An Exploration of Unit Commander Decision-Making

in the Australian Army

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Publications Arising from Material Presented in this Thesis  
Contract to Support the Research  
Presentations to Learned Societies and Review Groups  
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Abstract

In recent years, the adequacy of classical models to explain expert decision-making in environments involving time pressure, high stakes, uncertainty and dynamic conditions has been questioned. An alternative model to describe decision-making in these conditions is the recognition-prized decision-making (RPD) model (Klein, 1989). This model is descriptive and suggests that expert decision-makers learn to recognise typical situations and solutions and use these mental shortcuts to fill in gaps in their understanding and inform their decision-making. The model has been validated in many domains (Klein, 1999), but to date has not been applied in the Australian Army. Moreover, the model has been criticised because it largely ignores the influence of the wider context in dynamic decision-making. The aim of this research is to address these issues.

The setting has been the unit level of operations in the Australian Army. In particular, the focus is on the Commander, as she has the largest impact on the strategic direction of an operation. The approach combines a number of complementary data collection methods, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data. The main methods of data collection include in-depth, semi-structured interviewing; Q-sort analysis; and observational research in the field. These are triangulated to increase validity. Computer simulation is also used to investigate its adequacy for further naturalistic decision-making (NDM) research.

The outcome is firstly a validation of the RPD model in the Australian Army and revision to include contextual variables perceived to impact on NDM. The effect of these contextual variables on RPD requires further research using naturalistic techniques. Computer simulation has been found to be an unsatisfactory technique to employ in this instance.

These are important outcomes as the Australian Army moves towards an era of Networked Centric Warfare where established structures for team work are being revised. Establishing a better understanding of contextual factors that impact on NDM enables policy
makers to take this knowledge into account when hypothesising about the effect that structural change might have on business processes. Thus, having better defined models, and research techniques identified to achieve this, is a benefit.