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EDLE 801 Contemporary Organization Theory

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March 2021

Assignment #1: Article Critique

In his article, “Frame Restructuration: The Making of an Alternative Business Incubator Amid Detroit’s Crisis,” Suntae Kim (2021) explores how cognitive frames are formed, particularly in crises, when old frames are no longer adequate. Kim’s area of interest is the emergent space when old frames are discarded and new cognitive frames are formed, a process he calls restructuration, which then facilitates adaptive responses to crises. He argues that the use of a metaphor serves as an expeditious tool to allow such restructuration to germinate and emerge. Kim suggests the process of destroying old frames, developing new frames and the establishment of new frames is generally merged; his research contributes an important distinction between the act of formulation and realization. Kim also illuminates how a metaphor might contribute to this movement from one frame to another. However, Kim’s analysis leaves out key factors that may be influencing this restructuration process, which may diminish the veracity of his contention that a metaphor explains how new frames are developed. These key factors include the role of leaders, the type of change theory used in his example, the influence of the cycle of grief, definition of crisis, unclear data analysis, and the limits of metaphorical models.

The author suggests that efforts to respond to a crisis are limited by narrow information available, which leads to pragmatic actions geared toward problem solving an immediate need. The ambiguity and urgency stimulated by a crisis bring about situated actions that challenge and weaken an existing frame. Existing frames become inadequate, thereby increasing discomfort among actors and a consequential necessity to create new frames. Kim argues this “betwixt” space, namely, between recognizing one frame is not working but prior to the establishment of a new frame, is an emergent space where formation of new frames can occur. The destruction, and pointedly not the revision, of an old frame and creation of a new frame is called restructuration; Kim distinguishes restructuration from the realization of the new frame, which occurs only after the destruction/creation process is complete.

Of interest to the author is how actors move through the emergent space from one frame to another. Kim argues the deployment of the metaphor tool allows for frame restructuration. A metaphor is a tool to bridge the old frame to the new frame; it allows the formation, acceptance, and adaptation to the new frame, and serves as the “engine of the dynamic constitution between frames and actions” (p. 44). Metaphors are expandable, “elastic,” orderly, and provide coherence (p. 42), and are reinforced by contrasting with antithetical metaphors.

At the same time, while Kim acknowledges “frames tend to be self-reinforcing,” he does not apply the same logic to metaphors (p. 6). A risk of relying on a metaphor to explain a context or, more specifically, how actors move from one frame to another, can artificially force the interpretation of factors and events through the lens of the metaphor; in other words, a metaphor can be pushed to fit the circumstance. Kim indirectly addresses this latter point by suggesting the “elastic nature” of a metaphor may “continuously translate novel actions into structural growth” (p. 41). Said another way, a metaphor can be modified or transformed in the process of adding actions, environmental factors, events, and different actors in the emergent space between frames. In effect, additional factors are seen as reinforcing the metaphor rather than questioning its utility or limits.

Further, the author argues pragmatic actions “take the center stage” because crisis situations demand a departure from habitual and routine responses, which implies a “readjustment of basic assumptions” (p. 45). Two concerns arise from this premise. First, there seems to be a disconnect in the author’s perception of crisis. GREEN’s methods and underlying metaphor – grounding roots, growing seeds, generating trees – is a slow, gradual process. In contrast, a crisis may not be slow. For example, during a humanitarian crisis, such as the 2004 Thai tsunami, multiple bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental and private sector parties responded to urgent calls to address loss of life and land; massive homelessness and hunger; lack of clean water and health care; looting and loss of rule of law; and a host of other immediate issues. In effect, these were multiple crises occurring simultaneously; Kim’s suggestion that a metaphor serves as an optimal tool to move from one frame of reference to another is not explored during a multifaceted crisis with several stakeholders involved, which may suggest a limit to the use of metaphors in restructuration.

Second, the frustration felt by entrepreneurs during GREEN’s incubation process may be in part due to the slow “growing seeds” challenge noted above, and also because of the grieving process within the environmental and social context. When examining the Kubler-Ross grief scale, which moves from shock to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969), a possible correlation is evident in describing how entrepreneurs move and evolve from an original frame to a different frame, which was evident in several of the quotes by entrepreneurs. The grief scale is less metaphorical than it is descriptive of the formation process, which could suggest the living organism metaphor was a proxy for grieving as the adapting, restructuring process was illuminated. In other words, that the living organism metaphor continued to expand might be a reflection of the entrepreneurs moving through a grief process, which functionally destroyed old frames and created new cognitive frames. An implication of viewing restructuration as an observation of a grieving process toward restructuration is that the metaphor tool may not be as instrumental as Kim suggests.

