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Sally Riad

Abstract

This paper argues that knowledge on ‘organizational culture’ has acquired authority and constitutes a ‘truth’ on mergers, a truth imbued with both enabling and constraining power effects. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, the paper theorizes ‘organizational culture’ as a discursive formation that is implicated in a regime of truth. This regime has involved a process of disciplinary normalization in merger integration with the result that ‘culture’ has become naturalized to ‘organization’. Drawing on ethnographic research into merger integration, these arguments are illustrated through two vignettes titled ‘surveillance’ and ‘sanctuary’. These represent the reproduction of, and resistance to, the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’. The implications of critically examining ‘organizational culture’ in this way are twofold: first, it opens up space for other merger discourses, and second, it enables positioning of merger accounts within cultural discourses in a way that forwards productive rather than divisive effects in theory and practice.

Keywords: merger, organizational culture, discourse, power

‘Everyone knows that culture does something, somewhere, somehow…’ (Merger change manager)

‘Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true … the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.’ (Foucault 1980: 131)

‘Organizational culture’ has become a popular topic in mergers, one that is now accorded central relevance in both academic and organizational settings. Within the academic literature, merger authors have adopted diverse positions on the topic (Gertsen et al. 1998) reflecting the variety in approaches to ‘organizational culture’ more broadly (Alvesson 2002; Martin 2002). However, rather than contribute to knowledge on the topic, or coin yet another definition of ‘organizational culture’, this paper critically examines how such knowledge has acquired authority and constitutes the truth on mergers at a certain point in time. It argues that ‘organizational culture’ is not simply a root metaphor or a variable (Alvesson 2002); it is a prime example of Jeffcutt’s (1994) notion that an understanding of organization organizes understanding. Such understanding is constituted through power relations,
enabled by a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980: 133). In examining the power
dynamics of knowledge on ‘organizational culture’, quote marks are utilized
to designate the term as a contested site.

The paper departs from both the rational fit and process approaches to
‘organizational culture’ in mergers, adopting a Foucauldian perspective that
analyses socio-political relations (Prichard et al. 2004). There is variety in
what constitutes a ‘Foucauldian perspective’ (Burrell 1988) — indeed,
Foucault’s work shifts in emphasis and also includes a range of variegated
and overlapping discussions. This paper is inspired by the notion of a
discursive formation, one that Foucault introduces in his earlier work (e.g.
Foucault 1972), but then redevelops in his later work (Dreyfus and Rabinow
1983). A formation involves the operation of several statements together —
here on ‘organizational culture’ — to sustain a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault
1979, 1980, 1983). The analysis in this paper is concerned with what
discourse does (Prichard et al. 2004): ‘What is questioned is the way in which
knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power’ (Foucault 1983:
212). The study utilized is based on long-term ethnographic research, enabling
me to illustrate the argument in an organizational setting. Hence, the contribu-
tion of the paper is twofold: its analysis represents a rare example of a
Foucauldian perspective on ‘organizational culture’ in mergers and, in turn,
it opens further space for future studies that adopt a critical position.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it sets the merger scene, describing
the implication of the literature with ‘organizational culture’. It then intro-
duces the approaches to discourse and power on which the arguments and
method are based and illustrates how ‘organizational culture’ is implicated
in a regime of truth. Next, it describes the ethnographic research into a merger
in the New Zealand public sector, presenting two vignettes that illustrate the
power of ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration. Finally, the paper
concludes with implications for future research.

Setting the Scene

Integral to merger folklore has been the indication of merger failure
somewhere between 50% (Porter 1987) and 80% (Marks and Mirvis 2001).
Notions such as the significance of implementation in determining the
performance of a merger and that effective merger integration increases
chances of success have spawned considerable literature on managing merger
integration (Larsson and Finkelstein 1999; Ravenscraft and Scherer 1989).
Yet that shadow of failure still lurks. Together with high rates of merger
activity, it has ensured a wide and consistent space for contribution. Hence,
research on merger management has tended to focus on organizational perfor-
mance and the factors that are likely to influence it. Enter ‘organizational
culture’.

‘Organizational culture’ entered into discussions of mergers in the mid-
1980s (e.g. Buono et al. 1985; Marks and Mirvis 1985; Walter 1985). Very
quickly thereafter the literature found significance and strategic utility in it.
Within the rational fit approach to mergers (e.g. Chatterjee 1986), interest
turned to ‘culture fit’ (Olie 1994) as a component in pre-merger prescriptions (e.g. Cartwright and Cooper 1993). This was a contingency-based mould (Burns and Stalker 1961) of ‘organizational culture’ that attempted to gauge the potential compatibility of the two merger partners. Research themes on ‘culture fit’ included the match between ‘organizational cultures’ more broadly (Chatterjee et al. 1992; Very et al. 1997), the compatibility of management styles (Datta 1991; Larsson and Finkelstein 1999) and the extent of organizational autonomy (Datta 1991; Very et al. 1997; Weber 1996).

‘Organizational culture’ also became integral to the process approach to mergers (Jemison and Sitkin 1986). This body of work emphasized that organizations faced constraints inherent in the very processes and managers that drove mergers. The process perspective attempted to combine pre-merger fit with post-merger integration (Haspeslagh and Jemison 1991), highlighting a process-based contingency theory (Hunt 1990) in which ‘organizational culture’ played a central role. Some process authors examined its impact on integration outcomes (e.g. Pablo 1994) while others highlighted the potential variation in merged ‘organizational culture’ outcomes through the notion of ‘acculturation’, introducing acculturative stress (Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1988) and acculturative tension (Elsass and Veiga 1994).

Overall, most merger authors now operate from the normative assumption that a catalytic ‘organizational culture’ is essential to the creation of value. Yet, they forewarn of the immediate concern: that the interaction of the two ‘organizational cultures’ could result in a loss rather than a creation of value (Haspeslagh and Jemison 1991). Merger failure has become associated with haunting notions such as ‘culture clash’ or ‘culture ambiguity’ — generally situations that represent problems for effective integration (Datta 1991; Marks and Mirvis 1985; Nahavandi and Malekzadeh 1988). Indeed, most of the merger literature underlines ‘cultural differences’ — if not to assert the role of differences then to assert the popularity of the notion (Chatterjee et al. 1992; Larsson and Lubatkin 2001).

