

Book Reviews

ERIC-HANS KRAMER. *Organizing Doubt: Grounded Theory, Army Units, and Dealing with Dynamic Complexity*. Liber: Copenhagen Business School Press. 2007.

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This is an intriguing but arguably unfinished book. Intriguing, because by grounding an interesting analytical framework on the careful investigation of three Dutch army peacekeeping operations, it extends one of the most fundamental issues in the organization and administration literature—organizing under dynamic complexity—to a domain with which most organizational theorists are unfamiliar. Arguably unfinished because it misses the links between its methodological implications and its analytical framework and fails to generate, as the natural result of a grounded theory methodology, a synthesized theoretical product. Despite missing a theoretical synthesis, the great strength of this book is the analysis and application of organizational theories to military peacekeeping operations, and based on that, providing theoretical guidance on potential mechanisms for organizing under the most obviously challenging condition confronting military organizations: dynamic complexity. As such, while mostly targeting organizational and administrative researchers, this book is readable and would be of interest to a more general scholarly audience and would be especially beneficial to military administrators.

Grounded theory, for those less familiar with it, is a form of qualitative research that has resemblances to interaction research in that rather than testing hypotheses it begins with a series of open-ended interviews and then allows key concepts and theories to emerge. In the early stages of research, interviewers often take only keyword notes, or even no notes at all so as not to inadvertently narrow the focus. The method is, however, rigorously structured, and the data collection is followed by such processes as coding, comparison, categorization, saturation, and sorting. It is a good way to find patterns in unfamiliar settings. In this book, Eric-Hans Kramer uses grounded theory to pursue three fundamental questions about organizing: What is meant by dynamic complexity? How can operators deal with dynamic complexity in the

best possible way? How can an organization organize its ability to deal with dynamic complexity? These issues, as Kramer notes, are of great importance both for the development of organization theory and for administrative practices, but especially for deploying army units capable of dealing with dynamic complexity. Succinctly presenting answers to each one of his questions, Kramer offers a detailed picture of quasi-autonomous self-organizing units with the structural characteristics that can be successfully organized to deal with dynamic complexity in its immediate environment: the whole in the parts, requisite variety, redundancy of functions, minimal critical specifications, and double-loop learning.

The book is divided into six sections. In the first section, Kramer focuses on the recent research project in the Netherlands Military Academy, “Leiderschap in Crisisomstandigheden” (Leadership in Circumstances of Crisis). This project “investigates the Dutch Army Forces in former Yugoslavia in operations before and after the Dayton Peace Agreements in 1995 as part of a UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] intervention” (p. 21). The author highlights the conceptual foundations of his research and the methodological differences between his book and the rest of the project. Of particular interest to readers is the adaption of grounded theory methodology in this book. Grounded theory is nowadays an overly used generic term by qualitative researchers with confusion as to its epistemological implications. I have concerns about how Kramer used this term to describe his research methodology and present his findings. Grounded theory is generally regarded as an inductive methodology that is capable of generating theories from data so that the theory is empirically grounded in the data. The research logic presented in this book conveys the opposite. Kramer repeatedly indicates the logic of his research is from a theory (suspiciously equated to an analytical framework in the book) to data: “theory is used in this study as a heuristic to select relevant data and interpret patterns in the selected data” (p. 47). This begs some important questions. One such question is about forcing deductively derived categories onto data (Glaser, 1992). Will not researchers “see” the reality through intended categories, and, in the process, miss the emergent ones, thus negating the purpose of grounded theory? As one indication of this issue, Kramer does not explain how he decides when his data has reached the saturation stage of the grounded theory, which leaves readers to wonder whether the theoretical product of this grounded investigation has actually captured what it was supposed to capture. Another potential

problem is that the method is described as a series of mechanical algorithms, as reflected in chapter two. Although some theorists prescribe very rigid routines in applying grounded theory techniques, such mechanical applications are becoming the enemy of generating insightful theories. The impression of these issues might be caused by the sequential logic of the book presentation, which, instead of an iterative process of sampling, coding, sorting, and theorizing, is presented in a pure linear fashion from theory to data selection to analysis and results. The positivist paradigm behind this presentation logic, together with the pragmatic relativism underlying grounded theory, generates a methodological blurring.

In the second and third sections of the book things get better. The focus shifts to the development and operationalization of the analytical framework. As Kramer indicates, “the development of this framework has been a study in itself: a substantial part of the time that was devoted to this study was used to develop this framework” (p. 44). Indeed, excellent work is done. The academic literature is very well reviewed. Starting from general systems theories as the intellectual background, Kramer coherently connects diverse elements from a wide array of systems thinkers to answer the question “how can a system deal with dynamic complexity in the best possible way?” Although I am quite doubtful of the way this question is formulated—along the lines of the “best possible” organizing mechanisms to deal with environmental uncertainty, which inevitably draws the answer “it depends” as contingency theories reasonably argue—I still feel Kramer has done a wonderful job defining the core concepts of dynamic complexity and doubt, and applying Weick’s and Billig’s models to deal with dynamic complexity. Readers will find many insightful observations made by Kramer, such as my favorite: “distrusting one’s existing insights overcomes the risks of a positive feedback loop: ever-stronger confirmation of what one already knows” (p. 90)—a version of “self-fulfilling prophecy” in the organizational level. The answer Kramer provides for the “best possible” way is through a meaningful, yet difficult to be operationalized concept: doubt.

