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STRATEGIES, LEADERSHIP AND COMPLEXITY IN CRISIS AND EMERGENCY OPERATIONS

Stig O. Johannessen



Strategies, Leadership and Complexity in Crisis and Emergency Operations

Stig O. Johannessen has produced a masterpiece that combines compelling theoretical insights and solid empirical details; it is a timely must-read for everyone who is concerned with complexity, strategy and leadership in crisis and emergency operations.

—Dr. Zhichang Zhu, South-China Normal University, China,
Author (with Ikujiro Nonaka) of *Pragmatic Strategy:
Eastern Wisdom, Global Success*

This book is a must-read for anyone with an interest in strategy. It combines highly readable accounts of two major internationally significant events with state-of-the art analysis and theorising. In taking us well beyond the somewhat tired debates of mainstream strategy, it convincingly suggests new possibilities and ways of engaging in the complex and paradoxical landscapes of strategy in modern organizations. It turns compelling accounts of real-life events into valuable lessons for scholarly practitioners and practically minded scholars alike. Again, a must-read.

—Professor Donald MacLean, Adam Smith Business School,
University of Glasgow, Scotland

A compelling study of cases where organizations are pushed way beyond what they were prepared or designed for. Stig O. Johannessen not only notes the brittleness of hierarchy and bureaucracy, but helps us identify sources of organizational resilience, innovation and hope.

—Professor Sidney Dekker, Director, Safety Science Innovation Lab,
Griffith University, Australia

This book gives brand new insights into what made the police and the military react as they did in two famous cases of terrorism and international political crises. The explanations given using the complexity approach of the book provide a thought provoking contribution to analysis of emergency and crises response.

—Professor Ira Helsloot, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Netherlands

Strategies, Leadership and Complexity in Crisis and Emergency Operations brings together the themes of strategy, operational leadership, and organizational dynamics in the context of crisis and emergency operations. The result is a book that is timely and relevant for research and leadership in the police, the military, and other organizations involved in operations in highly dynamic and critical contexts.

The book is based on research material from two major events of international crisis and national emergency in 2011: the police operation in response to the terrorist attacks in Norway that left 77 people killed and hundreds injured, and the military response to the Libyan crisis during the Arab Spring. The author discusses and compares the dynamics within the Norwegian police and military during the crisis and emergency operations.

The book draws on theories of complexity, organizational communication, and social psychology to create a vivid inquiry of the case material and to develop a fresh understanding of the ambiguous landscapes of practices of communication, power, identity, and ethics that transform hierarchies, strategies, decision-making, and sensemaking processes in stressful situations during crises and emergencies.

Stig O. Johannessen is Professor of Organization and Leadership at Nord University, Norway.

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Strategies, Leadership and Complexity in Crisis and Emergency Operations

Stig O. Johannessen

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This book is dedicated to my long-term collaborator, working partner, and friend Dr Bjørner Bodøgaard Christensen, in appreciation of our conversations and common efforts.



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
PART I	
The Police in National Emergency	13
2 Terror in Norway	15
3 Panic and Collapse of Hierarchy	21
4 Collapse of Leadership and Coordination	31
PART II	
Complexity and Practice	45
5 Organizational Practices and Leadership	47
6 Communication	55
7 Power, Identity, and Ethics	69
PART III	
The Military in International Crisis	75
8 From the Arctic to Libya	77
9 Strategy Theory	85

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
10	Network Strategies and Complexity	97
11	War Without Strategy: Was It a Success?	111
	PART IV	
	Comparisons and Conclusions	119
12	Police and Military Cases Compared: Organizational Practices	121
13	Police and Military Cases Compared: Strategy	131
14	Conclusions	141
	<i>Appendix 1</i>	155
	<i>Appendix 2</i>	157
	<i>Index</i>	159

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Trondheim, Norway
March 2017
Stig Ole Johannessen



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1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the organizational complexity and dynamics in two cases of crisis and emergency operations with a particular view towards how strategies and leadership emerge in situations that are out of the ordinary. The study has sprung from two basic questions: Why did the police react *slower* than expected to a national terror emergency? Why did the military react *faster* than expected to an international political crisis?

Although these questions have motivated a comparison of two very different situations of crisis and emergency, the starting point for both cases, and for the organizations involved, was that the events were extraordinary and dramatic, and outside any scenario most people had imagined or for which the organizations had prepared. Clearly, there had to be many differences as well as similarities in the details of the organizational responses, but on the surface, the issue of *time* stands out as a profound difference between them. This issue also turned out to be the most important differentiator in the public response. Generally speaking, the military effort was hailed as impressive and heroic, and a sign of a high degree of professionalism, while the police effort was subjected to a public inquiry, during which it was condemned as having failed to protect the public against terrorism. In the wake of this public purging, a politically motivated reform emerged to reorganize the entire Norwegian police (Johannessen, 2015). However, no research in the aftermath of the events has attempted to explore the above questions with the aim of understanding the organizational complexity underlying the response times in the two cases.