In considering the merger literature, two issues are relevant to this discussion. First, not all the merger literature has approached ‘organizational culture’ from an essentialist or managerialist position in which culture is reduced to variables and is the prerogative of managers. Some authors have approached it from social constructivist premises in which culture is fluid, constantly being recreated and negotiated by participants (e.g. Gertsen and Söderberg 1998). This approach also includes seminal work by Vaara (1999, 2000) that examines the politics of ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration, offering a rare recognition of the political sense-making of ‘organizational culture’. This body of work, however, reproduces the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’. Second, there is increasing interest in discourse analytic work on mergers (e.g. Comtois et al. 2004; Fursich 2002; Vaara 2002; Vaara and Tienari 2002). Specifically, in identifying success and failure narratives, Vaara (2002) identifies a ‘cultural’ discourse — a theme associated with a general cultural perspective on organizations that predominantly focuses on nation-alistic discourses. My paper shares epistemological similarities with other discourse analytic work on mergers through its ascription to the constitutive
role of language. However, the key distinction in the perspective I adopt is that it aims at highlighting truth effects, the organizing power of ‘organizational culture’ as a discursive formation (Foucault 1979, 1980) in merger integration. I proceed to expand on this position.

**Discourse, Power and ‘Organizational Culture’ in Merger Integration**

This paper is based on Foucault’s (1979, 1980) notion of discourse as a set of language and practices that provide knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. This perspective has developed into an established body of work in the management literature (e.g. Burrell 1988; Knights and Morgan 1991; McKinlay and Starkey 1998; Townley 1993). Discourse can offer a re-interpretation of a phenomenon, opening out for it a new field of rationality (Foucault 1980); as such, ‘organizational culture’ becomes a form of rationality on merger integration. Discourse on ‘organizational culture’ represents the state of knowledge on mergers, appearing across a range of texts and practices and at a range of institutional sites within society. This is representative of Foucault’s notion of a discursive formation, the operation of several statements constituting a body of knowledge (here on ‘organizational culture’), which work together to construct a specific topic of analysis in a particular way, according to the rules of the formation (Foucault 1972: 38; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). Discourse constructs the topic:

> ‘discourse “rules in” certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself … [and] it “rules out”, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it.’ (Hall 1997: 44)

From this perspective ‘organizational culture’ was produced (i.e. does not pre-exist discourses about it) and only becomes salient within institutional and moral frameworks both academic and practitioner. ‘Organizational culture’ is regulated by discursive practices and disciplinary techniques (from the ‘culture survey’ to publications on ‘organizational culture’), measures that define what can and cannot be done and said about it. These ensure that ‘organizational culture’ is not simply the subject of reflexive research into common meanings; rather, it is implicated in the rule of the common truth (Foucault 1979).

To Foucault (1980), truth is part and parcel of power. Truth is produced by power and produces regular effects of power. So when certain types of discourse function as true, power is inherent within them; ‘knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of “the truth” but has the power to make itself true…’ (Hall 1997: 49). Yet, this is not an all-embracing theory of power. The emphasis is on power relations and specific power-knowledge configurations (Foucault 1980; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994; Prichard et al. 2004): in this case, power-knowledge configurations of ‘organizational culture’.

Two points are relevant to this discussion. First, power here is not necessarily negative or constraining; rather it has positive productive effects...
And second, power and resistance are entwined; they are not separate notions in a binary (as in, for example, the concept of ‘resistance to change’). Power is productive of resistance, and hence can be understood in terms of the resistance it generates or manages (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994). Foucault (1983) utilizes resistance as the starting point in locating and analysing power relations. Furthermore, resistance is not necessarily negative. Resistance can operate from within power; individuals can exercise power to resist certain elements of ‘organizational culture’, but then appropriate other elements of it in different contexts. Also, people can engage in “playing” of power relationships against one another by exploiting the various tensions within the discursive relations’ (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994: 178). In the case of ‘organizational culture’ these can involve the exploitation of tensions (whether by academics or practitioners) between different positions on the topic.

‘Organizational Culture’ as a Regime of Truth in Merger Integration

‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A “regime” of truth. (Foucault 1980: 133)

Foucault (1980: 131–132) characterizes the “political” economy of truth’ by several traits that bear relevance to ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration. First, ‘truth’ is centred on scientific discourses and their production. In this, the earlier discussion of the merger literature illustrates how discourses on ‘organizational culture’ established it through a process of disciplinary normalization, in Foucault’s (1979) terms. The ultimate effect of this process is that ‘culture’ has become natural to ‘organization’, i.e. naturalized, a notion to which I return later in this section. Second, a regime of truth is constantly incited by economic and political dynamics. Indeed, Barley and Kunda (1992) credit the 1980s wave of mergers and acquisitions with fuelling interest in ‘organizational culture’ as a form of normative control more broadly. Further, ‘organizational culture’ sits within the wider political salience of cultural discourses throughout Western societies (Hannerz 1999). Third, the developed ‘truth’, here ‘organizational culture’, ‘is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information….)’ (Foucault 1980: 131). For example, a search in the English language via Proquest online offers over 2000 articles that have appeared in print over the last four years in which the notion of ‘organizational culture’ is discussed as part of the merger process. This is not to mention books, conferences, courses, workshops and various other forums for discussing merger integration. Such accounts normalize the role of ‘organizational culture’ in mergers and make it seem inevitable. Having established that reality, discourse defines the problems that it is likely to solve: problem definitions are represented through discussions that highlight the role of cultural differences (e.g. Chatterjee et al. 1992), the resultant culture clash (e.g. Buono et al. 1985) and associated merger failure...
(e.g. Cartwright and Cooper 1993). Or the reverse: authors introduce the notion of culture fit and its role in successful integration and performance (e.g. Very et al. 1997).

Fourth, ‘truth’ is reproduced under the dominant control of political and economic apparatuses such as academia, consultants, the media and legal entities (Foucault 1980). I briefly sketch the role of each in transmitting ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration. Academics continue to research and present ‘organizational culture’ as pivotal to mergers. Out of the above-mentioned articles, 230 have appeared in peer-reviewed publications; mergers are usually presented as a context where managers cannot afford to overlook ‘organizational culture’. Also, consultants working in merger integration explicitly adopt a position on managing ‘organizational culture’ and incorporate that into their prescriptive books (e.g. Feldman and Spratt 1999). Books aside, merger integration has witnessed the rise of a ‘culture clash’ prevention and mediation industry — an active profession of trainers and consultants trying to raise awareness and prevent the potential problems of ‘organizational culture’ in mergers.