Doubt is considered to be a crucial process that organizations need to organize in order to deal with dynamic complexity in the best possible way. Organizing refers to the point that organizations should structurally see to it that the chance that existing insights are doubted is enlarged. (p. 91)

Doubt needs to be organized, Kramer argues, and should be built into the design of an organization facing dynamic complexity, but exactly

how to do that is unfortunately answered at such a high level of generality (e.g. by creating the whole in the parts, requisite variety, minimal critical specification, double-loop learning, and a leadership open to doubt and capable of developing holographic qualities within a group), that it is difficult to provide concrete and practical guidance for military organizations. Still, while these two sections are the most insightful sections of the book, the uneven emphasis on the development of the analytical framework, compared to the somewhat missing theoretical synthesis resulting from analyzing data based on the analytical framework, leaves readers to wonder: Where is the theory that is supposed to be the final product of a grounded theory approach? Readers might thus conclude that this book is half finished, developing an analytical framework based on theoretical ingredients from Weick and Billig, while leaving some important work of theorizing synthesis undone.

The next two sections (section IV and V) of the book focus on analyzing three cases based on the analytical framework developed earlier. Kramer aptly describes the self-organizing potential of the operational units (the logistic and transport Battalion, SFOR [NATO-led Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina], and Dutchbat [Dutch battalion]) to deal with dynamic complexity along three dimensions: the structural design of the operational units, the leadership, and the structural constraints from mother organizations. The evidence is ample to delineate the current classification scheme, and Kramer wonderfully and succinctly describes the incidents that occurred in these cases. However, Kramer appears to be quite ambivalent about how these cases are selected. Despite his emphasis in the previous sections, readers are left uncertain as to whether the selection of the cases was based on the research design or on their availability. Also unclear is how these cases were investigated—ethnographically, through archival reports, or maybe both? This uncertainty is partially caused by the unfortunately missing original case descriptions from the appendix. Readers new to Kramer's research and unfamiliar to Dutch language might find it difficult to fully appreciate his analyses without the background knowledge of these specific cases. This book would have been even better if Kramer had included at least one case study in the appendix written in English, rather than just providing a reference to the actual case reports. Still, interestingly, Kramer ends each case analysis with a few hypotheses that are straightforwardly linked with the case itself. For example, after analyzing the Dutchbat case, Kramer proposes four hypotheses, among which: "Dutchbat dealt with dynamic complexity by turning down its level of ambition" (p. 196) and "Dutchbat did not do a

good job because it was confronted with a mission impossible” (p. 197). For readers with a more positivist understanding of the concept “hypothesis,” these statements are more like concluding observations, rather than hypotheses specifying a relation between two or more variables. As my previous comments indicate, Kramer’s qualitative data fail to generate a new theoretical explanation synthesizing his findings. In blending descriptive elements with normative sensitizing themes, his grounded theory research methodology did not generate a theory susceptible to refutation using data collected from these cases.

In contrast with other grounded theory research reports, the last section of the book (section VI) is more like an epilogue, rather than a climax where authors usually present a theory derived from the data. In this short section, Kramer summarizes his most important contributions and provides a direction for future research. In this chapter, he attempts to bring the term “dynamic complexity” to military studies, adding to our existing knowledge on military operations. By shifting the administrative focus from issues of efficiency and effectiveness to those of structuring and organizing, the problems of dealing with dynamic complexity in peace operations could be tackled successfully. For Kramer, army organization, which is usually treated as a prototypical example of a “mechanistic” structure designed for efficiency and centralized decision making that functions by transforming all uncertainties into certainties, now needs somehow to shift to a more “organic” flexible structure characterized by decentralized decision making that is intended to deal with the ambiguity of its environment. This call is not new to organizational theorists. From the classic Burns and Stalker (1961) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) studies onward, organizational theorists have explored and proposed numerous theories of how to deal with environmental uncertainty characterized by complexity, ambiguity, stability/dynamics, and munificence. However, usually organization studies proposing explanations for dealing with environmental uncertainty and strategic considerations focus more on the business field, and are inadequately applicable to the public domain, much less to military organizations. Kramer’s contribution in this book is to successfully bring this familiar issue to a field in which we are not sure that what we already know can be effectively applied. Moreover, by investigating a domain with which organization theorists are not quite familiar, Kramer has opened a door to a new investigation subject. As Kramer indicates in his analyses, army units did find ways (self-organizing and local autonomy) to deal with environmental uncertainty within the tight constraints of mother organizations and existing rigid decision-making

structures. But, through what specific mechanisms do self-organizing and local autonomy function? How to balance the opposing forces of self-organizing and tight control in military settings while maintaining the effectiveness and efficiency of army operations? Kramer astutely promotes these important questions as future research directions for administrative theorists.

Altogether, the book affords intriguing glimpses into the fundamental questions of administrative theories, is written clearly, and is not without charm. Kramer has to be applauded for bringing together literature that is diverse in its explanatory scope and theoretical assumptions, and for organizing it coherently to develop his analytical framework. But the book's theoretical and methodological proclivities finally limit the possibilities for an insightful engagement in the concrete administrative theory of dealing with uncertainty and complexity. Nonetheless, Kramer fills a need for bridging military literature and administrative theories. While we are all anxiously waiting for some marvelous model to explain the secrets of organizing under ambiguity, Kramer, by his earnest efforts and exploration of how an army could be organized to deal with dynamic complexity, has already stepped onto a promising path.

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