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# Do Union Mergers Affect the Members? Short- and Long-term Effects on Attitudes and Behaviour

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Although union mergers have occurred since the earliest stages of unionization, few attempts have been made to uncover the psychological effects of merger on member attitudes and behaviour.

The literature suggests that the intended results of a merger (e.g. economies of scale, reduced jurisdictional disputes) can be accompanied by unintended consequences, such as lowered degrees of union commitment and membership participation. This study examined the effects of a union merger on members' attitudes and participation in union activity using questionnaires. Baseline data from two merging unions and a comparison union were collected a year prior to the merger, and longitudinal follow-up surveys were administered twice. The results suggest that membership commitment, satisfaction and participation do not necessarily have to be sacrificed for the benefit of building larger, more stable and powerful unions through mergers.

*Keywords:* merger, organizational change, Sweden, union attitudes, union participation

## Introduction

As the frequency of union mergers increases in many countries (Chaison, 1996), the debate over the costs and benefits of mergers

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becomes more intense. On one side, many claim that union members benefit from mergers because they create larger, more financially stable unions with skilled staff and greater political and bargaining power. Without mergers, small and highly specialized unions would inevitably decline in size, falling below the threshold of financial solvency and losing their ability to represent members. Moreover, large and expanding unions can effectively use mergers for fast and inexpensive inroads into new organizing territories (e.g. Ashton, 1987; Chaison, in press; Chitayat, 1979; Dreazen, 2000; Mawhinney, 1989; Stratton-Devine, 1992; Undy et al., 1981; Waddington, 1995; Williamson, 1995).

Critics of mergers do not necessarily dispute these possible benefits, but they argue that mergers provide opportunities for officers to rewrite their unions' constitutions to shift control and decisions from members and local leaders to national headquarters (Brooks and Gamm, 1976). Furthermore, merger agreements commonly create duplicate officer positions and departments, a step needed to assure the continued employment of officers and staff. But the result can be a bloated bureaucracy that is incapable of understanding and responding to members' concerns. Mergers often also join unions with different traditions and cultures, and this can reduce members' commitment and participation (Chaison, 1986, 1996; Sverke and Sjöberg, 1997). After mergers, critics claim, unions may become large, amorphous organizations, unable to mobilize workers during strikes or attract members to serve as volunteers in officer positions and committees. In essence, the trade-off for greater size and financial stability could be lower degrees of member commitment to the union, satisfaction with union representation and participation in union activities (Chaison, 1986; Conant and Kaserman, 1989; Williamson, 1995).

However, although union mergers may have positive as well as negative effects on the members' attitudes and behaviour, very little is known about the psychological effects of union structural change. It is not known, for instance, if the administrative improvements of mergers come at the cost of impaired membership commitment, satisfaction and participation (Chaison, in press). Most research on union mergers has provided chronological overviews of mergers (e.g. Janus, 1978), or predicted the aggregate pattern of merger activity from environmental indicators (e.g. Buchanan, 1981; Freeman and Brittain, 1977; Waddington, 1988). Other studies have examined one or more mergers in detail in order to identify

the reasons for the merger, describe the resulting organization and analyse its impact on such factors as collective bargaining power (e.g. Undy et al., 1981). The few studies that have contributed to the understanding of psychological aspects of the merger process have either predicted member support for the merger (Cornfield, 1991; McClendon et al., 1995) or examined unsuccessful merger attempts and members' expectations of negative merger outcomes (Chaison, 1986), whereas only a few studies have investigated how the membership is affected by merger (e.g. Chaison et al., 2001; Sverke and Sjöberg, 1997). Thus, there is a clear need for research into the consequences of merger activity (Chaison, 1986; Chaison, in press; Conant and Kaserman, 1989).

