
The crafty title of this book illuminates the two different ways Grey seeks to “decode” Bletchley Park, the British site famous for breaking the German Enigma ciphers during WWII. First, as an historical account, he provides deep insight into the organizational life of Bletchley Park, and second, he uses his analysis as a call to revive a particular way of analyzing organizing and organizations. Given this dual purpose, Decoding Organization should appeal to organizational scholars as well as to technology and intelligence historians or any others interested in this fascinating period.

Although the history of how Bletchley Park broke the code is well recorded, the organizational aspects are much less understood. The book is organized around three core characteristics of organizational life: structure, culture, and work. In each aspect, Grey takes the reader beyond the familiar accounts of the geniuses, organizational homogeneity, and nationalistic pride to show the political contestation, fragmented cultures, and the mundane work of this organization. For example, in chapters 5 and 6, Grey provides a detailed account of the varieties of work performed at Bletchley Park. We see that the intelligence work involved repetitive and low-skill tasks in addition to the highly skilled translation and cryptanalysis work. And both kinds of work involved both discretionary and mundane activities. Grey also shows that the control of this work varied, ranging from more formal bureaucratic control to normative control. Grey’s detailed analysis reveals both the coordination and fractures and provides fresh insight into this fascinating organization.

Grey admits that the second “decoding” of the book is much more controversial. He argues that the practice of academic organizational research that “encodes” organizations with conceptual variables and tries to explain their relations and significance has become too abstracted. Instead, this book aims to revive an interpretative analysis approach that seeks to understand the phenomenon of organizational life as opposed to providing a positivist explanation. Thus Grey warns that his “decoding” is not meant to reveal the underlying truth of Bletchley Park but to make more clear the process of organizing in general. Theoretically, the book does not seek to advance a particular kind organizational theory but, instead, pulls from a variety of theories when they prove insightful. Methodologically, Grey advocates his archival approach as a means to allow for the necessary distance that affords this deeper understanding.

From this perspective, we should read this book as an exemplar of a way of doing organizational research that can develop new insights. As such, even if you disagree with this approach, Decoding Organization is an important and
timely book. On the theoretical front, long-standing theories, such as neo-institutionalism and population ecology, are beginning to shift their focus toward issues of emergence, change, and decay—the very same kind of dynamic features of this book. Grey’s analysis provides significant insight into how to deal with the conceptual challenges associated with dynamism, as well as a vocabulary to talk about such processes, which is no easy task. For example, a repeated theme in the book is the common distinction between organization and environment within organization theory. Grey shows how this boundary was blurred in the case of Bletchley Park as the “organization” was constantly socially negotiated. Relaxing the environment-organization boundary can have significant implications for how we theorize the dynamics of organization. By focusing on the research as an approach, however, Grey stopped short of providing additional insight into how this approach can advance our theories of organizations.

The book is also methodologically timely. There is growing interest in revitalizing the historical method within organizational research, and Decoding Organization provides a good example of the merits of this kind of research. Even though Grey admits that he is not a historian, his work shows the value of historical distance in doing interpretive work and how this method provides a richer account by revealing alternative paths not fully developed. Yet Grey could have done more to help validate this method. A strength of the historical method is that it critically evaluates its evidence to determine the veracity and meaning of the accounts (see Golder, 2000). What other methods in organizational studies go through a process of internal criticism surrounding the meaning of its evidence? While Grey explained the sources of his data and the mixed use of archives and interviews, he did so to justify his interpretive approach as opposed to validating the evidence he used to make the interpretations. Given his emphasis on providing an approach to organization studies, more could have been said about its validity in providing the insights it reveals.

Despite these shortcomings, I would encourage organizational scholars to read this book. Grey’s decoding of Bletchley Park reveals the dynamics of an important organization while also raising important questions about how we as academics approach our analysis.

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REFERENCE

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