

Fear, Anxiety, and Loss of Control: Analyzing an Athletic Department Merger as a Gendered Political Process

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This study examined organizational processes involved in a merger between two gender affiliated intercollegiate athletic departments. A conceptual framework incorporating the concepts of gendered social processes, and the transition and integration stages of organizational mergers framed the study. Organizational political activity is perceived as a gendered process in merging groups. Interviews with 57 stakeholders of a university athletic department were conducted. The data analysis showed that gender politics identified in the transition stage involved stakeholders' emotional reactions. In the integration stage, gender politics were evident during the social processes of assessing trust and loyalties, and cultural reengineering. Practical implications for merger facilitation are noted in terms of considering the necessity of merging, the hiring of outside leadership, and implementing a communication plan. Overall, our study furthers our understanding of the gender politics involved in merging gender affiliated sport organizations.

Mergers between gender affiliated sport organizations have been a feature of the sporting landscape for at least the past 40 years. In the United States, most mergers between men's and women's intercollegiate athletic departments occurred subsequent to the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (Gravois & Suggs, 2004). In the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand mergers between sport organizations have largely occurred as a result of neo-liberal influenced government funding, a feature of those countries' sport provision models (Sam & Jackson, 2004). Merged gender affiliated sport organizations are seen by their supporters to be more effective and efficient, organizing the sport and competing as one organization for funding rather than two (Shaw, 2001). Resulting mergers have included the All England Women's Hockey Association combining with the Hockey Association in 1997 to form the English Hockey Association (Shaw, 2001). More recently in New Zealand, (men's) New Zealand Golf and Women's Golf New Zealand merged in 2005 to form New Zealand Golf (New Zealand Golf, 2006).

Despite the prevalence of mergers between gender affiliated sport organizations internationally, there has been little research conducted on these events. This is surprising because although gender is a feature of all mergers (Tienari, 2000), the prevalence of mergers featuring gender-affiliated organizations provides an opportunity to develop sport management research in two specific areas: 1) to better understand this type of merger and the implications of a merger on a sport organization, and 2) to develop gender research, offering an insight into how gender relations unfold within this highly politicized organizational process.

The purpose of our study was therefore to examine the merger of two gender-affiliated athletic departments at a large university, with the intention of developing our understanding of mergers and mergers as a gendered process. To address this research purpose, we have three research questions:

- 1) In what ways were stakeholders' reactions gendered (or seen to be gendered)?;
- 2) What were the political processes undertaken in the merger?; and
- 3) In what ways were those political processes gendered (or seen to be gendered)?

To address these questions, the paper is organized into five sections. The first section highlights the

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conceptual framework of the study. The second outlines the research context. The third describes the research design. The fourth section presents results and analysis, and the fifth provides practical implications and conclusions.

Conceptual Framework

To address the research questions, our study is framed using two stages of Schwieger's (2002) five-stage merger model. The first is the transition stage, which represents the official announcement of the impending merger and continues until the official signing of an agreement (i.e., closing the transaction). Examining the transition phase helps us to analyze the reactions to the merger and thus helps us to address our first research question. The second stage is integration, which commences once a transaction is officially closed and continues until after the merging organizations are integrated. During the integration stage, organizational processes are under scrutiny and may be politicized by groups and individuals attempting to control decision-making. Therefore, the integration stage helps us to address our second and third research questions.

Schwieger's (2002) merger model assists in framing reactions and processes, but is limited for our purpose because it does not explicitly address gender. By weaving gender into this model, we develop a conceptual framework that is sensitive to gender relations. Worts, Fox, and McDonough (2007) described the ubiquity of gender within organizational contexts as, "embedded in workplace organization, culture, and practices" (p. 4). Positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social processes helps us understand how and why gender is a powerful factor in the social and organizational processes that define organizations. Gendering occurs when organizational practices, images, cultures, interactions, and gender appropriate behaviors are linked to socially constructed masculine or feminine ideals (Acker, 1990, 1992; Britton & Logan, 2008).

More recently, Ashcraft (2009) has argued that caution is required in examining gendered processes and that a conventional binary approach to gender, in which the influence of masculinity is seen to be greater than that of femininity, is over-simplified. As she argued research in this area has found "remarkable diversity within gender groups (which) shatters any neat dualism" (Ashcraft, 2009, p. 315). We recognize this cautionary note and distance ourselves from a binary approach to understanding the gendered nature of political processes. We are particularly aware of this given the nature of sport organizations in which, despite deep rifts and differences within the culture of much of women's and men's sports, there are also strong bonds across some sports despite gender differences. It is also naïve to say that 'all women's sport administrations' are marginalized by "all men's sport administrations". We agree with Ashcraft's suggestion that "actual cases are far more complicated and contingent, hinging on local pressures and the interactive

identity work through which people respond" (p. 315). By analyzing a merger, or an "actual case" we will examine the local pressures that influence gender relations within this political process.