The present study sheds light on how union mergers may impact the membership by analysing questionnaire data in connection with a merger between two Swedish blue-collar unions. We examine the effects of the 1993 amalgamation of the Swedish Clothing Workers' Union (Clothing Workers) and the Swedish Factory Workers' Union (Factory Workers) – both affiliated to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO – to form the Industrial Union. By surveying representative samples of the two merging unions and a comparison LO union (the Swedish Food Workers' Union [Food Workers]) before, shortly after and two years after the merger, our quasi-experimental study allows for evaluating the short- and long-term effects of union mergers on member attitudes and behaviour. In contrast to previous reports from the project, which have examined short-term merger consequences (Sverke and Sjöberg, 1997) and focused on different aspects of member participation in union activity (Chaison et al., 2001), the present study evaluates both short- and long-term merger effects on union satisfaction, union commitment and union participation. To our knowledge, our project represents the only study of the psychological dimensions of merger outcomes.

## **The Merger**

The merger effort started with the Clothing Workers in the latter 1980s. As a response to severe membership losses – a decline of about 50 percent through the mid-1980s, due mostly to technological change and reduced employment in the clothing industry (Abrahamsson et al., 1991) – the union retained a consultant and

formed a committee to investigate merger possibilities. Two likely merger partners were identified, the Factory Workers and the Food Workers, and a committee was set up to plan the BEFALI merger. The name was an acronym formed from the initials of the three unions: BEklädnads (Clothing), FABriks (Factory) and LIvs (Food).

The proposed BEFALI merger was motivated by several factors. First, all three unions experienced financial difficulty. Second, the unions recognized the need to improve lower-level representational services because of the growing tendency in Sweden towards decentralized bargaining. Third, they believed that stronger local unions could best identify and satisfy the unique interests of the increasing numbers of women, immigrants and better educated workers in the Swedish workforce. Fourth, in the recent past, the three unions had been able to reduce operating costs by consolidating their regional bodies, but their officers now believed that this would detract from the goals of improved local-level representation and closer links between members and regional offices (BEFALI, 1991). The merger committee did not want a 'traditional merger' but rather the creation of 'a completely new union' that despite its size would be structured so as to increase the closeness between the members and their union, reduce bureaucratization and increase local power (BEFALI, 1991: 10). Hence, the merger plan could be described as a reflection of the Swedish union movement which, as Kjellberg (2000, 2001) has observed, is characterized by a combination of resilient direction at the central level and strong workplace organizations at the local level.

BEFALI was planned as a decentralized union, with a flat organization structure, short decision paths, greater member influence in decision-making and a stronger member identity with branch and regional bodies. The number of staff representatives would not be reduced, even if this lessened the immediate economic benefits of merger. Regional offices would be formed on a geographic basis with at least one per county (30 regions were proposed) in order to provide bargaining support for locals, recruit new members, conduct labour education programmes and create new locals at workplaces that had members but no union structures. The merger would entail a high degree of integration; for example, the headquarters and regions of the three unions would be combined and officer positions would not be allocated on the basis of pre-merger union membership. However, in keeping with the emphasis on

local-level participation, locals would not be required to merge (BEFALI, 1991; Chaison et al., 2001).

Although the merger proposal was approved by majorities of delegates at the conventions of the Clothing Workers and the Factory Workers in 1991, it was rejected by the delegates at the Food Workers' convention, primarily because the members feared that the interests of the Food Workers would be submerged in a larger, more diversified, union. Several delegates argued that their union could achieve decentralized governance and a more active and engaged membership without merger, and that merger would obscure the unique identity of workers in the food industry. After an intense debate, the delegates voted 163 to 85 against the BEFALI merger proposal (Swedish Food Workers' Union, 1991).