Further, the media plays an important role in reproducing merger discourses (Fursich 2002; Vaara and Tienari 2002) and it has represented the role of ‘organizational culture’ in mergers quite vividly. Both Chatterjee et al. (1992) and Very et al. (1997) mention the strong interest that the media has expressed in ‘organizational culture’ — e.g. cultural differences, culture clash — and the role that this has played in influencing perspectives on mergers including that of the capital asset market. Finally, ‘organizational culture’ is being formalized into the aspect of mergers most associated with ‘hard facts’ and legal considerations: the due diligence process. For example, Galpin and Herndon (2000: 26) argue that ‘there is far more convincing and strategic evidence to indicate a direct financial and legal impact of organizational culture’. The authors describe a US-based Supreme Court ruling that established ‘organizational culture’ as a viable consideration in merger decisions. This represents the ultimate in legitimation of ‘organizational culture’.

The last of Foucault’s (1980) points is that ‘truth’ becomes an issue of debate and ideological struggle. Indeed, ‘organizational culture’ is the site of debate in organization studies more broadly. Some of this debate addresses whether ‘organization culture’ is something an organization has/is (Smircich 1983) and presents distinctions between perspectives on ‘organizational culture’ as the ‘glue’, unitary and unique, versus perspectives on it as fragmented and ambiguous (Alvesson 2002; Martin 2002; Parker 2000). Such ideological debate is also unfolding in the literature on merger integration, one key example being the various positions on ‘organizational culture’ in mergers reviewed in Gertsen et al. (1998). The point to note here is that discursive formations involve the operation of several discourses. Indeed, some of the positions in this ideological debate approach ‘organizational culture’ in mergers critically, arguing against its essentialization and favouring culture as an outcome of social constructs that result in partly shared patterns of meaning (e.g. Gertsen and Søderberg 1998; Søderberg and Björkman 2003). Yet, the cohesion of a discursive formation does not depend
on agreement between statements; indeed there may be fierce internal debates within a field of knowledge that may appear irreconcilable. However, this does not undermine the creation of a body of truth around a particular object in a systematic way (Hall 1992). Debate normalizes statements that all organizations have/are ‘cultures’ with the basic challenge being how and through what measures to define it. What is not challenged is the relevance and the necessity of the notion (Knights and Morgan 1991). Further, ‘organizational culture’ can be more seductive than other normalized truths since cultural ascription is inherent to social constructionist approaches more broadly. The irony is that while the ‘cultural’ was introduced to counteract the essentialization of the ‘natural’ (Hall 2001), ‘organizational culture’ is now naturalized; in other words, ‘organizational culture’, like ‘nature’, now fixes and reifies difference, securing discursive closure. In critiquing ‘the new naturalized space of culture’ in political theory, Scott (2003: 97) argues:

‘the new theory … of culture cannot be something given but must, rather, be something that gets established in forms of authoritative discourse. [The new claim] … works well as a subversive claim turned against older essentialisms … It is enough to affirm … that a positive shift has taken place that has finally… supplied culture with the conceptual character it should have had all along.’ (2003: 101, 102)

The task at hand, therefore, is to denaturalize all approaches that engage with ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration with the purpose of opening up space for alternative takes on mergers and enabling reflexive positioning within the topic. The distinction of a Foucauldian approach to analysis is that it problematizes truth regimes within which the author is also implicated (Prichard et al. 2004), a notion that I revisit in various parts of this paper.

**Locating the Researcher**

‘…challenges to relationships of power can arise from within the very subject positions such relationships make available.’ (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994: 184)

Discourses on ‘organizational culture’ construct what Foucault terms ‘subject-positions’ from which they come to make sense. Such subjects personify the forms of knowledge produced by the discourse. In the case of ‘organizational culture’, examples of subjects are the ‘organizational member’ and the ‘ethnographer’. In other words, subjects are not only those whom ‘organizational culture’ researches, but those who undertake the research as well. Such subjects have attributes that are defined by the discourse, their conduct organized according to its ideas (Foucault 1983; Hall 1997; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994).

My engagement with ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration came through research into a New Zealand public sector merger. My access to the organizations came by their invitation; one of their members had approached the university to inquire whether a researcher would be interested in studying the dynamics of their merger. I leapt at the opportunity and into the subject position of the ‘ethnographer’, the latter not consciously, however, since at
the time, I was engaging with ‘organizational culture’ from a realist ethnographic tradition (Van Maanen 1988). Scott (2003: 93) describes how a ‘large and growing’ number of theorists feel ‘compelled’ to take account of culture in order to pursue and sustain critical reflection; I was (and in other work, continue to be) one of these, organized by ‘organizational culture’ as a truth regime. The temporal designation of ‘organizational culture’ as a category of research was a priori, its origination from the literature of mergers (Constas 1992). My initial research followed ethnographic prescriptions on analysing ‘organizational culture’ in which I documented rituals, symbols and quotes (e.g. Bate 1997; Van Maanen 1988). However, in the process of identifying sources of category nomination and then verification of ‘organizational culture’, I was struck by how commonplace the term was in that merger’s discussions (an observation also made by Vaara 1999). This led me to reposition my research to focus on how ‘organizational culture’ is appropriated in merger discussions with an emphasis on its rhetorical role in shaping meaning for participants (Edwards and Potter 1992; Gergen 1985; Shotter 1993). When I wrote up that work, the process of reflexively writing myself into the research (Altheide and Johnson 1994) generated my resistance to ‘organizational culture’ as a regime of truth. Hence, this paper provides a rereading of ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration, illustrating the argument with vignettes from that larger study.

Method

The merger researched represented an integration of two independent and long-established government organizations in New Zealand: Terra and Argo. With this announcement, however, government also announced a large internal merger within Terra: TerraCorp, previously a standalone unit within Terra being prepared for privatization, would be merged back with the core organization. Hence, in practice, this was a merger of three entities. The integration period allocated to the transition was eight months, at the end of which the new organization would officially commence operation. I spent the latter seven months with all parties to that merger, the ethnographic fieldwork including (Bate 1997; Van Maanen 1988):

- Observation at integration meetings (Schwartzman 1993): an average of ten hours a week, a total of 119 meetings. Based on the organizations’ request, I was only an observer, not a participant in these meetings.
- Observation with some participation within other forums such as plenary, special event lunches and dinners and a two-day post-integration review process.
- Conversations with various members before and after meetings and at chance encounters, coffee breaks and cafeteria lunch.
- Interviews: four focus group interviews with people within their original team structure (described in the next section) and in-depth individual interviews with the chief executive of the combined organization, the
transition team manager, and the three change team managers. These were tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

- Document collection, both internal (including emails, minutes of all the meetings, newsletters, press releases and integration plans) and external (Parliamentary debates and media articles).
- Compilation of the organizations’ histories using archival material such as annual reports, media sources and organizational reports.

