
ORGANIZATION THEORY

Period: a.y. 2025/26 – I sem.

Class Time: SEE CALENDAR

Instructor: Prof. Giuseppe “beppe” Soda

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Course Overview

This course introduces the theoretical foundations and paradigms in research on Organization Science. The primary objective is to cultivate an understanding of the main theoretical frameworks that shape the field, from classics to more contemporary advances. Through close reading and discussion of influential theoretical and empirical works, we will trace the evolution of key ideas and explore the current frontiers of organizational research.

We will meet once a week and the class will be a discussion format. The selected topics are listed below. My hope is that after you complete this course, you will be a more thoughtful user of research on organizations.

Course Structure and Requirements

As a doctoral course, Organization Theory is seminar-based. Along my lectures on the different topics, the main focus will be on developing an understanding of the material through discussion and debate. As such, it is essential that you come prepared having read all required readings prior to class; a cursory reading will not suffice—you will need to actively engage the readings.

The success of this class depends strongly on your active engagement with these readings. I will be looking for quality rather than quantity of contributions, and will be seeking out participation throughout the sessions.

You should come to class with questions, topics, and issues to be raised for discussion. Such discussions are important to help you develop your own positions on some of the theories in the area.

For each session I expect students to think of questions they would like to discuss in class regarding the assigned articles. Each student is allowed to submit one question only (not a series of questions) per session. You can focus on a single article, otherwise you might also try to make connections between the current readings or with the readings we have discussed in previous sessions. Questions should be used to raise issues that are worth developing in class. A good question is thought provoking and engages the other participants in a lively discussion of the readings by taking a clear, and perhaps challenging, position.

Questions should be sent by email to the instructor and to the entire class the day before each class (no later than 5 pm). Questions sent after the deadline will not be discussed in class and will not be evaluated. No exceptions. No excuses.

Your class participation will be graded. I assess discussion based on your active engagement with the readings and quality is assessed by relevance to discussion and NOT by whether your comment is “right” or “wrong.” Firstly, there is rarely a right or wrong answer for this kind of material. Secondly, I want the classroom to be a free learning space where you feel comfortable in asking for clarification and gaining assistance on a topic—in other words, you should feel ok to share your lack of understanding of any concept so asking questions is a form of participation. If you ever feel that the classroom experience is making you feel uncomfortable to ask questions, please let me know so I can make efforts to change the learning space to better accommodate such classroom engagement.

In addition to this form of participation, during the course, I will ask you to take on a variety of the different roles that an academic researcher must perform. The purpose of these different roles is to engage with research from a variety of different perspectives.

1. On the first day of class, I will randomly assign you to papers listed in the syllabus. For each week (except Week 1 in which I will be leading the discussion), there will be a group of presenters: some in the role of author and some in the role of reviewer.
 - Students in the role of **author** will present the papers for that week to the class in a 10–15 minutes presentation. The idea here is to assume the role of the author: pretend that you wrote the paper(s), you have ownership of it, and you are its champion. The presentation should explain what the research question is, why it is important, and what the theory and evidence are; imagine that this is a conference presentation. This presentation will be graded on how well you represent what the author was trying to do, and did.
 - Students in the role of **reviewer** will present a 5–10 minutes critique of the paper(s). Your job here is to assume the role of a reviewer for a journal. This critique should address such points as the quality and interest of the research question, the soundness and interest of the theoretical argument, and the quality of the evidence. Are there possible alternative explanations? Are there any critical flaws in the paper?
 - For one of the two papers where you played the role of reviewer, I ask you to write a **reviewer's report**. This report should be written as a letter to the author, in which you raise points of criticism, ask questions about areas you believe the paper has not adequately addressed, and suggest alternative explanations and theories. The reviewer's report should be between 3 and 5 pages (double-spaced).

Reviewers' reports can be submitted at your convenience but no later than one week after the last day of class.

There will be a final exam one week after our last class. The exam will be structured in a set of open-ended questions in which students will critically evaluate theories and concepts covered during the course. This will be a closed-book exam.

Specific Course Requirements and Grading

Participation:	25%
Reviewer's report:	25%
Final Exam:	50%

Letter grades will be assigned according to the observed distribution of total points earned in the different required components by the entire class. It will be students' best interest to perform as well as possible in each task.