The Clothing Workers and the Factory Workers started exploring the possibilities of a two-way merger, and a campaign was launched at all levels of the unions for a new combined organization to be called BEFA (an acronym formed by the two unions' initials). An investigation was carried out by officer committees dealing with economic issues, dues, administration, union regulations, regional structure, the central office, the union newspaper and the unemployment insurance fund. It was decided to retain the general objectives of the BEFALI proposal and promote decentralization. Twenty-two regions were proposed. Regions covering large geographic areas could set up branch offices to maintain close contacts with members. Some duties of the national governing board (i.e. personnel policy, education, industry sector policies and recruitment) would be delegated to three regional committees. Union headquarters would concentrate on lobbying, ideology, the publication of a joint newspaper and administering a combined unemployment insurance fund. Savings would come from reductions in higher-level administrative activities rather than regional- and local-level representational activities. Staff reductions would occur through attrition, to be accelerated by offers of early retirement (BEFA, 1992).

At extra conventions of the Clothing Workers and the Factory Workers in November 1992, the majority of delegates approved the terms of the BEFA merger. In April 1993, the two unions held separate closing conventions, voted to dissolve their former organizations, and then met together at the founding convention of the new organization called the Industrial Union. The Clothing Workers had 21,255 members and the Factory Workers had 73,233 members (BEFA, 1992). The convention approved the division of

authority between the national headquarters and the three regional committees, as described in the BEFA merger proposal (Industrial Union, 1993). Similar to the original merger plan, the Industrial Union integrated the regions of its predecessors, officer positions were not allocated on the basis of pre-merger union membership and locals were not merged. At the second convention of the Industrial Union, held in 1995, there were no significant changes in governing, administrative or representational structures (Industrial Union, 1995).

### **Potential Consequences of Union Mergers**

Although the questions of if and how mergers affect the membership clearly represent an issue of utmost concern, this is an area where predictions are difficult to make given that mergers can be implemented in very different ways. The outcomes of a merger depend not only on its form (i.e. amalgamation, absorption or affiliation), but also on the extent to which the structures of the merging unions are integrated (Chaison, 1996). Our study deals with an amalgamation, i.e. the combining of two national unions to form a new union. This is the most complex form of merger and the one that has the greatest potential for changing members' attitudes and behaviour. Because amalgamations create new unions, merger negotiators must rewrite union constitutions and resolve such contentious issues as the composition and powers of governing bodies and administrative units, the calculation and collection of dues and fees, and the roles of local officers and members in negotiations, organizing and political activity (Chaison, 1986; DeCenzo, 1981). The impact of an amalgamation is usually substantial and felt by members of all participating unions since they bring about comprehensive changes in structure and participation opportunities (Chaison, 1986).

In contrast, mergers characterized by a lower degree of integration of union structures – absorptions (i.e. mergers of small national unions into larger ones) and affiliations (i.e. mergers of single-company or single-plant unions into national unions) – typically leave the larger union relatively unaffected, and grant the smaller union a rather high degree of autonomy to determine bargaining policies and select officers. In absorptions or affiliations, the smaller

merger partners often become semi-autonomous divisions or locals of the larger unions. Many retain their own constitutions, officer elections and control over membership recruitment and negotiations with employers. Thus, absorptions and affiliations rarely have significant impact on the structure and governance of the larger unions; consequently, the larger union's members are usually not asked to approve of the merger proposal (Chaison, 1982).

There is a broad consensus that the attitudes and behaviour of union members are strongly related to the effectiveness of their unions (Gallagher and Strauss, 1991). Unions require members' support for union goals as manifested in their active participation in the fulfilment of these goals. As McClendon et al. (1995: 10) phrased it: 'Unions survive on the commitment of their members and, to be effective, national unions must have the support of local union rank and file.' Membership participation is crucial to union democracy, that is, the ability of the rank-and-file to influence their leaders' decisions. Democratically run unions are generally more effective than those with autocratic leadership because officers are more aware of members' needs and more able to mobilize members to achieve union goals (Strauss, 1991).

