streamlining work processes and standards become a challenge for consolidating organizations. Specialization and disruption of skills is another issue to deal with during and after the merger. At a municipal level, Sancton (2001) argued that voluntary consolidation produces better results than being centrally imposed. Using functional expedience and quality of service argument, Mayor Bloomberg’s rationale for integrating juvenile justice and child welfare programs was to facilitate long-term care for the young people and their families once they enter the juvenile justice system. It is meant to serve as a focused strategy to put the youth on the path toward school, work, and successful adulthood. The overarching goal is to decrease the rate of recidivism for youths, a rate that is traditionally higher among juvenile offenders than adult criminals (ACS, 2012).

A report by Bakirtzi, Shoukens and Pieters (2001) reviewed the merger of social security administration and tax revenues in multiple European countries and concluded that mergers can produce excellent results if organizations can overcome the immediate challenges such work processes, culture, mandates, and expectations. Another report by Owen, Kelly, Reed, Pittman, and Wagner (2011) analyzed 41 mergers of nonprofit organizations, contending that in the pre-merger stage, the factors that can be crucial include financial soundness of the merging organizations, external conditions, organizational structure, and leadership. Factors during the merging process include key stakeholder involvement, role of staff in the merger process, integrating formal and informal structures, and providing due diligence to the process. We have already indicated that in inter-agency consolidation, politics will shape and influence all of the factors associated with the merger stages. Research on organizational change has long indicated that commitment is imperative and lack of employees' involvement can be detrimental to the process in areas of cultural integration and identification. In the post-merger stage, there are four factors: funding and support, service and culture, organizational capacity, and structure. Once again, political forces seen as external factors will influence funding and support, service and culture, and structure.

As we have seen so far, inter-agency consolidation is an extreme form of organizational change process because it involves change in organization's strategies, processes, procedures, technologies, and culture. Although change is known to be inevitable or unavoidable in today's world, more often than not organizations struggle to deal with the challenges associated with it. The failure is more likely in situations where change is imposed from the top without careful planning and employees' participation. For instance, Bolman and Deal (2013) contended that organizations tend to waste resources on strategies to implement change, which often fails to provide little to no improvement and sometimes it makes the current situation worse. Beer and Nohria (2000) argued that employee accept changes more easily when management adopt a participative strategy which targets organizational culture rather than top-down approach. Thinking of change as a process can help in careful planning and thoughtful implementation with the inclusion of employees and other stakeholders (Ormerod, 2007).

In today's rapidly changing technology, an organization's ability to adapt to change is a necessity. Despite this being almost common knowledge, most attempts to implement change in public organizations still fail. Generally, it is true that people resist change, but more importantly employees tend to resist change and automatically assume it will not succeed if they were not involved in the process. Thus, approaching the process of change strategically is paramount. Denhardt and Denhardt & Aristigeueta (2015) maintained that employees accept change easily when they are made aware of the need, which makes it appear less fearful. These

elements are consistent with the projected continuity, uncertainties and motivational threat as drivers of organizational identification in the post-merger stage. There appears to be the paradox of change as politicians use improvement in service quality as a rationale for inter-agency merger while failure to efficiently manage change results in poor organizational performance, decline in employees' moral, and waste of resources (Fachruddin & Mangundjaya 2012). Literature on the topic of organizational change is consistent with the notion that the success of change depends on employees' commitment to the change. Therefore, gaining employees' commitment and trust can provide a sense of security and support the organizational change. In the following section, we examine the methods used to complete this study.

Methodology

This section explains the methods employed to conduct this study. It covers design and rationale, data gathering techniques, sample, and data processing. We begin with brief description of the study's overall methodological design and conceptualization then we follow with descriptions of sample, population and data processing.