Faculty Bio

Giuseppe "beppe" Soda is a Full Professor of Organization Theory & Social Network Analysis at Bocconi University in Milan and at SDA Bocconi, where he served as Dean from 2016 to 2022. His career at Bocconi University includes numerous institutional responsibilities, such as leading the *Claudio Dematté* Research Division at SDA Bocconi and the Department of Management & Technology at Bocconi University.

Prof. Soda's intensive research activity explores the interaction between formal organizational architectures and social networks. His scientific contributions have significantly advanced our understanding of the origins and evolution of organizational networks and have been published in the most prestigious international academic journals, including *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Management Science*, *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Annals*, *Journal of Management*, *Strategic Organization*, *Organization Studies*, *Research Policy*, *Strategy Science*, *Social Networks*, *Industrial & Corporate Change*, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, *Journal of World Business*. His research has been awarded with several recognitions such as Award for Excellence in Research (2023, 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2009, 2008 and 2001), Award for Research Impact (2017).

He has served on and is currently on the editorial boards of international academic journals; he is the editor of the Leading Management book series (EGEA - SDA Bocconi) and has edited the "Management" series published by Corriere della Sera and Egea.

Prof. Soda holds a PhD in Business Administration from Bocconi University, completed a post-doc at Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA, USA), and has been a Visiting Professor at IE Business School (Madrid, SP) and London Business School.

TIPS ON READING ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLES

Reading academic journal articles can seem like a daunting task: They are usually full of domain-specific jargon, complicated statistics, and what seems like irrelevant and complex information. Thus, a lot of the information may seem irrelevant—but (usually) it is not. The details that are presented will help you to determine how much stock to put into the research. The methodological and statistical details provide vital information for determining an article's strengths and weaknesses, and generally for determining whether it is an example of "good scholarship." Therefore, it is important that you learn how to read journal articles so that you gain the relevant information yet be aware of their limitations.

A primary goal of this course is to get everyone up to speed with the skill of reading journal articles. We will discuss this at various points throughout the course, and you should feel free to ask any questions that you may have. Though you will develop your own strategy over time, it is useful to keep the following questions in mind when reading a given paper:

1. **Motivation:** Why do the authors think that their topic or question is important? What do the authors (implicitly or explicitly) regard as incomplete in existing research such that their research constitutes a significant contribution?
2. **Theory:** What distinguishes the theoretical viewpoint of the authors under consideration? What causal mechanism or mechanisms do the authors focus on and why? What are the potential advantages of a given focus and what are the drawbacks?
3. **Evidence:** What types of evidence do the authors bring to bear to support their argument? Which sorts of analyses do you find most compelling and why?
4. **Big Picture:** To what extent do you regard this article as making a significant contribution to the larger questions that animate research in "organization theory"? How could the work have made a bigger contribution?

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Sessions 1-2: September 8, 14:45-18:00, Room 101

Behavioral Decision Theory (Carnegie School) & Contingency Theory

Mandatory:

- March, J. G., & Simon, H. (1958). *Organizations*. McGraw-Hill (Ch. 6: "Cognitive Limits on Rationality").
- Cyert, R. & March, J. G. (1963). *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*. Prentice-Hall (Ch. 7: A Summary of Basic Concepts).
- March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 2(1): 71-87.
- Levitt, B. & March, J. G. 1988. Organizational Learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14:319-340.
- Drazin, R. and Van de Ven, A.H. (1985). Alternative Forms of Fit in Contingency Theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30: 514-539.
- Perrow, C. (1967). A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 32(2): 194-208.
- Soda, G., & Zaheer, A. (2012). A network perspective on organizational architecture: Performance effects of the interplay of formal and informal organization. *Strategic Management Journal*, 33(6), 751-771.