Moreover, as Fiorito et al. (1993) succinctly put it, unions are essentially organizations of, by and for members. They are *of* the members because they are limited to those with a common occupationally or industrially based work interest. They are *by* the members because most of the effort devoted to union goals comes from the membership. And they are *for* members because their primary purpose is to advance the members' interests. Understandably, there is an extensive body of research on members' participation in union activity, commitment to the union and satisfaction with union representation (see, for example, the literature reviews in Barling et al., 1992, and Gallagher and Strauss, 1991). But there is mostly anecdotal evidence and speculation about the effects of merger on members' commitment to the union, satisfaction with representation and participation in union activity.

Union commitment refers to members' psychological attachment to their union based on an identification with its goals and values and an appreciation of the services that it provides (Gordon et al., 1980; Sverke and Kuruvilla, 1995). Mergers may reduce such attachment when members believe that their interests are submerged in a larger union with a broad jurisdiction. As Chaison (1982, 1986)

observes, this might occur when two unions with different types of members amalgamate, creating a general union that discontinues the customs and traditions of its predecessors (e.g. annual conferences of occupational groups, membership referendums to elect national officers, authorize strikes and ratify collective agreements). Also, since mergers require an adaptation to the policies and practices of a new organizational entity, they may involve 'an abandonment of history and tradition, and a loss of the institution's identity' (Williamson, 1995: 24).

Union satisfaction is an evaluative construct reflecting how content members are with union representation and performance (Fiorito et al., 1988; Kuruvilla et al., 1993). In their distinction between the attitudinal constructs of commitment and satisfaction, Mowday et al. (1982) noted that satisfaction is more short-term and affected by day-to-day events, but such transitory events should not influence the individual's attachment to the organization. It could be argued that mergers would assumedly increase union satisfaction; by merging, unions can achieve economies of scale in operations and increase the quality and quantity of services offered to members (Chaison, 1985; Stratton-Devine, 1992). But it is also customary, however, for mergers to create duplicate governing and administrative structures to gain the support of officers and staff by promising their continued employment. This could detract from efficient operations, at least in the short run. Greater member satisfaction may not be achieved until the merged union has gone through a transitional period, which could take several years, and redundant structures and officer positions are phased out (Chaison, 1982).

Union participation can take many forms, ranging from retaining membership and attending a few local membership meetings to running for high-level office in contested elections (Klandermans, 1986; McShane, 1986; Sverke, 1996). Conceivably, mergers may reduce members' participation. Brooks and Gamm (1976) and Waddington (1995) describe some instances in which officers negotiated merger agreements that centralized decision-making at the national headquarters and reduced the chances of electoral challenges to incumbent leaders. Centralization discourages the involvement of the rank-and-file: 'worker participation in the development of the union policies which affect their day-to-day lives becomes indirect and vicarious and the relationship between their aspirations and

the union's actions may become indistinct or disappear altogether' (Coady, 1976: 237–8). Furthermore, as unions created by mergers achieve economies of scale in operations, they are able to maintain a corps of full-time staff members. They become less dependent on the work of member volunteers at the local levels, and the opportunities and rewards for participation decline (Chaison, 1986).

The lack of empirical evidence and the theoretical ambiguity about merger outcomes makes it difficult to formulate specific hypotheses about how union members' attitudes and behaviour are affected by merger. Hence, we test for the possible *negative* impact of merger on the three key dimensions of union–member relations – commitment, satisfaction and participation – because a negative impact is broadly suggested by anecdotal evidence and conclusions of long-time observers of merger trends (see the reviews of research in Chaison, 1986, 1996). But we should also bear in mind that the officers investigating and negotiating the amalgamation of the Clothing Workers and Factory Workers, and the convention delegates debating it, sought to avoid a large, bureaucratic, centrally controlled union. They may have succeeded in creating a union without the negative features commonly associated with mergers.

## **Design and Data**

The merger between the Factory Workers and the Clothing Workers provides a natural experiment with a non-equivalent control group design – the merger serves as the treatment and the Food Workers, the union that rejected the merger proposal, as the comparison group. We used postal questionnaires, administered three times and at 18-month intervals, to assess the central variables before and after the merger. Pre-merger baseline data were collected one year before the merger (Time 1). Post-merger data from the same individuals were collected both two months after the merger to assess short-term effects (Time 2), and almost two years after the merger to enable detection of more enduring effects (Time 3). In order to explore potential differences between merged and non-merged unions as well as between merger partners, our analysis focuses on pre- and post-merger responses from members of each of the three unions.

