

**Concordia University
John Molson School of Business**

**MSCA 645AA
Seminar in Organization Theory
Winter 2009**

Draft – subject to change

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| Meeting Time | Wednesday, 11:45 – 14:30 |
| Office Hours: | Tuesday: 15:00 – 17:00 |

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a *research-oriented seminar*, in which we will explore a number of different theoretical perspectives on organizations and organizational environments. The primary aim of the seminar is to introduce students to an understanding of how organizational scholars have conceptualized and studied organizations as *social systems* and how these social systems interact with and are embedded in the context of an *external environment*. Particular attention is given to how organizations can be understood, both internally and in relation to the environment, as *social structures* composed of relationships, interdependencies, and social-cognitive institutions. The seminar cannot and does not provide a comprehensive coverage of all theoretical perspectives or topics of interest in organization studies simply because the field is too broad and too eclectic. Instead, the key aim is to introduce students to some basic conceptual tools for investigating a variety of organizational phenomena. At the end of the seminar, students would have acquired a sophisticated understanding of different perspectives about the *social structural context* in which organizational behaviour is embedded.

The course will begin with an introduction to how context is understood as social structures, as well as an overview of different paradigms that have been used to understand organizations in these ways. Following this introduction, we will explore different types of social structural arrangements in organizations, based on relationships, cultures, identities, and institutions. We then consider structural arrangements through which organizations are tied to the external environment and the structures that constitute that environment. Throughout, we consider how organizations can be understood as structured collectives and how those collectives are structurally linked to their external environment. Some topics we will cover in these discussions include organizational power, social networks, organizational identity and image, corporate social performance, and organizational change.

Course Format & Objectives

The course is a discussion-based seminar, in which students are expected to develop a grasp of the basic issues, concepts, and applications of the theoretical as well as empirical materials through discussion and the exchange of ideas. Prior to each class, **students are expected to have studied a set of assigned readings, given thought to them, and be prepared to engage in a discussion about them.** Don't worry if you don't understand everything in a given article. Helping all members of the class understand and interpret the readings is a key objective of in-class sessions and journal entry exchange. Class time will be used primarily to draw out key ideas from the readings, raise issues, criticize the theories or research, and develop integrations among different points of view. Students will get out of these discussions what they put in, and regular attendance and participation are critical to successful completion of this course. Don't be afraid to offer your personal understandings and visions of organizational theory but be prepared to defend them against the visions of your classmates.

For each class, one student will be assigned to **present and lead discussion** on designated research articles to the rest of the class. These presentations will serve to lay the groundwork for critical analysis and discussion of the materials in class by summarizing the main theoretical issues, highlighting key findings, and, most importantly, raising questions and issues pertaining to the research. **All students are expected to have read all articles** for a given session in order to participate in class discussions.

Student discussion leaders should provide a summary of the assigned readings, lasting about **20-30 minutes**, *assuming your colleagues have also read it*. Your summary should explain the theoretical argument and/or conceptual ideas presented in the article and articulate how the article links to the other readings of the day. Addressing several of the ensuing questions will help you articulate an informed presentation of a given research article.

1. What question the author is trying to answer. For example, is this research the first empirical test of an important theoretical prediction, does this research extend existing theory, and if so how, does this research develop competing theoretical predictions or theoretical ideas, does this research remedy important flaws in past empirical research or conceptual development? Good research does not need to do all of these, but it should be more than just a minor extension of an overly complex model.
2. Describe the model the author uses to answer the research question. What are the **key concepts** in the model and what are the explanatory **relationships** between those concepts? What **assumptions** does the author make? What do you think of those assumptions? How do the arguments made differ from other arguments you have read? What are the boundary conditions of the argument (i.e., is it limited to specific types of situations, organizations, cultures, or people?) Try to be as specific as possible in describing the model (e.g., do not say "this paper tests a contingency theory model of organizational design," rather say that "this paper examines the idea that the degree of uncertainty in the environment is related to how much organizations employ decentralized decision making routines").

3. Discuss the author's **methodology** and describe the **results** of any empirical research presented. Does the methodology appear to be able to answer the author's research question? Some issues to consider are: Is the **sample** appropriate (e.g., if the author wants to study factors that affect the death of firms, does the sample include both firms that died and comparable firms that did not die)? Are the **measures** reasonable representations of the constructs in the author's model (e.g., in the study just described, how does the author measure organizational death--is this measure consistent with the author's theoretical description of the construct)? If the article is theoretical, what are the **conceptual techniques** used by the authors (e.g., is it literature review, a theoretical integration, a conceptual innovation, etc.) and how well do the chosen techniques provide answers to the research question?
4. Evaluate the author's **conclusions**. Do the conclusions address the author's research question? Are the conclusions consistent with the analysis and results? Are there any untested alternative explanations for the author's results? If these alternative explanations cannot be tested in this research, does the author suggest ways in which these explanations might be tested in future research? Does the author discuss the limitations of the research and describe ways of remedying those limitations in future research?
5. Most importantly, you should raise and articulate a series of **discussion questions** that will form the basis of in-class debate. These questions might arise from your assessment of the article (i.e., in response to the questions above) or on any ideas you have about conducting any additional research. The discussion leader has to **submit these questions to me by email on the Sunday preceding our class**. I will then review these questions, modify or add to them, and distribute them to the rest of the students to reflect on before class.