Optional:

- Cohen, M. D., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1972). A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(1): 1-25.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32(3): 543-576.
- Nickerson, J. A., & Todd R. Z. (2004). A Knowledge-Based Theory of the Firm: The Problem-Solving Perspective. *Organization Science*, 15(6): 617-632.
- Birkinshaw, J., Nobel, R., & Ridderstråle, J. (2002). Knowledge as a contingency variable: do the characteristics of knowledge predict organization structure? *Organization science*, 13(3), 274-289.
- Gavetti, G., Levinthal, D., & Ocasio, W. (2007). Perspective—Neo-Carnegie: The Carnegie School's Past, Present, and Reconstructing for the Future. *Organization Science*, 18(3): 523-536.
- Argote, L., Lee, S., & Park, J. (2020). Organizational Learning Processes and Outcomes: Major Findings and Future Research Directions. *Management Science*, 67(9): 5399-5429.
- Lawrence, P., & Lorsch, J. 1967. Differentiation and integration in complex organizations, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12: 1-47.
- Meyer, A.D., Tsui, A.S., Hinings, C.R. 1993. Configurational approaches to organizational analysis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36: 1175-1195.

Fiss, P.C. 2007. A Set-theoretic Approach to Organizational Configurations. *Academy of Management Review*, 32: 1180-1198.

Ketchen, D. J., Thomas, J. B., & Snow, C. C. 1993. Organizational configurations and performance: A comparison of theoretical approaches. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36: 1278-1313.

Sessions 3-4: September 18, 14:45-18:00, Room 101

Transaction Cost Economics,

Mandatory:

Coase, R.H. (1937). The nature of the firm. *Economica*, 4: 386-405.

Williamson, O. E. (1981). Economics of Organization: The Transaction Cost Approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 87(3):548-577.

Williamson O.E. (1991). Comparative economic organizations: the analysis of discrete structural alternatives. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, June, 269-296

Ouchi W.G. (1980). Markets, Bureaucracies and Clans". *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25-129-141

Ghoshal, S., & Moran, P. (1996). Bad for practice: A critique of the transaction cost theory. *Academy of management Review*, 21(1), 13-47.

Optional:

Williamson O.E. (1985). *The economic institutions of capitalisms*. New York, Free Press.

Williamson O.E. (1980). The organization of work. A comparative institutional assessment. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, n. 1, 5-38.

Barney J.B., Ouchi W.G. (eds.). (1986). *Organizational Economics*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass.

Hill C. (1990). Cooperation, opportunism and the invisible hand: implications for transaction cost theory. *Academy of Management Review* 15/3, 500-13.

Academy of Management Review, Forum on 'Management Theory and Organizational Economics' 15/3: 394/401, 1990

Neo-Institutionalism

Mandatory:

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2): 340-363.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2): 147-160.

Suchman, M. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional perspectives. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3): 571-611.

Edelman, L. B., Uggen, C., & Erlanger, H. S. (1999). The endogeneity of legal regulation: Grievance procedures as rational myth. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(2): 406-454.

Optional:

Zucker, L. G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. *American Sociological Review*, 42(5): 726-743.

Selznick, P. (1996). Institutionalism "old" and "new." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(2): 270-277.

Kraatz, M. S., & Zajac, E. J. (1996). Exploring the limits of the new institutionalism: The causes and consequences of illegitimate organizational change. *American Sociological Review*, 61(5): 812-836.

Rao, H., Monin, P., & Durand, R. (2003). Institutional change in Toque Ville: Nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French gastronomy. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(4): 795-843.

Zhao, E. Y., Fisher, G., Lounsbury, M., & Miller, D. (2017). Optimal distinctiveness: Broadening the interface between institutional theory and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 38(1): 93-113.

Population Ecology of Organizations

Mandatory:

- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1977). The population ecology of organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5): 929-964.
- Carroll, G. R. (1985). Concentration and specialization: Dynamics of niche width in populations of organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90(6): 1262-1283.
- Young, R. C. (1988). Is population ecology a useful paradigm for the study of organizations?. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(1), 1-24.
- Carroll, G. R. & Swaminathan, A. (2000). Why the microbrewery movement? Organizational dynamics of resource partitioning in the US brewing industry. *American Journal of Sociology*, 106(3): 715-762.