## *Samples*

For each of the three unions, 2 percent of the members were randomly sampled from the national membership files and questionnaires were mailed to the participants' home addresses. In all three data collection waves, confidentiality was guaranteed and participation in the survey was voluntary. For the second and third waves of the survey, questionnaires were distributed only to the members who participated in the first stage of the project.

**Merged unions.** The Clothing Workers organized workers primarily in textile, carpet, shoe and leather production. Of the 418 members sampled for the survey, 237 (57 percent) submitted usable questionnaires at Time 1. A comparison with demographic data from the parent population (extracted from union records) revealed no significant differences between the respondent group and the national union in terms of mean age and sex. Approximately 75 percent ( $N = 178$ ) of the Time 1 respondents returned completed questionnaires at Time 2, and 55 percent ( $N = 130$ ) also at Time 3. The mean age of the respondents was 42 years ( $SD = 12$ ), the average length of union membership 16 years ( $SD = 12$ ), and the proportion of males 45 percent.

The other merging union, the Factory Workers, had members in oil refineries and chemical and rubber plants, among other facilities. A total of 1434 members of this union were selected for the survey. Usable Time 1 questionnaires were received from 755 of these, for a response rate of 53 percent. Data made available by the union allowed for a comparison of the respondent group with the union as a whole in terms of age and sex. In neither case were significant differences found. Of the Time 1 respondents, 541 (72 percent) returned completed questionnaires at Time 2, and 445 of these (59 percent) also at Time 3. The respondents' mean age was 38 years ( $SD = 11$ ) and they had been members of the union for an average of 11 years ( $SD = 9$ ). Males comprised 65 percent of the sample.

**Comparison union.** The Food Workers, which serves as the comparison union in this study, organizes workers in the food and related industries (e.g. slaughterhouses, dairies, canneries and tobacco plants). Usable Time 1 responses were obtained from 51 percent ( $N = 494$ ) of the 979 food workers sampled for the survey.

There were no significant differences between the respondent group and the national union in terms of mean age and sex distribution. Of the Time 1 respondents, a total of 356 (72 percent) provided usable questionnaires at Time 2 and 277 (56 percent) also at Time 3. The mean age of the respondents was 39 years ( $SD = 12$ ), the average length of union membership 12 years ( $SD = 10$ ), and the proportion of males 58 percent.

### *Measures*

Respondents in the three samples completed identical questionnaires. The order of items in the questionnaire was random in order to avoid negative effects on mean values, reliability and validity stemming from item blocking (cf. Frankie, 1997). Estimates of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for all variables in the three data collection waves are presented in Table 1 and indicate acceptable levels.

**Union commitment.** Union commitment was assessed using Sverke and Kuruvilla's (1995) nine-item measure of value-based commitment. The items focus on members' identification with the values of the union and the perceived similarity between union and personal goals. A five-point response format was used (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

**Union satisfaction.** Union satisfaction was assessed by a four-item measure developed by Sverke and Sjöberg (1997). The items reflect members' contentment with how they perceive the local union to represent and inform them. This variable was scored on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

**TABLE 1**  
**Internal Consistency of Measures**

Measure	No. of Items	Internal Consistency		
		Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Union commitment	9	0.91	0.92	0.92
Union satisfaction	4	0.70	0.67	0.68
Union participation	7	0.82	0.84	0.82

**Union participation.** A composite seven-item measure of union participation, developed by the authors, was used to assess members' self-reported involvement in a variety of union activities. Items reflect both formal and informal aspects of participation, focusing on such behaviours as attending union meetings, serving in elected office, discussing union issues with co-workers, taking part in bargaining and reading the union newsletter. The respondents indicated, on two-point scales (1 = no; 2 = yes), if they had been involved in each of these activities in the recent past.

