

The worst of times? A tale of two HEIs in France (0235)

Introduction

Like Ursin's paper in this symposium, this paper examines institutional merger. It presents the findings of a case study of the merger of two French higher education institutions.

The study was an opportunistic undertaking. I learned of an impending institutional merger that was to occur: a national research institute was to be integrated within a *grande école* in a French city. (*Grande écoles* are elite higher education institutions; they are the Oxbridge of the French higher education system.) Having always wanted to research an educational institution in transition, I seized the initiative and sought – and was granted – permission to research the integration process as an outsider. My interest was principally in examining its impact on the attitudes and the working lives of the individuals affected by it: staff employed at both institutions, but focusing particularly on those employed at the smaller institution – the research institute – being integrated within the *grande école*.

The research design

My research design was focused on three inter-related research questions:

- What perceptions of the institutional merger in principle are held by those employed at the two institutions?
- What are the effects on the working lives of these individuals of the integration process?
- How do individuals respond to these effects?

I was interested in uncovering individuals' 'ideological responses' and 'participative responses', which respectively refer to the extent to which individuals consider specific change to be 'ideologically acceptable', and the extent to which they consider specific change 'pragmatically acceptable' (Evans, 2000). I chose one main method of data collection: semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with a sample of over 20 employees of both institutions, particularly those employed in the research institute. This was supplemented by documentary analysis. The interview sample comprised mainly academic and teaching staff, but also managerial, administrative and clerical staff. Several individuals were interviewed on two occasions: first, within weeks of the official date of the institutional merger, and, again, six months later, when the effects of any changes on the practicalities of day-to-day working had been felt.

Theoretical Perspectives

My research design and the impetus for undertaking the study were prompted and informed by the work psychology knowledge base, particularly as it has been applied to education contexts. The institutional merger, I realised, was bound to constitute substantial change to the working lives of many people. Cherished ways of working - habits that had been formed over months and years of repetitive routine - were under threat. Likening it to bereavement, Maris (1974) equates change with loss, and the inevitable attitudinal and emotional responses

to the loss of significant valued elements of one's daily life are likely to include one or more of: dissatisfaction, lowered morale, demotivation, despondency and frustration. The higher education research literature provides a growing body of evidence of academics' responses to actual or anticipated changes to aspects of their working lives (Evans & Abbott, 1998; Halsey, 1995), most recently including perceived changes to professionalism and professional status to result from what is collectively referred to as 'new public management' (e.g. Enders et al., 2009; Jones, 2006; Kolsaker, 2008; Neave, 2009).

It would be interesting to examine, I noted, whether my interviewees reported any of the seven specific 'strategies and adaptations' identified by Sikes (1992, p.45) as individuals' responses to change: 'carrying on as before', 'forming cliques, factions and enclaves', 'leaving', 'becoming career entrepreneurs', 'general resistance and sabotage', 'shifting the balance', and 'grasping the opportunity', and which, if any, of three attitudinal responses to change they manifested: *resentment*, *resignation* or *receptivity* (Evans, 2000).

The findings: an outline overview

Findings revealed a predominantly negative picture, which I expand upon, using illustrative quotes from research interviews, in my symposium presentation at the conference.

From the moment of its being announced the merger was vociferously opposed - particularly by employees of the research institute, who mobilised the forces of trade unions and support from the international research community, launching a petition and publicising their opposition on dedicated websites. Such opposition proved fruitless, and the merger went ahead as planned, having been ordained by the French Ministry of Education.

The first set of interviews with employees of the research institute presented a collective picture of cynicism tinged with disillusionment, and – on the part of those who had been union activists – of failure on their part. Several interviewees – those with temporary contracts – expressed grave concern for their future employment prospects at the institute. These individuals were concerned for their livelihoods, and their considerable anxiety was underpinned with uncertainty and insecurity stemming from having been kept very much in the dark about what was to become of them.

Others, more sanguine and secure about issues of tenure, expressed opposition to the merger on several bases, most notably that it was unjustified and unnecessary from an economic perspective, and, from a more ideological perspective, that it undermined the mission and the work of the institute. Reflecting Nias's (1989, p. 62) observation that 'modifications in professional practice often require individuals to alter deep-rooted, self-defining attitudes, values and beliefs; the personal redefinition which this involves is likely to be slow, stressful and sometimes traumatic', the irony was highlighted by several interviewees that such an institute, whose researchers had for many years been committed to revealing injustice and promoting equality of opportunity in the compulsory education sector, should now be absorbed within France's most elite higher education sector. For some, this was a source of immense dissatisfaction.

Most alarming, though, were findings from the second tranche of interviews, carried out some six months after the merger. By this time a new director of the institute was in place, answerable to the director of the 'parent' grande école, and this new broom was, from all accounts, sweeping clean, brushing aside all who did not correlate with his vision. 'An intolerable atmosphere' as one interviewee – a distinguished professor nearing retirement – put it.

The findings are analysed within several related theoretical frameworks – sociological and psychological - with the purpose of shedding light on what accounts for the

attitudinal responses to the merger expressed by interviewees, and any disparity between them.

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