Throughout the research, I systematically took notes in a field diary including verbatim quotes as well as description of events. Emphasis in the analysis was on conversations and practices among those researched, identifying when ‘organizational culture’ was featured as the starting point of discussion or event, and when it surfaced in other discussions or events. This analysis (Knights and Morgan 1991; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994; Prichard et al. 2004) focused on identifying

- subject positions in power/knowledge relations involving ‘organizational culture’,
- official knowledges on ‘organizational culture’ implicated with associated, situated organizational practices,
- specific forms of knowledge (on ‘organizational culture’) that are deployed to shape the conduct of others — i.e. the practices through which power is rendered operable,
- differences between formal knowledges (defined, intelligible way of talking) and subjugated knowledges (restricted ways of talking) and how these are appropriated in struggles within power relations,
- the playing out of the various tensions between the discursive elements in ‘organizational culture’; how people resist some elements of ‘organizational culture’ and appropriate others.

Altogether, these elements were pulled into two vignettes. The vignettes are not intended as validation for the role of ‘organizational culture’ by offering a rich description of ‘cultural dynamics’; rather they illustrate how the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ engage organizational members as subjects whose merger is an attempt to combine ‘organizational cultures’ — such knowledge then deployed in situated organizational practices. Pseudonyms have been used for the organizations and the participants.

In the first instance, I map out the broader discursive context (Prichard et al. 2004) and present the intersection of discourses on ‘organizational culture’ that constituted the milieu in which this merger was positioned.

**Locating the Merger: A ‘Culture of Restructuring’**

By the late 1990s, restructuring had been so extensive in the New Zealand public sector that the State Services Commissioner described it as ‘a culture of restructuring’ (Beware 1998). By then, the New Zealand public sector had been governed for over a decade through principles grounded in a few key theories, two of which are relevant to this discussion: public choice theory
(Hood and Jackson 1991) and new public management or ‘managerialism’ whereby public sector departments could be run like the private sector (Boston et al. 1996; Stace and Norman 1997). The appropriation of public choice theory had resulted in explicit structural outcomes with departure from large-scale vertical integration and development of a small-is-beautiful ethic (Stace and Norman 1997) whereby departments were broken off into independent entities or privatized. Such structural changes accorded ‘change management’ a central role within organizations, mainly mediated by managers and human resource professionals. With ‘change management’ came ‘organizational culture’, predominantly shaped by the human relations and organizational development traditions. On the other hand, new public management was a movement crossing national boundaries. Yet, while ‘new’ to public management, its basic principle was one of the oldest known to general management: ‘Let the managers manage’ (Mintzberg 1996: 79), then reward or replace them depending on performance. With managerialism came culturalism (Parker 2000), ‘organizational culture’ as the property of managers and a normative ideology of control (Barley and Kunda 1992; Jeffcutt 1994).

These two approaches to ‘organizational culture’ institutionalized the notion in the public sector. Yet, its salience did not sit in a vacuum; it was immersed in cultural discourses within New Zealand more broadly whereby ‘culture’ had become the default term in race relations (Goldsmith 2003; Wetherell and Potter 1992) and ‘cultural differences’ commanded respect.

In the late 1990s, government sought to reduce expenditure, realize synergies and increase coordination between public departments. This initiated attempts at horizontal integration and some vertical integration of previously independent departments through mergers. By then, organizational members were well versed in private sector literature, terminology and practices — inclusive of ‘change management’, ‘organizational culture’ and, significantly, ‘culture differences’.

The Vignettes

‘All along we had talked about the cultures being so different.’ (Argo change management team member)

Well before the merger was publicly announced, discussions of ‘cultural differences’ were at the forefront of concerns shared within the organizations, as well as among some external stakeholders. The decision-making review process had documented wariness that Argo, the smaller and more focused of the two organizations, could be ‘marginalized’. Further, the press became vocal about the merger, articulating warnings that Argo would be ‘submerged’. Over the years, Argo had built up a very positive image of its organizational practices, championed by the chief executive and senior managers’ commitment to organizational development. Through positive appraisal by the media that was replicated within other organizational settings in the public sector (e.g. HR groups, university seminars), Argo had come to
symbolize how a public sector organization could rival the practices of private sector firms. A key factor in discussions by Argo’s senior managers and organizational members was their ‘organizational culture’, one that had been ‘hand built’, to use a senior manager’s term. When the merger came into consideration, explicit fears were articulated by senior managers about the potential ‘destruction’ of that ‘organizational culture’ if the new organization were predominantly driven by Terra’s traditions. To appease concerns, the central government departments legally rendered the combination a ‘merger’ rather than an ‘absorption’ of a smaller, focused, department by a larger, more diverse one. The formal strategic review proposed ‘explicit communication to staff of the vision, values and intended culture’.

The management set-up for the merger included three change management teams, one for each entity, and a transition team. The change management teams had been developed by some managers in the organizations well before the merger was announced. Their key initial purpose was facilitating discussion, a key feature of which was ‘organizational culture’. Once the merger was announced, these teams were given predominantly ‘operational’ responsibility for employee change processes such as appointments and support systems. Further to these teams, with the announcement of the merger, government appointed a transition team that was charged with the overall strategic responsibility for the merger’s integration, including organizational design. The team comprised a member from each of the three organizations, representatives from central government departments and consultants in finance, IT and communications.

While the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ had shaped the pre-merger dynamics, they were also implicated with integration practices. Throughout the integration period, explicitly driven by an urge to prevent ‘culture clash’, the change management teams had endeavoured to develop an awareness of the respective ‘organizational cultures’ (as recommended by some merger authors, e.g. Buono et al. 1985). As integration proceeded, however, there were repeated announcements of merger decisions that disappointed Argo members. These included the appointment of the chief executive of Terra as the chief executive of the new organization, the similarity of the new organizational structure to Terra’s, as well as other decisions on appointments and physical premises. Hence, Argo change management team members repeatedly voiced concerns that the outcome for Argo had become a ‘takeover’ whereby there would be a ‘loss of culture’.

Below, I present two vignettes titled ‘surveillance’ and ‘sanctuary’. The former represents interactions on ‘organizational culture’ between the transition team and the change management teams, and the latter focuses on selected dynamics across the change management teams. Where the term ‘member’ is utilized, it implies a team member rather than an organizational member more broadly.
Vignette 1: Surveillance

As societal practices develop that reproduce ‘organizational culture’ as a truth, it becomes embedded in merger techniques. One of these activities is the ‘organizational culture’ audit. A legacy of the rational ‘fit’ approach to mergers, the culture audit was introduced to the merger literature to gauge the ‘culture fit’ between the merging parties (e.g. Cartwright and Cooper 1993). The culture survey was formally introduced in this merger by the transition team to identify the type of ‘organizational culture’ preferred by organizational members and to aid in the organization design.