## Results

We used repeated measures analysis of variance procedures to determine if there were overall post-merger differences between members of the merged unions and the non-merged union in terms of the attitudinal and behavioural variables. Three types of effects were estimated: the effects of the union, time and the union-by-time interaction. Because a significant group effect (i.e. the union factor) in a pretest–posttest design only indicates that there are overall differences between groups (Huck and McLean, 1975: 512), we interpret a significant interaction effect (i.e. the union  $\times$  time interaction) as an indication of a merger effect. Following this reasoning, a significant time effect, on the other hand, merely reveals that mean values change within unions over time, and indicates that the merged and comparison unions are influenced by variables not included in the study.

As shown in Table 2, the major factor accounting for the variance in the study variables was time. There were overall changes over time in union commitment ( $p < .001$ ), union satisfaction ( $p < .05$ ) and union participation ( $p < .001$ ). Only for the behavioural measure, self-reported union participation, was there a significant effect of the union factor ( $p < .05$ ). Most importantly, the union  $\times$  time interaction was not significant for any of the variables, thus indicating that the merger did not have an impact on members' levels of commitment, satisfaction or participation.

Given that the time factor accounted for the variance in all of the variables, our next set of analyses was directed at further exploring the changes in mean levels over time. Table 3 reports mean values in the study variables at all three time points and for each of the unions.

**TABLE 2**  
**ANOVA Results: Overall Effects**

Measure	Effect	d.f.	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Union commitment	Union	2	0.03	NS
	Time	2	41.84	0.001
	Union × time	4	0.35	NS
Union satisfaction	Union	2	0.04	NS
	Time	2	3.09	0.05
	Union × time	4	0.49	NS
Union participation	Union	2	3.57	0.05
	Time	2	3.78	0.001
	Union × time	4	0.86	NS

NS = not significant.

It also presents the results of means contrast *F*-tests for differences between time points for each union.

As is apparent from the overall *F*-tests, there were significant changes over time in union commitment for the Factory Workers ( $p < .001$ ), Clothing Workers ( $p < .05$ ) and Food Workers ( $p < .001$ ). The contrast tests show that the mean values in commitment were significantly higher immediately after the merger (Time 2) than prior to it (Time 1) for all three unions. Also in the longer perspective, the mean values remained higher at Time 3 compared to Time 1 for both the comparison union (the Food Workers) and one of the merger parties (the Factory Workers) while for the smaller merging union (the Clothing Workers) the difference, albeit of about the same magnitude, failed to reach significance. These results indicate that the degree of union commitment increased slightly for each of the three unions, regardless of whether that union had been through a merger.

A relatively stable trend is apparent for union satisfaction. The only change is for the Factory Workers, whose members reported higher satisfaction with the union at Time 2 compared to Time 1 ( $p < .05$ ). Again, changes over time for this variable did not differ between merged and non-merged unions.

As noted earlier, union participation was the only variable for which, in addition to the time effect, there was also a significant overall effect of union. As is apparent from Table 3, the mean values in participation decreased significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from 1.35

**TABLE 3**  
**Contrast Tests for Short-term Effects (Time 1 vs Time 2) and Long-Term Effects (Time 1 vs Time 3)**

Measurement	Union <sup>a</sup>	Mean Values			Overall <i>F</i>	Contrast Tests	
		Time 1	Time 2	Time 3		<i>F</i> <sup>b</sup> (T1 vs T2)	<i>F</i> <sup>b</sup> (T1 vs T3)
Union commitment	Factory	2.46	2.70	2.65	26.36***	46.64***	30.81***
	Clothing	2.52	2.71	2.64	3.23*	6.27*	2.65
	Food	2.49	2.68	2.63	10.75***	20.22***	10.44***
Union satisfaction	Factory	3.12	3.23	3.21	2.43	4.16*	3.06
	Clothing	3.20	3.19	3.14	0.16	0.01	0.27
	Food	3.10	3.21	3.20	1.53	2.71	1.79
Union participation	Factory	1.35	1.34	1.32	2.93	0.37	5.44*
	Clothing	1.30	1.24	1.25	2.87	4.48*	4.13*
	Food	1.35	1.35	1.34	0.24	0.19*	0.46

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Scale range: 1–5 (union commitment and satisfaction); 1–2 (union participation).