In this study, the seemingly simple questions of time have necessitated an in-depth examination of the details of the events in order to bring to the forefront the *dynamics of organizational breakdown* and the simultaneous *transformation* of formal hierarchical organization into informal network organization during crisis and emergency. In the highly volatile contexts of the events, the meaning of strategy and leadership also transformed, from static formalities of hierarchical levels to a dynamic interaction in which *communication, power, identity, and ethics* drove, defined, and, above all, differentiated group and organizational practices between different hierarchies, and at the different formal levels of hierarchies.

2 Introduction

Although often experienced, the collapse of hierarchical organization and the spontaneous emergence of network organizing in crisis and emergency operations is poorly understood. This raises the general question: why, in the heat of the moment, do some organizations that are responding to crises immediately manage to redefine any pretext they have of authority, organization, and coordination (i.e. strategies and leadership), while others do not? This is a challenge for organizational actors and leaders involved in crisis and emergency operations, but also one for organizational research. The present study aspires to contribute in the search for more knowledge to answer this question.

The study is shaped within a broad field of organizational process research, and in particular, it explores dynamical phenomena of organization and leadership from a complexity theoretical understanding of organizations. As this approach deals specifically with interactions, dynamics, unpredictability, self-organizing structuring of order, and sudden structural breakdown, it seems to be well suited for studies of crisis and emergency operations.

Crisis and Emergency Operations

Research on organizational issues in crisis management and crisis response has been conducted in response to a variety of events throughout history (Rosenthal, Boin & Comfort, 2001; Helslott et al., 2012), from the Mann Gulch fire in 1949, an event that was geographically and historically remote from public scrutiny and academic analysis until light was shed on it much later (Maclean, 1992; Weick, 1993), to more recent spectacular and hugely public events that have undergone intense scrutiny and academic analysis with wide consequences, such as the 1986 space shuttle Challenger accident (Rogers, 1986), the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA (The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004; Pfeifer, 2007), the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the USA (Schneider, 2005; Farazmand, 2009; Boin et al., 2010), and the 2011 earthquake and tsunami followed by a nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan (The National Diet of Japan, 2012; Kadota, Varnam & Tokuhiro, 2014; Casto, 2014). These events are not characterized primarily by the scale of their destruction and number of deaths – the death toll range from the seven astronauts on Challenger to an estimated 15,000 people in Japan – but rather all events were *national traumas* that caused a nationwide collective, organizational, institutional, and political state of shock.

This was also the case for one of the studies in this book, the terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya in 2011. For Norway, they fall into the same stream of dramatic national emergency and trauma as the above-mentioned events were for their respective countries.

The second case study falls into a different category, that of international military operations. However, this operation too was a response to a

national trauma in Libya, where a brutal civil war was breaking out in the early days of the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings in North Africa in 2011. The case shows the organizational mobilizing response of the Royal Norwegian Air Force as a small part of a much larger and massive rally of mainly NATO military forces in the Mediterranean. The military forces were sent to Libya in response to a UN Security Council resolution to protect civilians from being massacred by Muammar Gaddafi’s forces as part of the crackdown on the rebel forces.

In both cases, and as for other national trauma events, organizational and decision-making processes were later subjected to public inquiries (NOU, 2012; House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016a, 2016b). However, to date, there has not been any systematic research into the issues of the dynamics of strategies, leadership, and organizational complexity in the events, or any attempts to draw specific and general knowledge from comparisons between the two events, hence the purpose of this book.

In contrast to routine emergencies such as those handled by fire departments, hospitals, and police on a daily basis, crises are associated with serious threats to society, life, health, and property, which demand urgent responses in uncertain contexts (Boin et al., 2005). Clearly, there are a great variety of issues and research problems coming out of the immense complexity of large dramatic events, including the responses from a variety of professional organizations. There are issues *before and after* a crisis, such as public management, policies, strategies, systems, and practices for operational training and preparations, as well as issues to do with inquiries, politics, reforms, learning, and organizational change. *During* a crisis there will be problems related to leadership and decision-making, crisis communication, and phenomena related to stress and performance in very dangerous situations for the responding individuals, groups, and organizations. Additionally, there are various differentiations, definitions, concepts, and theories, which can be used to approach such a multitude of issues and problems.

