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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emotional practices: how masking negative emotions impacts the post-acquisition integration process

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Research Summary: We conducted a real-time field study of a post-acquisition integration process. We identified two practices that contributed to integration failure. First, the practice of masking negative emotions caused members of both firms to perceive that the partner firm's members were satisfied with the integration process, even though they were not. These false perceptions of satisfaction resulted in minimal corrective actions, the escalation of the situation, and ultimately, integration failure. Second, efficiency-driven communication practices used in inter-firm communication exacerbated the effect of masking negative emotions on false perceptions of satisfaction by shielding both firms' members from the other firm's members' spontaneous emotional reactions. Our research invites scholars to consider more deeply the emotional consequences of various common organizational practices.

Managerial Summary: Do you disagree with your employee, manager, or business partner? Does this disagreement make you annoyed or even angry? Yet, you decide to mask your negative emotions and discuss the disagreement with a neutral or happy face. Wrong. We find that masking negative emotions in the work environment can prevent corrective actions, escalate disagreement, and make people to develop long-lasting negative sentiments toward the counterpart that ultimately result in dysfunctional behaviors. Our findings further reveal that commonly used organizational practices such as communicating via email may contribute to the deliberate masking of negative emotions. We suggest that managers should carefully review if and how their organization's practices prevent or enable people to share their emotions authentically to ensure timely corrective actions and proactive development of business operations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Mergers and acquisitions often fail to achieve the anticipated benefits because of difficulties during the post-acquisition integration process (Graebner, Heimeriks, Huy, & Vaara, 2017). One possible reason for this is that people feel negative emotions such as fear, anger, or anxiety during the integration (Empson, 2001; Graebner, 2004; Greenwood, Hinings, & Brown, 1994; Vaara, 2003). These negative emotions cause detrimental individual-level outcomes such as job dissatisfaction (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991), turnover among top managers (Hambrick & Cannella, 1993), and decreased productivity (Marks & Mirvis, 1985, 2001). Negative emotions could also harm inter-organizational relations. For example, angry people may develop thoughts such as "I don't want to work for some of those a—holes" (Greenwood et al., 1994, p. 249), and the fear of exploitation and contamination reduces knowledge sharing with the partner firm (Empson, 2001).

Although scholars have reported that *felt* negative emotions generally harm integration, research has yet to investigate how members of combining firms *express* their negative emotions during the integration, and how such expressions influence the integration process and its outcomes (see Graebner et al., 2017, for a review). Yet, research on settings other than the integration context suggests that emotional expressions could be consequential for integration performance because they influence other organizational members' emotions and behaviors (Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012). For example, if people express their negative emotions during a task conflict, those emotions can spread through emotional contagion; this could make other participants more hostile, turning a constructive task conflict into a destructive relationship conflict (Yang & Mossholder, 2004). However, the effects are not always that straightforward (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). For example, although showing negative emotions increases the risk of a relationship conflict, people who hide them might receive less help from others (Coté, 2005). Hence, we cannot draw straightforward implications to the integration context from the previous studies on emotional expression. There is a need for a complementary theoretical perspective.

Scholars have recently suggested that many behaviors that are typically seen as manifestations of individual-level psychological dynamics could be better understood through a practice lens (Whittington, 2006). That is, people's emotional expressions in specific situations may not only reflect their own inner psychological states and personal beliefs about appropriate expressions, but may also be manifestations of practices that enable and constrain people in various ways (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). As practices shape patterns of behavior, in both intended and unintended ways, they are likely to influence important organizational processes and outcomes (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, & Whittington, 2016). Hence, a practice lens might allow us to better understand why people express their emotions the way they do, and how emotional expressions influence organizational processes and outcomes.

Thus, we have conducted a longitudinal, real-time study of an integration process between two firms. This setting allowed us to track both firms' members' emotions as they arose, the way they expressed those emotions, and associated consequences.

Our research findings contribute to theory on the intersection of the strategic process of integration and strategy-as-practice. More precisely, we identify *the practice of masking negative emotions*—that is, knowingly expressing faked neutral or positive emotions while actually feeling negative emotions—as a way for managers of each firm to prevent their emerging negative emotions from being noticed by the partner firm's members. We describe how the initial positivity that characterized the integration influenced the formation and use of this practice.

Elaborating this contribution, we specify the mechanism through which the practice of masking negative emotions contributed to integration failure. We found that the central mechanism was not emotional contagion (cf. Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Yang & Mossholder, 2004), but the use of emotional expressions as cues about the other firm's level of satisfaction (see also Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). Various task disagreements started causing situation specific negative emotions among the members of both firms. However, the members of each firm mistakenly perceived that the partner firm's members were satisfied with the integration process because the latter masked their negative emotions. Consequently, they did not initiate corrective actions, and thus, task disagreements persisted, which led both firms' members to experience even more (masked) negative emotions. Over time, these ephemeral negative emotions accumulated into stable negative sentiments toward the partner firm that elicited increasingly unilateral actions and contributed to integration failure.

Moreover, we found how *efficiency-driven communication practices* exacerbated the impact of masking negative emotions by reducing direct exposure to the partner firm's members' spontaneous negative emotions. The consequence of these practices was that, as negative emotional cues were not transmitted, false perceptions of satisfaction persisted. This finding contributes to the integration and strategy-as-practice research by revealing unintended emotional consequences of common organizational communication practices (see also, Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Whittington, 2006, 2007).

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Emotions in the integration process

Negative emotions can harm post-acquisition integration in many ways (Graebner et al., 2017). Therefore, previous research has suggested that actively addressing employees' emotions during integration could be beneficial (Birkinshaw, Bresman, & Hakanson, 2000; Buono & Bowditch, 2003; Graebner, 2004; Ranft & Lord, 2002; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991; Schweiger, Ivancevich, & Power, 1987).[1] Graebner (2004), for example, described how negative emotions are "analogous to friction that can slow the acquired organization's momentum" and how "mitigating actions [to reduce negative emotions] are analogous to removing any friction that could impede the progress [of the integration]." Similarly, Schweiger and Denisi (1991) noted that active communication is needed to reduce the stress and uncertainty caused by integration.

Although integration studies that have highlighted the importance of addressing employees' emotions seem to have implicitly assumed that managers were aware of other organizational

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[1]Consistent with other qualitative case studies in management research (e.g., Vuori & Huy, 2016), we define emotion following Elfenbein (2007, p. 315) as a process that "begins with a focal individual who is exposed to an eliciting stimulus, registers the stimulus for its meaning, and experiences a feeling state and physiological changes, with downstream consequences for attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions, as well as facial expressions and other emotionally expressive cues." Emotions can accumulate into more longer-lasting moods (affective state without a target) and sentiments (affectively charged attitude toward a target) (Elfenbein, 2007; Čehajić-Clancy, Goldenberg, Gross, & Halperin, 2016).

members' felt emotions, some studies hint that there might be differences in how organizational members express their emotions during integration. For example, Vaara and Monin (2010, p. 16) described how discussions during a merger "were often linked with strong emotional expressions" and contained "strong emotional rhetoric." In contrast, other studies have described situations in which people did not express their true emotions: Vaara (2003, p. 382) quoted a manager revealing, "On one occasion, we got angry and said nothing," while Vaara and Tienari (2011, p. 383) cited another manager reflecting, "I wish we would more often have the courage and dare to confront each other…." Although they have described instances of both open and limited emotional expression, integration studies have yet to investigate and theorize the underpinnings of emotional expressions and their consequences.

2.2 | The social consequences of emotional expression

Emotions can have interpersonal effects and social consequences (e.g., Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012) beyond influencing individual behavior (e.g., Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015). Such social effects can occur to the extent that other people perceive a focal person's emotions (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). The accurate perception of others' emotions is not always guaranteed because people do not always express the emotions they are feeling, but rather suppress them (e.g., Gross, 1998). Moreover, they might express emotions that they do not truly feel (e.g., Grandey, 2000; Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

The social consequences of emotions can occur via at least three different mechanisms. The first is emotional contagion, which refers to a process where one person's emotional expression triggers others to unconsciously mimic the expression and feel similar emotions (Barsade, 2002). For example, sales clerks express positive emotions to make customers feel positive (Grandey, 2003). The second mechanism is emotional reactions, which refers to a process where one person's emotional expression triggers other emotions in other people (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). For example, a debt collector's anger expression can trigger fear in the debtor, and therefore, make the debtor more compliant (Sutton, 1991). Much of the strategy and organizational research that has focused on the interpersonal effects of emotions has relied mainly on these two mechanisms (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004; Vuori & Huy, 2016).

The third mechanism—using others' emotional expressions as cues of their deeper thinking and motives—has remained under-investigated in strategy research. The basic idea is that people often infer others' deeper preferences from their emotional expressions, rather than from their verbal communication (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). One rare exception is probably the sub-stream that has shown that negotiators' concessions are partly based on their interpretations of the counterpart's emotions (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004b). For example, they are likely to make larger concessions if the counterpart displays anger in regard to a specific matter because they interpret this to indicate that the matter is particularly important for the counterpart (Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006). Thus, inferences from others' emotional expressions could influence integration dynamics, but these dyad-level experimental findings have yet to be investigated in regard to organization-level processes involving many groups (Humphrey et al., 2015).

2.3 | Strategy-as-practice perspective for studying emotional expressions during integration

To better understand the origins and consequences of emotional expressions during integration, we draw on the strategy-as-practice literature as a complementary meta-theoretical perspective. The strategy-as-practice literature is mainly rooted in practice theories (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984)

and emphasizes the interplay between people's concrete actions (praxis) and the social structures and practices that inform, enable, and constrain those actions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Whittington, 2006, 2007). When acting, people are likely to draw on organizationally accepted practices, such as the use of voting during meetings in strategy making (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). These actions, in turn, reinforce the practices: For example, every selection of a strategic initiative by voting strengthens people's tendency to keep using the voting practice (see Jarzabkowski et al., 2016 on the importance of such feedback loops). These influences shape patterns of behavior that can have organizationally relevant consequences.

Previous strategy-as-practice studies have noted how analytical, discursive, and socio-material practices influence behaviors that are relevant for the strategy process. For example, Mantere and Vaara (2008) identified three types of discourse that reduced middle managers' participation in strategy work, and three other types of discourse that promoted it. Their finding illustrates how the way strategy is being talked about in the organization—the discursive practice—enables and constrains the praxis of middle managers. Similarly, Kaplan (2011) described how the use of PowerPoint influenced the way strategy was formulated in a particular organization. The content of strategy was shaped by the way PowerPoint allowed managers to reshuffle and delete slides to include the information that would lead to the approval of their project and to mask information that could prevent it. This again illustrates how organizational members' actions were both enabled and constrained by the practices on which they drew.