Evaluation

Evaluation of performance in this seminar will be based on four components. Participation contribution to in-class discussion will account for 10% of your grade, on-line journal entries about the class readings will account for 20%, two *Thought Exercise* assignments will account for 30% (i.e., 15% each), and a term paper will account for 40%.

Participation Contribution.

You are expected to participate actively in each class session. Of course, having thoroughly studied the assigned readings is a prerequisite for effective participation, but **critical thinking** about reading is the main desired objective. The grade for participation will be determined through the instructor's evaluation of the quantity and quality of your performance throughout the semester, using the following criteria:

- Raising and answering questions
- Sharing ideas, insights, and feelings
- Sharing personal experiences and observations
- Relating and synthesizing ideas of others
- Providing constructive feedback on the learning climate and processes in the classroom
- Helping others develop their views and ideas
- Pointing out relationships to earlier discussions

On-line Journal entries.

Students are required to make written submissions as part of an on-line ideas sharing forum about the readings in the course. We will make use of the First Class conferencing system for this purpose, which features a discussion board on which student should post their contributions. Your contributions should take the form of a journal entry – an expression of your reflections and deliberations about a particular topic, paper, or research issue. Think of journal entries as a written form of class participation contribution, meaning that what you write into a journal entry need not be complete arguments or well-developed ideas, but ruminations and explorations of thought that you can put forward in response to a question or to provoke thinking by others. Please see the guidelines for preparing discussion leader presentations above for questions you may want to consider in developing a journal entry.

There are five separate occasions on which students are required to submit a journal entry to the forum, each of which should pertain to the readings of a specified time period. Of course, students may submit more than one journal entry during a given time period, and the Professor will also participate in the debates, primarily as a catalyst to stimulate ideas. Since your entries should involve conceptual thinking and research ideas, students are encouraged to keep ongoing notes of their thoughts and ideas about the readings and in-class discussions throughout the semester, which you can use to articulate your contributions to the on-line discussions. Contributions need not be long but must provide an interpretation, critique, integration, or extension of the materials we cover in this course that elaborates on and evaluates the materials in the readings. Application of theoretical ideas to personal experience or industry examples is

not enough and must be supplemented by an elaboration of theory that logically derives from the application.

The primary purpose of the on-line journal entries is to help you develop an independent style of conceptual thinking and logical argumentation in reference to the research literature. In line with this objective, practicing the composition of journal entries will also serve as a stepping stone to writing a more elaborate piece, in which you will be required to articulate your original thoughts in the form of a more coherent and structured argument (see below).

A secondary purpose is to share ideas with your class mates and learn from each other. To the extent possible you may contribute journal entries that build upon or respond to those of your fellow class members. In addition, you will be asked to participate in the evaluation process by submitting to the Professor your choice of the best journal entry for a given submission period. Your choice should be substantiated with an explanation for why you thought it was the best entry.

The schedule for journal entry submission and evaluation is as follows:

| Journal entry period | Submission closing date | Evaluation due date |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Weeks 1 & 2 | January 16 | January 21 |
| Weeks 3 & 4 | January 30 | February 04 |
| Weeks 5 & 6 | February 13 | February 18 |
| Weeks 7 to 9 | March 13 | March 18 |
| Weeks 10 & 12 | March 27 | April 08 |

Thought Exercise Assignments.

Students are required to write two "*Thought Exercise*" assignments, accounting for 20% of the course grade (10% each). A *Thought Exercise* is a short written assignment, **about 4 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point or 10cpi font size)**. The objective of a *Thought Exercise* is to discuss relevant theories, your understanding of and agreement or disagreement with those theoretical ideas, your thoughts about linking different theoretical ideas, and to integrate your thoughts about theory with your experiences or observations of the world of organizations around you. The *Thought Exercise* is what the name suggests: An exercise in thinking about the materials you learn in this course and how they can help you to understand the world of organizations. Writing a *Thought Exercise* involves deliberating, picking apart, debating and/or challenging theoretical concepts. Critical analysis, playing with ideas, and uncovering insight and understanding are the keys to writing a *Thought Exercise*. It is expected that **you make use of the readings in this course** for writing your *Thought Exercises*.