The Transition Phase and Gendered Reactions to the Merger

Reactions within the transition phase are characterized by emotion, particularly fear of the unknown, a perceived loss of control, uncertainty of the future, and loss of attachment to an organization (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000). Tienari (2000) offers more depth to this description, arguing that the transition phase prompts "a mosaic of distant, confused, and demoralized employee attitudes and behaviors" (p. 112). Understanding gendered emotion (Knights & Surman, 2002) is important because it plays a key role in how reactions transpire within a merger setting. Research suggests that women are more likely to be adversely affected by mergers than most men because they are often in positions that have less control, and have fewer or less influential support networks within organizations (Collins, 2005; Meyerson & Scully, 2003; Shaw, 2006). A woman whose job is under threat in a merger will therefore most likely react with negative emotions, not because she is a woman but because of the situation she is in. For example, Division I athletic departments typically have one female administrator on staff, usually in the role of Senior Women's Administrators (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Hoffman, 2010). The majority of women's athletic department administrators (which were typically female) will thus be vying for generally one administrative position when departments merge. A man in a similar position might also react emotionally but most men are less likely to be negatively affected in a merger than most women (Collins, 2005). There are typically more senior positions that are traditionally held by men in merged organizations. Analyzing gendered emotional responses is therefore useful, not to gain some insight into an artificially constructed, binary 'essential nature' of being a man or a woman. Rather, it helps to highlight and clarify the gendered emotions attached to being in a particular organizational role, and the perceptions of what will happen to that role, within the merger.

The Integration Phase and Gendered Merger Processes

Processes that occur during the integration phase include development of trust and cultural reengineering. Employee loyalty and trust are derived from the concept of organizational commitment, which is defined as an employee's psychological attachment to an organization (Chen, Tsui, & Fahr, 2002). The integration stage often includes the elimination of operational redundancies, downsizing, and job losses (Schwieger, 2002). Organizational employees' commitments and loyalties may then come under scrutiny as leaders assess attitudes and skills

and make decisions about which employees can offer a good fit in the new organization.

Loyalty, trust, and commitment to an organization and supervisor are performed and assessed via the everyday dialogue and social interactions between group members (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Category-based trust is where trust is predicated on information regarding an individual's membership in a social or organizational category (Kelly & Harris, 2010). Research suggests that category-based trust can increase levels of distrust between individuals from different groups within an organization (Insko & Schopler, 1997). Kramer (1999) found that as a result of social categorization processes, individuals placed into the "out-group" were labeled as less reliable, honest and trustworthy compared with individuals in the "in-group". In a gender specific sport organization, "in groups" and "out groups" are likely to be categorized by gender (Shaw, 2006). Category-based trust is therefore relevant to gender specific sport organizations undergoing a merger as in the process of assessing loyalties, men and particular forms of masculinity may come under different levels of scrutiny when compared with women and varying forms of femininity (Acker, 1992).

Alongside trust, cultural reengineering is an important element of the integration phase and is a key aspect in creating the new organization in a merger. Images and identities are at stake in the process of cultural reengineering, and employees will feel a great deal of loss, express resistance to the change, and hold on to aspects of the previous culture (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000). The creation of culture, images, and symbols not only defines the organization, but also justifies, supports or occasionally opposes embedded organizational divisions and inequalities (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Martin, 2001). Images, symbols and culture serve ideologically to naturalize gender relations and resulting gender disparities (Acker, 1992, 1999; Britton & Logan, 2008).

When organizations with very distinct gendered cultures are forced together, considerable resistance and political activity may occur as stakeholders jockey for position and power (Hubbard, 1999; Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Tienari, 2000). In sport, cultural images and ideals of masculine and feminine can permeate positions resulting in jobs which are perceived to be "masculine" and "feminine". For example, Hovden (2000) reported that gendered images of corporate, heroic leaders permeated the discourses surrounding the selection of leaders in sport organizations. We contend, however, that gender is not just about women being marginalized by men. Rather, that culture is gendered and based on beliefs about women and men, and both genders can be influenced positively and negatively by those beliefs and assumptions (Acker, 1992).

This framework presents an opportunity to address our research questions by showing how a significant organizational event, in this case a merger, can be understood through expressed emotions and cultural change. By examining this process as gendered, we intend to examine

how and why gender is central to this process to provide an insightful, nuanced understanding of it.