Despite having studied analytical, discursive, and socio-material practices and their various implications, strategy-as-practice research has under-investigated practices related to emotional expression in organizational settings, and whether and how other commonly used organizational practices enable and constrain emotional expressions in organizations. Some strategy-as-practice scholars have studied emotions, and these studies have mainly considered the consequences of emotions and their expression over short time periods (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014), but paid much less attention to practices' influence on emotional expressions and the broader organizational consequences of emotional expressions (see Brundin & Liu, 2015, for a review; and Moisander, Hirsto, & Fahy, 2016 for a partial exception). For example, Liu and Maitlis (2014) showed how expressed emotions influenced whether a decision was reached during a meeting, but they did not investigate whether the emotions expressed during the meeting had any longer-term consequences. Yet, some studies have hinted that the short- and long-term consequences of emotional expression could differ: Although expressing anger in negotiations could elicit greater concessions (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004a), it might also undermine relationship quality and harm long-term collaboration (cf. Vuori & Huy, 2016). And although evoking enthusiasm could help a merger at the outset, it also risks creating unrealistic expectations and diverting attention from critical issues, causing subsequent harm during integration (cf. Vaara & Monin, 2010).

3 | METHODS

We conducted a longitudinal real-time field investigation of a post-acquisition integration. The transaction we studied was a friendly cross-border acquisition of Target by Acquirer (pseudonyms). Target operated in the customer relationship marketing (CRM) sector. Acquirer had five business units, one of which operated in the CRM sector; this unit was approximately eight times the size of Target in terms of number of employees. Acquirer had extensive experience in conducting acquisitions, and used the services of a top-tier investment bank; this suggests that the company had developed an increased awareness of best practices in relation to integration, and thus, avoided making basic mistakes during the process. This should allow us to investigate the influence of subtle emotional dynamics on the process.

TABLE 1 Informants and interviews

Informants in acquirer	Number of interviews in each period		
	Period I	**Period II**	**Period III**
Vice president #1	1		
Vice president #2	4	2	2
Group director		1	1
Business director #1	1	1	1
Business director #2		2	
Senior middle manager #1	2	1	1
Senior middle manager #2	1	1	
Middle manager #1	1		1
Middle manager #2	1		
Middle manager #3	1		
Middle manager #4	1		
Middle manager #5	1		
Total	**28**		
Informants in target	**Number of interviews in each period**		
	Period I	**Period II**	**Period III**
Director #1	2	2	2
Director #2	1		1
Director #3	1	1	
Senior middle manager #1	1	1	1
Senior middle manager #2			1
Senior middle manager #3	1	1	1
Senior middle manager #4			1
Middle manager #1		1	
Middle manager #2	1		1
Middle manager #3		1	1
IT team member #1		1	
IT team member #2	1		1
IT team member #3	1	1	1
Employee #1	1	1	1
Employee #2	1	1	1
Employee #3	1	1	1
Employee #4	1		1
Employee #5	1	1	1
Employee #6			1
Employee #7			1
Total	**45**		

3.1 | Data collection

We collected data longitudinally from 2011 to 2014.[2] We conducted 28 interviews with 12 informants from Acquirer and 45 interviews with 20 informants from Target, totaling 73 interviews (see Table 1).

[2]We have masked the actual dates of case events and data collection as follows. We chose a random number between 1 and 6, and added this number (always the same number) to the actual years. Thus, for example, when we write that something happened in 2010, the actual year was between 2004 and 2009. This change should have no material effect on our findings.

The interviews lasted from 45 min to 2.5 hr. The average duration was 75 min. During each interview, we asked the informants to describe in concrete terms how the integration was going; how they personally interpret events and feel about these events; how the members of their partner firm feel about the same events; and how they perceive their partner firm and its managers' behaviors. We also asked several elaborating questions during each interview, and followed up on specific themes and examples that the interviewees had brought up in earlier interviews (to capture the longitudinal dynamic) or themes that other informants had mentioned (to capture both firms' interpretation of key events). All but five interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim; careful notes were taken for the rest. The formal interviews were complemented with over 100 informal and follow-up conversations that took place between and after the formal interview rounds.

We also observed seven meetings at Acquirer and the flow of two days at Target. Acquirer's meetings related both to specific actions to be taken with respect to Target, and to Acquirer's integration approach more generally. At Target, we observed the flow of the working day and related interactions in the firm's office. In addition, as we conducted our interviews on site, we were able to carry out casual observation throughout the study period. The primary goal of these observations was to triangulate the information we collected in our interviews.[3] For example, during the interviews, Acquirer's managers told us that they had become frustrated by Target's behaviors; we could confirm these emotional reactions by observing them during their private meetings. We made detailed handwritten notes during these observations.

We further complemented the data with documentary sources. These sources included Acquirer's integration manual; a sample of email correspondence from both firms; annual reports of Acquirer; Acquirer's press releases regarding the acquisition of Target and other acquisitions; and Facebook posts by several managers from both firms. Again, these sources allowed us to validate informants' interview statements. For example, when Target managers told us that the firm's customers had perceived certain changes negatively, we checked whether their customers had emailed negative feedback concerning these changes.[4]

3.2 | Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in parallel with data collection. We used a number of commonly used analytical techniques (Langley, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We also engaged with the literatures throughout the analysis process such that, while we remained open to the data, our coding was informed by our knowledge of various literatures from the start. When we recognized potentially important new or refined themes in the data, we examined related literatures for additional conceptual insight and used the new insights to inform our coding. While theoretical insights are sometimes described as emerging from data, we recognize that we actively sought to interpret the data by using

[3]We observed different things in Acquirer (meetings) and Target (informal interaction during the working day) because the companies used different forums for discussing integration-related problems. Acquirer preferred formal meetings, whereas Target used informal interaction. Hence, for both companies, our triangulating observation focused on situations that were most relevant for ensuring the validity of the interview accounts.

[4]The ratio of interview statements validated by external sources varied depending on the nature of information. We were able to validate 100% of the collective behaviors described in our theoretical model (controlling and decoupling) since, for example, we saw the surveillance cameras and alternative computers in Target's office during our site visit. On the other hand, we had to rely on the informants' accounts of their private thoughts and feelings, since they rarely shared them with outsiders during their normal activities, and we were unable to find external sources that would have recorded them. However, informants' descriptions of their private thoughts and feelings are unlikely to be biased in major ways because we collected data in real time (whereas in retrospective interviews people might remember their past thoughts and feelings inaccurately). Furthermore, their descriptions of their emotional states were consistent with what appraisal theories of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) would predict in the focal situations.

various alternative theoretical perspectives (see also, Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). In the early phases of our data analysis process, these perspectives included themes that are typically considered in integration studies, such as cultural differences (e.g., Chatterjee, Lubatkin, Schweiger, & Weber, 1992), identity (e.g., Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010), and learning (e.g., Laamanen & Keil, 2008; Vuori & Vuori, 2014). However, we ultimately concluded that a combination of emotional and practice perspectives would provide novel and important insights that could not be achieved with the other perspectives. Through such an abductive approach (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008; Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013), our research focus evolved in several steps such as: (a) general interest in the social-psychological dynamics during integration; (b) development of negative emotions during integration; (c) the influence of negative emotions on sense-making during integration; (d) more nuanced aspects of emotional dynamics during integration; (e) masking negative emotions during integration; and (f) practices associated with the masking of negative emotions during integration, and their consequences. Each step in the evolution involved recognizing problems with our prevailing interpretation and trying out several alternative interpretations to improve our theorizing until we arrived at what we consider the best explanation of the data and a robust theoretical contribution.

Although the analysis was iterative, several analytical techniques can be identified. We started with open coding, during which we read through the interview statements and wrote (first-order) codes to passages. Consistent with methodological prescriptions (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we generated new codes during the coding process itself. Overall, we generated 1,512 codes during open coding. To illustrate, we read the data segment "The sellers are three young, ambitious guys who are very skillful people" and coded it as "Acquirer's managers perceive Target's managers as skillful and ambitious people."

We compared the first-order codes with each other and kept asking, "How is this code similar to the other codes, and how is it different?" This allowed us to recognize properties associated with the codes and develop abstract observations, which enabled us to group the first-order codes into more abstract second-order categories and aggregate dimensions that we generated during the process. For example, we grouped codes "angry about cold calling" and "feels nervous because of limited access to webmail" under "negative emotions."

We elaborated the evolving second-order categories with additional, more focused coding. In particular, when coding for emotion, we used two main approaches. First, we used the informants' explicit statements about their emotional states and reactions. Second, we used appraisal theories of emotion to attain further precision in our coding (Huy, 2011; Vuori & Huy, 2016). These theories suggest that people appraise situations along several dimensions, and that certain appraisal patterns are connected to specific emotions (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). For example, when people perceive a harmful change in their situation that was intentionally caused by a certain person or people, they are likely to feel anger or frustration (Lazarus, 1991). Hence, when we saw Target's managers describing how implementing some tasks as Acquirer suggested was harmful, we could infer that frustration potentially resulted. Although we coded specific emotions, we ultimately focused on positive and negative emotions because this level of granularity seemed sufficient for explaining our key mechanisms.

We also sought to deepen our understanding of the relationships among the conceptual categories. We drew diagrams that depicted how the concepts might be related, wrote memos theorizing how the concepts might influence each other over time, and used tables to map the links between people's descriptions of each concept and their descriptions of other concepts. Once we had recognized potential relationships among the concepts, we asked, "Why might these concepts be related?" For example, we recognized that the masking of negative emotions might be related to the

development of negative sentiments, and started investigating why the masking of negative emotions could influence the accumulation of negative emotions into sentiments. We then realized, after returning to the data, that such masking prevents people from attending to each other's emotions and taking corrective actions. Similarly, we started asking why people masked their emotions and started realizing (after reinvestigating our data, and reading various literatures and receiving feedback from the editor, reviewers, and colleagues) that organizational practices played a significant role in enabling and constraining people's emotional expressions. We also attended to informants' descriptions of potential causal relations between events, and compared our evolving theoretical understanding with the descriptions of how the integration had been progressing in concrete terms. In this way, we sought to create a processual model that was both logically sound and consistent with the data.