Study design

We used a mixed model combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. In this way, we were able to connect the analysis from the initial phase to the second phase of the study so that both results can be compared (Sandelowski, Voils, & Knafl, 2009). The decision to use both methodological tools is justified by the nature of the research questions that the study set out to answer. While the study is primarily concerned with discerning employees' perceptions of the merger and how perceptions affect service quality, research has shown that relying on quantitative measures alone in explaining perceptions can be tricky and misleading at times even if the sample is large and representative. This has been a common setback in the public opinion polling data in recent times, often rendering them unreliable because "the science of public surveying is in something of a crisis right now" (Geoffrey Skelley, a political analyst at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics as cited in Williams, 2015). People's response depends largely on how questions were framed and the context within which questions were asked. Consequently, to eliminate a potential bias, we attempted to triangulate by conducting follow-up interviews with participants who responded to the self-

administered questionnaire. We also conducted interviews with managers who have been with either DJJ or ACS during the merger process. While managers' views are not representative, we contend that they are useful in providing deeper insight because they had access to information and networks when the process was initiated.

We used qualitative tools to analyze responses from interviews with managers as well as the data collected in the follow-up group interviews. Qualitative analysis helped deciphering some of the contradictory quantitative responses as well as corroborating validity, assigning meaning, and clarifying implications. Fundamentally, we want to deeply understand the forces behind the employees' continuous identification with their old agencies and why OCCs (culture, policies, and communication) continue to reflect two agencies while there is only one agency with one mission and a new mandate.

Population, Sample and Data Gathering

Currently, there are about 8,000 employees who work for ACS, of which around 800 are in the Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ). So, the population for this study is close to 8000 employees after the merger. After providing all relevant documents for human subject protection and obtaining the institutional review board (IRB) approval, we distributed a self-administered questionnaire to a sample of 125 (N) participants who signed the consent form and agreed to take part in the study. It is worth mentioning that we have tested the questionnaire for reliability and validity with a pilot groups of seven participants before distributing them. Of the 125, only 105 (84 percent of distributed questionnaire and .01 percent of the total number of employees) participants responded to the questionnaire. We are aware that 0.01 percent of employees is very unlikely to be a representative sample of the merged organizations. In nutshell, this is a convenient sample, for this was an unfunded research conducted during limited periods of access to the field of the study. We hope that using three points of contacts—self-administered questionnaire, follow up interviews with former participants and managers- can help tell the story while acknowledging that we were working with a potentially not a representative sample

Our point of contact with participants was the HR unit at ACS, where employees usually come to resolve their routine personnel-related matters of non-disciplinary nature. In the first phase, we asked those who came to HR during October 2015 through February 2016 to complete the survey. We immediately followed the self-administered questionnaire with interviews with managers. We interviewed 17 staff members in managerial positions who have been with either

DJJ or ACS for over 11 years. In the second phase, to address possible perception inaccuracies, we obtained access to the field for another short period of time during which we reached out to 45 former participants who responded to the self-administered questionnaire for in-depth follow-up interviews but we only received 30 responses.

All respondents were ACS employees at the time who came from various units and locations in the city. In essence, while this sampling is not random, we assumed that those who came to HR unit during the period of study might share similar opinions as other employees. While we have no way of confirming whether those who were asked to fill out our survey are comparable to those who were not reached because of inapplicability, we have no reason to believe that the responses to the questionnaire are not reflective of an ongoing perception about the merger of the two agencies. Given the nature and purpose of the study and time constraint, we believe this methodological design appears to be sound and sufficient for a preliminary exploratory study and can potentially inform future studies in this regard.

Data Processing and Interpretation

We processed the data in two steps. First, we entered the responses from the anonymous questionnaires into Excel spreadsheets (available as Appendix A) where we categorized responses by demographic, agency affiliation, years of service, and response to ten questions closed-ended Likert-type questions with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This allowed us to conduct descriptive statistics computation. Second, the contents of the interviews were transcribed verbatim before any analysis was attempted. Simple descriptive statistics techniques are employed to tabulate data collected through the questionnaire.

For qualitative responses, i.e. follow-up interviews, all participants responses were registered in a word document computer file first. These response were then manually classified in codes, categories and themes that were prepared based on the research questions and the interview protocol. We used explanatory qualitative technique that build on preexisting codes derived from research questions. According to Dey (1993) qualitative data analysis involves nine successive steps: data, finding a focus, managing data, reading and annotating, categorizing data, linking data, connecting categories, corroborating evidence, and producing an account. Tesch (2013) suggested that these steps can broadly be divided into two essential stages: de-contextualization and contextualization. As

shown in Table (1) during de-contextualization, fragmented pieces of data can stand alone.