Research Context

The research setting was the 2002 amalgamation between the men's and women's athletic departments at a large National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institution. The athletic department is a broad based program that sponsors 25 sports (12 men's and 13 women's), with an operational budget of just over \$53 million reported for the fiscal year in which the study was conducted (www.usatoday.com, 2003–2004). The respective athletic departments were separate for 29 years and while they were common in their central purpose and loyalties, they were widely divergent in philosophies and management styles. The women's program represented an "educational model", which rewarded academic achievement first, and winning second, and served as a national model for athletic departments. The women were solid performers in the NCAA with a women's hockey national championship, six top ten national finishes, and nine conference champion teams (Goetz, 2001) and, therefore, had a strong, successful identity. The former women's AD was a renowned advocate of gender equity and had developed a supportive booster base. As a result, there was limited tiering of sports and in general all the women's sports were valued. Furthermore, the women's program enjoyed much success in terms of building quality facilities, winning teams, displaying strong student-athlete academic records, females serving in administrative and coaching roles, and acquiring financial resources. However, the women's administration was also characterized as highly formalized and micromanaged.

Conversely, the men's program typified the athletic "business model" (winning first, academics second) that invested in three revenue generating sports (i.e., football, men's basketball, and men's ice hockey). The tiering of sports was evident and accepted by the Olympic men's sports as they acknowledged that success of revenue producing sports ultimately benefited their sports. The men's department culture was characterized as loosely run, department stakeholders had extreme autonomy, there was limited accountability, minimal academic success was reported, and several stakeholders were openly against Title IX. The men's program also possessed a strong successful identity permeated by several national titles in football, basketball, ice hockey, wrestling, swimming, baseball, and golf, along with numerous Conference championships, Olympic champions, professional sport Hall of Fame winners, and former athletes that enjoyed professional sports careers. The men's program had developed an extensive and loyal supportive community base that provided scholarships and facilities to support a broad based athletic program.

In 2001, the Office of the Vice President and Chief of Staff conducted a fiscal review of intercollegiate athletics where it was reported that revenues exceeded

expenditures and as a result the University was subsidizing athletics by approximately \$10 million. The central rationale for merging the departments was therefore related to serious athletic department fiscal shortfalls, duplication of services, and a perceived dysfunctional relationship between the men's and women's athletic administrators. It was reported that "separate departments had fostered competition and rivalry, which had undermined collaboration" (*External pressures squeeze U*", 2002, p. 2)

Leadership from both sides clashed and they were renowned for publicly criticizing each other. For example, a donation to men's athletics to build a football practice facility created tensions because Title IX required that the women's program should also receive a similar donation amount to build facilities that would act as a recruiting tool (Gustafson, 1999); and a men's coach blamed the University's compliance with Title IX the reason for his program's diminishing budget (*"Merger shouldn't mean takeover"*, 2002). Both departments also blamed each other for the reported fiscal shortfalls in athletics. The men's department criticized the women's department's perceived unrealistic demands for gender equity. The University's commitment to gender equity had resulted in the women's program needing to keep pace with the growing men's program. Thus, the women's program was one of the few programs in the United States that had quality playing facilities (e.g., hockey arena, softball and soccer stadiums) that were built specifically for women's sports teams to compete on/in, and the women's athletic department received annual state appropriation funding that was not provided to the men's program. While the women's program condemned the men's program for their fiscal irresponsibility as their expenditures were frequently more than their revenues, both departments were uncooperative and the men's department felt that they were superior to the women's program. Hence, many women's department stakeholders did not support the merger and perceived the merger as a hostile takeover.

The transition stage reflected the point of the merger announcement in May 2002 until the new athletic director (AD) joined the department in August 2002. The former AD's contracts expired June 2002 and a national AD search was conducted between June and July 2002. The new male AD was from a midmajor conference that had a combined sports program, and he did not bring any associates with him to serve on the athletic management team. The integration stage represented the period from August 2002 to August 2004 where the two departments combined in terms of amalgamating structures, policies, procedures, culture, and reorganizing personnel roles and responsibilities.

Research Design

A single-case study design (Yin, 2009) was used to examine the gender politics evident in the amalgamation of two gender affiliated athletic departments. Case study

research is appropriate for investigations that require in-depth analysis and seek to explain the complexities of how and why social phenomenon works (Yin, 2009). This research process also allowed for Ashcraft's (2009) call for case specific research into gender to be addressed. While the examination of the social processes involved in this merger process was typical of most corporate mergers, the gender politics motivated through gendered organizational relationships was atypical. In comparison with corporate combinations, merging organizations in sport provide a unique opportunity to engage in a detailed analysis of the gender politics involved in the various social processes when gender affiliated organizations merge. In particular, given the gender affiliated nature of the merging sport organizations the multiple data sources allowed for us to learn about how stakeholders' reactions to the merger can be gendered, to identify what political processes can occur during the merging of gender affiliated sport organizations, and how these political processes can be gendered. The findings of this study are not generalizable across all sport organizations however broad conceptual claims can be made and transferred to settings that have similar contextual features (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Yin, 2009).