To increase the trustworthiness of our findings, we asked our informants to provide us with feedback throughout the study (Shah & Corley, 2006). In the early stages, we mainly asked them to validate our interpretations of their perceptions and feelings. For example, we asked whether we had correctly understood that Target's members' excitement about the acquisition. In the later stages, we also asked for feedback on our theoretical interpretations. (We only did this toward the end of data collection to minimize our influence on the informants' thinking.) The informants agreed over 85% of the time with our interpretations.

4 | FINDINGS

We found that the members of the two firms experienced various negative emotions triggered by persistent task disagreements, but consistently masked these emotions from the partner firm. As a consequence, members of each firm mistakenly perceived that their colleagues from the partner firm were satisfied with the progress of the integration. This false perception was also reinforced by efficiency-driven communication practices that shielded both firm's members from the other firm's members' spontaneous emotional reactions. Neither firm therefore took corrective actions and the task disagreements continued persisting and triggering further negative emotions. Over time, these ephemeral but repeated negative emotions accumulated into stable negative sentiments toward the partner firm that, in turn, caused both firms to start acting unilaterally. Unilateral actions further exacerbated negative sentiments and contributed to integration failure. We elaborate these findings below and present additional data in Table 2.

4.1 | Initial positivity

At the early stage of the acquisition, both firms' members formed positive expectations and perceptions of each other, and gained trust and optimism. This initial positivity resulted from extensive negotiation and due-diligence processes, during which each learned about the capabilities and culture of the other. Acquirer also used best practices, including frequent communication about the acquisition and the integration, various workshops, and informal events to build strong bonds. The following quotes illustrate the initial positivity:

> The sellers are three young, ambitious guys who are very skillful people. They started a business and ran it successfully for 10 years. So, they have good competences, good knowledge of the market, the business. So they have the skills to work with data, they are also good in project management. (2011, top manager at Acquirer)

TABLE 2   Additional data on theoretical categories

Target	Acquirer
INITIAL POSITIVITY	
I feel no fear. I hope we will have better offices, higher salaries, and better medical insurance. I have very positive feelings. I think we will benefit from the acquisition. Now we have the opportunity to embark on more ambitious, more interesting projects because we have more money; more resources for research and development (Middle manager, Target)	We [Acquirer's members] are delighted that we've been able to welcome these very competent people [Target's members] to our family. (Top manager, Acquirer)
	As an innovator in its field, Target will bring new know-how and vital local knowledge to Acquirer. Correspondingly, we can expand our service offering to new markets. Our vision is that Target will be a platform for future expansion to [certain areas]. (Top manager, Acquirer)
If I was acquiring another firm, I would do everything exactly as Acquirer did. They are very nice. They respect us. They show they appreciate us. I have very positive feelings. When I meet [top manager at Acquirer] in the hallway, he always asks how we are doing. He knows little things about each of us. I feel they care about us. It is not that they communicate with our bosses only. They know something about all of us. (Employee, Target)	We are quite happy that we were able to get these very competitive people in our family, and we are able to build more comprehensive service concepts in this area of customer relationship marketing. (Top manager, Acquirer)
PERSISTENT TASK DISAGREEMENTS	
Emerging task disagreements	
IT system: We have a problem with the registration form of our client on Facebook. The system reported an error: "Acquirer Corporation restricted." I informed Acquirer's IT support last week. The registration form still does not work! … What will I do if the client calls me today and asks me to send a report [how many people visit the page with the event ad, how many people are going to the event, how many people enrolled for the test drive]? The client won't like the fact that we're not monitoring page visits… [Slowness] means less client loyalty. (Senior middle manager, Target).	*IT system:* Technical integration went very well…. [The outcome of IT integration] does not affect business. It's very easy to argue that it would affect some business. It might cause some annoyance at Target, and they stop doing something or other. But [the outcome of IT integration] doesn't have any direct impact on business. It really impacts the business very little. It just makes things a bit slower. (Middle manager, Acquirer)
Planning: It sounds insane when [Acquirer] asks us to make a five-year plan. The most we can do is plan for one year. Our business is different. It's a mistake to think that one can make forecasts and plan everything. Our business is very volatile: It's feast and famine. [Acquirer] insists on strict planning; they insist that we need to know exactly how much we will earn next month and next year. Also, they want us to estimate how much money we will make within five years! I feel like we are building sandcastles all the time. I don't believe there is anything real behind this planning. (Top manager, Target)	*Planning:* We did not set them strategic goals last year. We did not discuss how they saw themselves, how they will develop. Where they will be in five years? We did not discuss these issues last year. This year, we tried. It didn't seem to be that easy…. It was very hard for them to understand that [numbers and plans] are not just pointless paperwork, but actually a call for action. It was a very difficult moment. (Middle manager, Acquirer)
Elusive agreements	
IT system: Of cours, using Acquirer's service is not so comfortable in comparison to our own. But business processes did not stop. Of course, if we weren't integrated into their server, solving technical problems would take two hours maximum instead of four days. However, I understand Acquirer. It might be that there are security or some other reasons for [the integration]. So I helped them with the equipment and installation. (IT team members, Target)	*Long-term planning:* It seems that there is the real challenge behind [strategic planning]. Everyone closes [all transactions] by year-end here [in Target's market]. They have been always in minus at the end of the year, and everyone is in a panic. Then suddenly, when all the bills have been paid, Target goes to plus. And all our people here [at Acquirer] were very surprised. Because of this specific characteristic of the Target market: how they pay, how they delay payment… all this. The culture is very difficult, of course. (Middle manager, Acquirer)
Perceived uncertainties	
They [Acquirer] brought some new ideas—well, not *new* ideas, but ideas that are different from what we are doing here. Of course, when we first heard about it, we were	I don't know whether it would help if I or someone else moved there. I think that it might be good for transferring our knowledge to them and, at the same time, learning from

TABLE 2   (Continued)

Target	Acquirer
afraid that it wouldn't work. It would drag us into a completely different market, it would change our business model and distribution channels. Of course, it triggered doubts. However, we tried to find something good in it. We tried to think, "Yes, it's dragging us to new markets, but there is a possibility that we have a chance in these markets." We tried to implement it. (Top manager, Target)	them. It would increase our understanding of the market and business culture…. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

We are now learning the business, but we do not have any experience with that. I do not have experience of Target's market at all. And within Acquirer we do not have the kind of know-how that Target has. (Middle manager, Acquirer)

Well, of course, I'd like to change the reward system. However, when I was asked: "What can you offer? What would help, in your opinion? Which system would work in your department?" I couldn't give any answer, as I really didn't know [what reward system would be optimal]. (Senior middle manager, Target)

The reason why we are not pushing our products is that there's an assumption you'll be working with personal data. And at this point the personal data laws are changing as well as the requirements for data storage. It's not very clear at this point whether Acquirer will satisfy the requirements—namely, whether we could store the data. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

We tried to show them something, but they just said, "No, you're doing it wrong; you need to do it this way." We tried to adjust, but not because we needed it or found it useful, but because we had to do what Acquirer wanted. (Middle manager, Target)

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Appraisals of goal incongruence in relation to daily tasks

Our current clients are continuously complaining that we need to spend more time on them. They want us to be more proactive in offering them some new solutions. But we have no resources to do it, because now we have to look for new customers. (Middle manager, Target)

Our vision is that Target needs to adapt the product to the market and look for customers at the same time. They [Target's manager] want to finalize the product adaptation, to build everything, to automatize everything. They are so afraid that during demonstration a customer can see that something somewhere does not work…. I am telling them, "What if you do everything ready now, but no one will buy your product?"… So we have these kinds of problems. (Middle manager, Acquirer)

I will repeat once again, that [the working time control system] is quite difficult because you don't simply have to mark that you spent eight hours in the office, but also allocate time spent with different tasks. [Having] 10 clients and tracking time, like, "Now, one client called me and I spoke with him for 10 min. Then another one called and I spoke with him for 15 min. Then I wrote an email to the first one. And tracking this throughout the day? (Employee, Target)

I have to teach them very basic things: You have to call potential clients and you have to go and try to sell something. But they asked me, "How can I sell if I do not know what the client wants?" But this is the art of selling! Even when I meet you for the very first time, I can sell you something. But before I meet you what can I find out about you? That you work at a university and you are doing research on mergers and acquisitions, etc. So what could I sell you? (Top manager, Acquirer)

[Lack of webmail access is problematic because] We need to reply our clients on weekends, from home, from vacation. Our work is not like you are here from 9:00 to 18:00 and then you left and forgot. I require from my team to reply to client's emails at the very same day (Employee, Target)

Negative emotions

It [a need to fill the time control system] evoked anger. (Middle manager, Target)

This type of thing is something I'm not really happy with. I've tried to influence a bit, but I haven't been able to get the sort of result that I would personally be happy with. Basically, if we agree something, they [Target's managers] should make sure it gets done. But when I do the follow-up, most of the time, it hasn't gone the way we agreed. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

Sometimes, especially when there are tons of reports and all this bureaucracy, I've started feeling sad. (Top manager, Target)

We have very emotional interaction here. People run into my office and yell at me…. What annoys me most is that I wish I could solve a problem and forget about it. In the current situation, I have to keep this problem in my head and come back to it in my thoughts again and again. That annoys me more than anything! (IT team, Target)

My frustration was caused more by the solution sales process and this generic type of selling because nothing was really happening there. (Middle manager, Acquirer)

PRACTICE OF MASKING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Expressing your negative emotions would not lead to good things. Even if it could solve the problem, the

Of course, during meetings you are more formal in the expression of your emotions. You do not show your

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Target	Acquirer
uncomfortable feelings afterward would be strong. (Top manager, Target)	emotions. You do not use expressions with strong emotions. … When you speak with people you don't know so well, you don't express your emotions. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
One explanation [for me hiding negative emotions] is because we are connected with Acquirer by the deal. They paid money to us; we gave them our company. This connection is intimate. It is special. Our employees cannot feel it. Because I entered into this partnership, I have to live with Acquirer; I need to find a compromise. (Top manager, Target)	You explain and explain and explain. They don't understand. It's no good getting angry because they just do not understand. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

EFFICIENCY-DRIVEN COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Communicating through intermediaries