Kim considers how GREEN’s founder, Ted, used an “antithetical metaphor” to reinforce the relevance of his metaphor of a business serving as a living organism (p. 40). In this case, the antithetical metaphor sited was observing an organization as a machine in contrast to seeing an organization as a living entity. A machine-like organization may employ a rational-empirical strategy within an organization, which offers a highly directive, top-down and bureaucratic approach. A living organism type of organization may use a creative strategy, which focuses on the individual creativity of members where ideas and a vision drive change (Janicijevic, 2014). These strategies convey how individuals interact with one another and with leadership, which shapes how an organization’s relationships operate as well as engage with the external environment. Kim’s discussion would have been bolstered by examining the metaphor not just as a way to define the context, but also as a way of highlighting how individuals relate to one another. These interrelationships create conversations and new narratives, which may further explain the utility, and perhaps the boundaries, of the metaphorical tool.

Perhaps most troublesome in Kim’s article is the absence of discussion regarding the role of the leader and the change theory used by leadership. Frames are recognized as “deeply entangled with personal identities and political interests,” and “cues inconsistent with frames are easily ignored” (p. 3). Actors are therefore habituated to respond, which is only disrupted with “deliberate work and moral courage” (p. 3). Said another way, the conversations that create our realities and direct our responses rely on patterns of meaning and patterns of relating (Suchman, 2011). These patterns continuously evolve and self-organize as an “emergent design” within a mindset of “curiosity, flexibility and experimentation” (Suchman, 2011, p. S45). The question is who guides this process?

Kim alludes to the founder of GREEN, Ted, who he suggests is viewed as a “cult leader” by the entrepreneurs (p. 10). Ted led his stakeholders, including GREEN staff, community partners, and entrepreneurs, through a multi-month process of creating new patterns and thinking by recalibrating how to launch and sustain a business in the context of Detroit. As leader, Ted held the space for shifting the conversation and holding the living organism metaphor while emphasizing organic and living growth rather than machine operations or the more traditional startup seeking investment funds. The interview quotes sited in the article further reinforce the influence of Ted and his efforts to align the entrepreneur’s actions and values with the metaphor he used. However, Kim neither explored the role of a leader in the restructuration process nor examined the extent to which restructuration was the result of a changed leadership approach.

Related, while Kim seeks to reveal the “how” in frame destruction and formation, he does not explore the types of theory of change Ted may have been deploying. For example, Ted’s theory of change is reminiscent of a systemic approach as he leans on traits recognized as key to successful leadership: (1) seeing the big picture and understanding interconnections; (2) analyzing the need; (3) management and interpersonal skills; and (4) broad experience and knowledge (Shaked & Schechter, 2016). Another or complementary leadership approach employed by Ted may have been servant leadership given Ted’s focus on building stronger individuals and communities for the sake of a better world (Greenleaf, 1998). A form of distributive leadership is also apparent as Ted focused on situational and social processes found in the triangulation of stakeholders (Klar, Huggins, Hammonds & Buskey, 2016).

Finally, Kim’s data analysis does not seem clear. Kim used a qualitative, ethnographic analysis of a Detroit-based incubator called GREEN, which served as a self-professed for profit, “adult learning” company offering workspace, start-up services and mentorship to local businesses establishing in what was then a city struggling to rise from bankruptcy. The analysis assessed four businesses, but Kim’s analysis was not dispersed evenly across his study. Specifically, Kim held 18 or 19 in-process observations of three of them, but only seven of the fourth, Good Food Network. However, he held 20 post-process interviews with Good Food Network, and none with two others and eight with a business that subsequently closed (p. 13). Kim does not explain why the data collection was not consistent across the four samples. Another area unclear is the analysis of “critical moments” during the first three incubation processes. Kim seeks to identify patterns between performance and discussion of actions, and the continual redefinition of the context, but his table does not seem to reflect his assertions (p. 16 and 17). As a result, the conclusion from his analysis that GREEN’s actions were “sensible and compelling” as they built a view of the situation through the use of a metaphor does not seem fully grounded in the data (p. 18).

While Kim contributes to the discussion of how new frames are formed, particularly in periods of crisis, his analysis leaves out critical elements in the process of destruction and creation of new frames, which leaves his analysis incomplete. Specifically, his discussion of restructuration and his research with GREEN would have been strengthened by a closer study on leadership and specifically the role Ted held as leader; the theory of change utilized by Ted; the lack of clarity in Kim’s data analysis; the possibility of entrepreneurs moving through a grieving process; and the limits of metaphors as a tool. Such further analysis on the agency of actors in this analysis could illuminate additional factors contributing to restructuration, which would improve the applicability and reliability of his conclusions, and contribute to future organizational structures seeking to mimic GREEN’s success.

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