The lead author negotiated access with the AD who granted access in 2004. Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethics approval was then obtained as all guidelines were suitably met. The researchers and participants also agreed that due to the unique and highly contentious nature of the case, the context and the participants might be identifiable. If certain participants' identities were revealed they were subject to possible harmful ramifications. Thus, a confidentiality agreement was reached where the researchers would only identify the participants by general position (e.g., a coach, a student-athlete, or an administrator), which was included in the IRB approval. No demographic (gender, specific title, sport affiliation, athletic department affiliation) information was therefore included in the findings. The AD served as the organizational gatekeeper in the organization in terms of gaining access to external stakeholders, such as boosters.¹

Participants

The participants were 57 athletic department stakeholders (see Table 1) who had first-hand experience with the transition and integration merger phases, which included the following informants: athletic department administrators ($n = 10$), athletic unit directors ($n = 2$), coaches ($n = 9$), athletic department staff ($n = 9$), student-athletes ($n = 3$), faculty ($n = 3$), athletic boosters ($n = 18$), and central university administrators ($n = 3$). Study participants were identified from the University's website and contacted via e-mail inviting them to participate in the study. The athletic boosters were sent an e-mail invitation from the AD whereby they were instructed to contact the lead researcher if they wished to participate.

Table 1 Breakdown of Participant Interviewees' Role, Gender, and Sport

| Role | Interviews | Gender | Sport |
|--|------------|--|--|
| Central university administrators | 3 | Male ($n = 0$) Female ($n = 3$) | |
| Athletic department administrators | 10 | Male ($n = 6$) Female ($n = 4$) | |
| Athletic unit directors (e.g., compliance and academic counseling) | 2 | Male ($n = 1$) Female ($n = 1$) | |
| Athletic department staff | 9 | Males ($n = 5$) Females ($n = 4$) | |
| Coaches | 9 | Male ($n = 4$) Female ($n = 5$) | Revenue ($n = 1$) Nonrevenue ($n = 8$) |
| Student-athletes | 3 | Male ($n = 1$) Female ($n = 2$) | Men's golf Women's hockey Women's swimming |
| Boosters | 18 | Male ($n = 9$) Female ($n = 9$) | |
| Faculty | 3 | Male ($n = 2$) Female ($n = 1$) | |
| Total number of interviews | 57 | | |

Data Collection

Data were collected over a year-long period (2004–2005). Multiple sources of data were sought, and the primary data source was in-depth tape-recorded interviews. In-depth interviews provide the opportunity to ask respondents about facts of a case and their insights about events (Yin, 2009). The interviews were conducted either on the phone or at a site of the informant's choice (i.e., the informant's office or the researchers' offices). An interview guide was used which is a systematic yet flexible means for the interviewer to use a conversational interview style and spontaneous wording of the questions (Patton, 2002).

Each interview began with asking general demographic questions (i.e., role and responsibilities during the transition and integration stages and years worked in separate and combined departments), which were followed by asking respondents to describe the series of events that occurred during the transition and integration stages of the merger, people's reaction to the merger, the culture of the two athletic departments premerger and postmerger, how their position/role had changed or evolved, how various stakeholder's interests and values were taken into consideration during organization restructuring, and to identify the challenges experienced and/or observed during the two merger stages. Interview length ranged from 60 to 120 min. Secondary data were also collected through acquiring various documents that provided background information about the rationale for the merger, stakeholder reactions, the merger process, and cultural changes. Documents included pertinent

institutional meeting minutes (i.e., faculty consultative committee, university senate, and athletic department), newspaper articles, institutional reports (i.e., financial plan), and athletic department promotional materials (e.g., development fund brochure, strategic plan, and media guides).

Data Analysis

Data analysis by the research team followed a multiple step process. Interview data were first transcribed verbatim and informants were provided the opportunity to verify their transcripts for accuracy. Where the researchers had questions, follow-up questions were asked via e-mail. All data were then prepared and then downloaded into the qualitative software ATLAS ti. (Scientific Software Development, 2003–2010). To assist in developing a rich understanding of the case and its setting (Yin, 2009), the data were then read and reread and key events and experiences identified. Data were next openly coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify the various events during the merger stages and to examine the nature of the gender politics in the social processes of emotional reactions, assessment of loyalties, organizational restructuring, and culture reengineering. Examples of these codes were transition stage-emotional reactions, transition stage-general concerns, integration stage-department restructuring, and integration stage-reorganization of work. While most of the codes were developed from the literature, in vivo coding was also performed, where concepts

were developed from the participants' own words (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987). Examples of in vivo codes included, transition stage-fear of loss of importance, transition stage-fear of loss of identity, and integration stage-assessing trust and loyalties. The open coding processes led to category development where their respective properties and dimensions were delineated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Category development involved comparing incidents with incidents with both the interview transcripts and the archival documents until a point of saturation was reached and no new properties, dimensions, consequences, conditions or actions were evident in the data. Axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was next performed to examine relationships between categories and subcategories, and to identify themes. For example, the category integration stage and the relevant subcategories reorganization of work and structural changes were assessed to ascertain the link to gender politics. Respondents' perceptions of the gender politics in relation to the merger stages were also compared and contrasted, along with comparing archival document accounts of the gender politics with the interview transcripts. The following results and discussion showed in the transition stage gender politics in stakeholders' reactions to the merger and stakeholders' concerns about potential losses. During the integration stage, gender politics was evident during assessing loyalties, and gendered cultural reengineering.

