MORS520
Cultural and Meaning-Based Theories of Organization

Winter Quarter 2007

Meeting time
Wednesdays, 2-5pm, Jacobs 387

Overview and Objectives

This course introduces doctoral students to major theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches in the cultural analysis of organizing processes. Cultural analysis in organization studies is a broad and vaguely defined area and consequently, coverage is somehow selective. Specifically, the course is (a) anchored on current questions and debates in organization theory and economic sociology; it (b) emphasizes relatively structured qualitative and quantitative approaches to understanding meaning systems and processes; and (c) it is particularly concerned with multi-level mechanisms that connect collective cultural systems with individual and organizational subjectivity and action.

The course draws on insights from organization studies, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and sociology that we apply to core intra- and interorganizational processes, such as communication, competition, coordination, domination and contestation, exchange, and institutionalization. There is a dual focus on theory and method, so that materials range from some basic metaphysics to questions of research design, data analysis and writing. Some sessions include short tutorials about techniques for data analysis and software support. Readings include some classic statements of major approaches and more current applications and debates. Tracing the history of ideas from the past to the present puts current debates into perspective, but critical discussions of examples and exemplars are the primary vehicle for developing facility with the material and for finding your own voice. I will provide some background and short synopses, but all classes are run as seminars. Come to class prepared, as your discussions carry the day.

By the end of the course, you should have acquired a conceptual vocabulary that allows you to evaluate what makes for a good and useful cultural explanation and should have a good idea how to integrate issues of meaning into your own research. Hopefully, you’ll also walk away with a better sense of which questions are susceptible to empirical resolution, which are due to differences in first principles, and which are “merely” semantic. There are no prerequisites for this course. It is designed for students with an interest in organizations and markets but is suitable for any other aspiring social scientists.

Readings and Seminar Sessions

There is a basic tradeoff in a course that seeks relatively wide coverage and that is based on a fundamental analytic perspective rather than a particular literature or well-defined academic field. On the one hand, it needs to introduce and survey the general approaches and foundations. The challenge then is to connect those generic recipes and ideas to specific feasible research. At the same time, the course needs to provide specific examples and exemplars of research that connect to current discourse in the field of organizations, without running the risk of you missing the larger picture that allows you situate this
research and your own interests in the larger landscape of ideas. There is no easy solution to resolving this tension, but at least I can be transparent about the material. If you imagine a continuum from 1 to 10 where 1 = specific and 10 = general, I judge my readings to average out to 7. Some are below and others above, and opinions may vary on those ratings depending where you come from.

The implication of this trend towards generality, though, is worth pointing out. It will be your/our shared responsibility to tip the balance back in class towards specificity. I expect you not to stop at the point of understanding the ideas in the readings. I expect that clarifications of concepts and a discussion of example studies will only take up the first half of each class. The second half is dedicated to collectively unearthing intriguing leads for theory and empirical research, with a special emphasis on relating the course content to other research areas that you know. So the rhythm of a class will go something like this: Warmup on topic – discussion of assigned articles (appreciative; key points, compare and contrast) – discussion of extensions and boundary conditions (more critical) – attractive and inviting leads for research (implications, applications) – summary reflection. Somewhere in-between I am likely to provide some further background, history or systematic coherence to the topic.

For each session, I have also listed a set of additional background readings, which are simply resources for delving deeper into a topic. These background readings are a mix of foundational classics that I (very hesitantly) did not include for the sake of keeping at bay the number of assigned pages, introductions to related literatures that the course does not cover, and further empirical studies.

Assignments and Requirements

This course has two requirements: class participation (50%), and either one of two options (50%): (1) a full length 15 – 20 page research proposal due at the end of the quarter; or (2) a set of 8 one page “research idea” mini-proposals, due at the beginning of classes 2-9, plus a 10pg maximum book review due at the end of the quarter. Note: You need to tell me by the second class meeting which options you chose.

Class participation (50%). Because this course is a seminar, most of the action takes place during class discussion. Thus, all participants should show up prepared to discuss the readings, and actually speak up, too! To make sure that you are well-prepared for discussion, I ask that you send me a brief (one page) memo on each week’s readings via e-mail by 10:00 a.m. on the day of class, starting with the second class meeting. The memo should identify major themes of the readings, draw connections and contrasts between articles, and should end with 2-3 questions that you would like to see addressed during the discussion. Note: you are allowed to miss one memo over the course of the quarter without special reason.