Coding	Themes	De-contextualization	Interpretations	Contextualization
Based on previously identified codes: research questions and/or literature	Codes that emerge during data analysis	Findings In the de-contextualization stage pieces of data can stand alone Category is a purposeful way to tabulate and organize data around logical linkages	It is a method to organize categories broadly, there have to be a reasonable assumption as to why two or three categories fit under one theme	Discussions In the contextualization stage the researcher/s decides what the accounts mean: this is the moment of interpretation

Primarily, contextualization depends upon a systematic process of data interpretation during which overall themes and new organizing principles can be identified. Producing themes is similar to producing an account. During de-contextualizing, we used priori coding techniques to identify themes pertaining to OCC (culture, policies, procedures, and communication). For new themes we used emerging coding techniques. To carefully contextualize these responses we used a team (co-authors) to cross-check the themes derived in order to establish inter-rater reliability. We also relied on OCC during the merger stages: pre-merger, during the merging and post-merging, as discussed in the previous section.

Findings and Discussion

Of the 105 respondents, 12 has been with ACS for less than five year, 36 between 5 and 10 years, 26 between 11 and 15 years, 22 between 16 and 20 year, and 9 for over 21 years. Moreover, 47 of the respondents were initially hired to work for ACS, 46 for DJJ and only 12 joined ACS after the merger was completed. The distribution of respondents among the three categories, though random, provided an opportunity for ideal representation of employees' perception about the three

stages of the merger. 93 of the surveyed employees (88.57 percent) have been around when the merger was initiated and implemented. Given that DJJ was taken over by ACS, one would expect that those who were DJJ employees at the time are likely to respond negatively to the merger. This did not appear to be the case. While those who were DJJ employees at the time of the merger were more vocal about their views regarding the process, affiliation with DJJ or ACS did not appear to be a factor in their current views about the post-merger stage. Speaking to this point in a follow-up interview, one of the DJJ respondents stated that:

I believe the merger was the wrong thing for DJJ. It presents a conflict of interest. When we were taken over by ACS (not merged) we lost the sense of family that we had in DJJ (we became the little fish in the big pond). DJJ was used to getting things done with minimal staff. ACS utilizes many staff and things don't get done and are not followed up.

Another disgruntled, though reasonable, voice added:

The merger was not well thought out in the best interest of the population served. DJJ was law enforcement agency, however, ACS is a social service agency. Their missions are different and merging the two creates conflict of interest. I would need to write my own paper to explain all the reasons and provide credible evidence to support what I say.

Most of the interviewees who held managerial position when the merger was announced share similar views. There are those who fundamentally thought the merger was not logical in principle. A manager at ACS when the merger was announced echoed these points by stating, "DJJ detains children following their alleged/convicted criminal act. ACS protects the children from trauma, abuse and neglect. The general missions of the two agencies are very different". Table 2 summarizes qualitative analysis findings, however as we discuss findings in the following sections direct quotes from interviews will be provided.

Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis

Coding		De- contextualization		Contextualization
Research questions	Themes	Findings	Interpretations	Discussions
What are the forces that continue to shape employees' perceptions within ACS?	Pre-merger stage: status, projected continuity, motivational threat and uncertainties	Powerlessness Connected employees Disconnected employees Do what we were told	Employees were largely uniformed, confused, and lack understanding of why these decisions were made, consequently, they know it is top-down approach and there was not much they could do	Confirming reviewed literature, DJJ merger into ACS was typical case of inter-agency merger in which pre-merger status was a major determinant of post-merger organizational identification. Implication for policy is that inter-agency merger neither saved cost nor improved quality of service. An alternative approach to functional expediency need to be considered, perhaps gradual merger of services and slow phase out of one of the two merging agencies
Do these perceptions influence employees' understanding of the agency's mission and mandates?	During merger: communication climate and leadership Post-merger stage: Organizational Identification Assumptions, values and	Lack of awareness and engagement, top-down approach Isolation Different policies and procedure for DJJ and ACS, different understanding of organizations; mission Merger or not we do what used to do	beyond associating with their old networks and identifies and maintaining their culture, assumptions and value	

Pre-merger Stage

With regard to the pre-merger phase, we asked three questions pertaining to 1) The logical soundness of the merger, 2) outlining of the process, and 3) Training based on the new mission of the ACS. Table 1 shows the distribution of responses regarding the pre-merger phase.