You may select the topics for your two *Thought Exercises* from the list below. In addition, you may propose a unique topic of interest for your assignment. For example, you could write about an issue or debate that arose during one of our class discussion or that surfaced as part of the

journal entries forum. Your objective would be to extend and elaborate that issue with your additional thoughts and deliberations. You could focus on a particular topic or paper from the reading list and then engage in a deliberation about its validity, merits, shortcomings, or implications in reference to an organizational topic of your interest. In each case, please make sure that you **discuss the appropriateness of your chosen topic** with me prior to proceeding with the assignment.

Some *Thought Exercise* Topics:

1. Compare and contrast ideas about rational and natural system models of organization.
2. How is thinking about networks of actors different than and similar to thinking about individual actors?
3. Why is organizational identity important in organization studies?
4. What is power?
5. What is the role of organizational images in the emergence of organizational identity?
6. Why do we have so many different theories about organizations?
7. How do organizational institutions evolve?
8. What kind of social structure is social capital?
9. How do institutions affect organizations?
10. What type of resource is legitimacy?
11. What is the relationship between power and legitimacy?
12. What kind of organizational identity is the sustainable organization?
13. How stable are organizational fields?

Evaluation of the *Thought Exercise* assignments will be subject to the following criteria:

- (1) Demonstrates a thorough understanding of theoretical ideas in organization theory.
- (2) Integrates or extends theoretical understanding through systematic analysis and logical inference.
- (3) Exhibits some critical evaluation of theoretical concepts.
- (4) Focused on a relevant and integrated argument that is well-crafted.

I encourage you to come and talk to me if there are any doubts or uncertainty about your ideas for the *Thought Exercise*. *Thought Exercises* are due during the weeks of 04 February and 04 March. You should hand in a hard-copy of your assignment at the beginning of class. **Late Submissions are not acceptable, and will receive a grade of zero** unless accompanied by a medical or registrar's note.

Term Paper.

The largest portion of your overall grade will come from an original term paper. Your term paper may be a theoretical review of one of the topics covered in the course, a conceptual integration of several perspectives pertaining to a relevant organizational phenomenon, a research proposal for a specific study, or a theoretical treatise on a relevant topic not covered in this seminar. The choice will be up to each student, and an outline of your paper is due in our 10th class meeting

(18 March). Each student will receive detailed feedback on his/her outline so that you may improve the final product. The final version of your paper is due on the last day of class **(Deadline: 08 April)**, so start thinking about term papers as early in the course as possible. You may use your work on one of the thought exercises as a springboard for writing your term paper. However, students are expected to investigate the organizational literature **beyond the assigned readings of this course** and engage in independent research about their chosen topic. You should make use of the library research resources, such as on-line search engines (e.g., ABI Inform, JSTOR), CLUES, and on-line journals, to research their term paper. Late papers will not be accepted and result in a grade of zero, unless permission for an extension is granted by the instructor for special circumstances. Guidelines for the **format of the paper** are the Academy of Management submission guidelines, available from the instructor.

In the past, several students have used their paper as a springboard for their MSc. Thesis.

Presentation.

To help you develop your ideas and academic presentation skills, class session 10 (18 March) will be devoted to the presentation and discussion of student term papers. Each student should prepare a 10-15 minute presentation of their final paper topic and ideas to be used as a catalyst for generating feedback from the class. For example, you may provide a general outline of your ideas, theory, and/or methods, and conclude with some key questions and unsolved issues that you offer for discussion and debate to the audience. Evaluation criteria and tips for presenting effectively will be distributed in class prior to the presentation date.

CLASS SCHEDULE

The list is provisional and subject to further modification

Session 1: 07 January

Orientation & Introduction

Hatch, M.J. (1997). *Organizational Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (pp.3-12)

Scott, W.R & Davis, . (2003): Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems (5th Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Chapter 1 (pp. 3-32)

Session 2: 14 January

Organizational theory: Structure, Symbols & Environments.

Pfeffer, J. (1981). "Management as Symbolic Action: The Creation and Maintenance of Organizational Paradigms," in L.L. Cummings & B.M. Staw (eds.), Research in Organizational Behavior, 3: 1-52.

Pfeffer, J. (1991). "Organization theory and structural perspectives on management." Journal of Management. 17: 789-803.

Nohria, N. & Gulati, R. (1994). Firms and their environments. In N.J. Smelser & R. Swedberg (Eds.), The handbook of economic sociology: 529-544. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Session 3: 21 January

Social networks & social capital in organizations

Adler, P.S. & Kwan, S.-K. (2002). "Social capital: Prospects for a new concept." Academy of Management Review, 27: 17-40.

Ibarra, H. (1992), "Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm." Administrative Science Quarterly, 37: 422-447.