One or two students will also act as discussants each week. The job of a discussant is twofold: first, to “prime the pump” for getting started a constructive discussion of the readings, which can be accomplished, for example, by distilling the main ideas of articles as you see it or by asking smart questions; and second, to launch and direct the discussion around intriguing research leads. You don’t need to present anything, but should have your talking points down. We want discussions to be appreciative and critical at the same time. So it’s best to start with asking yourself, What are the interesting ideas in the paper? How could this be useful for my research? Then, What are the scope conditions—under what circumstances is the argument meant to apply (e.g., only to French chefs, or bicultural individuals in the US)? What modifications and extensions would be necessary to extend the argument? Are there critical differences between this author's arguments and those of others we have read? Can these differences be resolved? What would a study look like that did this? How would those ideas inform other theories (e.g., what would a discursive theory of corporate governance look like)?

Research proposal (50%). This option is most suitable for those who have research interests closely aligned with the literature covered in this course and want to develop papers in this area, and for those that are working on existing projects that can be informed and advanced by ideas and materials from the class. It is acceptable to use research that you have already started, but not one that is already fully developed. In this case you may also chose to focus more on methodological development and data analysis than on theory. I will give you more details on in class and encourage you to consult with me
about this project early on. The research proposal is intended to get you thinking concretely about designing research that advances the discourse in a particular area (and, not incidentally, to give you practice in writing a dissertation proposal). Proposals generally are to resemble the front end of an empirical research paper, with introduction (“why is this interesting and needed?”), theoretical development, hypotheses if applicable, and a reasonably concrete sketch of a methods section. I am willing to give feedback on drafts throughout the quarter.

Mini-proposals plus book review (50%). This option is better suited for those who are either not at a stage to commit to a fully fledged research project or those who prefer to use the course to selectively pick up ideas that apply to their research. One new mini proposal each is due at the beginning of sessions 2 to 9. The page limit is strictly enforced. The idea is that you convert the articles you read into a paper that you might want to write. To do this, the proposal includes the title of the article, a one sentence summary of the point the article will make, followed by a commentary in which you say what led you to the idea, what contribution you feel it might make. If you propose an empirical study, also include one sentence about a suitable setting and methodology. These are short statements, so craft them carefully. Part of the idea is to hone your skill in working with the vocabulary and expressing your ideas in a succinct way. While the mini-proposals address breadth, the book review gives you chance to also practice depth by examining a more complex and comprehensive piece. See it as an opportunity to explore an author, theory or phenomenon that you have become attracted to in detail. The review should include a concise description of the main ideas in the book and a critical review and evaluation in light of the material covered in this class. A list of suitable books are listed below; some are mainly theoretical others empirical in nature, some classics, some recent*. For inspiration how to write the review and for additional books that you’d rather cover, check out the book review section in journals such as ASQ. You can review books not listed below with my approval.


*I am well aware that reviews have already been published for most of these books. Needless to say that yours needs to be entirely original to pass.*
1 – Introduction: Culture and Meaning in Theories of Organizing

The readings for the first session set the stage for questions of culture and meaning. Smircich provides a useful characterization of different approaches to culture. Weick et al say why and how meaning making is central to organizing processes. Swidler’s piece provides a view of culture with great affinity to Weick’s ideas but that is missing in Smircich’s review. DiMaggio’s overview is excellent but can be skinned for the main points. Ask yourself, what are the key aspects of culture and meaning that these authors subscribe to? Where do they differ? What would be a good working definition of both concepts and how do they relate? Why do these authors claim that culture and meaning matter in organizations?

Readings:


Discussant:

Background Resources  (other classics in organizations, pointers to other perspectives)


2 - A Semiotic Framework of Analysis

Signs are the vehicles that encode and transmit meaning and hence are fundamental to understanding small and large scale systems of culture and meaning. Semiotics provides some insights and terminology into the structure, variety and “life” of signs that will help us analyze subsequent questions in a more systematic fashion. Chandler’s online book is an exquisite resource that you should draw on throughout the class. Pierce is probably the toughest read of the quarter, so make sure you read Chandler’s chapters first. A more practical methodological piece and two exemplary empirical studies round out the readings. Try to sort out the basic terminology as much as you can, we’ll clarify the rest in class. What are the different ways in which meaning is being made? What is the respective role of concrete social and abstract linguistic processes in meaning making?

Readings:


Administrative Science Quarterly 28:393-413.


Discussant:

Some “Hardcore” Semiotics Texts (key pieces, not recommended for everyone)


3- From Signs to Systems: Dimensions and Measurement of Meaning Systems

Cultures and meaning systems are made up of many people using many signs for many purposes. This class focuses on the “content” of culture, rather than its use. The question becomes: What should we analyze when we analyze culture? The choices seem endless: words, binary oppositions, repertoires, concept networks, maps, narratives, frames and logics, discourses, multidimensional meaning systems, root metaphors? What are the pros and cons of these choices? Are these choices simply arbitrary, or are these better and worse options for some purposes? Which research questions can you address with particular forms of analysis? In class we’ll also start discussing some more practical data questions, too.