[Our question:] Why you did not say how you felt directly to [Acquirer's manager]? [Answer:] I did consider it. But sharing it with [Acquirer's manager] would mean going over our bosses' heads. (Employee, Target)	I ended up in the role of mediator between Acquirer and Target. There were dozens of times when I wrote Acquirer ICT an email [to communicate issues expressed by Target ICT].… I did this with Target ICT and Acquirer ICT [who did not communicate directly between each other]. (Middle manager, Acquirer)
Basically, he [Acquirer's senior middle manager] delivers principal information to us: what the requirements of the mother company are. (Middle manager, Target)	
We communicate it all to him [Acquirer's representative]: what we would like, how we would like it, and then we solve these questions with him. Unfortunately, we are isolated from Acquirer's HR. (Middle manager, Target)	[The idea was that] Target reported directly to me. But now I have changed it: they report to [name of Acquirer manager] first because I have so many bigger problems and I just don't have, kind of enough time to concentrate on Target. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

Communicating via email and in English as a common language

I will give you an example. We received an email from Acquirer last week. The sender put just her name at the end. It read: "Dear friends, we did not receive your report for 2009. We would like to remind you that the deadline is…." I ran to [name of Target manager]: "Do you know what this email is?" We were thinking, "What kind of report? Why 2009? Who the f— is this person who sent this to us?" (Senior middle manager, Target)	The [typical communication] process is such that [Target] sent one email [to IT support] and if [Target] did not get any reaction [from IT support] they contacted me, "Hey, this is not working…." (middle manager at Acquirer, Acquirer)
I report to one of the principal managers, and that's it. We communicate via landline or corporate email. (Senior manager, Target)	When you are tired or you get worked up, you're less able to communicate in a foreign language. You can't find the right nuance. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
I am receiving an order via email, for instance, that I have to do this and that for this and that client within some project. (Employee, Target)	[One of the Target top managers] doesn't speak good English. So I have to use very simple expressions if I want him to understand. (Middle manager, Acquirer)

FALSE PERCEPTION OF SATISFACTION

After the meeting, we went to a restaurant. I was sitting between the CEO and CFO. They seemed like nice people: very down to earth, very interesting and talkative. I felt comfortable.… I perceived that there were no problems. (Top manager, Target)	They have adopted our processes, they see that it's a big benefit for them that they are now a part of large Western corporation that is helping and supporting them in their business. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
I perceived a lot of positive excitement during my visit to Acquirer. Acquirer welcomed us very warmly. The mood was very positive, happy. I got positive impressions. (Middle manager, Target)	Personal satisfaction has been really, really good there. (Middle manager, Acquirer)

MINIMAL CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

Minimal substantive corrective actions

[No evidence of active effort to take substantive corrective actions]	[No evidence of active effort to take substantive corrective actions]
I share [my employees' and IT team's] anger and annoyance because we are repeating the same things again and again,	We would agree that he would do something, but then he wouldn't implement it. What can I do? I just have to say,

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Target	Acquirer
but they [Acquirer] do not hear us, or forget what we are telling them. It is irritating. (Top manager, Target)	"Hi, [Name of Target manager], we agreed...." And then he always, you know, he gives me all kinds of explanations [why it was not implemented]. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
Limited empathic attention to partner firm's negative emotions	
[No evidence of active effort to attend to Acquirer's members' negative emotions]	[No evidence of active effort to attend to Target's members' negative emotions]
I wish it wasn't that [Acquirer] gives us orders. I wish they would come here and observe processes, observe how managers work…. I have seen no interest in us, or attention paid to us. I only see orders. (Employee at Target)	He told us about this plane thing; he was proposing that [the board] should buy a plane so I could travel more easily. Then I thought, "This probably wasn't the right forum for your joke; these guys are a bit too serious for that sort of thing." (Middle manager, Acquirer)
Currently, Acquirer does not give us money for events: there are no team-buildings, no parties. (Employee, Target)	
NEGATIVE SENTIMENTS	
He tried to set us some goals, some targets. Well, it's understandable because he has a background in finance. So he just worries about financial results and growth. He has tried to change our opinions about things. And here some frictions began to appear. (Top manager, Target)	The fact is, I have realized that their [Target's members'] attitude is, "This is a nice place to work. I will just do my best for seven or eight hours and that's it." They are not developing the company; they are not concerned with acquiring new customers, with turnover. They are just getting very good salaries…. They are thinking, "OK, now I am going take it easy." I think that's their attitude. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
They [Acquirer] forced us to sell their product. We did not get excited about this product for various reasons…. I think the main driver behind [Acquirer's representative's] decision to force this product [on us] was his desire to see some activity. You know, something should be happening all the time. Something global should happen. I think this was driving his decision. (Top manager, Target)	They are nice-looking, very flirtatious. Life has been good to them and they don't want to change. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)
	He is a guy who has a very small comfort zone. (Senior middle manager, Acquirer)

> We got very lucky with Acquirer. They are just delightful. I've heard really horrible stories about what happens when one company buys another, but our case is so different! They were very open from the beginning. They were open and honest. We got very lucky. I felt very comfortable working with them. I think we have the same level of energy, the same level of honesty. It's very pleasant to work together. (2011, manager at Target)

The firms also saw value in each other's complementary knowledge and capabilities. Acquirer was selling a standardized product: a platform for delivering marketing campaigns for the mass market. In contrast, Target perceived itself as a "boutique marketing agency" that offered consultancy on customer relationship management solutions, helped plan marketing campaigns, and provided tailored marketing services for a small number of clients. Each company's managers believed that they were missing a piece of their value chain, which the acquisition would provide. These positive initial expectations suggest that potential prejudices, stereotypes, and other culture-related factors did not have an overly negative influence on the attitudes and emotional reactions of the members of the two firms as the integration process began (cf. Datta, 1991; Larsson & Finkelstein, 1999). Although members recognized that there were differences between their firms, they were optimistic about the future of their collaboration, respected the other party, and had action intentions that favored integration. As we will describe later, these initial positive perceptions in part contributed to the formation and maintenance of the practice of masking negative emotions.

4.2 | Persistent task disagreements

4.2.1 | Emerging task disagreements

Despite their positive expectations and shared high-order strategic goals, members of the two firms started disagreeing over various details of how best to proceed in relation to various tasks. For example, while the managers of both firms agreed that Target needed to grow sales revenues, they disagreed on how to achieve this growth. Target had traditionally grown by offering new services to its established clients, and relied on word of mouth to acquire new clients. Acquirer, in contrast, wanted Target to use a more systematic, proactive approach by cold-calling a large number of potential clients:

> It's just simple math—you need to make a certain number of cold calls per week; some of those calls turn into meetings with potential clients; and ultimately some of those meetings turn into signed contracts. (2012, middle manager at Acquirer)

However, Target's members found it hard to get behind this practice:

> To be honest, I don't believe in cold calls. I believe in participating in our professional conferences to spread the word about our products and services. This is a much more effective way. Cold calls are not for our business. (2012, senior middle manager at Target)

Other task-related disagreements that emerged during the integration related to IT integration, planning systems, and time and attendance systems (see Table 2).

4.2.2 | Elusive agreements

When task disagreements emerged, the members of the two firms discussed them. In most cases, these discussions remained largely superficial, and the parties did not explore the causes deeply enough to resolve the disagreements. Instead, the two firms found themselves in a state that we call "elusive agreement": One partner is willing to act temporarily according to the other's views and opinions, despite privately maintaining personal dissenting prior beliefs (see also Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011). For example, despite their private doubts over the value of the new sales technique that Acquirer was suggesting, Target still put it into practice:

> We didn't reject the idea, even though we didn't believe it would work in our context. We discussed the new sales process internally. We tried to adapt. We even put the calendar up on a noticeboard and used stickers to mark meetings, open tenders etc. (2012, top manager at Target)

However, as time went by, Target's managers kept returning to their initial beliefs that this approach did not work in their particular context:

> We were given a sales plan and we had to do so-called cold sales and cold calls. We tried to explain that our product cannot be sold this way because it isn't a "boxed" product. Our product is complex software systems and solutions. It's not feasible to dial the number, talk to a person, or a secretary, or someone you don't know, and explain on the phone what we are offering and moreover arrange a meeting. It is very difficult to explain what we are actually selling, because it is not like a physical product. (2012, senior middle manager at Target)

Similar elusive agreements occurred in relation to the other task disagreements (see Table 2).

4.2.3 | Perceived uncertainties

Why did the task-related disagreements turn into elusive agreements and persist for so long? Even though Target and Acquirer disagreed on various task-related matters, they were not fully confident in their own views. They could not be certain which practices would work best in the new situation, even though they had their own preference in mind. These perceived uncertainties were consistent with the general definition of uncertainty in organizational literature, in that there was a perceived "lack of the information needed to assess means-ends relationships, make decisions, and confidently assign probabilities to their outcomes" (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001, p. 536). Both firms' members were uncertain about (a) whether their or the partner's preferred actions would lead to more successful outcomes, and (b) how the partner would react to assertive argumentation about task disagreements.

Perceived uncertainty about whether and how actions would lead to successful outcomes caused managers on both sides to argue less assertively during interactions with the partner firm's members. For example, even though Target's managers disagreed with the active sales approach proposed by Acquirer, they perceived that Acquirer might have superior sales capabilities. In the quote below, note that although Target's manager suspected that the new sales approach might not be effective, he remained unsure of his own judgment:

> I really did not see how it [active sales] could be applicable in our case. But I tried, I admitted that I could be wrong…. It might be beneficial for us to learn because they [Acquirer] are much more developed than we are. So, it might make some sense to listen to them and infer some useful lessons from their experience. (2012, top manager at Target)

Acquirer's managers, in turn, doubted their own understanding of the acquired local context. As one of Acquirer's managers said: "[Target's managers] say that [the way a client should be approached] is down to differences in business culture. They probably know what they're talking about, because that's where they live" (2012, middle manager at Acquirer).