Following an extensive literature review, Casto (2014) distinguishes *extreme events*, *extreme contexts*, and *routine crises*. In line with Hannah et al. (2009) he suggests that extreme events must be separated from routine crises since they are of an intolerable magnitude to the organization in contrast to just being a threat to organizational goals. Furthermore, extreme events are distinguished from routine crises by the ambiguity of cause and effect and the means of resolution in combination with low probability. In this sense, the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011 in Norway clearly were extreme events for the police. However, whether the call for immediate action from the Air Force to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya together with allies was an extreme event for the Air Force is open for discussion.

Moreover, extreme events have a non-characteristic preparation time in the sense that organizations involved in the events are not fully prepared. They may have long preparation time, but will be unprepared for the specific event. This was the situation in the 22 July case. As far as the Norwegian

4 Introduction

military was concerned, they had long prepared for similar events as the Libya situation, but not specifically for Libya. The crisis ended up being handled both as routine and as a response to an extreme event, the latter specifically concerning the initial attacks on civilians in Benghazi by Gaddafi's forces. The Libya event, therefore, does not fall neatly into one category but raises interesting questions about *emergent strategic response*, which are investigated more closely in the case study.

Extreme events can combine with other events or follow closely after one another to form an *extreme context* of high complexity. One example is the March 2011 context in Japan, in which there was a domino effect of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant meltdown at Fukushima, subsequently followed by additional social disaster for thousands of people (Casto, 2014). Other examples of extreme contexts are Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, not forgetting the vast extreme context and total collapse of societies and states catalyzed partly by the Western military response to the 9/11 attacks, in the region of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

The terrorist bomb in Oslo in 2011 was in itself an extreme event, but when it was followed a couple of hours later by a mass shooting 38 kilometres from Oslo, the situation turned into an extreme context, primarily for the police, but also for other emergency responders. Despite the serious nature of the bombing of government buildings, the massacre of young people by shooting arguably transformed the event into the combination of an extreme context and a national trauma. The military mobilization from a coalition of members and non-members of NATO to enforce a UN decision that sanctioned military action on a member country that was rapidly decaying into civil war was clearly a response to intervene in an extreme context and potentially deal with it. In this sense, both operations analyzed in the case studies share the characteristics of being organizational responses to national traumatic events in extreme contexts.

Nevertheless, I emphasize that the two cases are separated by a time dimension and, for some actors, a great difference in the degree of danger. In order to shed light on this distinction, I have chosen to use the terms crisis and emergency, and not extreme events and extreme contexts. Both cases in the book clearly fall into the category of crisis, but an ongoing terrorist attack is an emergency demanding an extremely quick police response.

Although the situation was explosive and the demand for military intervention came sooner than most had expected, the Libya situation emerged over several days, then weeks and ultimately months compared with the minutes to three hours in the police operation on 22 July. The Libya situation was an international political crisis, during which politicians called for swift international military action, but unlike the terrorist attacks in Norway, it was not an emergency. However, I will return to the question of whether the politicians and military confused the crisis with an emergency by overreacting as if the military was a sort of international police force.

Boin et al. (2005) suggest that crisis studies can be separated into those looking at the level of strategic leadership and those researching the operational level of the people directly involved in the crisis. This book crosses these and other abstract levels of organization, and demonstrates what happens when organizations are seen as dynamical interactions and emerging organizational practices performed by people during crises and emergencies.

Theoretical Approach

The theory base of this study is drawn from general complexity theories in organizational studies (Johannessen & Kuhn, 2012). For the purpose of generating a more precise contextualized theorizing on crisis and emergency operations, the view of complexity is energized with a number of theoretical insights integrated into the discussions and referred to throughout the book, some of which concern ideas of organizations as communication and authority (Taylor & Van Every, 2014); power, ideology and group identity (Dalal, 1998); and group dynamics and behaviour in circumstances of high organizational stress (Weick, 2001). Among the ideas I have found particularly helpful within organizational complexity theory are those of Stacey (2010) and his sources in social theory, namely George Herbert Mead (1934) and Norbert Elias (1939; 1991).

Based on these sources of inspiration, I have developed a complexity theoretical framework for studying organizational practices during crises and emergencies. I propose that organizations responding to crisis and emergencies consist of a number of conflicting organizational practices that are differentiated by the practitioners' understanding of *communication*, *power*, *identity*, and *ethics*. The different practices are defined by acts of inclusion and exclusion, and the insider-outsider dynamics constructed by them. Most importantly, the *interactions* between operational, bureaucratic, and political practitioners before, during, and after a crisis are crucially important for how strategy, leadership, and organization are understood and performed *as practice* by different organizational practitioners.