Table 3					
Participants' Responses Pre-merger stage					
Indicator/ Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The logical soundness of merger	10	30	36	20	9
Outlining the process of merger	5	36	30	24	10
Training based on the new mission	4	27	27	36	11
Table 1					

As appears in Table 1, between not sure, disagree and strongly disagree about 65 (about 62 percent) of the respondents did not appear to think that the merger was logically sound based on the missions of the two agencies. One respondent made these sentiments very clear by stating that “Our mission is to assist children and families, unfortunately staff was never consulted or trained when DJJ was merged into ACS.” Another added “Both agencies should have never merged. It should have stayed the way it was or merge DJJ with a different agency like the Department of Probation.” Some respondents did not oppose to the idea of merger in principle, but they suggested that merging DJJ with an agency with a closely similar mission was a suitable idea. Speaking to this point, one respondents stated that “Bloomberg should have merged the agency (DJJ) with another agency like Department of Correction for example.” Another added “DJJ needs to merge with Correction rather than ACS. There might be conflict of interest with ACS.” Yet, another exclaimed “How can you merge ACS that was set to protect children with DJJ which works to lock up children! Who does that?” As for the planning and training on the imminent merger before its implementation, 64 (about 60.9 percent) and 74 (about 70 percent), including not sure responses, of the respondents reported that neither planning nor training was provided. We assumed that if an employee

was informed about the merger or trained on the new mission, he or she won't respond by choosing 'not sure'. One employee stated that:

The idea of the merger was not announced to employees. The goals were not presented to me. To this date, I don't know if the goals were met. Internally, employees were not trained about the practices, policies, etc. As a result DJJ continues to follow old policies and procedures which place the employees at jeopardy of disciplinary charges.

Once again, many of those we interviewed were of the same opinion. We are only highlighting some of these views. A participant, who held a manager position at the time of the merger added "there was no explanation or training of how/why the merger was necessary or the goal or purpose of the merger". Another manager added "I don't believe that the logic and process... was clearly outlined before the merger".

Merging Process

To examine employees experience with and perception of the merging process, we asked respondents whether they thought the implementation was poorly conceived and carried out. To this, 40 responded either agree or strongly agree, 33 not sure and 32 disagree or strongly disagree. The fact that there is 65 (61.90 percent) thought either the idea of the merger was either bad or not sure suggests the poor planning and communication of the rationale to the employees. It must be acknowledged, however, that some of the respondents were likely to continue to think that the merger was a bad idea not because of planning or lack of knowledge but as we have seen because they believe it was not a sound idea in principle. Table 2 summarizes responses for questions pertaining to the merging process stage.

Table 4 Participants' Responses merging stage						
Indicator/Response	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
The idea was good but the implementation was terrible	4	36	33	25	7	105

True merger requires mission-driven training to all	17	60	17	11		105
Table 2						

To this end, one respondent argued that “I think it was not a plan well thought out as far as employees were concerned.” Another stated that “Planning before the merger was insufficient.” A third employee made the case in a point by suggesting that:

Merging the DJJ under the umbrella of ACS was a great idea, however, constant training on both child welfare and DJJ is necessary. The ACS serves youth in both systems (child welfare/DJJ) meaning crossover, worker understanding of both systems helps the youth/family.

The lack of robust training in both juvenile delinquency and child welfare not only undermine the logic of the merger, but also raises question about any potential improvement in service quality that was intended. When we asked participants whether they thought that a true merger requires mission-driven training, 77 (73.33 percent) responded agree or strongly agree while 17 responded not sure and 11 disagree. One interviewee stated that “effective training for employees is needed.” There are those who think that mission-driven training might not be sufficient to address the deficiencies. A manager elaborated on this by suggesting that:

The agencies merely coexist, but in no way share missions. Nor do the agencies share resources. DJJ titles are specifically for DJJ—juvenile counselor. ACS are specifically for ACS—CPS, CPM. To successfully merge the two, there needs to be one mission, one code of conduct, and exchange of resources (staffing and funding).