Similarly, both firms' managers' uncertainty about the other firm's managers' reactions to the focal firm's arguments and decisions reduced their assertiveness. For example, Acquirer would have preferred to reduce overheads in Target, but thought that it had better not to avoid upsetting the partner firm's members: "They have so many overheads. This is a problem. We can change it, but we need do it very slowly and carefully. We can't demotivate them" (2012, middle manager at Acquirer). Likewise, Target's managers trod carefully around Acquirer's managers because they were uncertain of Acquirer's managers' reactions to more direct approaches. For example, one of Target's top managers was strongly against Acquirer's decision to buy a costly new office in the A-level business center in an expensive location. However, he did not argue much against the new office because he worried that Acquirer might react negatively:

> I called [Acquirer representative] and said, "I've got the papers [regarding the purchase of a new office] to sign. I don't think I can sign them. This is the wrong decision." He replied, "Well, OK. Do as you see fit." Five minutes later, I got a call from the CEO's assistant saying, "You have to sign this." Well, I realized that the decision had been made and that, in general, my role here is a technical role, the role of the man who

signs papers. If I don't sign, I'll be fired and someone else will sign. So I signed. (2013, top manager at Target)

In sum, even though both sides had initial positive expectations, they started disagreeing on various emerging task matters as the integration unfolded. These disagreements persisted in part because managers on both sides made tentative ad-hoc concessions and reached elusive agreements—despite holding on to their preferences in private—because they remained uncertain about the full consequences of their preferred actions and the partner firm's members' potential reactions to strong arguments.

4.3 | Felt negative emotions

The persistent task disagreements elicited negative emotions in both firms.

4.3.1 | Appraisals of goal incongruence in relation to daily tasks

People experience negative emotions when they appraise changes as incongruent with their goals (Lazarus, 1991). Many of the elusive agreements led to situations in which members of the two firms had to implement tasks that they appraised in this way, as goal-incongruent. For example, Acquirer's IT system and sales approach prevented Target's personnel from executing their tasks in a way they considered effective:

> I used to wake up at 6 am and I start my day with a cup of coffee and my work email to plan my day. Now I've lost that [because of the IT system and policies imposed by Acquirer]. Also, an important client can send me an email at 5 pm with an invitation to dinner at 8 pm. And I've got to be there! Because we now have no webmail access, I can't read my email after I leave the office. I'm often nervous: "What if I have some important email waiting for me in my inbox?" (2012, top manager at Target)

> I am still in charge of many old projects and I need to work on them. At the same time, they want me to call potential clients and go and meet them. All I hear is: "Make this presentation," "Let's go meet the client." As a result, I feel stressed and overloaded. I don't know where to start! And then I feel pressure from old projects that I had to put on hold. It's difficult! (2013, Employee at Target)

Similarly, Acquirer's managers appraised issues relating to the disagreements as goal-incongruent. For example, when Target wanted to increase salaries based on situationally determined rationales rather than standardized ones, Acquirer's human resource department had difficulties because they had to deviate from their standard procedures:

> Acquirer has very strict rules about doing things the Acquirer way. And IT and HR are the main groups. We need to standardize all processes. And when issues come up [with the compensation and reward system at Target] we need to solve them.… Because we have detailed process descriptions, but the fact is that we are now not following them [because Target requested a change].… And now we are facing these problems because of that. (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Acquirer's managers also perceived that Target's managers' behaviors were preventing them from achieving goals in joint sales meetings:

They went to clients with a 50-slide presentation; sometimes it was as many as 60 or 100 slides. We told them that nobody can listen to all that, nobody's got time for it!… We are worried [and] afraid that they [Target] will not be able to sell these products. (2012, middle manager at Acquirer)

4.3.2 | Negative emotions

The tasks that the members of the firms disagreed with, and appraised as goal-incongruent, gave rise to negative emotions in them. For example, Target's managers felt negative emotions in relation to IT changes, cold calling, and reporting:

We lost our flexibility. If there were problems, first [Acquirer's IT support] scratched their heads, then they did this and that. Before, we could [fix the problem] in two minutes. This annoys us. We [are used] to working fast. [Being unable to do work now] is quite painful. (2012, top manager at Target)

They want us to make cold calls. And they don't understand that the person on the other end would reply, "F— off, guys!" [Acquirer's members] just don't get it! (2012, manager at Target)

It's frustrating that Acquirer just asks for reports all the time, instead of real work. It makes people skeptical. (2014, middle manager at Target)

Acquirer's managers, like Target's, also felt negative emotions because they perceived several obstacles to effective task performance:

I would say frustration is probably quite close to my reaction to the situation. Naturally I am not happy because it is not going as planned, or as well as it could have. (2012, middle manager at Acquirer)

The current situation makes me feel bad. I am not pleased with the current situation at all. We have grown the company a bit, but not fast enough! (2012, top manager at Acquirer)

In sum, managers in both companies felt negative emotions in relation to disagreements and complications that they appraised as impeding the achievement of important task-related goals.

4.4 | The practice of masking negative emotions

Despite feeling negative emotions, members of both firms masked them from the partner firm. For example, during one meeting we observed at Acquirer (at which only Acquirer members were present), Acquirer's business director, having read a recent report on Target, threw down her pen, banged her fist on the table, and burst out, "Let's fire these people. They're not the right ones to run this business." However, a senior middle manager sought to calm her down:

Let's wait a bit longer. Just give me more time. Give me half a year or so and then we decide. Obviously, when we look at our initial plan, how this acquisition would support the whole growth strategy of Acquirer, the reality is a bit different. But I think cultural and technical integration went quite well. The business side of integration was

much harder because very little steering was provided from our side. We didn't provide enough steering because we didn't have time; we were busy with something else. But now we can offer more support. (2012, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

The manager also explained to us, after the meeting, why Acquirer's members decided to mask their frustration from Target:

Definitely, there might have been some frustration, but in general my business attitude is, like, exceptionally positive. I know that this is a bit different than many other people. My philosophy is that there are always bad things that happen. When bad things happen, you just do something to improve the situation. (2012, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Acquirer's managers also elaborated more generally on why they masked negative emotions:

For example, when we were talking about how to build sales, it was something that they couldn't understand at all. Like, be proactive, and contact the client. I [felt] frustration. You always feel frustration. [However,] I don't show it verbally. I don't shout, I don't raise my voice. (follow-up interview, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

It's my personality, my character, who I am. I'm not the sort of person who would shout. How do you deal with others? I don't know if that is acceptable behavior…. I've got the sort of personality where you don't reveal negative emotions. (follow-up interview, middle manager at Acquirer)

One senior middle manager also described how he encouraged his subordinates to keep their negative emotions masked:

But [expressing negative emotions] is one reason why I fired them [people in my organization]. The last guy I fired in September. I went to lunch with him and I said that right now, today, while we eat, you have to decide if the glass is full, half-empty or half-full. If it's half-empty, then I think you should try to find a new job. Because this company can't make you happy…because you know we can't change so much that you would be happy. And because you don't even know yourself what would make you happy. (2014, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Similarly, Target's members kept their true negative emotions masked. For example, on one occasion when Acquirer's senior middle manager was visiting Target, Target's members showed neutral and positive emotions during a meeting with him. However, after the meeting, several Target members came "out of the meeting rolling their eyes and saying, 'OK. I'm fed up with this bullshit. I'm going to go and do something useful instead'" (2012, top manager at Target). This behavior reflected a general tendency to mask negative emotions from Acquirer: "When Acquirer's bosses visit us, people are on their best behavior. Everyone is more friendly and polite" (2012, top manager at Target).

Target members also masked their negative emotions in more deliberate ways. They revealed to us that they had provided inauthentic positive answers to job satisfaction surveys to please Acquirer. They also strived to make Acquirer's members feel welcome:

> When [Acquirer's representative] comes to visit us, our girls take him out. They try to entertain him and bring him out of his shell. They ask how he is doing, how he likes [our city], how he likes our company. They show that they are very happy to show him around. (2012, manager at Target)

Our informants also explained to us that they masked their negative emotions in part because they did not want to dispel the early positivity that had characterized the integration. For example, one of Target's top managers explained that the masking of negative emotions helped in maintaining a friendly relationship with Acquirer:

> The main thing [was] not to express our negative emotions.… Acquirers, well, not only Acquirers, but all people who work in the corporation respond negatively to the expression of negative emotions. It would turn them against us…. Our dialogue with them is valuable, even though it may not be perfect. But if I were to express my anger and raise my voice, our dialogue would be under threat. (follow-up interview, top manager at Target)

Similarly, Acquirer's managers wanted to avoid harming the relationship:

> Of course, if I were to express my anger, he [Target's top manager] would most likely obey. But do I want to have a sheep that follows my orders without thinking? No, what I want is to have a proactive managing director who thinks and act independently. I need him to be creative. I need him to grow the business. (follow-up interview, manager at Acquirer)

> You have your own opinion, but what is the right thing to do? And someone else has a different opinion, how do you convince them? By having arguments? I don't know if you can really convince people by shouting. That can actually be counterproductive. (follow-up interview, manager at Acquirer)

In addition to the desire to maintain the initial positivity, the perceived uncertainties that contributed to formation of elusive agreements may also have contributed to the masking of negative emotions. Since members were uncertain of how the partner firm's members would react to strong argumentation (including emotionally charged argumentation), they softened their emotional expressions, as we described above.

4.5 | Efficiency-driven communication practices

The effects of masking negative emotions were exacerbated by the use of efficiency-driven communication practices that shielded people from direct exposure to the partner firm's spontaneous negative emotions. These practices allowed the members of the two firms to efficiently share factual information and logical arguments between one another. Such an approach was practical, given their busy schedules and the geographical distance between the firms (around 350 miles). However, the unintended side effect was to filter out their emotional expressions in relation to the content being communicated.

4.5.1 | Communicating through intermediaries

The members of the two firms relied on some colleagues performing intermediary roles to convey business-relevant thoughts and information to the relevant members of the other firm; they also

communicated emotionally charged thoughts in this way. This practice enabled more efficient communication because the sender and the receiver of the communication did not need to coordinate their schedules. For example, a busy top manager could simply leave a message for another busy top manager's assistant, who could convey the message at an opportune moment. In addition, the intermediary could collect information from several senders before delivering the information to the intended recipient in one package.