Nelson, R.E. (2001) "On the shape of verbal networks in organizations." Organization Studies, 22: 797-823.

Session 4: 28 January

Power

Hardy, C., & Leiba-O'Sullivan, S. (1998). The power behind empowerment: Implications for research and practice. Human Relations, 51: 451-483.

Krackradt, D. (1990). "Assessing the political landscape: Structure, cognition, and power in organizations." Administrative Science Quarterly, 35: 341-369.

Pfeffer, J. (1992). "Where does power come from?" In J. Pfeffer, Managing with power: Politics and influence in organizations: 71-81. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Session 5: 03 February

Organizational identity and image

Brickson, S.L. (2005). Organizational identity orientation: Forging a link between organizational identity and organizations' relations with stakeholders. Administrative Science Quarterly, 50, 576-609.

Dutton, J.E., & Dukerich, J.M. (1991), "Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation." Academy of Management Journal, 34: 517-554.

Whetten, D.A., (2006). "Albert and Whetten revisited: Strengthening the concept of organizational identity." Journal of Management Inquiry; 15: 219-234.

Session 6: 10 February

Institutions & Institutional Theory

Scott, R.W. (1995) Institutions and organizations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Chapters 1 & 2.

DiMaggio, P.J. & Powell, W.W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. American Sociological Review, 48: 147-160.

Oliver, C. (1991). Strategic responses to institutional pressure. Academy of Management Review.

Zucker, L.G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. American Sociological Review, 42: 726-743.

Session 7: 17 February

Organizational Legitimacy

Ahlstrom, D. & Bruton, Gary D. (2001) "Learning from successful local private firms in China: Establishing legitimacy" Academy of Management Executive, 15: 72-83.

Pollock, T.G. & Rindova, V.P. (2003). Media legitimation effects in the market for initial public offerings. Academy of Management Journal, 46: 631-642.

Suddaby, R. & Greenwood, R. (2005). Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy. Administrative Science Quarterly. 50: 35-67.

Session 8: 04 March

Inter-organizational networks

Uzzi, B. (1996). The sources and consequences of embeddedness for the economic performance of organizations: The network effect. American Sociological Review, 61: 674-698.

Soda, G., Usai, A. & Zaheer, A. (2004). Network memory: The influence of past and current networks on performance. Academy of Management Journal. 47: 893-906.

Human, S.E. & Provan, K.G. (2000). Legitimacy building in the evolution of small-firm networks: A comparative study of success and demise. Administrative Science Quarterly, 45: 327-365.

Session 9: 11 March

Institutional change

Garud, R., Hardy, C., & Maguire, S. (2007). Institutional entrepreneurship as embedded agency: An introduction to the special issue. Organization Studies. 28 (7): 957-969.

Reay, T. & Hinings, C.R. (2005). The recomposition of an organizational field: health care in Alberta. Organization Studies. 26: 351-384.

Zilber, T. (2007). Stories and the discursive dynamics of institutional entrepreneurship: The case of Israeli High-tech after the bubble. Organization Studies. 28 (7): 1035-1054.

Session 10: 18 March

**Due: Outlines of term papers
Student Presentations**

Session 11: 25 March

Organizational stakeholders and corporate social responsibility

Wood, D.J. (1991). Corporate Social Performance Revisited. Academy of Management Review, 16: 691-718.

Preble, J.F. (2005). Toward a comprehensive model of stakeholder management. Business and Society Review. 110 (4): 407-431.

Session 12: 01 April

Organizational fields and macro-structure

Hoffman, A.E. (1999). Institutional evolution and change: Environmentalism and the US Chemical industry, Academy of Management Journal, 42: 351-371.

Lamertz, K., Heugens, P.P.M.A.R. & Calmet, L. (2005). The configuration of organizational images among firms in the Canadian beer brewing industry. Journal of Management Studies, 42:817-843.

Porac, J. F., Thomas, H., Wilson, F., Paton, D., & Kanfer, A. (1995). Rivalry and the industry model of Scottish knitwear producers. Administrative Science Quarterly, 40: 203-227.

Session 13: 08 April

Organizational population ecology

Baum, J.A.C. & Amburgey, T.L. (2002): Organizational ecology. In J.A.C. Baum (Ed.): The Blackwell Companion to Organizations. Malden, MA: Blackwell. (Chapter 13, pp.304-326)

Carroll, G.R., & Swaminathan, A. (2000). "Why the microbrewery movement? Organizational dynamics of resource partitioning in the U.S. brewing industry." American Journal of Sociology, 106: 715-762

Baum, J.A.C., & Oliver, C., 1992. Institutional embeddedness and the dynamics of organizational populations. *American Sociological Review*, 57: 540-559.