Optional:

- Carroll, G. R., & Hannan, M. T. (1989). Density dependence in the evolution of populations of newspaper organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 54(4): 524-541.
- Singh, J. V., Tucker, D. J., & House, R. J. (1986). Organizational legitimacy and the liability of newness. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 31(2): 171-193.
- Young, R. C. (1988). Is population ecology a useful paradigm for the study of organizations? *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(1): 1-24.
- Zucker, L. G. (1989). Combining institutional theory and population ecology: No legitimacy, no history. *American Sociological Review*, 54(4): 542-545.
- Burt, R. S. (1997). The contingent value of social capital. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42(2): 339-365.
- Zuzul, T., & Tripsas, M. (2020). Start-up inertia versus flexibility: The role of founder identity in a nascent industry. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65(2): 395-433.

Sessions 9-10: October 8, 14:45-18:00, Room 101

Power & Resource Dependence Theory

Mandatory:

- Pfeffer, J. & Salancik, G. (1978). *The External Control of Organizations*. New York: Harper and Row (Ch. 3-4: pp. 39-91).
- Cook, K. S., Emerson, R. M., & Gillmore, M. R. (1983). The distribution of power in exchange networks: Theory and experimental results. *American Journal of Sociology*, 89(2): 275-305.
- Casciaro, T., & Piskorski, M. (2005). Power imbalance, mutual dependence, and constraint absorption: A closer look at resource dependence theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(2): 167-199.
- Boyd, B. (1990). Corporate linkages and organizational environment: A test of the resource dependence model. *Strategic management journal*, 11(6), 419-430.

Optional:

- Gulati, R., & Sytch, M. (2007). Dependence asymmetry and joint dependence in interorganizational relationships: Effects of embeddedness on a manufacturer's performance in procurement relationships. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 52(1): 32-69.
- Thompson, J. D. (1956). Authority and power in "identical" organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(3): 290-301.
- Hickson, D. J., Hinings, C. R., Lee, C. A., Schneck, R. E., & Pennings, J. M. (1971). A strategic contingencies' theory of intraorganizational power. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 16(2): 216-229.
- Davis, G. F., & Cobb, J. (2010). Resource Dependence Theory: Past and future. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 28: 21-42.
- Drees, J. M., & Heugens, P. P. (2013). Synthesizing and extending resource dependence theory: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Management*, 39(6): 1666-1698.
- Sytch, M., & Kim, Y. H. (2020). Quo Vadis? From the Schoolyard to the Courtroom. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 66(1): 177-219.

Social and Organizational Networks

Mandatory:

- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6): 1360-1380.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: S95-S120.
- Burt, R. S. (2004). Structural holes and good ideas. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(2): 349-399.
- Zaheer, A., & Soda, G. (2009). Network evolution: The origins of structural holes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54(1), 1-31.
- Soda, G., Tortoriello, M., & Iorio, A. (2018). Harvesting value from brokerage: Individual strategic orientation, structural holes, and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61(3), 896-918.

Optional:

- Baker, W. E. (1984). The social structure of a national securities market. *American Journal of Sociology*, 89(4): 775-811.
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3): 63-68.
- Uzzi, B. (1997). Social structure and competition in interfirm networks: The paradox of embeddedness. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42(1): 35-67.
- Davis, G. F., & Greve, H. R. (1997). Corporate elite networks and governance changes in the 1980s. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(1): 1-37.
- Iorio, A. (2022). Brokers in disguise: The joint effect of actual brokerage and socially perceived brokerage on network advantage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 67(3): 769-820.
- Powell, W. W. (1990). Neither market nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (eds.), *Research in Organization Behavior*, Vol. 12: 295-336. Chicago: JAI Press.
- Krackhardt, D. (1987). Cognitive social structures. *Social Networks*, 9(2): 109-134.
- Hansen, M. T. (1999). The search-transfer problem: The role of weak ties in sharing knowledge across organization subunits. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(1): 82-111.
- Reagans, R., & McEvily, B. (2003). Network structure and knowledge transfer: The effects of cohesion and range. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48(2): 240-267.
- Obstfeld, D. (2005). Social networks, the tertius iungens orientation, and

involvement in innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(1): 100–130.

Academy of Management Journal, 61(3): 896–918.

Hernandez, E., & Shaver, J. M. (2019). Network synergy. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 64(1): 171–202.