Sean, a transition team member from Argo, had suggested that the survey would offer ‘a broad overview’ since the team was ‘working with two different structures and cultures’. Although not explicitly drawing on Cartwright and Cooper’s (1993) work, the survey bore resonances in two ways. First, it was based on Harrison’s (1972) typology of ‘organizational culture’, the same used by the authors. Second, Sean’s claims for the benefits of the survey were similar to those offered by the authors: that it would provide the knowledge to assess the expectations of both sides for the new organization, and that could be used in designing the merged entity. These were the first official knowledge on ‘organizational culture’ implicated in the event of the survey.

The introduction of the culture survey in this merger elicited torrents of passionate discussion on ‘organizational culture’ in which people played out the various tensions between its discursive elements. The survey became the subject of controversy within the transition team and between it and the other teams. Members of all the change management teams were very vocal in their resistance to it. Despite this, they agreed to implement it, even encouraged their respective organizations to fill it out, but then continued to critique it in retrospect. Across the various teams, there were three main themes to the criticism. The first two themes addressed the utility of the survey and its validity. The third reflected on the role of ‘organizational culture’. I sketch these briefly.

The first concern raised around the culture survey was that of utility: not the utility of ‘organizational culture’ to mergers, but of the culture survey to organization design, the immediate task at hand. Yet several of the people who based their critique of the survey’s utility on time constraints, including the chief executive and the Terra change manager, were quick to point out that the results could be used as a baseline to gauge changes in ‘organizational culture’ over time (similar to Cartwright and Cooper 1993). Yet, formal knowledge on ‘organizational culture’ was more explicitly deployed in struggles within power relations in the discussion of the validity of the technique and the various definitions of ‘organizational culture’.

Having accepted the notion of gauging ‘organizational culture’, people grappled with the means of doing so. On the academic front, as part of the ideological struggles on ‘organizational culture’, debate across the qualitative/quantitative research divide has been rife (Alvesson 2002; Martin 2002). In this case, people either rejected the notion that ‘organizational culture’ could be measured and hence surveyed, or accepted this quantitative proposition but critiqued processual details around its administration that would render
it invalid. At the qualitative end, there was cynicism expressed as to the role of culture surveys. Some change management team members stated that there was literature that questioned the validity of approaching culture through measurement and that quantitative approaches did not ‘do an adequate job’. More specifically, the Terra change manager critiqued the notion that you could offer people a certain set of ‘culture categories’ from which to choose. The Argo change manager also stated that it had become ‘common knowledge’ in organizations that culture surveys were a controversial approach. At the quantitative end of that debate, there was wariness over the ‘numbers game’: if an organization filled out fewer surveys, or had a lower response rate, it might be disadvantaged in the process (an issue that led the members to encourage their respective organizations to fill out the survey, and which was also statistically corrected). One of the interesting arguments on the practical dynamics of administering the survey was posed by a TerraCorp member who stated, ‘We have a culture of not filling out surveys.’ Hence, others in his team argued, a low response rate could invalidate the results. In this case, members had utilized a practice legitimated by its ascription to ‘organizational culture’ to resist the survey as a technique of ‘organizational culture’.

The third theme in these conversations articulated assumptions on the relationship between ‘organizational culture’ and structure. On the one hand, members of the Terra change management team and some of the members on the transition team were of the opinion that ‘organizational culture’ was subordinate to structure. In expressing their scepticism over the use of ‘organizational culture’ to design the organizational structure, Terra members had noted for the minutes of their meeting that ‘it is essential to build the organization first, then the culture comes second’. Within the transition team, some members also pushed for the notion of culture relating to the ‘how’ in organization design, a factor that can only be achieved after structure, or the ‘what’ of organization design. On the other hand, to members on the Argo change management team, ‘organizational culture’ and structure were entwined. They both explicitly stated this as well as used the words ‘culture and structure’ simultaneously in their conversations. To them, ‘organizational culture’ was an integral aspect of designing the new organization; it was the survey as method that inspired their criticism. People described how, over the years, Argo had adopted ‘organizational culture’ as a foundation for organizational development and were proud that they ‘approached matters the culture way’. In effect, these debates had reproduced the is/has binary on ‘organizational culture’ (Jeffcutt 1994; Parker 2000) that was played out in the ‘culture wars’ (Martin 2002): organizations ‘having’ cultures, in which ‘organizational culture’ becomes the ‘how’ versus organizations ‘being’ cultures whereby ‘organizational culture’ is the pivotal notion underpinning all others including strategy and structure (Smircich 1983).

As a regime of truth, ‘organizational culture’ has offered, not one, but a range of variegated and overlapping discourses. People in this merger could represent their own situation as an interaction of ‘organizational cultures’. But then people could also attempt to forward their understanding of ‘organizational culture’ and its respective practices — in this case the culture
survey — to assert their perspective on events and to oppose or enable the intervention. Yet significantly, while the discussions around the culture survey represented official knowledges, all these discussions stood within ‘organizational culture’. There was not a single attempt in this storm of controversy to question its existence. Whether people approached ‘organizational culture’ as something an organization ‘is’ or something an organization ‘has’ (Smircich 1983), they accepted it as real; it was real to the extent that the relevance and accuracy of its assessment was questioned, but not its truth status. In the attempts to identify problems with approaching it and posing alternative explanations or solutions, people factualized their accounts appropriating from the rich repository of academic and practitioner contributions on ‘organizational culture’ that are in circulation. People discussed right ways and wrong ways of intervention and that to do the latter would be ‘dabbling in culture’. In doing so, they were highlighting some elements of ‘organizational culture’ (e.g. questionable validity of measurement and driving assumptions) to resist other elements (e.g. the culture survey) and hence were caught up in its reproduction.

Regardless of the debates surrounding it, in the end, the culture survey in this merger was implemented. Even though there had been some opposition within the transition team, the team decided to go ahead with it. Then, once the transition team had formally made that decision regardless of the change management teams’ protests, the latter formally indicated that they would implement it regardless of their disapproval. I draw on selected dynamics to canvass some power effects of ‘organizational culture’ and to illustrate how resistance to it was overcome.

First, during the debates on the survey, people speculated on the reasons behind its introduction. The prime driver the change management team members attributed to the culture survey was that it filled a ‘void’ or ‘vacuum’ for the transition team, ‘giving them something to do’ at a time when members were not sure how to approach the organization design. Indeed, some transition team members had initially suggested that the results of the survey could be used to draft an organizational ‘vision’. Two of the transition team members supported the change teams’ idea: the culture survey had filled a ‘hiatus’ instigated by the merger. They both attributed that dynamic, however, to a ‘lack of leadership’. Because leadership did not offer a ‘vision’, one suggested, this provided Sean with the opportunity to establish one by resorting to the people in the organisations through a culture survey. In effect, the survey represented a positioning of transition team members as subjects of ‘organisational culture’ whose engagement with it arose initially out of a need for a directional discourse, and to whom ‘organizational culture’ offered generative potential. This generative power in managing ‘organizational culture’ is particularly relevant for mergers because of the uncertainty and the ambiguity for which mergers are notorious (Marks and Mirvis 1985; Jemison and Sitkin 1986; Vaara 2003).