Here it appears that the quality of service is undermined by continuous divergence of the two agencies despite the fact that they are under one management. Not only mission alignment does not seem to have taken roots, but even job title reflects the pre-merger affiliations. Differences in culture remain an issue and communication between DJJ and ACS doesn’t seem to have improved by the consolidation.

Post-merger Stage

We asked participants whether they perceive the merger as a success, 4 responded strongly agree, 33 agree, 38 not sure, 21 disagree, and 9 strongly disagree. It must be noted here that the response to this question registered the highest ‘not sure’ in the questionnaire. Responses from follow-up interviews helped clarify the contradiction in the response to this question and other questions pertaining to the reasons for success and existing schism between DJJ and ACS. Table 3 shows the responses to questions relating to the post-merger stage.

Indicator/Response	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
The merger has been a success	4	33	38	21	9	105
The reason for success were planning and implementation	4	24	35	34	8	105
The division between the two agencies is visible	8	55	27	15		105
The merger was about budget not social service	6	43	33	21	2	105
Table 3						

One of those who perceive the merger as a success stated that “I believe the merger makes the ACS stronger as it concentrates more on rehabilitation than incarceration of the juveniles.” Another contradicted that image by reporting that “I have not experienced an impact in our work nor are we informed of what takes place concerning DJJ and our division.” A third respondent added that “the divisions are run separately, the agency overall is divided by the services each division provides.” One possible explanation is that unlike DJJ workers, many of ACS workers did not have to change the way they carry out their daily duties. Another explanation is that almost all the 12 respondents, who joined the agency after the merger, did not seem to have an opinion about the merger impacts or

whether it was a success or not, but they see and feel the differences. A manager commented that “the merger did not assist ACS in meeting its overarching mission”, adding that “there is a clear distinction between ACS and DYFJ (goals/mission), and the cultural difference remains.” Once again, OCCs culture, policies and procedures, and communication remain unresolved in the post-merger phase, which is likely to have impacted mission misalignment, processes, and overall service quality.

When asked whether they thought that the reasons for the merger’s success were careful planning and implementation, the responses were similar to whether they thought the merger was a success in the first place. That appears to be logical and consistent. Participants’ response may help explain the ambivalence about the merger, as one respondent stated that “The merger is supposed to provide better service for younger children that at times must deal with troubles and juvenile court, there is no evidence it did that”. Another participant added that “Through training and well-designed planning and participation, ACS could provide combined approach to juvenile justice and youth issues in NYC.” A training to align mission and goals that is yet to occur.

The discrepancy became even more apparent when we asked participants whether they believe that a visible division between DJJ and ACS still exists after six years of the merger. Overwhelmingly, 63 (60%) believe that there is a visible division between ACS and DJJ. On the first glance, one would expect the response to the question about whether a merger was a success to be consistent with the response to whether a visible division exists or not, i.e. 60 percent were likely to think the merger was unsuccessful. However, as discussed previously, one usually wouldn’t bother to call something a success or a failure if one is indifferent to the process. But it is easier to notice division because employees continue to identify with old titles and divisions. Once again follow-up interviews helped clear the seeming discrepancy. One respondent put it this way: “DJJ is still having difficulties adjusting to ACS.” Another respondent concluded that “It wasn’t a good merger, all the workers seem so unhappy and without happy workers, they cannot get the job done.”

A manager attributed the visible division between the merging agencies to the fact that “there is no cross-divisional meetings that afford either (DJJ or ACS) to benefit globally from the vast services or resources” and that “DJJ has its own code of conduct while ACS has a different code of conduct, the separation of standards of conduct is the clearest example separate and unequal.” This is a clear example of how OCCs are treated in the post-merger stage, the code of conduct shapes culture and culture influences communication, processes and mission. How could there be an improvement in the quality of service when DJJ remains separate

within the ACS. A perceptive respondent attributed the sense of division to resistance, stating that:

When it comes to a merger, both parties should follow the same policy and procedure and have the same mission, but ...ACS works this way and DJJ will continue to work that way. Unity is power to success but this merger will continue to be difficult until employees stop saying, I work for DJJ and start saying we work together for the same reason. Training is not the key, acceptance is the key of merger.

