

WSSR WORKSHOPS ON SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Working with Concepts in the Social Sciences

Dr. Frederic Schaffer

Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst

May 14-15, 2018

9:00am – 4:30pm

Summary

Concepts are foundational to the social-science enterprise. This two-day workshop introduces you to two distinct ways to think about and work with them. One is the positivist approach to what is called concept “formation” or “reconstruction” – the formulation of a technical, neutral vocabulary for measuring, comparing, and generalizing. This approach focuses attention on building concepts with a high degree of external differentiation, internal coherence, explanatory utility, and content validity. The other is an interpretivist approach that focuses on what I call “elucidation.” Elucidation includes both an investigation into the language of daily life and a reflexive examination of social-science technical language. It is intended to illuminate both the worldviews of the people that social scientists wish to understand and the ways in which social scientists’ embeddedness in particular languages, historical eras, and power structures shapes the concepts with which they do their work.

The main goals of the workshop are fourfold:

1. For you to understand the difference between reconstructing and elucidating concepts and to see what is at stake in choosing to do one or the other.
2. For you to learn the basics of conceptual reconstruction: how to construct concepts by defining and organizing properties; how to situate the concept on a ladder of generality; how to build more complex ladders of generality that include diminished subtypes; how to assess the goodness of a concept using the criteria of external differentiation, internal coherence, explanatory utility, and content validity.
3. For you to learn basic elucidative strategies derived from ordinary language philosophy and Foucauldian genealogy and how to assess the goodness of social-science concepts by recognizing problems of one-sidedness, universalism, and objectivism.
4. For you to gain practice reconstructing and elucidating concepts by doing in-class exercises with concepts that you yourself have chosen.

Note that I will also be available during the lunch breaks for one-on-one consultations about your individual research needs and how the insights of this course might be adapted to meet those needs.



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REQUIREMENTS

You will need to bring a Wi-Fi enabled laptop as well as MS Word (or other document-editing software) and Adobe Acrobat (or other pdf-viewing software) to do in-class exercises. You will also need to identify one or two concepts of interest to you. It would be helpful if you could do that in advance of the workshop. Please email me if you would like help thinking about what concepts you might choose. All readings are optional.

SCHEDULE

Morning sessions run from 9 to 12; afternoon sessions run from 1:30 to 4:30

| Session | Topic | Details |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Monday morning, part 1 (May 14) | Methodologies and concepts | In this introductory part of the workshop, you will learn what it means to adopt a positivist or interpretivist methodology and their respective approaches to concepts. You will also contemplate the value that each approach might hold for your own research interests. |
| Monday morning, part 2 (May 14) | The basics of positivist reconstruction | You will learn a few fundamental tools of concept reconstruction: identifying and organizing the defining properties of a concept and situating that concept on a ladder of generality which includes its enclosing concept, contrasting concepts, and subtypes. You will then reconstruct a concept of your own choosing and situate it on a ladder of generality. |
| Monday afternoon, part 1 (May 14) | Advanced reconstruction | We add to our reconstructive repertoire by learning how to construct more complicated ladders of generality that include diminished subtypes. You will then create diminished subtypes of your own concept and place them on the ladder of generality which you have already created. |
| Monday afternoon, part 2 (May 14) | Assessing reconstructed concepts | You will learn to assess, using both positivist and interpretivist metrics, the goodness of a reconstructed concept. Operating within a positivist framework, you will learn to apply criteria such as measurement validity, differentiation, coherence, and theoretical utility. Operating within an interpretivist framework you will learn to recognize problems of one-sidedness, universalism, and objectivism. |
| Tuesday morning, part 1 (May 15) | Introduction to interpretivist elucidation | You will learn about the basic aims of concept elucidation as well as two key elucidative strategies: “grounding” (examining how concepts are used in everyday language) and “exposing” (identifying how concepts are embedded in webs of power). |



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| Tuesday morning, part 2 (May 15) | The elucidative strategy of grounding (using the tools of ordinary language interviewing) | Ordinary language interviewing is a tool for uncovering the meaning of words in everyday talk. By studying the meaning of words (in English or other languages), the promise is to gain insight into the various social realities these words name, evoke, or realize. First we will cover some basic questions about ordinary language interviewing: what it is and what can be discovered through it. Next you will learn how to conduct an ordinary language interview and gain practice doing one. |
| Tuesday afternoon (May 15) | The elucidative strategy of exposing (using the tools of Foucauldian genealogy) | The language of social science contains many concepts that have become stabilized, naturalized, or neutralized in ways that obscure from view their histories of contingency and contestation. In this part of the workshop, you will first learn to use Foucauldian genealogy to denaturalize the natural, destabilize the stable, and thus make space for new ways of conceptualizing the world. You will then use the tools of Foucauldian genealogy to practice exposing a concept of your own choosing. |

RECOMMENDED (OPTIONAL) READINGS

| Session | Readings |
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| Monday morning (May 14) | Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine, and Dvora Yanow. 2012. <i>Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes</i> (New York: Routledge): 4-7. <i>Available at Webster Course Reserve Room (3 hour loan)</i> Sartori, Giovanni. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 64,4: 1033-46. http://0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca/stable/1958356 _____.2009. "An Illustration." In <i>Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori</i> edited by David Collier and John Gerring. New York: Routledge; 72-74. http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EEF836 |
| Monday afternoon (May 14) | Collier, David, and James E. Mahon, Jr. 1993. "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis." <i>American Political Science Review</i> 87,4: 845-55. http://0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca/stable/2938818 Gerring, John. 1999. "What Makes a Concept Good? A Critical Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences." <i>Polity</i> 31,3: 358-93. http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?u-http%3A%2F%2F0-www.jstor.org.mercury.concordia.ca%2Fstable%2F3235246 Bevir, Mark, and Asaf Kedar. 2008. "Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology." <i>Perspectives on Politics</i> 6,3: 503-17. http://0-dx.doi.org.mercury.concordia.ca/10.1017/S1537592708081255 |



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| <p>Tuesday morning (May 15)</p> | <p>Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1972. "Context, Sense, and Concepts." In <i>Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press; 71-98. http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14EEF90B</p> <p>Schaffer, Frederic Charles. 2014. "Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy." <i>Polity</i> 46,3: 303-30. http://0-dx.doi.org/mercury.concordia.ca/10.1057/pol.2014.14</p> |
| <p>Tuesday afternoon (May 15)</p> | <p>Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In <i>Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews</i> edited by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 139-64. http://reserves.concordia.ca/ares/ares.dll/plink?14E40D0D</p> <p>Mitchell, Timothy. 1998. "Fixing the Economy." <i>Cultural Studies</i> 12,1: 82-101. http://0-dx.doi.org/mercury.concordia.ca/10.1080/095023898335627</p> <p>Oren, Ido. 1995. "The Subjectivity of the 'Democratic' Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany." <i>International Security</i> 20,2: 147-84. http://0-dx.doi.org/mercury.concordia.ca/10.2307/2539232</p> |

Workshops on Social Science Research (WSSR)
1455 de Maisonneuve W. – H1Z2S.30
Montreal, Qc H3G 1M8
Telephone: 514-848-2424 x7854, x5473