Findings and Discussion

In this section we examine the transition and integration phases of the merger, and the gendered political nature of these phases.

The Transition Phase: Gendered Reactions to the Merger

During the transition phase, both genders expressed concern about the loss of attachment to the organization and the future of their respective sports.

The greatest anxiety came from women's athletics and that the women felt they had the most to lose. (university administrator #1).

I would describe it as a period of nervousness on the part of the women's program in wondering what is going to happen to us, are we going to continue to be favorably treated here or are we going to fall through the cracks. Is some guy going to come in here and focus on the men's program? I think there was a lot of nervousness on the part of the women. (booster #4)

Reactions also included fear about a loss of identity within the new athletic department. Booster #7 provided more specific detail on the concerned reaction to the merger about losing a historically strong sense of identity tied to Title IX:

The University really did have a true commitment to women's athletics. We were funded better, there was more of a Title IX commitment . . . I was really concerned about what would happen going forward, if that commitment would stay . . . people would be fired and would the person they hire be able to keep some of the men boosters at bay . . . because there were vocal people who were saying that they wanted to take over.

Athletic staff member #2 described what the department's identity meant and the fear associated with losing that:

Having separate athletic departments made this place unique and it also allowed women's sports to have their own kind of culture and philosophy that was separate from men's athletics. Losing their identity was a big fear. They were losing something they had whether they were losing it or it was changing into something different. The women felt much more threatened than the men did.

Athletic administrator #1 outlined how the strong identity of the women's department put it in a unique financial position:

Part of it is that many of the coaches and many of the administrators within women's athletics had a sense that because we were separate, the women student-athletes were not in a position where they had to compete with the men's sports for either dollars, marketing, or facilities.

Student-athletes were also keenly aware of a threat to their identity during the transition phase of the merger. Student-athlete #1 outlined both financial and cultural identity threats as a result of the merger:

I would say just losing women's athletic identity as a whole, decreasing in marketing or even the fan base obviously. Also we felt we had a lot of respect from the University. I came in here as a freshman knowing that playing on a women's team I got equal rights to the men's teams and with the looming combination of the two we didn't know if we were going to lose that, and so that was probably the main worry, just that we'd lose our identity and wouldn't be taken as seriously.

We offer two possible explanations these respondents' reactions. Most simply, it may have been that the women's department had either personal experience or knowledge about the outcome of other gender-specific sport mergers and predicted that they would be taken over. Predicting such an outcome fueled the loss of attachment to the organization highlighted in the first quotations. This finding replicates Tienari's (2000) view showing how emotions of loss and nervousness were central to the emotional reactions to the merger, and shows how gender was central to these emotions (Acker, 1990). Our

understandings of sport mergers are extended because this finding highlights how important it is to understand emotional reactions in a major organizational event that may be dominated by discourses of the inevitability of a merger (Sam & Jackson, 2004), without considering the stresses experienced by individuals.

Our second explanation focuses on fear that was fed by a perceived threat to what was described as 'favorable treatment' toward the women's department. Women felt anxiety about losing the treatment they enjoyed in separate departments. The women's department had received strong backing from the University administration and boosters and this position was threatened in the merger. Gender is central to this finding too (Acker, 1992) but the importance here is that it contradicts Collins' (2005) assertion that women enter into mergers from a weaker position. In this research, it was quite clear that women were politically powerful. What made them vulnerable, however, were the potential challenges to this position, which they feared would be a consequence of the merger. It was well understood that once a women's specific sport organization is merged with men, women's sport lose value within the merged organization (Staurowsky, 1996).

Gender was central in the women's' emotional reactions because women's privilege or status was due to Title IX and a strong historical University commitment to it. Maintaining that status relied upon the University's continuing strong commitment to the processes associated with Title IX. This analysis extends Worts et al. (2007) by showing that women can go into a merger in a strong position. With this position of strength, however, came the threat of a weak future. The organizational context of this position is important. That is, women were not in a potentially weak position because they were women, rather, their sports were dependent on the University's support, which could easily be marginalized in post-merger politics.

These findings are important because they highlight fears about whether Title IX commitments can remain as strong after a merger. The perception of a lack of value and possible changes to the University's commitment to Title IX was enough to make the participants in the women's department fear that their cultural and financial identities were under threat, which would put them in a weaker position described by Worts et al. (2007). This is important to our findings because they show how pivotal emotions are in the transition process, and how gender is central to the development of those emotions and any reaction that manifests from them. The emotional reaction set the tone for the merger with implications for the development of the processes that would underpin the merger, which are discussed later.