One central idea of this book is to explore how the multiple meanings of strategy and leadership anchored in the different organizational practices deeply influence how organizations respond to crisis and emergencies. A key problem is that of *coordination* in unpredictable and dynamic contexts. To uphold standardized procedures and decision-making at the same time as creative improvisation emerges from many actors who lack certainty and relevant information in local situations inevitably means that coordination and collaboration across local contexts becomes a great challenge. As a theory problem, this is at the core of what complexity theorists have been exploring for many years, particularly in the form of computer model simulations of *complex adaptive systems* (i.e. networks of small units (agents) that interact on the basis of local information or rules) (Kauffman, 1993; Holland, 1998; Allen, 1998).

6 Introduction

In simulations of complex adaptive systems, the interactions tend to form widespread and changing organized patterns without following overall instructions for how the patterns should be organized. To name the systems complex means that they are *unpredictable, non-linear, self-organizing, and emergent*, while being adaptive means that the different agents constrain and adapt their behaviour in relation to other agents. Such computer simulations have provided important theoretical insights into the dynamic behaviour of groups of agents that operate without any central control and with only very simple and local information. By the help of these insights researchers have studied how less advanced living creatures can produce advanced organized patterns, such as ant colonies, schools of fish, and flocks of birds. The results have become part of a wider new paradigm of thought about the complex dynamics of nature, life, and society (see Prigogine & Stengers (1984); Prigogine (1997); and Mainzer (1997) for thorough examinations of the scientific and philosophical foundations, and the implications of complexity thinking).

Since the 1990s, a number of organizational researchers have explored human organizing in terms of complex adaptive systems (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007). However, many of their assumptions overlook important differences in reality between the models, organization in nature, and human organization. Clearly, the organized patterns of behaviour among ants, fish, and birds are simpler than the organized patterns of human social behaviour. Therefore, the models that assume simple and local information are more relevant for the behaviour of simpler organisms. Moreover, computer models are abstract and artificial, and programmed by humans; they are not anything like human reality.

Some earlier contributors (Etzioni, 1961; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992) to the exploration of organizational complexity have tended to see complexity as that which is complicated or consists of many components. This view rests on the assumption that organizations are complex when a very large number of people interact. Although this might be true, the assumption leaves no explanation of how small groups and individuals can be complex or generate complexity.

Insights from complex adaptive systems research have radically challenged traditional views of complexity. In the computer simulations of interactions between individual agents (which are algorithms) that are not in themselves complex, complex patterns of interaction form whenever the number of agents is medium, in the scale of hundreds, given that they are heterogeneous (Casti, 1994; 1997). A larger number of agents who are homogenous form less complex patterns than a small number of agents who are heterogeneous.

Hence, complexity is primarily associated with heterogeneity and dynamic interaction, not so much with the number of components in a system. A large number of identical agents will only produce static order and repetition. A large number of extreme diverse agents will produce total lack of order, which means that the pattern is not complex but random.

Complexity, then, is created by a dynamic patterning process of local interaction in which *sufficient* variation and numbers of actors are held in paradoxical tension of stability and instability at the same time so that they are able to adapt dynamically to simultaneously form stable and unstable patterns.

Since the beginning of the 2000s other researchers have advanced the use of ideas from complex adaptive systems by combining them with theories and ideas drawn from sociology, psychology, and philosophy (Stacey, 2001; 2010; Griffin, 2002). These researchers have questioned what it means to use the conceptual language of complex adaptive systems to explain phenomena found in human experience. Instead they suggest that this language is used as analogues of human reality, while also proposing that organizations could be seen as *complex responsive processes*.

In this particular theory, attempts are made to link people's interactions and behaviour with change, unpredictability, and experiences of social realities. This is relevant to leaders because it challenges established notions claiming that leaders need to be in control and to manage their organization in order to succeed. From the perspective of complex responsive processes, organized activities are seen as entangled, repetitive, and transformative processes of interaction between people. Individuals, groups, organizations, and societies are seen as different aspects of fundamental processes of communicative interaction. People create and change their complex social patterns of behaviour and experience, their technologies, and their natural environments through these processes of communicative interaction.

Strategies, Leadership, and Complexity

Based on the above outline, my theoretical assumption is that organizations are *paradoxical, self-organizing, and emergent processes* created in communicative interactions between people. Organizations cannot be subjected to leadership, because organization cannot be separated from leadership. Acts of leadership and/or organization can be performed among people through the influence of themes of communication. When people perform organized activities (i.e. practices), these communicative themes organize their experience of power, belonging (i.e. identity), and ethics.

