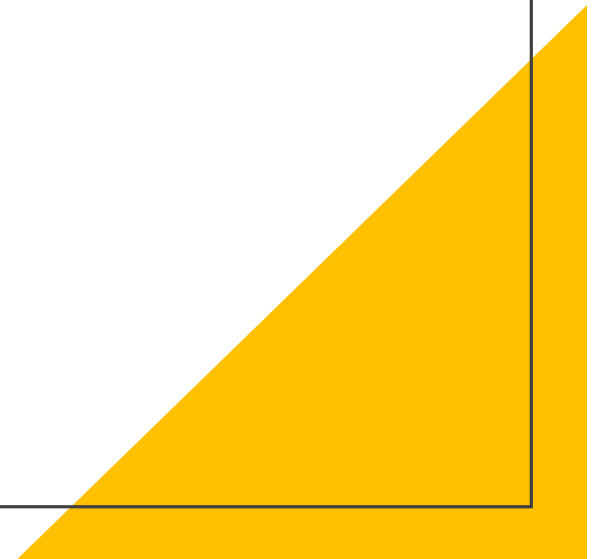# Concepts

Doing Political Research

Introduction

- Political research is full of concepts: democracy, power, capitalism, war, the working class, austerity, military coups, liberalism

- What is a concept?
  - An abstract idea generalized from particular instances
  - Concepts can be more or less abstract eg voting and representation

- Concepts are the building blocks of theories

The Nature of Concepts: Two Views

Classical view	Prototype view
• an individual instance is part of a concept if it meets certain conditions • for example, democracy is a political system involving free and fair elections	• how close an individual instance is to a prototypical (or ideal-typical) instance • for example, liberal market economies and co-ordinated market economies in Varieties of Capitalism

Figure 4.1 *The structure of concepts*
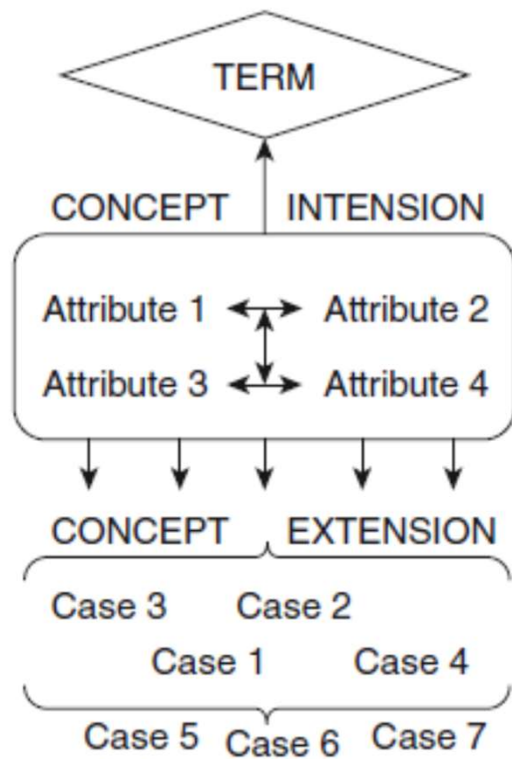
The Structure of Concepts

- Intension: the definition of the concept specifying the attributes of the concept
  - Democracy: political system, free elections, fair elections
- Extension: the set of instances that the concept refers to
  - Democracy: UK, Botswana, Philippines…

The Ladder of Abstraction

- Concepts are often nested inside each other

- For example, civil war < war < conflict

- As we move up the ladder, the extension expands

- We can change the intension and level of abstraction to set the scope of our theories

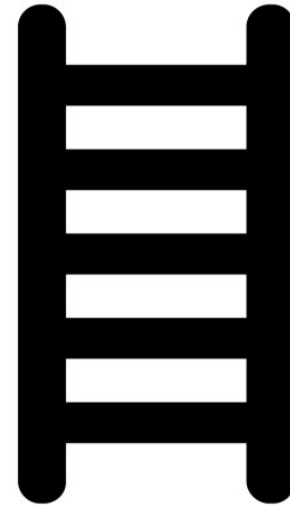- Is our theory about the causes of civil wars, wars or conflicts?

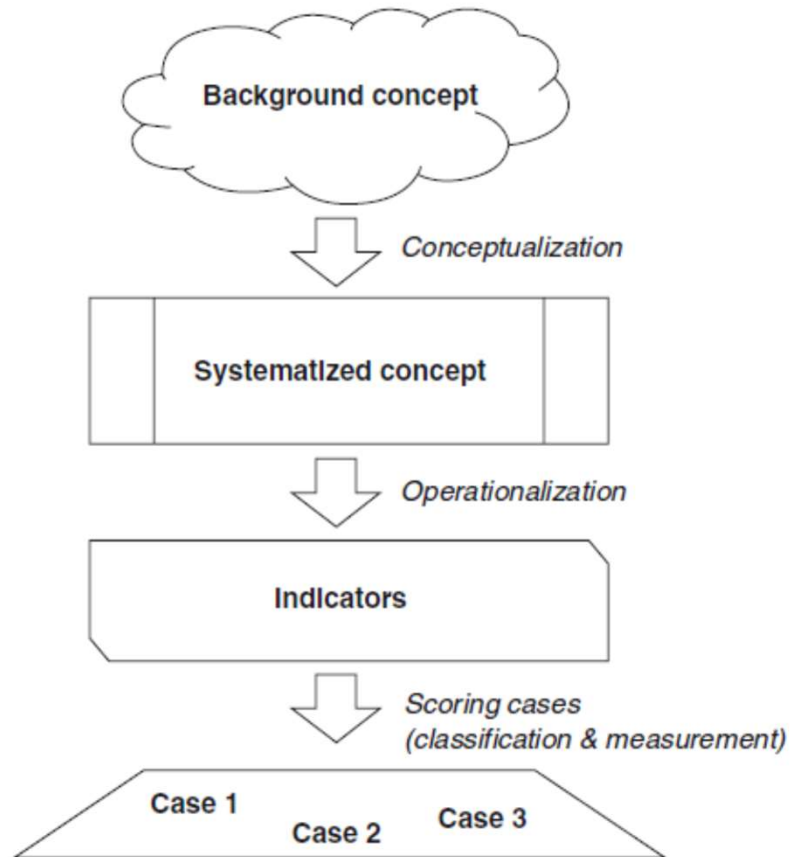Figure 4.2   *Conceptualization and operationalization*