Gender was also central to fears expressed by the men's Olympic or nonrevenue sports. Coaches of men's Olympic sports perceived the merger as creating a further tiering of sports and ultimately a decrease in their resources. Before the merger, in gender specific sport departments nonrevenue sports were one of 12 or 13 sport programs, while in an amalgamated program they would

be one of 25. Coaches of men's Olympic sports feared they would be undermined by women's revenue sports. Coach #4 felt there would be a loss of identity, based on gender, for these sports after the merger:

On the women's side, the merger in some ways has probably been even better [for the women] because ... the number one criteria of the merger that we were not going to diminish the women's experience in any way, shape or form. They've [administration] gone out of their way to protect that [the women's] side and where they've take away has been from the other [the men's] side.

He continued:

I said from day one, the merger wasn't going to help the men's non-profits. All it actually was going to do was just force us further down the line. I could see that coming from day one because they had a culture over there and women's sport and women's athletics had risen to a place, and they weren't going to take any of that away. It's hard to take away from somebody something that they already have, especially on that [women's] side. (Coach #4)

Again, we see a gender as central to an organizational process (Acker, 1992). In this case, fear of a loss of identity and a loss of value and status were gendered. This example is important in understanding the complexity of this merger. Within the wider men's collegiate sports environment, Olympic sports have a low value because they are nonrevenue sports (Robertson, 2006). Entering the merger, the Olympic sport coach felt a double concern: nonrevenue and perceived discrimination against men's sports due to the University's commitment to women. We can analyze this as a situation in which the men's Olympic sports went into the merger feeling they were of low value because they recognized the privileged treatment the women had earned from the University.

These findings contradict the women's fears, indicating how complex and contested the gendered emotional reactions to the merger were (Acker, 1992). It is this contradiction that enables us to extend research to consider wider issues of the gender as an influence on reactions to the merger. Unlike Tienari's (2000) study, the women's department entered the merger in a strong, well organized, well financed situation, albeit easily threatened. In addition, contradicting Tienari's views, the men's nonrevenue sports had concerns about their status within the merger, and expressed emotional reactions to that. Both groups expressed their reaction was one of fear about losing their identity. Rather than being a situation of 'men' versus 'women', the reactions to the merger were influenced by individuals whose departments were in their respective positions because of their gender, and associated organizational, historical, and social assumptions about gender and sport. They felt that these positions were threatened, not necessarily because of anything the other groups would do, but because they understood that there would

be change to those positions. Gender was at the center of these concerns of status and identity, and these findings show the power of gender to influence emotions and reactions to the merger (Collins, 2005). They indicate the entrenched views of both departments, and the enormity of the task at hand for administrators to recognize but also to try to mediate a path forward when gender was so thoroughly embedded within organizational practices.

The Integration Phase: Gendered Processes

The newly appointed AD spent the first 18 months after his appointment performing a cultural assessment and planning for organizational restructuring. More specifically, two merger processes defined the integration stage: assessing trust and loyalties; and cultural reengineering.

Assessing Trust and Loyalties. The notion of trust encompassed the concepts of openness (e.g., freely sharing ideas and information), integrity (e.g., honesty) and business sense (e.g., tacit knowledge). The following comments describe the new AD's attempts to establish rapport with key personnel and the process of building trust:

He [the AD] worked on getting to know all of the players because he had people coming at him from all ends and people with vastly different opinions and agendas. I don't think he knew who to trust or where to turn to or who to listen to . . . he just listened to everybody that first year and then started to make some decisions toward the end of that first year. (athletic administrator # 2)

He had no idea how bad it was going to be, and I've asked him if he knew what was ahead of him . . . it has been harder than he thought to bring it together. (booster #13)

The AD was clear about how he expected trust to be developed, that is, by consulting widely. This supports our argument that social interactions between group members are key to developing trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). In the messy political context, though, a clear vision of trust was hard to gain. Understanding that trust is not a clean, tidy, isolated concept is crucial to our argument. As key personnel jockeyed for position and tried to gain an upper hand, they tried to align themselves as the "in group" and position others as the "out group". As Kramer (1999) found individuals placed into the "out-group" were labeled as less reliable, honest and trustworthy compared with individuals in the "in-group".

The organizational process of assessing trust and loyalties was gendered (Acker, 1992). One of the ways in which the gendered nature of trust unfolded is evident in how a female senior athletic administrator faced greater scrutiny compared with her male counterparts in the men's department within the assessment of trust process. Faculty #1 stated:

There was a real fear initially for the [new] AD that the female senior administrator was still a puppet for the former women's department AD. Because the female senior administrator had worked with the [former women's AD] and I think there was a real fear of "can I trust her?"

