SOCIOl 302: the sociology of organizations  
spring 2018  
Monday/wednesday 9:30-10:50, 555 Clark street B03

Instructor  graduate teaching assistants
Craig M. Rawlings, associate professor of instruction  Anna Michelson
Office hours: M/W 3:00-4:00;  Mariana Oliver
And by appointment!  Office hours: TBA
CRAIG.RAWLINGS@NORTHWESTERN.EDU
Office: 1810 Chicago Ave., rm. 228

Description: Organizations permeate our lives. Most of our waking hours are spent participating in various types of formal organizations. We typically begin our lives in hospitals, and often end our days in nursing homes; in between, we generally go to schools, and work, work, work. While we desperately want to join some organizations (e.g. Northwestern – go cats!), we also really hope to avoid others (e.g. prison). And yet, we don’t often think about how organizations shape who we are. Instead, we tend to become aware of organizations only when they seem to interfere with our lives (“What?! I have to go to the DMV?!”).

Where do organizations come from? What accounts for organizational success and failure? How can we make organizations better for individuals and society? This course will start to answer these questions by getting you to think analytically about organizations. It is primarily a theory class. It is not a course on practical leadership or managerial skills, and it probably won’t make you a great entrepreneur (but it might help!). This is a course aimed at getting you to think like an organizational sociologist and, consequently, to improve your critical thinking skills. Readings and lectures will present different theoretical paradigms about how sociologists think about organizations, often with contrasting assumptions and conclusions. We will be examining three main theoretical frameworks – sometimes called the “rational,” “natural,” and “open” systems approaches – that present very different understandings of organizations.

By the end of the quarter, you will be able to think analytically about organizations from these different and sometimes competing perspectives. You should be able to analyze and diagnose problems in the same organizations from each of the three theoretical perspectives and derive different strategies and recommendations for improving organizational performance. This should enable you to think about how you might better survive and thrive in our organizational world!

readings: All readings will be available through Canvas as PDFs or links to websites.

requirements: (1) keep up with the reading and participate in active lectures – otherwise, you won’t be able to make much sense of the readings in terms of the main course themes; (2) demonstrate that you have understood the theoretical frameworks and can apply them appropriately to make sense of organizational phenomena.

assessments: Requirement (1) will be assessed by a number of short written assignments done prior to and during lectures, as well as your attendance and participation in active lectures. Once each week, you will need to upload a brief of one of the starred readings from the popular press. Details of the brief format will discussed in class. I will reserve a small amount of the participation points as a subjective measure of your overall engagement in lectures to be used in the event that your final grade is on the border of a higher grade – i.e. students who have been particularly engaged will be given up to a 1
percentage point bump based on exemplary participation. In addition, I will give two opportunities to gain extra credit or make up for potential losses in participation points due to illness or conflicting obligations.

(2) In the first week or so, you will pick a specific work group/team in an organizational setting where you have some personal experience and that you think is interesting or may be important to you personally or professionally. Premed students might consider a hospital where they have worked or are a volunteer. Athletes might choose their own team. Others might choose a campus student group, a religious organization, a summer camp, a corporation, a non-profit organization. You will use this as the basis of three case study write-ups that will be handed in with take-home exams.

**Grades are computed as follows:** Participation is 25%; Take-Home Midterm/Case Study #1 is 20%; Take-Home Midterm/Case Study #2 is 25%; Take-Home Midterm/Case Study #3 is 30%.

**A Note on Reading Academic Journal Articles:** Some of the readings are from academic journals. These often include detailed descriptions of data and methods, which you are not expected to understand in any detail. Please feel free to skim over these, and to concentrate instead on the theoretical and substantive conclusions.

**Other things to keep in mind:**

- Late assignments will not be accepted.
- All assignments should be double-spaced, with 12-point font, and 1-inch margins.
- All assignments are individually written. Feel free to study together; but all written work handed in must be your own.
- The internet has changed the nature of academic misconduct and led to more “borderline cases.” Suspected violations of academic integrity will be reported to the Dean’s Office. For more information on Northwestern University’s academic integrity policies, please see http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/handbook/integrity/index.html.