<sup>a</sup> Merged unions = Clothing and Factory; Comparison union = Food.

<sup>b</sup> Means contrast *F*-test for difference between times within unions.

at Time 1 over 1.34 at Time 2 to 1.32 at Time 3 for the Factory Workers, and from 1.30 at Time 1 to 1.24 and 1.25 at Times 2 and 3, respectively, for the Clothing Workers, while they remained relatively stable around 1.35 on the two-point scale for the comparison union. The significant effects of both time and union on union participation indicate that the mean values changed differently over time for the three unions. However, even though small drops in participation were observed for the two merging unions, these reductions were small in absolute values and the absence of a significant union  $\times$  time interaction suggests that the small post-merger difference in this variable is not attributable to the merger.

## Discussion

Although mergers may enable unions to achieve economies of scale and improve organizational effectiveness, they are often viewed negatively in regard to union–member relations. Critics claim that mergers create large, bureaucratic organizations that increase the distance between members and leaders, centralize decision-making and abandon the histories, traditions, cultures and occupational identities of pre-merger unions (e.g. Brooks and Gamm, 1976; Chaison, 1986, 1996; Williamson, 1995).

By surveying representative samples from two amalgamating unions and a comparison union, we employed a quasi-experimental design to test for the negative consequences of a Swedish merger in the 1990s. The results of our study provide an optimistic view of how union members are affected by mergers. In general, members' commitment, satisfaction and self-reported participation remained fairly stable or even increased slightly in all three unions. The only exception to this trend was the slight decrease in participation characterizing the smaller merger party, the Clothing Workers. The short- and long-term changes in members' degrees of union commitment, union satisfaction and union participation, as compared to the pre-merger period, did not deviate substantially between merged and comparison unions. Rather, union commitment tended to increase after the merger in all three unions, while union satisfaction remained relatively stable. And the small, albeit significant, decreases over time in union participation for the two merged unions could not be attributed to the merger per se.

We believe that the absence of negative consequences of the merger can be traced to how and why the merger was proposed and negotiated, a context that we briefly described earlier. First, a prime reason for the creation of the Industrial Union was the need for a financially stable organization that could encourage and adequately support greater local-level participation (Ahlén, 1992). Merger proponents sought stronger local unions whose members would be imbued with the spirit of unionism and volunteer for local union offices. Greater participation and decentralized decision-making were presented as reasons for the formation of a new union through merger, not as incidental outcomes (BEFALI, 1991). Indeed, a notable aspect of the report recommending the creation of the Industrial Union (BEFA), as well as its planned predecessor (BEFALI), is its strong linkage of merger with the promotion of local union activity and democratic decision-making (Abrahamsson et al., 1991; Ahlén, 1992; Chaison et al., 2001).

Second, when merger proposals were presented to union conventions, union effectiveness was not just seen as an outcome of greater size and financial well-being, but also decentralized decision-making, a flatter organization structure and more membership participation in the amalgamated union (BEFA, 1992). Accordingly, emphasis was placed on avoiding reductions in the number of representative staff and forming committees on a regional basis to carry out duties that had formerly belonged to national boards (e.g. personnel policy, education, recruitment and organization). This may explain why satisfaction with the local unions remained stable despite adverse economic conditions after the merger; national unemployment rose from 2.7 percent in 1991 to 4.8 percent in 1992, 8.2 percent in 1993 and 8.0 percent in 1994, and the employment situation was particularly severe in general manufacturing and the clothing sectors (OECD, 1994, 1995, 1996).

