

POLI210: Political Science Research Methods

Lecture 5.1: Concepts

Olivier Bergeron-Boutin

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The basis of all research

Gerring (2011, 112): “the most basic question of social science research: what are we talking about?”

Unfortunately, all is not well in the land of concepts. It has become a standard complaint that the terminology of social science lacks the clarity and constancy of natural science lexicons. Concepts are variously employed in different fields and subfields, within different intellectual traditions, among different writers, and sometimes – most alarmingly – within a single work. Concepts are routinely stretched to cover instances that lie well outside their normal range of use.²⁸ Or they are scrunched to cover only a few instances – ignoring others that might profitably be housed under the same rubric. Older concepts are redefined, leaving etymological trails that confuse the unwitting reader. New words are created to refer to things that were perhaps poorly articulated through existing concepts, creating a highly complex lexical terrain (given that the old concepts continue to circulate). Words with similar meanings crowd around each other, vying for attention and stealing each other's attributes. Thus, we play musical chairs with words, in Giovanni Sartori's memorable phrase.²⁹

A result of these pathologies is that studies of the same subject appear to be talking about different things, and studies of different subjects appear to be talking about the same thing. Cumulation is impeded and methodological fragmentation encouraged. Concepts seem to get in the way of clear understanding.

Gerring, John. 2011. *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.