All individuals' sense of reality is subjective but, at the same time, it is knitted together with and dependent upon other subjective realities in inter-subjective processes. In such ongoing processes, the individual and the group are created simultaneously as two sides of the same emerging phenomenon – the organizing social individual.

From this perspective, *strategic and operational decision-making* in the context of organizational response to crisis and emergency are processes that many actors influence based on uncertain and local knowledge rather than on global and certain facts. A *creative strategic response* is the ability to move from static plans (which assumes complete homogeneous actors) towards pragmatic action (which assumes sufficient heterogeneous actors)

8 Introduction

that will face the immediate situation. Strategy as planned overall direction is transformed to become strategy as emergent coordination of local adaptive patterns of interacting people.

This is the core of the term *emerging strategies*, which means that strategies are not pre-chosen, and sometimes not even known to those who traditionally are charged with making strategies. Patterns of action are bent and sometimes broken completely off from the frameworks of preparations in order to respond to a situation that has not occurred before.

Organizations' abilities to adapt to immediate situations are rooted in organizational practices. It is possible to change and improve those practices because they are created in ordinary everyday activities in organizations that deal with crises and emergencies. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the practices that enable are the same that constrain. Group inclusion cannot happen without group exclusion, hierarchy cannot happen without authority, trust cannot happen outside power relations, and identity cannot happen without difference. These processes and relational phenomena all play a part in constraining and enabling the ability of individuals, groups, organizations, and multiorganizational networks to respond strategically and operationally to crises and emergencies. These ideas are presented and explored in more depth in the theory chapters in Part II and Part III. They form the basis for my theoretical approach to strategies, leadership, and complexity in crisis and emergency operations.

The Research Methodology

The two case studies, which are presented and discussed throughout this book are based on information from interviews, public documents, and media. For the Libya case, interviews were conducted during a 12-month period from the end of the Libya operation in October 2011 through to October 2012, as part of a Royal Norwegian Air Force research project. The interviews included 15 key officers who were part of the military operation. For the police case, 20 people who in different ways were connected to the police operation were interviewed either formally or informally in the course of a four-year period from January 2012 to December 2015.

The analyses are constructed as *interpretative narratives*, with theorizing fused into the material rather than applied instrumentally, meaning that initially the two cases are not subjected to the same thematic and theoretical analysis. I have not aimed at understanding merely the same themes in both cases. Rather, I have been searching for ideas to address particular themes that have stood out in the cases.

The purpose of this approach is to highlight the *differences* between the cases as well as the *similarities*. Regarding differences, for example, the theme of strategy is more salient in the military narrative, whereas the theme of stress is more salient in the police narrative. After the cases have been separately narrated, they are brought together to compare and shed light on

their similarities. The theoretical themes are then mobilized into the comparisons of the narratives in order to create new formulations that might clarify shades and nuances in the separate cases, but at the same time also raise doubt on arguments that in each case may have seemed steadfast.

As in any research, there is also here some kind of trade-off. Exploring and comparing the two cases in this book is a choice between pursuing clarity in criteria, facts, and phenomena – much like an investigation commission sets out to do – and accepting that a dynamical approach could at least insert a creativity into the analysis that would allow for nuances in interpretations to emerge even if it means leaving behind any ambition of finding full clarity. The narratives can be told in a number of ways and from different angles and viewpoints, and an endless amount of detail can be emphasized, diminished, made obvious, or made to appear dubious, depending on from which position in the matrix of evolving patterns of events they are viewed and told.

The case stories told here are the author's versions based on the obtained material. Like most people, I was merely a distant spectator of the events when they happened. Thus, the stories are not objective truths; they are outlines of interpretations: versions that can only find validity from the manner in which they are read, perceived, interpreted, and negotiated by those who were close to the events and those of us who were distant from them. Stories are like that – they are constantly reinterpreted by reiteration and by being told in new and different versions.

By gathering the stories and information from selected people who were close to the events, I have tried to get closer to the events than I otherwise would have been able to from merely reading the public documents, media articles, and absorbing broadcasted news and documentaries. However, the sources are ultimately also stories told from particular positions in the event matrix. Not only the involved actor's views but also the documents are constructed within the contextual power constellations through which the events occurred and were made sense of.

In preparing this book, I have encouraged people who participated in the events and people who were distant from the events to read different parts of the manuscript and comment on my interpretations and highlight any obvious errors. Their readings greatly helped me to question and clarify my interpretations. I see this ongoing questioning and challenging of interpretations as part of the politics of methodology and organizational process research. Hopefully, this book will continue to open new questions for its readers.

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10 Introduction

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