Even though the intermediaries typically relayed the factual content of the messages accurately, they tended to filter out the negative emotions. This happened partly because the mediator was less emotionally attached to the focal issue. For example, Target's middle managers, who were frustrated by Acquirer's new requirements, generally reported their concerns to their own top managers first. However, when communicating with Acquirer's representatives, Target's top managers did not share their subordinates' negative emotions:

> Of course, if our [middle] managers had the opportunity to express their emotions to Acquirer counterparts, they'd take it. They came to me saying, "It's terrible! It's a nightmare!" It was very emotional. If they had access not only to me but also to Acquirer, they would definitely channel all these emotions there.
>
> [Question: So you filtered out negative emotions?]
>
> Yes. Because they [our managers] deal with clients. The client told them not to be late again, and here they are, late again…. Of course, the manager who works with the client is very irritated because he understands that being late again is not his fault, but Acquirer's. But that's not the way it is for me. [Our question: Why?] I'm old and wise. (follow-up interview, Target's top manager)

Similarly, a Target top manager who was frustrated with one particular Acquirer decision did not get a chance to talk to an Acquirer senior manager directly in the moment because the Acquirer senior manager was on a plane. Instead, he spoke with the senior manager's assistant, who relayed only the factual information. In addition to the intermediary filtering out the emotional tone of the message, relying on an intermediary gave the sender time to "cool down" before a face-to-face meeting with the receiver. When Target's top manager finally had the opportunity to talk directly with Acquirer's senior manager, he chose to bottle up his frustration:

> One decision that triggered negative emotions in me was made by [Acquirer's top manager].… When I called him to protest, I was not transferred to him. So, I spoke with his assistant.
>
> [Question: Did you express your emotions when you met him face to face later on?]
>
> No, [because] it would be weird to spit out my discontent. And then I think that his assistant had already let him know that I had called and protested. So, he knew about my negative reaction. It didn't make sense to go over it all again. (follow-up interview, top manager at Target)

Acquirer's top managers' frustration was likewise filtered by intermediaries:

> It [profit] should have been around [redacted] million, but it was actually around [redacted] or less. I know [focal top manager's] personality: he has really, really strong

reactions to things. He got angry about this, but it was only the secretary of the management board who communicated to Target [concern about low profit without strong emotion] at the time. (2013, Senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Thus, even though communicating through intermediaries did not seem to impair the accuracy of organizational communication in relation to business content, it reduced both firms' members' ability to perceive the partner firm's members' negative emotions.

4.5.2 | Communicating via email and in English as a common language

In addition to using intermediaries, communication between the two firms was characterized by the use of email and English, which was neither partner's native tongue, as a common language. Efficiency was increased, as sending an email was quick and incurred no travel costs, unlike meeting face to face. Similarly, adopting English as a common language was simpler and cheaper than hiring translators to allow managers to speak in their mother tongues.

As a side effect, however, the acts of writing emails and translating thoughts from their native languages into English reduced people's emotional expressiveness. Typing an email gave people time and space to calm down, and choose whether and how to express their initial emotional reaction. For example, Target's top manager described how he decided not to express his negative emotions while drafting an email:

> A couple of times when we had problems with the server and we could not work, I opened the contact information of Acquirer's CIO, but could not reach him. So, I wrote emails. [As I was typing,] I realized that it was a technical problem. That there was no one person who was deliberately shitting on us, who had disconnected us [from the server] deliberately. But there was a problem, and no one gave a shit about it. It's annoying. But what's the point in expressing it? You just have to say that the business is on hold. (follow-up interview, top manager at Target)

The use of emails also constrained the full expression of emotion because non-verbal expressions of emotion were difficult to detect in email communication (see also, Gylfe, Franck, Lebaron, & Mantere, 2016; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, on how the body shows emotions).

In a similar way, a lack of rich English emotional vocabulary likely limited some members' ability to share their emotions in inter-firm communication (see also, Kroon, Cornelissen, & Vaara, 2015). As our informants reflected:

> Of course, I was there during the discussions. But unfortunately, my English isn't fluent enough for me to defend my points vigorously. I start looking for the right word in my head. (2013, top manager at Target)

> If I say, "Motherf—r" to you, it does not really have strong meaning to you. But if I say "Motherf—r" to an American, they would be like, "What?!" The convention of some words is much stronger in native languages. We do not have capabilities to express and perceive emotions…. You can't read between the lines. (Follow-up interview, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Similar to communicating through intermediaries, using emails and English as a common (foreign) language by members of both firms did not necessarily reduce the factual content of interorganizational communication during the integration process. However, these practices filtered out

much emotional information, which made it more difficult for the recipients to recognize the true level of urgency, importance, and frustration that senders sought to convey in regard to their task-related matters.

4.6 | False perception of satisfaction

An intended consequence of the practice of masking negative emotions was to maintain the initial positivity that had characterized the acquisition. A less intended consequence—which was also reinforced by the use of efficiency-driven communication practices—was that the members of each firm perceived that the partner firm's members were generally satisfied with the progress of the integration, even though they were not. Acquirer's managers perceived that Target's members were highly satisfied:

> [Target's people] are very satisfied and very happy. I don't think they have any motivational problems. I visited them last week and discussed the integration process with them. I didn't just speak with the top management team, but with the employees too. … They were very happy and satisfied. (2012, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

> I interviewed them [Target's members] two weeks ago because I wanted to understand how they felt, how they worked, what their perceptions are behind the scenes about how things were going. I asked how they felt toward Acquirer and how Acquirer has influenced their work.… They had very positive feelings. Everyone reported they had positive feelings. (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Target managers similarly thought that Acquirer's members were pleased with their progress:

> I made a presentation about the current situation in the company and about the future of our company. I said that we were growing in line with the plan, or even a bit faster, and that everything was fine. They [Acquirer's executives] looked very happy and satisfied. They said the current situation looked good and that our plans for future were cool, amazing, and very interesting. (2012, top manager at Target)

> I don't remember us ever seeing anyone [from Acquirer] who was unhappy, angry, frustrated, and demanding. (2013, top manager at Target)

4.7 | Minimal corrective action

The false perceptions of the partner firm's members' satisfaction with the integration process meant that neither firm's managers saw a need for extensive corrective actions to improve the integration process. Corrective actions could have occurred at least on two levels: (a) resolving the task disagreements that generated new negative emotions, and (b) addressing the negative emotions directly to reduce their harmful effects.

4.7.1 | Minimal substantive corrective actions

Perceiving that the partner firm's members were, by and large, satisfied with how the integration was progressing, neither firm's managers saw any urgent need to address various task disagreements that caused negative emotions. For example, because Acquirer did not know how much frustration the imposition of their IT system had caused within Target, they took no action to fix the problem:

We [Target IT] had a meeting with the CTO [of Acquirer] and asked him to give us administrative rights [to manage the IT system]. He promised to think about it. Two months passed and we got a "No" as the decision. Now, for example, Acquirer's server went down on Monday. So, the users cannot check their emails, browse the internet. The main problem here is the [slow] reaction time [of Acquirer's IT maintenance team]. Today is Thursday. The server is still down! I am expecting an engineer from [an IT company] today. He will come to check. If we weren't integrated into Acquirer's IT system, if they would just leave us alone, the problem [with the server] would be solved within two hours maximum instead of four days. (2012, IT team at Target)

When we asked an Acquirer senior manager about this problem, he explained:

Technical integration went very well…. [The outcome of IT integration] does not have any direct impact on business. It really impacts the business very little. It just makes things a bit slower. (2012, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Likewise, Target's managers responded passively to requests that Acquirer felt strongly about because they were unaware of the strength of feeling behind them. For example, Acquirer's managers considered it crucial that Target implement new software for optimizing resource allocation and project pricing, and found it very frustrating when Target was slow to implement the new software:

We agreed [with Target that they would start using the software], but when I left their office, it was not implemented. So [Acquirer middle manager who was in charge of this software] was complaining to me [Acquirer senior middle manager], "OK, we agreed, but now [Target's top managers] are not supporting the implementation."… At one point, she was almost having a nervous breakdown, [but only showed it inside Acquirer]. (2012, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

However, Target's managers perceived far less urgency to implement the software:

They told us to install the software. We promised to do it, but we haven't done it yet. The software is ready, but it hasn't been installed. But that's not sabotage. It's not like we promised to do something significant and didn't do it. This is a small, insignificant thing. (2012, senior middle manager at Target)

4.7.2 | Limited empathic attention to partner firm's negative emotions

Both firms' managers could also have complemented substantive corrective actions to business processes with more empathy by addressing the partner firm's members' negative emotions. Such empathic acknowledgement of emotions could have in itself reduced the intensity of the emotions and their (potentially) harmful effects (Huy, 1999). However, despite our extensive data collection, we did not find evidence of managers on either side actively trying to respond to the other firm's members' negative emotions. Rather, our informants described a low-empathy approach:

Of course, I wasn't there on a daily basis, so I felt I couldn't be the decision maker and cheer people up. You have your managers to do it…. And I didn't try to reassure them. I never tried to say, you know, "Guys, let's smile."… I said that we're not gonna

fire people anymore, but of course we want to see some changes (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

They perceive our voice as like the whine of a mosquito that wants to push through something it wants, but that Acquirer has no interest in. (2013, top manager at Target)

Similarly, Target's members showed little empathic attention to Acquirer's managers' negative emotions. Even on one rare occasion when Target's managers were exposed to Acquirer's negative emotional reaction, they failed to show any real concern. Acquirer's senior manager shouted at Target's manager about Target's inability to sell their product. Later, he played down the incident by telling the Target manager that he had been acting, and not genuinely angry. Instead of investigating this outburst more deeply, Target's manager took Acquirer's explanation at face value:

I thought there was no way he could get that emotional from the conversation that we had. He just could not get so angry about what we were discussing. So, I believe that he was putting on an act. It was theater. He doesn't usually behave this way; it's not his style. (2013, Target's top manager)

In addition to not addressing each other's negative emotions, managers of both firms did very little to generate positive emotions among the other firm's members to counterbalance the negative emotions (beyond Target's habit of taking Acquirer's representatives to dinner occasionally). As informants on both firms described:

We lack [events whereby Acquirer] could say to us, "Hooray! Folks, you did a great job! Let's have champagne!" And we would all have champagne. Everyone would be happy. We miss [events whereby] they would organize parties to celebrate our achievements where everyone would feel that Acquirer are happy, and we are happy. (2013, top manager at Target)

But maybe they didn't mention their EBIT [as a reason for canceling an office party]? … So there was no kind of business thinking behind that [office party], they were like a big family who wanted to have fun and send the bill to the mother company. (2014, senior middle manager)

4.8 | Negative sentiments

In the absence of corrective actions, both firm's members continued to experience negative emotions due to mounting task disagreements, and neither firm's members' negative emotions were empathically addressed. The psychology literature suggests that repeated experiences of negative emotions with a partner can lead to the development of negative sentiments that refer to "enduring negative feelings toward the outgroup…that are not contingent upon specific action or behavior of that group" (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016: 74; see also, Frijda, 1994; Halperin & Gross, 2010). Such sentiments have a dispositional character: Instead of negative emotions being felt constantly, negative emotions and unfavorable thinking patterns are activated when people are dealing with the object of their sentiment (see also, Vuori & Huy, 2016). In our case, the (masked) negative emotions felt by the members of both firms, which were initially short-lived and targeted to concrete task-related matters, accumulated into more stable negative sentiments toward the partner firm.