Here force field analysis could provide an insights into why some employees resist the merger (Swanson & Creed, 2014). Good explanations of the merger rationale (to improve quality of service) might have eased the resistance, especially the merger did not involve lay off or major negative impacts on personnel. Finally, when we asked participants: in your personal opinion, was there a conflict between the budgetary goals of the merger and the social service goals of protecting children? 49 (46.57 percent) respondents agreed, 33 were not sure and 23 disagreed. Of those who disagreed, one participant stated that:

I believe merging the two agencies was a great idea, both agencies are/were dealing with a young population that came together on a number of issues ... ACS and DJJ thought about a way to unite the children with their mothers or fathers who were locked up in the system. I believe the focus overall was to unite families, budgetary concerns are mostly always a matter in bringing together agencies or separating them.

Another similar voiced echoed that:

I think the new arrangement was great. It gives youths who are considered dangerous or committed crime an opportunity for improvement. ACS offers many programs for these youths to improve their lives, stay at home with their families, teach them to follow rules and guidelines, and most importantly an opportunity to get an education and improve their lives.

An opposing voice stated, "Mayor Bloomberg merged both agencies for financial reasons." It is evident that the merger has had logical rationale to improve the outcomes for juvenile by bringing all welfare and deterrence in one house and some employees see the point, the challenge is whether it did that.

Conclusion

Inter-agency consolidation whether driven by cost reduction or quality of service remains a topic that call for further empirical examinations. Earlier, we speculated that employees' continuing identification with old agencies indicates that the OCC (culture, policies and procedures, and communication) were not sufficiently addressed during the three stages of merger. While the employees' perception about the merger were not conclusive one way or another— more so in the post-merger stage— regarding the merger success, there is however strong case that culture, policies, and communication remain divergent between DYFJ and ACS despite being one agency for over six year. Such divergence has implications for mission alignment and employees' understanding of their role, which affected the service quality from employees' perspectives. Employees' views revealed no evidence that the merger has positively impacted how well ACS protects children because the Division of Youth and Family Justice is in the house, which still is referred to as DJJ. What purpose would having DJJ as part of ACS serve if vision, mission, culture, policies, code of conduct, values and assumptions remain frozen in the pre-merger stage? This is to suggest that our speculations about the merger of DJJ into ACS were confirmed.

There is no conclusive evidence as to why employees' perceive the merger of DJJ into ACS this way. Similar to findings from previous studies, it is possible that the pre-merging status of merging DJJ and ACS determined the post-merger organizational identification. It could also be the poor design in the pre-merger stage coupled with implementation mishaps during the merging stage. It is also plausible that not fully involving employees in the merger process is responsible for the existing divergence between employee's perception and management declared intentions. However, none of these explanations can justify maintaining different policies and procedures. Additionally, there appears to be relative post-merger internal conflict between two perspectives: the minority voice which believe that functional expedience could be achieved versus those who believe that the tension between law enforcement and welfare coupled with the way the merger was carried out is unlikely to improve the service quality. Here come our study limitation as it cannot offer broad and accurate generalization about the merger. Yet, this study revealed signs of incomplete merger, which may lead to ill-conceived goals and misalignment of the organization's mission. While the overlap of activities between then DJJ and ACS was used to justify the merger to better

serve children and juvenile in NYC, there is no evidence for improvement of service quality based on employees' views or general news coverage of the agency's records. Mission-driven training appears to be one area that ACS management can do to create a sense of one organization with unified goals.

For broader policy implication, reviewed literature along with findings of this study suggest that inter-agency merger, like municipal consolidation, neither saves cost nor improves quality of service. An alternative approach to functional expedience calls for consideration, perhaps simultaneous dual process of service merging leading to complete absorption of one agency by another over a period of time. Finally, an area of exploration for future research can be on the effect of time on change of perceptions within merging organization. Intellectually, given all what we know about complex organizations in the 21st century, we have to be cognizant of the fact that organizational realities often take a life of their own, including identification, which can make them less responsive to rational assumptions.

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