Finally, there was a long and intense discussion of the merger, starting in 1987 with the Clothing Workers' investigation of merger alternatives and culminating at the 1992 conventions of the Clothing Workers and Factory Workers that approved the merger agreement. Merger opponents repeatedly asked if greater democracy and membership participation could occur through internal reform and restructuring, thus avoiding the dramatic step of merger. Merger advocates responded that the benefits of greater size and financial stability did not have to come at the expense of member-

ship participation and lower-level representational effectiveness. They buttressed their arguments with proposed structures (e.g. regional committees) and practices (e.g. reductions in costs should not be achieved through cuts in regional and local activities) (BEFA, 1992).

It is also noteworthy that at the time of the merger the Factory Workers was three times the size of the Clothing Workers. The difference in size was not as important in the proposed three-union merger for BEFALI (the combined size of the Food Workers and Clothing Workers nearly equalled that of the Factory Workers), but in the BEFA merger talks it might have created the impression of an absorption of the smaller union rather than a true amalgamation. Such an imbalance is rare in two-union amalgamations (Chaison, 1986). The merging unions tried to avoid any structural changes that might make it appear that one union was taking over the other (e.g. merging small locals into large ones, or continuing many of the structures and governing practices of the larger union). Hence, the BEFA proposal emphasized the creation of a new union, assured members that their interests would not be submersed in a larger union, and shifted authority away from national headquarters.

## Conclusions

Along with technological change, shifts in industrial sectors and membership decline, increasing numbers of labour organizations in many countries have chosen to merge with other unions – either in similar jurisdictions or with a vastly different membership base (see Chaison, *in press*, for a review of research on union mergers). As a result, ‘trade union mergers’, it has been argued, ‘are one of the means by which trade union structure develops’ (Waddington, 1988: 409). Still, even if union officers seem to have the greatest of expectations when entering merger negotiations, few attempts have been made to uncover the effects of merger on the union members (Chaison, 1986).

When we tested for changes in members’ attitudes and behaviour, we could not uncover short- or long-term negative consequences of a union merger. The Swedish merger we studied was implemented

with great care and took place in a context where local-level participation was strongly emphasized. Admittedly, the impact may be different for other mergers – absorptions, affiliations as well as amalgamations – that are negotiated with less concern for membership participation and power-sharing within unions. Generally, decentralized decision-making is low on the list of priorities of merger negotiators. Union mergers are usually responses to the immediate threats of severe membership loss and related financial decline, not attempts to deal with pressures for greater local-level power (Chaison, 1996).

It might also be that the merger effects would be different in other countries than Sweden. Because of the characteristics of the Swedish industrial relations system (union density exceeding 80 percent, the combination of strong central as well as local unions, and union officers consciously trying to guard against member alienation and apathy in merger negotiations; Chaison et al., 2001; Kjellberg, 2000), it could be argued, the findings reported here may not generalize to mergers in other cultural contexts. However, although the present results await replication, it should be recalled that the unions forming the Industrial Union were facing membership decline, increased unemployment and financial difficulty despite a high unionization rate in the country as a whole. As noted by Chaison (1986), even in times of overall membership stability or growth, unions react to their specific membership changes and financial problems. Moreover, all countries have their particular characteristics (e.g. union density rates, presence of many small unions, jurisdictional overlap, labour law, unions confined to declining industries) that make all national contexts exceptional.

So, while the Swedish context might not tell us a great deal about merger frequency or outcomes in other countries, the BEFA merger process still provides an example of how mergers can be implemented so as to avoid some of the unintended consequences that are often attributed to union structural change. Our results suggest that membership commitment, satisfaction and participation do not necessarily have to be sacrificed for the benefits of building larger, more stable and powerful unions through mergers. We hope our study will lead other researchers to examine behavioural outcomes of mergers, a much neglected area of research on labour unions, and will also encourage union officers to place union–member relations at the centre of merger negotiations.

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