At first, these sentiments were manifested in our informants' interpretation of certain difficulties. For instance, when Target's managers complained that a new reporting system did not suit their business model, Acquirer interpreted Target's managers' dissent as "just normal resistance to change" (2013, Acquirer senior middle manager). When Target's managers explained to Acquirer that their market was not ready for Acquirer's product due to local data protection laws, Acquirer attributed it to Target's bad attitude:

> It's not about the product; it's just about their attitudes.… It was a "not invented here" sort of thing. Also, he [Target's managing director] appointed this guy who's hopeless at selling anything to lead this whole product-selling process. He was good at his job, but he was no salesman. So it wasn't about the product, it was how the whole thing was launched there, how it was implemented. (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

They also inferred passive aggression in Target's behaviors:

> Target is already waiting for us [Acquirer's IT support] to make some mistakes. They are not actively trying to make the processes better, they are just eager to point out the mistakes [of Acquirer's IT support]. (2014, middle manager at Acquirer)

The negative sentiments toward partners became both broader and less connected to specific behaviors as the integration progressed:

> They [Target's managers] are just incapable of doing business…. It would take another two decades for them to learn [the necessary skills]. (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

> To me [Target's representative] looks like someone who would need a shrink. (2014, top manager at Acquirer)

Similarly, Target managers developed negative sentiments toward Acquirer:

> As our managers said, [Acquirer's senior middle manager] is so immature that he shouldn't be allowed to meet our clients alone! (2014, employee at Target)

> We do not have strong negative emotions. We just twist our fingers into our temples and say, "What idiots they are." We understand that this is the madness marasmus of the large organization. No one cares about things and everyone tries to shift responsibilities to others. Some stupid decisions are made because no one is an owner who would bleed for this. (2014, top manager at Target)

> I have a feeling that some disgusting machine has acquired us. And this machine is trying to dictate its own boring rules; it pushes us to live in accordance with its own rules. (2014, top manager at Target)

4.9 | Unilateral actions

Growing negative sentiments toward the partner ultimately made both firms initiate unilateral actions (i.e., actions taken without consulting the partner firm or considering their perspective). The

two firms were still disagreeing on various task matters. The negative sentiments included generally unfavorable thoughts about the partner firm and unfavorable beliefs about the partner's knowledge and competencies (cf. Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). Hence, these sentiments motivated both firms to ignore the partner firm's viewpoint, and instead simply implement what they thought was needed. Consequently, Acquirer's managers started stepping up coercive actions toward Target, while Target started taking some subversive actions in secret and reporting activities to Acquirer that had not occurred.

4.9.1 | Acquirer: Increasing control

Acquirer's managers started imposing stricter controls on Target and setting ever more detailed tasks for them. Closer instruction and control, they assumed, would improve Target's business conduct:

> I think they [Target] had so much freedom, too much freedom, not to be integrated. We had all these things run by [integration manager at Acquirer]: different kind of programs, training, sales-process practice, and so on, and so on. But nothing happened! Now [senior middle manager at Acquirer] will be there more often. He will be looking at what they are doing, and also working along with them. Not just pushing them to do things, but also getting involved with [working with Target employees]. And he will handle planning with them too. I think this is the best way to do it. (2013, top manager at Acquirer)

Other coercive changes imposed by Acquirer included the adoption of more intrusive reporting systems, restrictive HR systems, and physical control systems such as electronic time cards and surveillance cameras. Each of these organizational actions was intended to make Target obey.

4.9.2 | Target: Decoupling

While Acquirer began to disregard Target's perspective by taking more coercive and controlling actions, managers at Target reduced their compliance with Acquirer's commands by decoupling their actions from their rhetoric. Publicly, they professed compliance with Acquirer's directives, but then carried out their business routine in accordance with their former work practices in secret.[5] For example, Target's members pretended that they had adopted Acquirer's cold-calling practice:

> How we are coping with the need to follow new sales practice? Well, we have a number of old business friends. We put their contact information in the list for cold calls. So, they're not really very "cold" contacts! [laughs] (2013, middle manager at Target)

Target also created a secret IT system and transferred most of their business processes to it, to avoid having to deal with Acquirer's IT department. They used Acquirer's system in parallel to give the impression that things were still progressing normally:

> At some point, we realized that we could not continue with their IT support. The quality was just too bad. We created our own IT system in parallel to Acquirer's, bending all their rules. This system exists incognito. Acquirer does not know about it. (2013, top manager at Target)

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[5]Given the sensitive nature of our data, we present only selected examples of decoupling.

> You know, we launched our own IT system. They are not aware of it. All vital business processes that could be delayed because of the inability of Acquirer's IT to provide fast service were transferred to our secret local IT system. (2013, employee at Target)

Other subversive action by Target was populating strategic plans with rough figures rather than real data and rigorous calculations:

> We were staring at the ceiling and thinking what numbers to write down in the plan. We tried to use some common sense when filling in the numbers, but we used no calculations, no tools. (2013, top manager at Target)

4.9.3 | Further escalation

The unilateral actions escalated the situation by perpetuating existing task disagreements, creating new ones, and triggering new negative emotions that continued to accumulate into negative sentiments. One of Acquirer's senior middle managers, who was involved in the integration, resigned because of dissatisfaction over working with Target:

> Okay, now, I think I have done everything I could to make things work, and now it would probably be better if someone else took over…. So that was basically it. I was really feeling that now we are not going to do the things that we need to do. There were dozens of times when we agreed to do something, I traveled back home with the assumption that they were doing it, but instead they were doing something totally different from what we agreed. (2013, senior middle manager at Acquirer)

Likewise, Target's members felt ever more negative. They perceived Acquirer's increased control as a lack of trust:

> People aren't stupid; they can see surveillance cameras. Even though I got a direct order [from Acquirer] not to spread the news [about the installation of cameras], people still noticed them. We think it's an obvious sign of distrust. (2013, IT team member at Target)

Target's members also started perceiving that the practices imposed by Acquirer harmed morale:

> Things have changed around here. We used to work long hours at the office. We ordered pizza for everyone and stayed until midnight. We were laughing and having fun. People were coming in to the office over the weekend. Not anymore. We don't want to come here. They [Acquirer] control us through these machines [electronic time cards]. The trust is gone—long gone. It's sad that things have changed. (2014, employee at Target)

4.10 | Integration failure

As the negative, antagonistic sentiments toward the partner continued to be reinforced, both firms' managers increasingly perceived that the integration was failing. At the end of the third year, Acquirer decided to divest. As a top manager at Acquirer lamented:

Target has never made a single euro of profit for Acquirer. So it was just making losses every single year. We have been putting money in for many years now. Many years we had negative cash flow. It's got to stop, and it should be stopped now. (2014, top manager at Acquirer)

When Target's top managers heard about Acquirer's decision to divest, they toyed with their own ideas on how to end the partnership (though without actually pursuing them):

We, the top managers who are three former owners, discussed [toward the end of the third year of the integration] and agreed on the plan. We agreed that we would take actions to dramatically decrease the price of our company in a short period. We would be ready to take actions that would have made us very unattractive for a potential buyer. That would push Acquirer to sell our business back to us for peanuts. You see, it's like being a slave—you can cut off your arms so that no-one will be interested in you. (2014, top manager at Target)

5 | DISCUSSION

While previous literature on post-acquisition integration has shown that negative emotions are harmful in many ways, it has not problematized managers' ability to recognize and address employees' negative emotions (see Graebner et al., 2017, for a review). Previous studies give the impression that if employees feel bad, they show it, and it is up to managers to manage those emotions as they appear (Graebner, 2004; Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013). However, in the case we documented, members of the integrating firms masked their negative emotions from their partner firm, which created the false perception that they were generally satisfied with the progress of the integration. This false perception inhibited corrective actions that could have addressed the negative emotions or the task disagreements that elicited them. In the absence of corrective actions, the negative emotions, initially short-lived, accumulated into long-lasting, dispositional negative sentiments toward the partner; these sentiments motivated unilateral actions that further escalated the situation and contributed to integration failure. Efficiency-driven communication practices further contributed to the falsely optimistic perception of the partner firm's satisfaction because they also filtered out much of the negative emotion from inter-firm communication. Figure 1, which visualizes the
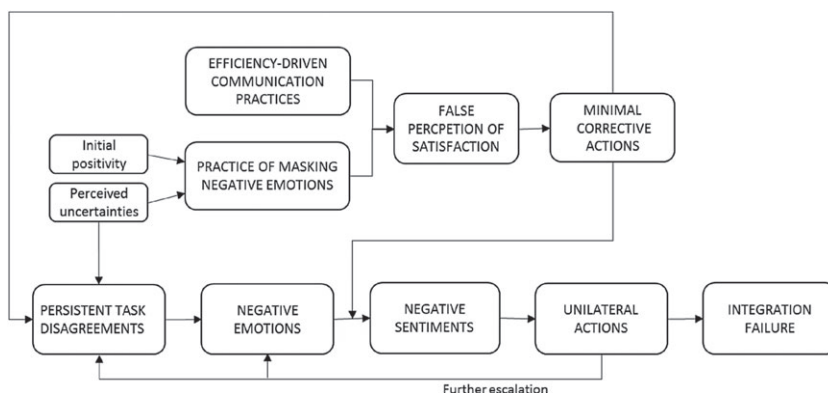

FIGURE 1 Theoretical model

theoretical model we constructed, shows how the practice of masking negative emotions and efficiency-driven communication practices can lead to a situation where an optimistic illusion of satisfaction persists on one level (perceived satisfaction with the ongoing integration process, in the upper half of the figure), even as people's emotions and sentiments become increasingly negative, and actions increasingly unilateral and counterproductive, on another level (lower half of the figure).