Readings:
Williams, Raymond. 1985. Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society. New York: Oxford University Press. (excerpt)

Discussant:

Background Resources (mainly leads to approaches not covered extensively here)
4 – Culture as Context: Comparative Analysis

Cultures are usually seen as properties of collectives, such as regions, countries, industries, organizations, or groups. Much cultural analysis is quintessentially comparative. This raises several questions: What is the relevant unit or is it just a matter of taste? Is it enough to establish group differences? How do “cultural effects” of collectives come about in the first place, how do they emerge and how do they influence the thoughts and actions of members? What are the carriers of collective cultures? (When) Is drawing boundaries around “cultural groups” sensible?

Readings:


Discussant:

Background Readings (conceptual amendments, alternative groups, blending and change)


5 - Linking Mechanisms Between Culture and Individual Behavior I

If cultures are systems of meaning that shared by a collective, why does not everyone in a community think the same and act the same? One answer may lie in the fact that actors occupy different positions, have different social identities and develop dispositions that are reflective of their “locations” in this community. The readings are a mix of conceptual explications of how this may come about and empirical examples of how that may manifest itself in meaning making processes. What is the difference between notions of identity, habitus, position, role and location? What are boundary conditions and sources of variation for these things to matter? How should one think about individual agency in these models?

Readings:


Discussant:

Background Readings (the structure-agency debate, more Bourdieu, diverse empirical examples)


While identity-like concepts have taken up most of the attention in recent research, meaning and behavior are also conditioned by the social and cultural structure of situations, domains and concrete interactions. People (or firms) do not make sense and act purely based on their identity but also based on their interaction context and partners. But what exactly is a “situation”, how are situations constituted and how do they influence behavior? Do people move in and out freely? Is there skill in doing this? What carries over and what is different from last week’s focus on identities and positions?

**Readings:**


And either one of:

**Discussant:**

**Background Readings (the more basic theories, some informative work by a colleague)**


7 – The Bottom-up View: Culture and Social Construction

The last sessions focused on “contextual mechanisms.” This one examines bottom-up or “aggregation” mechanisms. Note that in both instances, we start with culture and meaning and look at social behavior as the outcome. So this week is about cultural dynamics in the creation of larger social dynamics and environments. Social construction is the short-hand, and you will want to unpack what exactly that term means. In particular, it is often taken as a reference that imagined realities become real by default or that spin works. How does the process work, though, and when are constructions successful, i.e. “reality”?

Readings:

Discussant:

Background Resources (background to B&L, enactment, then applications to different contexts)

The last three sessions of the quarter focus on three growing streams of research in organization studies in which meaning and culture take center stage. The first is the larger area of research tied to sensemaking perspectives. We’ve covered the basic perspective before, so these are more concrete examples and some extensions.

**Readings:**


**Discussant:**

**Background Resources** (the basic text, links to other organizational literatures, empirical studies)


**9 – Cultural practices: Framing and Authenticity**

Sensemaking researchers are accused of neglecting political interest and the use of language and symbols for (self-interested) influence. You want to assess this claim as it applies to the basic perspective and to the practice of research. Framing research takes conflict of interest and strategic use of language seriously, but you’ll notice that framing also facilitates coordinating collective action. A central question in this literature is around the notion of de-coupling (public from private beliefs, symbolic communication from action, etc.). How should we understand decoupling from the perspective of earlier readings in this class? Underlying the notion of de-coupling is often a notion “authenticity.” Why are we concerned with authenticity in the first place? How is it achieved? What processes and factors should we analyze to assess authenticity empirically?

**Readings:**


And one of three:


Refresh you memory on:


**Discussant:**

**Background Readings** (another take on when framing “works”, additional empirical pieces)

10 – Cultural Practices: Public Discourse

The final area of research where analysts of meaning and culture find fertile ground in the analysis of public discourse. What is the role of external discourse for organizations? What is the relevant “public” and how does it influence organizations? Do organizations rather manipulate public discourse about them? This is a field that has experienced a resurgence in organization studies over the past years and leaves plenty of work to be done, with more sophisticated theories and methods becoming available.

Readings:

Resources (another link to institutionalism, studies of effects and dynamics of public discourse)
Appendix: A Idiosyncratic and Selective Set of Methodological Resources

Also see the more general overviews in the main syllabus

Interpretive Analysis of Field Data

Narrative Analysis

Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Discourse and Frame Analysis More Generally

Quantitative Content Analysis

Quantitative Semantic Analysis - Maps, Networks, Latices