The second consideration focuses on the subject position of the manager engaging with ‘organizational culture’, the focus here on Sean. On the one hand, Sean introduced the culture survey because of the salience of ‘organizational
culture’ in mergers; he was organized by it truth effects. Yet, on the other hand, discourse also has empowering effects (Knights and Morgan 1991). For example, intervention in ‘organizational culture’ can generate a sense of security for managers as subjects through the assurance that their work is in line with the broader prescriptions on mergers and that they are in control of the merger’s integration. This latter dynamic was particularly salient in some of the Sean’s discussions within the transition team of the culture survey. Further, introducing the survey is a strategist’s prerogative since one understanding of ‘organizational culture’ renders it the domain of managerial control (Barley and Kunda 1992; Jeffcutt 1994). However, engagement with ‘organizational culture’ is not simply a strategist’s privilege, it is also a normative expectation in merger contexts. For example, a transition team member had stated,

‘The change management teams took it upon themselves to see to lots of things including culture. But attention should also be paid to it at that higher level.’

Yet the most intriguing dynamic came through change management team members’ articulated opinions of Sean. While there were numerous speculations and suspicions around what drove him to introduce the culture audit, many were still appreciative of his intentions, empathizing that part of that endeavour was a genuine concern for the organization brought about by his background in organizational development. In an interview, his most bitter critic stated,

‘He was absolutely committed to organisational development and had been working a lot in Argo doing that … there was a lot of that side in it.’

This commitment to organizational development that seeks to do things ‘the culture way’ represented a balance to a potentially dry and analytical approach to organizational design. The role of working with ‘organizational culture’ represented the considerate in a strategist that could still deliver the functional. In other words, elevating ‘organizational culture’ to strategic considerations reflected positively on the strategist, providing the image of balance between the strategic and the humane, the analytical and the caring.

The last illustration focuses on the stymieing of resistance involving one of the transition team members. Although included in the ‘strategic’ transition team, Smith’s background had been predominantly operational. I had been exposed to Smith’s ironic description of the culture survey as ‘state-of-the-art cutting edge HR’ in a context away from the transition team in which he had stated that ‘organizational culture’ was ‘a navel-gazing luxury that analysts can afford’. However, he had not formally opposed the culture survey within the transition team. In explaining his position, he stated:

‘I was out of favour at the start. I represented the biggest lump, potentially the most difficult part, and I represented the lowest theoretical base. Academically, I would be the lowest person in that team, which is very important. So I was still seen as operational versus strategic.’

This is an example of Knights and Vurdubakis’ (1994) contrast of ‘knowledge embodied in the formal discourses’ (e.g. academic) with
‘marginalized self-knowledges’ (e.g. of unqualified practitioners). ‘Organizational culture’ is academically endorsed and hence some are not credentialed to critique it. Yet, Foucault’s subjects are not only positioned, they position themselves as well (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994). Smith drew on discursive elements of ‘organizational culture’ at a later stage, explicitly forwarding his understanding of ‘organizational culture’ as the ‘how’, emphasizing the need to understand organizational practices, working with people and getting to know them. For example, he articulated differences between ‘the culture in Argo’ and ‘the culture in TerraCorp’ and how that impacted on service delivery. In other words, discursive elements of ‘organizational culture’ as the ‘how’ enabled him to appropriate its truth effects in his ‘operational’ role. This came as part of his initiation of a range of physical integration projects and at a time when the transition team manager described him as a ‘rough diamond’.

**Vignette 2: Sanctuary**

‘It’s not part of our culture.’ ‘It’s part of our culture.’ ‘It’s about their culture isn’t it?’ (Representative quotes across the various change management teams)

Within this merger, emphasis on ‘organizational culture’ had mainly come from Argo members. It was initiated by Argo change management team members in discussions prior to the merger and predominantly sustained by them throughout the transition. As a group, their subject-position within ‘organizational culture’ was that of the potentially ‘destroyed’ through the merger’s integration. This resulted in disciplining of talk and practices of the other change management teams. Several members repeatedly voiced that they were ‘very careful not to do anything that would upset Argo’ and that they ‘could not say certain things’ because ‘it would upset Argo’. Further, all sides undertook practices that represented official knowledges on ‘organizational culture’; these included workshops and facilitated sessions designed to familiarize each side with the other ‘organizational culture’. Significantly, these practices were aimed at enabling a genuine merger attempt rather than a ‘takeover’. Argo members’ emphasis on ‘the cultures being so different’ not only addressed expectations in terms of outcomes, but also process. They often talked about how they might ‘bring parts of their culture into the new organization’ but also how ‘because of the culture, some things have to be done differently’. These represented specific forms of knowledge on ‘organizational culture’ that rendered power operable. I proceed to elaborate.

Increasingly, as the merger progressed, TerraCorp members became wary of the emphasis on ‘organizational culture’. While Argo as an organization was a fraction of theirs in terms of size, it had gained more attention in the merger process. A few months into the transition process, TerraCorp members started to suspect Argo members of ‘playing the culture game’. They expressed concerns that Argo members’ emphasis on ‘organizational culture’ represented a threat to their group despite its larger size. Hence, the role of their ‘organizational culture’ as part of the internal merger within Terra was overlooked. This became an explicit subject of discussion:
First TerraCorp member: ‘… the small amount of Argo people have actually had a large say given to the extent that yesterday when we were having a meeting about cultures everyone was talking about the culture in new Terra between Argo and Terra and I had to remind them that there are 650 coming back from TerraCorp actually with a third different culture … we just allowed ourselves, I think, to be too soft, I think.’

Second TerraCorp member: ‘I think you’re right. There’s some time that we should have played their game.’

To TerraCorp members, Argo’s emphasis on ‘organizational culture’ had earned it more recognition as a group. This inspired outcome concerns within TerraCorp — concerns that the new organization would be more influenced by Argo’s practices than their own. Eventually, the notion of explicitly using ‘organizational culture’ was also voiced by Terra members, one of whom suggested that Argo members were ‘leveraging culture to gain certain advantages’ in the merger, while another stated that Argo members were ‘using culture as a stamp to authorize actions’. Hence, there were also process concerns.