This example shows how interactions with the former women's regimen perpetuated gender divisions and symbolically enforced the image that female athletic administrators were and are disloyal and could not be trusted. The woman administrator was positioned in an "out group" because of her close ties with the former women's AD. We extend the concept of trust presented by Kramer (1999) by analyzing its creation as a gendered process. That is, the woman in this example faced a double bind when attempting to negotiate her role in an organization undergoing radical restructuring. On the one hand, she had a desire to be considered an insider and maintain contact with and provide reassurance to a variety of stakeholders from the former women's department. In doing so, her interaction drew criticisms from the existing management team and men's department stakeholders. On the other hand, female administrators seeking to fulfill their responsibilities to a newly combined department as well as the newly hired executive leader can have their loyalties questioned and be considered "outsiders" from their female alliances. For example, the women supporters felt that she was too close to the newly appointed AD and therefore could not be trusted to represent the interests of women's athletics. The creation of "out" and "in" groups (Kramer, 1999) can certainly develop distrust (Insko & Schpler, 1997). Importantly, our research shows how gender is an influential part of this process and is essential to our analysis to understand mergers as gendered events.

Gendered Cultural Reengineering

Reengineering culture following a merger between two organizations is a significant and challenging activity, and one that holds gender implications (Tienari, 2000). In the process of cultural reengineering, images and identities are at stake and employees will feel a great deal of loss, express resistance to the change, and hold on to aspects of the previous cultures (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, et al., 2000). Despite attempts to create a new cultural identity, the strong loyalties to the previous administrations' organizational values and beliefs inhibited the integration of systems in terms of resisting change to policies and practices, and restructuring. The following comments describe the deep loyalties and resistance to change.

When the AD came, the football coach and to a lesser extent the men's basketball coach went to the AD and said, 'I am reporting to only you unless . . . I will go to the senior men's associate AD, because he is my buddy. I am not reporting to anybody else but you.' So in other words, don't send me to a woman. (athletic administrator # 6)

... where the rubber sort of started to hit the road for the men is that they really thought life would not change much for them. I think the notion of one of those coaches, men's coaches reporting to a woman administrator was when they were like, 'Huh? Well we didn't quite know we bargained for that'. (university administrator #1)

From these comments, it appears that the reality of change did not become clear for the men until the merger was well under way in the integration stage. When it did become clear, significant jockeying for position started for powerful roles (Hubbard, 1999). Masculinity is often allied with maintaining control and mergers are indicative of this process (Collins, 2005; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996). That control was threatened by various organizational decisions. For example, the deliberate assignment of a female manager to oversee the sports of men's and women's basketball informed the culture of the newly merged department.

Our findings support research that male middle managers hold a strong cultural resistance to women in leadership positions (Powell & Graves, 2003), more specifically sport oversight, within intercollegiate athletics. This resistance is consistent with previous research that claims that women do not receive the experience in sport oversight, specifically revenue generating sports such as football and basketball (Claussen & Lehr, 2002; Lough & Grappendorf, 2007) as well as the notion that organizational roles and responsibilities are traditionally gendered where certain positions are perceived to be typically filled based on an individual's gender (Acker, 1990, 1992; Britton & Logan, 2008; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

This example of assigning a female manager to oversee a men's sport reveals an important feature of using gender to manipulate a situation. An organizational merger can provide senior female managers an opportunity for a promotion and challenge norms regarding male leaders (Hovden, 2000). However, it can also backfire or cause concern, as in this example. For managers in similar situations to that reported in this research, there is an opportunity to present symbols of gender equity and show support for women's as well as men's involvement in the merger process but processes to mitigate against backlash must be considered. If a manager tries to manipulate an organizational position to support gender equity, she or he needs to be aware of the potential for resistance to that effort. The resistance offered in this research was cultural in nature, and influential.

Interestingly, one lone voice questioned the structure of the changes and whether the merger could have been framed differently. Athletic Administrator #5 noted:

... the University defined their entire differences [as] male – [as] female, which I am not so sure was accurate. I don't think some of the differences were gender. They might have even been Olympic sport versus revenue generating, but they defined them as male – female. That is what I saw when I got here.

Almost all of the differences really were based on gender, at least the perception of it being based on gender. (athletic administrator # 5)

The participant's comments reveal two ideas. First, this response indicates that there could have been a different way to present the merger, and that focusing away from women's and men's sports could have altered the tone of divisive politics that developed during the process. This finding contradicts our suggestion that gender was considered by all respondents to be at the center of reactions and processes regarding the merger. However, athletic administrator #5's comments outline that even for someone who did not believe gender was at the center of the merger, it was a pervasive force within organizational processes. The gendering of organizational processes is so insidious (Acker, 1992) that it must be considered within the management of all major events such as this merger. The administrator's comments shed critical light on research that suggests that integration strategies should be culturally compatible (Calori, Lubatkin, & Very, 1994). Attempts to erase social categories are impossible for cultural reengineering (Kleppetto, 1998). In our research, cultural integration was characterized by political behaviors associated with gender identities. Acker (1994) maintained that "symbolic processes define the organization and give meaning to the efforts of its members, although these meanings may be contradictory and disputed" (p. 118). In cultural reengineering involving gender equity and maintaining identity, sport managers therefore, might expect stakeholders to challenge organizational practices and policies as they create a new organizational identity. This finding showed how complex the reengineering of a culture can be. The department in this study tried to create a new culture, however, with the historical entrenchment of views about the 'other' by the various stakeholders, this attempt was problematic.