Background concept

Conceptualization

Systematized concept

Operationalization

Indicators

Scoring cases
(classification & measurement)

Case 1
Case 2   Case 3

Conceptualization and Operationalization

Table 1. Criteria of Conceptual Goodness

1. Familiarity	How familiar is the concept (to a lay or academic audience)?
2. Resonance	Does the chosen term ring (resonate)?
3. Parsimony	How short is a) the term and b) its list of defining attributes (the intension)?
4. Coherence	How internally consistent (logically related) are the instances and attributes?
5. Differentiation	How differentiated are the instances and the attributes (from other most-similar concepts)? How bounded, how operationalizable, is the concept?
6. Depth	How many accompanying properties are shared by the instances under definition?
7. Theoretical Utility	How useful is the concept within a wider field of inferences?
8. Field Utility	How useful is the concept within a field of related instances and attributes?

What Makes for A Good Concept? (Gerring)

Problems with Concepts

- Conceptual profusion
  - For example: radical right, far right, populist right
- Conceptual stretching
  - For example, corporatism
- Contested concepts
  - For example, social justice
- Fuzzy concepts
  - For example, corruption

Concepts and Philosophy

- Most thinking about concepts has not paid much attention to ontology and epistemology

- Should concepts refer to aspects of social reality or interpretations?

- Bevir and Kedar argue that most discussion of concepts implicitly takes a positivist or critical realist stance

- What would interpretist concepts look like?

This article offers an anti-naturalist philosophical critique of the naturalist tendencies within qualitative concept formation as developed most prominently by Giovanni Sartori and David Collier. We begin by articulating the philosophical distinction between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Whereas naturalism assumes that the study of human life is not essentially different from the study of natural phenomena, anti-naturalism highlights the meaningful and contingent nature of social life, the situatedness of the scholar, and so the dialogical nature of social science. These two contrasting philosophical approaches inspire, in turn, different strategies of concept formation. Naturalism encourages concept formation that involves reification, essentialism, and an instrumentalist view of language. Anti-naturalism, conversely, challenges reified concepts for eliding the place of meanings, essentialist concepts for eliding the place of contingency, and linguistic instrumentalism for eliding the situatedness of the scholar and the dialogical nature of social science. Based on this philosophical framework, we subject qualitative concept formation to a philosophical critique. We show how the conceptual strategies developed by Sartori and Collier embody a reification, essentialism, and instrumentalist view of language associated with naturalism. Although Collier's work on concept formation is much more flexible and nuanced than Sartori's, it too remains attached to a discredited naturalism.

A prominent faultline that continuously surfaces in debates over modes of inquiry in political science is the one between positivist or scientific approaches on the one hand and postpositivist or interpretive approaches on the other.[1] Alas, these debates are often conducted with very little reflection on the philosophical underpinnings of the relevant approaches.[2] In these debates, concepts like "positivist" and "postpositivist" are often associated with methodological choices—quantitative or qualitative—at least as much as philosophical commitments—naturalism or anti-naturalism. This lack of philosophical reflection can result in a skewed understanding of the issues at stake in the debates over an adequate political science.[3] For example, when methods are judged solely in pragmatic terms (i.e., in terms of their substantive utility for certain lines of inquiry), it might seem possible to reconcile methods that are in fact irreconcilable from a philosophical standpoint. We will argue, more particularly, that when political scientists lump all qualitative approaches together, they neglect the philosophical chasm that separates naturalist and anti-naturalist uses of qualitative and interpretive methods.

The distortion that arises from a neglect of philosophical issues is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the division between qualitative and quantitative approaches. In methodological debates, this division often gets mapped onto that between positivism and postpositivism. But, in philosophical terms, the qualitative methods camp is in fact split between some who share the philosophical naturalism of so much positivism, and others who seek to distance themselves from just such naturalism.[4]

A split between naturalists and anti-naturalists haunts even the recently formed Organized Section on Qualitative Methods within the American Political Science Association. On the one hand, many qualitative scholars neglect philosophy while making implicit naturalist assumptions and trying to build bridges between qualitative and quantitative methods.[5] Thus the first issue of the Section's Newsletter defined its scope in methodological terms: "case study methods, small N analysis, comparative methods, concept analysis, the logic of inquiry, comparative historical methods, the ethnographic tradition of field research, constructivist methods, interpretive methods."[6] On the other, some qualitative scholars raise philosophical concerns, challenge attempts to build bridges to the positivism they associate with quantitative approaches, and insist on the

Mark Bevir is Professor of Political Science (mbevir@berkeley.edu) and Asaf Kedar is a doctoral candidate in Political Science (asafkedar@berkeley.edu) at the University of California, Berkeley. We would like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2006 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.

Conclusion

- Concepts help us to develop theories and think in general terms about the political world
- Conceptualisation and operationalisation are vital parts of the research process which should be carefully considered
  - Easy to criticise but hard to implement
- Developing 'good' new concepts is very difficult
  - But applying existing ones also has problems