5.1 | The practice of masking negative emotions

5.1.1 | Mechanisms and consequences

Our findings reveal the crucial role that emotional expressions can play as sources of information on others' preferences and satisfaction in organizational change settings. Managers leading an integration process are dealing with much contextual uncertainty and complexity. They often lack the information that would help them decide what would be the best way to act (e.g., Vaara, 2003). Under these conditions, managers inevitably rely on others' emotions (alongside many other cues) to infer how well things are going and what should be done. The reliance on emotional expressions as information is consistent with experimental studies of negotiations, which have shown that people use their counterpart's emotional expression as cues about what is important for the counterpart (Van Kleef et al., 2004a, 2004b). Similarly, managers who receive numerous inputs, requests, and complaints every day likely (and subconsciously) infer that those communications that are accompanied by strong emotional expressions are more important than those that are conveyed in an affect-neutral way.

A key implication of our findings is that the mechanisms through which emotional expressions influence organization-level processes and outcomes should be considered in a more sophisticated manner than in the past. Previous research has mainly theorized how emotional expressions can spread through emotional contagion and influence behaviors in the short-term (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014 ; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). For example, Cornelissen et al. (2014) described how expressed negative emotions spread through emotional contagion in a distributed security team and "overrule[d] reflective thought" (p. 711), contributing to mistaken interpretations and unfortunate action during a 4-hr episode; and Liu and Maitlis (2014) described how positive emotional expressions spread through contagion and contributed to collaborative strategizing during meetings that lasted around 2 hr. One might infer from these studies that it is best not to express negative emotions in work settings because they might spread uncontrollably and cause harm.

In contrast to studies that have highlighted emotional contagion as the mechanism through which emotions have organizational consequences, our findings posit the emotions as information mechanism—that is, people infer others' preferences and state of mind from their emotional expressions. In particular, our findings reveal that people interpreted the absence of negative emotional expressions as a cue that members of the partner firms were generally satisfied. This false optimistic perception reduced their tendency to undertake corrective actions and caused disagreements to persist. A seemingly straightforward implication could be that people should express their negative emotions authentically at work so that others can detect problems and initiate corrective actions.

Despite their apparently opposing effects, the mechanisms of emotional contagion and interpretation of emotional expressions often coexist in the empirical world. The sender's expressed negative emotions can help the receiver infer that the sender is unhappy and that corrective actions are thus needed. However, at the same time, these negative emotions can spread from the sender to the receiver through emotional contagion and make them respond in counterproductive ways. This coexistence invites deeper questions in regard to the relative importance of these two mechanisms and

how they interact with each other. One could surmise that there exists some threshold level of emotional intensity that causes one or the other mechanism to prevail. To illustrate, some literature suggests that an extremely angry person could arouse similar overwhelming anger in others, overruling all reflective thought (cf. how fear overruled reflective thought in Cornelissen et al., 2014). On the other hand, other research suggests that an extreme expression of anger could surprise others and motivate them to think more reflectively (cf. how sense-making is triggered by surprise, Weick, 1995), thereby reducing the dominance of emotional contagion and advancing emotional interpretation as a mechanism. Whether such thresholds exist and have systematic effects remains a topic for future research.

Another possibility is that the relative strength of the mechanisms varies over time. Emotional contagion might have a stronger influence in the short term. For example, someone shouting at a meeting might cause a heated debate and make all the participants feel angry and less willing to work with one another in the moment (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). In contrast, the mechanism of inferring others' preferences from their emotional expressions could have a stronger effect in the long term, as interpretations that people form about others' preferences could influence their actions only after long reflection and deliberation. For example, several days or weeks after a heated debate, once the intense emotions have subsided and are no longer overwhelming people's cognitive processing, they might reflect on the past debate in a more analytical and empathic manner, and learn about the preferences of the discussion partner. Such learning would enable them to better integrate the partner's preferences when deliberating about their subsequent actions.

There could also be moderating factors that influence how people react to others' emotional expressions. For example, Samra-Fredericks (2003) recognized how a manager used various rhetorical elements in combination with emotional expressions to convince others. Such elements may interact and influence whether the expressed emotion causes others to perceive the issue as important, or the person describing it as a difficult person and/or behaving unreasonably. Future research on the effects of emotional expressions can investigate such moderating factors (see also, Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Moisander et al., 2016, for discursive perspectives, and Grant, 2013, for an emotion regulation perspective).

5.1.2 | Origins of the practice of masking negative emotions

In addition to studying how the impact of the practice of masking negative emotions is shaped by various organizational factors, it would be fruitful to explore what makes people adopt such practices. In general, the adoption of practices is likely influenced by a number of factors ranging from social conditions to local consideration of instrumental rationality (e.g., Whittington, 2006; see also March & Simon, 1958). In our case, general social norms that discourage the expression of negative emotions in the workplace (cf. Hochschild, 1983) and individual managers' personal beliefs about the harm of negative expressions might help to explain the occurrence of the practice.

As a complementary explanation, the strategy-as-practice perspective can help us understand how the initial positive perceptions of the acquisition and of the partner firm might have contributed to the formation and maintenance of the practice of masking negative emotions. That is, the initial meetings between Acquirer and Target were characterized by authentic positivity, as people had positive expectations and engaged in typical rituals such as team-building workshops and dinners to launch the integration. Consequently, a pattern of expressing positive emotions during meetings between Acquirer and Target emerged. It might be that these initial socializing behaviors generated a shared expectation that only positive emotions should be expressed during meetings. Initially, when the felt emotions were positive, expressing positive emotions came naturally, but as

individuals started feeling negative emotions, they might have felt an innate reluctance to express them, thereby masking them. Such masking in praxis, in turn, might have reinforced the practice of masking (cf. Giddens, 1984). As this social pattern endures, social mechanisms begin to dominate psychological ones in influencing people's emotional expressions, highlighting the value of the strategy-as-practice perspective to our understanding of organizational behavior and strategy formation (see also Whittington, 2006, 2007).

The possibility that initial positivity influenced the formation and adoption of the practice of masking negative emotions invites us to consider the unintended consequences of many other practices that are used in the early stages of mergers and acquisitions to promote "human integration" (Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Buono & Bowditch, 2003; Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Monin et al., 2013). Beyond creating unrealistic expectations about business performance (see also Vaara & Monin, 2010), such practices risk imposing pressure to keep maintaining the illusion of a happy integration—being the first to start rocking the boat is difficult (e.g., Janis, 1972), and when no one does so, the optimistic illusion endures. This suggests that it might be more beneficial for leaders to expose people to the not-so-pleasant reality of the integration process early on (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012) to encourage authentic and reflexive discussions, and readiness to take corrective actions that are important for integration success (Graebner, 2004; Greenwood et al., 1994; Vaara, 2003).

5.2 | The emotional side effects of efficiency-driven communication practices

In addition to recognizing how people deliberately drew on the practice of masking negative emotions in their praxis, our findings suggest that efficiency-driven communication practices also contributed to the partner firm's managers developing mistaken perceptions of the partner firm's members' satisfaction with the integration process. These practices conveyed factual information about the business situation to the decision makers in the partner firm, but filtered out the emotional expressions that had accompanied the initial communication.

The primary reason for this emotion-filtering was that efficiency-driven communication practices shielded people from direct exposure to others' spontaneous emotional reactions. Emotions can be "leaky," and non-verbal cues are naturally most intense at the moment when the emotion is experienced (Ekman, 2003; Keltner & Ekman, 2003). When communication practices do not allow direct and immediate interaction, non-verbal signs are less likely to be perceived fully by others. The importance of perceiving the non-verbal cues of emotions, both facial expressions and bodily gestures, for the accurate interpretation of emotions has also been recently highlighted by strategy-as-practice scholars (Gylfe et al., 2016; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). Our study extends these insights by integrating them more explicitly with organizational practices and their consequences.

Furthermore, the media used for conveying the business content in an efficient manner seemed to have low bandwidth for transmitting emotional information. That is, assistants and middle managers who typically relayed messages between members of two firms tended not to pass on vivid emotional expressions to the ultimate targets of the communication; instead, they prioritized factual information. Put differently, these intermediaries were performing uncertainty absorption (March & Simon, 1958) in that they condensed the information to what they believed was most task-relevant rather than subjective emotions (see also Huy [2011] on task-focused professionalism). Similarly, people did not (or could not) express their emotions in their emails, but rather wrote down more concrete descriptions about problems related to business tasks. The relative absence of emotional cues in emails is consistent with research on the richness of communication media more generally (e.g., Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Lengel & Daft, 1989; Markus, 1994). Similarly, the use of a foreign language also stripped down the initially rich communication to what was considered most

essential for business tasks, and thus, removed descriptions of emotions. This finding is consistent with research that has shown that people tend to think more rationally when using a foreign language (Keysar, Hayakawa, & An, 2012) and with research on misunderstandings caused by the use of foreign languages (Vaara, 2003).

As a central contribution, our study invites scholars to consider the subtle emotional consequences of various organizational practices more deeply. Practices that we recognized as constraining authentic emotional expressions are relatively common in organizations, and scholars and managers have yet to consider their full implications (see also Whittington, 2006). One could hypothesize that the current ways of organizing communication efficiently through email and intermediating persons can reduce emotional transparency and contribute to the maintenance of emotionally dysfunctional organizations (e.g., Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004; Vuori & Huy, 2016). Authors have long emphasized the virtues of management by walking around (e.g., Fisher, 2012)—our findings reveal another reason why this practice can be valuable, as it increases the likelihood of perceiving emotions accurately.

Obviously, in very large or global organizations, it may not always be feasible for managers to walk around very often. Technological advances could help here, if used in a way that is mindful of emotional dynamics (cf. how people may use technologies in ways other than initially intended; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Kaplan, 2011; Orlikowski, 2007). For example, strategy-as-practice scholars have speculated that "new technologies may promote inclusion in strategy formation and the transparency of strategy processes" (Vaara & Whittington, 2012: p. 32). Although we can see this potential benefit, we also caution that new technologies might be used in ways that elicit superficial participation (see also Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009), prevent the rich exchange of emotions, and encourage an overly rational approach to strategizing (see also Hayes & Abernathy [1980], as discussed in Whittington [2006]).

In conclusion, organizational practices may enable and constrain people's emotional expressiveness in unintended ways. When people do not express their negative emotions, their colleagues are less likely to address those negative emotions and associated causes, which can lead to the maintenance of suboptimal organizational processes and also negative emotions accumulating into negative sentiments that harm collaboration. Metaphorically speaking, felt negative emotions are like fire, and expressed negative emotions are like smoke. Masking the smoke will not douse the flames, but simply help the blaze to spread out of sight.

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