Practical Implications

This research has shown that gendered politics are a central feature of a merger between gender affiliated sport organizations. It has also identified that despite the efforts of senior management, the merger was perceived largely in terms of "us" versus "them" rather than as a benefit to the whole athletic department. The findings present several practical implications for managers confronted with such a phenomenon. First, managers considering merging gender-affiliated organizations should spend a considerable amount of time examining the compatibility of combining the two organizations. Research suggests that even though potential synergies may exist there is no guarantee the realization of unity and teamwork among stakeholders (Appalbaum, Gandell, Yortis, et al., 2000; Cartwright & Cooper, 2003). In some cases where organizations are incompatible (i.e., strong gender cultures) managers might be better suited maintaining separate organizations. Put another way, rather than just accepting the 'naturalness' of the outcome (i.e., a merged

organization), care should be taken to decide whether the outcome or end point is truly necessary and justifies the means by which it is achieved (Alvesson, Bridgman, & Wilmott, 2009).

Second, once the decision has been made to merge, critical to facilitating the merger and managing the gender politics is the hiring of outside leadership (i.e., AD and senior managers) who are not affiliated with the previous regimes. The complexity of gender politics that a CEO may face can be undermined further if inside leadership is hired to manage the merger. While Bruhn (2001) argued managing politics is related to the personality and style of the leader, we maintain that in the sport context managing merger gender politics is tied to hiring leadership external to the organization. Decision-making will be under less political scrutiny from both sides if an outsider is evaluating and making decisions.

Third, to help address the uncertainty and speculation experienced by gender affiliated stakeholders and defuse some of the politicking, a sound communication plan by top-level management is necessary. A communication plan during the transition stage is critical to keeping stakeholders well informed in a timely and honest manner and can assist in defusing the gendered emotional reactions related to fears of loss of and identity. Fourth, before integration, a merger plan should be developed which is critical to cultural reengineering, and obtaining stakeholder acceptance in creating a new organization (Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Schweiger, 2002). A multidisciplinary team comprised of representative stakeholders (e.g., stakeholders from both the men's and women's departments) would be responsible for developing a new organizational vision and action steps for implementing the vision. Such an approach can help provide a clear direction with short and long-term goals (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al., 2000). Furthermore, a merger plan can assist in building a new culture while also preventing some of the resistance to change, and the culture clash. These strategies outlined above can assist managers to facilitate mergers between gender affiliated sport organizations.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the merger of two gender affiliated athletic departments at a large NCAA Division I institution. We drew from the concepts of gendered, social processes, and transition and integration merger stages to analyze an actual case, which offered nuanced understandings of how local pressures influence gender relations and how merger social processes can be gender political. By following Ashcraft's (2009) suggestion to examine a specific, context bound example, we have extended Acker's (1990) framework to show the peculiarities and nuances of a specific organizational event. For example, in our study, women entered the merger from a strong organizational position, which contradicts much of the existing research on mergers. We also noted how

important it is to understand how gender influences the seeming inevitability of mergers. We found two aspects to gender within the merger. At some points, gender relations were characterized by "us" versus "them" duality, when women's or men's respondents clearly showed that they thought the other gender was being better treated. However, more importantly, we have shown how gender was a very powerful organizing concept within this merger process. Respondents recognized that their positions, which at times were privileged and at other times were not, were tied up in historical practices, assumptions, and processes that were largely defined by gender. When those were perceived to be threatened, gender was expressed as a central feature of that threat. For example, the women's respondents felt that were in a strong position premerger because the university supported them as women. Other possible factors such as their commitment to educational principles were not mentioned. Consequently, gender was the most influential organizing factor in this research. This key finding answers our three research questions: that is, we uncovered how gender was a key element to stakeholder reactions to the research. Equally, we were able to outline the political influences on the merger, and show how gender was central to those processes. As such, our research builds on existing research by showing how gender is central to major organizational events and that gender must be understood as a key organizing factor in such events.

Obviously this study was limited by examining a single case study. The goal of this study was not to exhaustively understand all mergers between men's and women's sport organizations but to document the complex local pressures that informed the gender politics associated with specific social processes in an athletic department merger. The gender politics documented in this case established these merger social processes relevant for continued research. Such research will help examine the gendered nature of mergers. In addition to other research directions previously mentioned, future study should include the examination of different merger stages and how gender is manifested within various merger stages. With the increased instances of mergers between gender affiliated sport organizations, understanding mergers as a gender political process is critical.

Note

1. Athletic boosters are individuals who are active supporters and advocates of the athletic department, many of whom provide large financial donations to the department and / or sport team(s).

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