In discussing Argo’s ‘organizational culture’, TerraCorp members drew on several examples since the start of the merger where they suspected that Argo members were intentionally rigid about what they called things (e.g. ‘teams’ versus ‘units’) and how they did things, and that they justified their rigidity by attributing those practices to ‘organizational culture’. Other TerraCorp members explicitly voiced suspicions that Argo members used practices attributed to ‘organizational culture’ to ‘get power’:

First TerraCorp member: ‘… there was a degree of suspicion in the Argo case and the way they dealt with things was different and their willingness to co-ordinate things like mail-outs, advice to people and things like that was not there. They dealt with their people as their only priority and didn’t worry about the fall-out.’

Second TerraCorp member: ‘Did you think that they were trying to get power in some way?’

While their suspicion of ‘gaining power’ is couched in negative terms and proprietary notions, it represents the members’ awareness of certain truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ and how these had disciplined their conversations and actions. One incident in particular became salient in people’s discussions. It involved confrontation at a meeting between the Argo and TerraCorp members and was concerned with the ways in which the various organizations planned to communicate with their staff during the appointments process. While Argo members insisted on communicating with every organizational member, TerraCorp members stated that this would be logistically impossible due to their group’s significantly larger size. The tension within that discussion rose to its climax when an Argo member said, ‘Your culture might allow you to do this, but ours certainly doesn’t.’

The discussion ended there. The meeting then quickly turned to considerations of other issues. Significantly, however, while TerraCorp members had had the opportunity to voice their resistance to those suspected of drawing on the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’, they had let it pass. Two dynamics
came to my attention: the first from discussion with TerraCorp members, and the second from observations of later meetings.

First, in reflecting on that statement, a TerraCorp member said, ‘What could we have said? “Never mind culture”? How would that have gone down?’ In this case, the member could not articulate the dismissal of ‘organizational culture’ due to the truth effects that could enable an undesired response. ‘Organizational culture’ ruled in appropriate ways of talking and acting and ruled out other ways, disciplining subjects that engaged with it. Hence the formal knowledge that practices are legitimated by culture subjugated this member’s knowledge that she stated within her own team: ‘the issue was to ensure consistent service to employees across all sides in the merger’. She (and two other members) attributed that behaviour to ‘PCness’ or political correctness. In other words, the constraining effects of ‘organizational culture’ had been reinforced by the dominant social norms that mandated a respect for culture in society. Second, after that meeting, each group ‘went off and did its own thing’ (to use an Argo member’s term) in communicating with their staff. Argo managers couriered material to every organizational member, while TerraCorp managers sent the material only to key managers. In effect, taking sanctuary in ‘organizational culture’ had benefited both sides, including the side that had initially voiced wariness of it.

As this incident became critical in the groups’ discussions, TerraCorp members resisted the superiority of Argo’s ‘organizational culture’ insinuated in that statement and dismissed it as derogatory. They suggested that it adopted a ‘holier than thou’ attitude. TerraCorp members continued to suspect the motives behind Argo members’ representation of their ‘organizational culture’ as one of ‘open communication’. Argo’s ‘open communication’ practices quickly thereafter had instigated misunderstanding within TerraCorp where employees thought that their managers ‘were running some secret agenda’. Hence, TerraCorp members were forced to engage with the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ to defend their position. In explaining their decision to limit communication with their employees, the central theme in their discussion was represented in the following statement: ‘I think that at TerraCorp we have this culture of just wanting to get on with it.’

In that discussion, TerraCorp members contrasted their ‘organizational culture’ with those of Terra and Argo by describing their ‘organizational culture’ practices of ‘getting outcomes’ and ‘keeping busy’. For example:

‘Also our staff is busy. If you’re an officer, you’re in a car going around … all day. You’re not sitting down in the twelfth floor across the road with a whole bunch of analysts who’re basically paid to ponder.’

TerraCorp members also associated the practices of being ‘busy’ and ‘getting on with it’ with the need to communicate succinctly rather than proliferate. They took pride in the notion that, unlike Argo, their employees were ‘not into relitigation’. They discussed the frequency in complaint submissions on the appointments process from Argo members, concluding with the question, ‘That’s very much about their culture, isn’t it?’

In framing Argo’s ‘over-communication’ practices negatively and attributing that to ‘organizational culture’, TerraCorp members shifted from
resisting the power effects of ‘organizational culture’ to embracing them, undertaking the very action of which they had accused Argo. Next, TerraCorp members actively utilized other discursive elements of ‘organizational culture’. They associated the positive framing of their ‘organizational culture’ as outcome-oriented with the possible superiority of their own group in the newly merged organization because of its competitive practices:

First TerraCorp member: ‘…people around here who will be going to the new organization are going to be heaps ahead of the organization and the culture they are joining and they will have to determine whether to keep that pace or to start marking time.’

Second TerraCorp member: ‘The culture is a major factor of the environment and the environment that TerraCorp has is that it is a contestable business.’

Hence, the rationale was that TerraCorp members could get ahead in the newly merged organization because of the competitiveness of their ‘organizational culture’, a notion that became salient when the outcomes actually favoured them. The power effects of ‘organizational culture’ were convenient and seductive even for those who had resisted some of its elements. As such, their engagement as subject-positions within the discourse continued. Participation in ‘organizational culture’ is not passive (Knights and Morgan 1991); however, in order to resist certain effects, people engage with its content, appropriating elements of it and thus participating in its reproduction. This creates a lack of reflexivity whereby critics problematize others’ engagement with ‘organizational culture’, yet engage with it themselves.

The Vignettes Concluded

‘When I thought about it afterwards I wondered if it [calling it a merger] had in fact been the right strategy… especially as it became clearer to me that one culture [Terra] had to dominate in a sense that part of this was being done because the government perceived the culture of one organisation [Argo] as wrong.’

In this statement made towards the end of the transition, the chief executive talks about how ‘one culture had to dominate’, an inevitability justified because — ‘part of this was being done because…’ i.e. the motive for the merger — ‘government perceived the culture of one organization as wrong’, i.e. a value judgement of ‘organizational culture’. In this case, a change in ‘organizational culture’ eventually became posed as one of the motives for the merger — when the merger of equals became a ‘takeover’. In Argo’s case, being ‘industry focused’ became described as a ‘wrong culture’ that needed to be changed, enabling Terra to legitimate its domination. Indeed the stability of discursive elements is precarious; elements of power-knowledge relations are always open to rearticulation (Foucault 1980). Since managers could place value statements on ‘organizational culture’ depending on how it served the merger’s motives, an ‘organizational culture’ could be defined as good or bad, right or wrong. The association of ‘organizational culture’ with values has defined their salience, and the association of ‘organizational culture’ with managers has legitimated managerial attempts to set those values that enable their prerogatives. Managers can draw on ‘organizational culture’ to legitimate the exercise...
of power across the two organizations. Hence, in mergers, a good and right ‘organizational culture’ could legitimately dominate the other in attempts at improving it and realizing the motives for the merger.