**Additional Resources:**

Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.
Topics and Readings (Subject to Change with Advance Notice):

I. Why Study Organizations? The Social Scientific Approach (Week 1)


II. Organizations as Rational Systems (Weeks 2-3)

A. An Introduction

Tolbert and Hall, Chapter 2: “Organizational Structure: Key Dimensions”

B. The Rationalization Process

Tolbert and Hall, pp. 44-57

C. The Limits of Rational Systems

March, James & Herbert Simon. “Bounded Rationality and Satisficing”

III. Organizations as Natural Systems (Weeks 4-6)

A. An Introduction: Human Relations and the Discovery of Informal Structure

Tolbert and Hall, pp. 89-107

B. Organizational Change and Adaptation

Tolbert and Hall, pp. 204-209
C. Organizational Culture


IV. Organizations as Open Systems (Weeks 7-10)

A. Introduction

Tolbert and Hall Chapter 8: “Managing Organizational Environments: Conceptions of the Environment”
Peterson, Richard and David Berger. “Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music”
*The Globe and Mail*. “Shifting NHL Culture Knocks Enforcers Down For the Count”

B. Resource Dependency Theory

Tolbert and Hall Chapter 4: “Power and Power Outcomes”

C. Organizational Ecology


D. Neoinstitutional Theory

Tolbert and Hall, Pp. 58-67
Lom, Stacy. 2015. “Changing Rules, Changing Practices: The Direct and Indirect Effects of Tight Coupling in Figure Skating” *Organization Science*
*New York Times*. 2018. “Success of Russia’s Female Figure Skaters Takes a Toll in Injuries and Stress”
### Schedule of lectures and readings (subject to change if we get behind or ahead):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Due Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4/3</td>
<td>Welcome. Why Study Organizations?</td>
<td>T&amp;H: Ch. 1; Du Gay; NTY – Deep State</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Social Scientific Approach to Organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>Rational Systems: An Introduction</td>
<td>T&amp;H: Ch. 2; Perrow; Wertheim &amp; Moskowitz; NYT – Cubs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4/10</td>
<td>Rational Systems: The Rationalization Process</td>
<td>T&amp;H: 44-57; Kuper &amp; Szymbanski; Lewis; March &amp; Simon; Leidner; NYT – Hospitalists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/12</td>
<td>Rational Systems: The Limits of Rational Systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4/17</td>
<td>Natural Systems: An Introduction</td>
<td>T&amp;H: 89-107; NYT – Better Morale; Burowoy; Berstein</td>
<td>4/23: 11:59 p.m. Exam/Write-Up #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/19</td>
<td>Natural Systems: Informal Structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/24</td>
<td>Natural Systems: Survival, Adaptation &amp; Change</td>
<td>T&amp;H: 204-209; Gouldner; Zald &amp; Denton; NYT – Wounded Warrior Project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4/31</td>
<td>Natural Systems: Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Fleming &amp; Sturdy; Kanter; NPR – Wells Fargo; NYT – SoFi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>Open Systems: Environments;</td>
<td>T&amp;H: Ch. 8; Peterson &amp; Berger; Globe &amp; Mail – Enforcers</td>
<td>5/12: 11:59 p.m. Exam/Write-Up #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>Open Systems: Sociological Accounts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5/14</td>
<td>Open Systems: Resource Dependency;</td>
<td>T&amp;H: Ch. 4; Vanity Fair – Theranos; NYT – Craft Beer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/16</td>
<td>Open Systems: Population Ecology</td>
<td>Carroll &amp; Hannan; Carroll &amp; Swaminathan; NYT—Cannabis; NYT—Yogurt; NPR—Applebee’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5/21</td>
<td>Open Systems: Neoinstitutional Theory</td>
<td>T&amp;H: 58-67; Bielby &amp; Bielby; Lom; NYT – Learning Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5/28</td>
<td>Memorial Day (No Class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/30</td>
<td>Open Systems: Neoinstitutional Theory</td>
<td>NYT – Genius and Age;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6/4</td>
<td>Course Wrap-Up</td>
<td>NYT – Harvard Business School</td>
<td>6/11: 11:59 p.m. Exam/Write-Up #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>