Meso-Organizational Behaviour
(ORGB 706)

Fall 2018 • Th 11:35 – 2:25 • Bronfman 310

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“You’re teaching Meso in the Fall? Awesome. What’s that?”
—Unnamed graduate student

“If you figure out what ‘meso’ means, could you tell me?”
—Unnamed colleague*

Description

This course is about meso-organizational behavior. As a rough-and-ready, definition, we are going to cover several streams of research that, in their unit of analysis, lie between the “individuals and small groups,” social psychological perspective that you will typically see in a micro-OB class and the “organizations and environments,” sociological perspective in a macro-OB course.

What’s left between those two realms? Quite a lot, actually: the meat of what goes on inside of organizations. The “meso” level is where the field of organizational behavior got its start, and the study of intra-organizational processes is a perennial source of new analytical constructs and hypotheses that can enrich micro- and macro-level research. It’s a place worth spending some time.

There are a vast number of topics that you could discuss at any level of organizational analysis. This means that, like other survey courses, this class will be broad but shallow. In a one-semester class, one must pick and choose. I have let three principles guide my choices in this syllabus. First, I try to minimize overlap with topics covered in other classes, particularly those within the OB group. Second, I am merciless with the historical literature. I think that, if you have to choose, it’s better for graduate students to ceremonially engage with “the classics” and seriously engage with more current research than vice versa. Third, I err toward including things that I find interesting or think are fertile ground for future research.

I will assume that you have passing familiarity with some of the classics of the field. You need not be able to quote books like Taylor (1911), Mayo (1933), March and Simon (1958) or Cyert and March (1963) chapter and verse, but you should have some idea what those works are about. If you don’t, then you should consult a good textbook on organizational theory, such as Richard Scott’s Organizations or Charles Perrow’s Complex Organizations before the start of the class, focusing on work before about 1965.

Policies

This is a seminar. I expect you to talk, to one another as much as to me. It is through discussion and debate that you develop your own position on theories and devise ways to empirically evaluate them. One of my major roles in such a class is to give you larger context for the materials you have

* The other pages have footnotes, and the pagination works better if this page does, too.
been assigned to read that week, so I’ll typically lecture some at the start of each class. But a class like this one fails is there is no civil society—and I mean that in the Habermasian† context of a sphere of interaction governed neither by the Church nor by the State, nor by the Boss. If all goes well, you’ll be talking to and arguing with one another for years to come, outside of formal environments like the classroom as well as inside them. Get used to it.

Your grade will have three components:

1. **Class Participation**: Each student must be an active participant in class. There are two sides to participation: constructive comments in class discussion, and active listening to your fellow students (and to me). Do not come to class with a set of comments that you want to make no matter what anyone else says. Instead, try to develop a conceptual map or model of the issues covered in the readings, and keep that model in mind during the discussion. If the discussion heads somewhere else that doesn’t fit that model, try to understand why and help us to understand your different perspective.

   A note on class discussion: In an academic career, you start as a graduate student being asked to find (perhaps niggling) flaws in excellent pieces of published scholarly work. You gradually progress to being asked to find (perhaps minute) contributions in, shall we say, “unfinished” work. The sooner you make that transition, the sooner you move from being a consumer of knowledge to being a producer. So focus on where and why the glass is half full. We will consider the limitations of work we read, but with an eye to producing something better.

   Class participation is 30% of your grade.

2. **Mechanism Memos**: Identifying the theoretical mechanism that an author invokes helps you cut to the chase when evaluating a paper. It can tell you whether the research design is appropriate, for example. Stating the mechanism more abstractly is also the first step in generalizing research findings to other contexts and thus advancing the broader project of knowledge generation that we’re involved in.

   You will hone this skill in this class. For each session save the first and the last, you will write a memo summarizing the mechanism in one of the readings assigned. There are constraints on the form of these memos:

   • State the main contribution of the reading in one or two sentences.
   • State the theoretical mechanism that purports to explain the finding underlying that contribution. This statement should be as abstract as possible and no more than two sentences long.
   • Apply the mechanism to a different empirical phenomenon of your choosing. In other words, expand the domain of application of the theory: use the mechanism to explain something else. This too should take no more than two sentences.

I take these length constraints seriously. I will return memos longer than six sentences. And spare me gymnastics with semicolons and em dashes.‡

In the schedule, I have marked (♦) the readings for which you may write a memo. You have a choice most weeks. These memos are due at noon on the Wednesday before class. This deadline is important, because I need time to read them before the seminar.

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† My use of the term “Habermasian” here is solely intended to give me this opportunity to say I’ll forego such obfuscatory jargon in the rest of the class. But I used it correctly here, oh you bet I did.

‡ If the concept of an em dash, as separate from an en dash, a hyphen, or the semi-mythical “third-of-an-em” dash, is foreign to you, well done on ignoring it so far. But academic copywriters everywhere will love you if you read up on minutia like this. Might I recommend Robert Bringhurst’s *The Elements of Typographic Style*? I just might.
Mechanism memos are 40% of your grade.

3. Final Exam: This will be a take-home exam and you will have 24 hours to write it. I have not decided the exact format, but it will likely have one or more short essays. The questions will be based on the readings and class discussions, and will probably resemble the types of questions seen on a field exam.

The final exam is 30% of your grade.

A note for auditors: I am on the fence about you. It’s not personal. It’s just that when a class is overwhelmingly based on some form of participation (and here I expect auditors to attend, to discuss, and to prepare mechanism memos), and when there is not a massive project from which to exempt you, the distinction between auditing and taking a class for a grade becomes hazy indeed. So, with that said: auditors do not take the final exam, but they are expected to attend and participate in all classes and to write the mechanism memos.

Academic Integrity Statement: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

Language Statement: In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Materials

There is no course reader. We have an internet these days. Email me before class if you have questions about materials.

There are two books of which we will read substantial portions: Gideon Kunda’s *Engineering Culture* and Diane Vaughan’s *The Challenger Launch Decision*. You might consider purchasing them. They are both well-written books that come closer to higher-quality non-fiction than to academic monographs per se, so I don’t think you’ll regret buying them.

Schedule

6 September: What and Why

13 September: Organizational Search and Learning

20 September: Routines and Coordination

27 September: Teams, Coordination, and Spillover

4 October: Routines, Failures and Crises

11 October: Culture and Socialization

18 October: Culture and Control

25 October: Careers and Occupations

1 November: Authority and Status
• Huising, R. 2015. To hive or to hold? Producing professional authority through scut work. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 60(2): 263–299.

8 November: The Problems with Power

15 November: Ascription in Organizational Processes
22 November: Organizational Demography and Stratification


29 November: The Meso Roots of Macro Theories