Conclusion

‘Foucault’s subjects … are a presence within, rather than simply bearers of discursive relations. They are active in both positioning themselves within such relations and in committing themselves to particular subject positions.’ (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994: 184)

The advocates of merger ‘culture fit’ who made their case in the late 1980s/early 1990s would feel vindicated at the extent to which their efforts have secured a concrete acknowledgement of the risks and opportunities inherent in merging ‘organizational cultures’. Like the practitioners in this merger, part of the academic passion for ‘organizational culture’ is a genuine concern for the organizations. Discourse has productive effects; indeed, there have been positives in taking ‘organizational culture’ to merger integration. The notion has drawn attention to the fine grain of people’s interaction in mergers as well as the role of history, traditions and values in organizations. Writing back in 1985, Walter had suggested that mergers represented an assertion of property rights over human rights. The discourse of ‘organizational culture’ has, to some extent, provided voice to the latter: it has enabled people to articulate their concerns for the ‘human side’ of mergers (except where ‘organizational culture’ is approached as the ‘property’ of management).

The emphasis on ‘organizational culture’ in mergers, however, is not only legitimate; it has become normative. This is where the constraining effects of its truth regime come to the surface; it shapes our conduct as researchers and disciplines what can and cannot be said. Indeed, it would be very difficult for an academic to take the step (that the practitioner would not take in this case) and state, ‘never mind culture’. Even the most economically and financially driven would find it hard to voice such a notion in mergers. With the role of ‘organizational culture’ so commonly accepted and valued, critique or opposition to its role, or to the way it is used, is easily repressed. This begs critical reflection on our part as academics: does this enable the organizational equivalent of cultural fundamentalism (Hannerz 1999)? With empowerment through ‘organizational culture’ comes constraint: the potential silencing of other perspectives. In contrast, denaturalization opens up space for other discourses on mergers from positions that may not subscribe to the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’. So while this account argues against the grain, problematizing the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’, it also avoids premature closure by posing organized solutions. Hence, second to the argument against naturalization is an argument for the exploration of positions within ‘organizational culture’ as a discursive formation that enable productive effects. Here, the paper poses several issues for reflection.

To start with, as a researcher examining ‘organizational culture’ in merger integration, one could be caught up in reproducing certain discursive
elements. This is especially the case since ‘organizational culture’ is sustained through a rich repository of everyday language in which practitioners are increasingly well versed and can serve back to researchers. So rather than engage in academic debates that further reify the reality of ‘organizational culture’, the alternative is to explore means that critically examine its taken-for-granted role. ‘Organizational culture’ is very seductive so that, even with the rising discomfort as to how it is utilized, authors — practitioner (e.g. Feldman and Spratt 1999) or academic (e.g. Vaara 1999) — who attempt to resist some of its discursive elements adopt other elements in the process. This has been my experience as well. As a merger researcher, a constructionist and a person with a passion for diversity, I would find it hard to articulate explanations of organization without some cultural ascription; I, too, am disciplined by knowledge on ‘organizational culture’, in other work occupying subject-positions within it. So having attempted to resist the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ in this account, I now commit myself to a subject-position wherein intervention becomes possible through participation.

This alternative position on ‘organizational culture’ acknowledges its power/truth effects and poses a closer examination of the difference implicated in it. While Vaara (1999) suggests that the explanatory power of ‘organizational culture’ makes it useful to practitioners, this is more so for academics. To academics, ‘organizational culture’ not only identifies merger problems for which to provide solutions, it also offers the explanation for why these problems occur. Various activities within a discursive formation reproduce its object as a way of seeing the world. The irony in the case of ‘organizational culture’ is that some of its definitions have explicitly positioned it as defining the different ways in which people come to see the world. As Scott (2003: 103) states, ‘Culture now becomes the universal ground and grid and horizon of difference. It becomes, so to speak, the commanding natural language of difference.’ So merger authors have access to a discourse that sets itself up as an explanatory system for difference in worldviews and hence explains difficulties in mergers. As such, merger researchers continue to find ‘organizational culture’ both relevant and necessary and hence participate in its reproduction. This poses food for thought.

With core discursive elements premised on difference, the truth effects of ‘organizational culture’ can have divisive effects on mergers. While one of the aims in merging is to ensure ‘connectivity’ in various forms by identifying relational premises, ‘organizational culture’ legitimates difference, a very productive effect in many contexts, but potentially a constraining effect in mergers through the polarization of contrasts. Further, the irony is that, while the intuitive assumption is that attention to ‘organizational culture’ could enable merger integration, it also enables resistance by legitimating people’s opposition to the different measures introduced — by providing them with various discursive elements in support of their actions. It also legitimates managerial interventions in mergers by enabling them to ascribe their actions as attempts to overcome ‘cultural differences’ and to weed out the ‘wrong’ elements of an ‘organizational culture’. As Foucault (1980) noted, great themes can be utilized to legitimate any ends.
While authors with very different theoretical perspectives on mergers — positivist (e.g. Larsson and Lubatkin 2001) and constructivist (e.g. Vaara 1999) — now argue that difference is not necessarily problematic in mergers, difference continues to be a salient notion. This raises two issues. First, merger authors need to be wary of the legacy of those discursive elements that can demonize ‘organizational culture’ through the implication of ‘difference’ with ‘clash’. And second, it is timely for the merger literature to re-examine the salience of difference through rigorous exploration into the philosophical premises of why difference matters (Burrell 1988; Hall 2001), the productive effects it can pose and the inclination to simplify it into divisive binaries.

In closing, this paper argues for vigilance in whatever we ascribe to ‘organizational culture’, reflexively acknowledging our own participation in the discourse as we do so. While it is not unusual for the literature to problematize practitioners’ engagement with ‘organizational culture’, the researcher’s implication with truth effects necessitates introspection. Indeed, critical and reflexive engagement becomes particularly central in social constructionist research. The constructionist discipline emphasizes radical uncertainty at the same time as authors ascribe individual identity and sense of being to ‘cultural’ factors. Hence, the challenge for constructionist researchers is to find means of acknowledging and reflexively articulating the social construction of ‘culture’ more broadly, and ‘organizational culture’ specifically. To ignore that would be a realist acceptance of the inevitable role of whatever we term ‘culture’.

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