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Schaffer's Elucidating Social Science Concepts: Notes of a Conceptualist in the Field

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I am quite sympathetic to many aspects of the anthropological and ethnographic approach defended by Fred Schaffer in his *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*.¹ Much of my methods work is motivated and informed by what I call "methodological anthropology," which I define as the examination of the practices of social scientists and philosophers regarding concept formation and construction.

My original interest in concepts started from the observation that social scientists and philosophers spend a lot of energy and effort defining, disputing, and thinking about concepts. At the same time, concept methodology was completely absent from methods, statistics, and research design textbooks. These have chapters on measurement but nothing about concepts.

Schaffer's chapter 2 has the subtitle "how people understand a concept." He focuses on "everyday people" as subjects of his methodology; in contrast, I have focused on social scientists and philosophers as subjects. This is a major difference between our interests. For example, in addition to understanding social science practice, I give advice to my subjects (social scientists) on how to do things better. Fred is not telling everyday people how to do concepts better.

At the same time, I completely agree with almost all the "lessons" he has for elucidating concepts and would apply these lessons to my target groups. For example, his postulate to "investigate ordinary use" is critical because people, in-

cluding social scientists, do all kinds of odd things with concepts. This analysis is critical in producing better social science concepts. "Compare the use of the same word in different language games" means, for example, that one should look at how political theorists or philosophers work on a concept, say democracy, versus quantitative social scientists. "Examine opposites and negations" is absolutely essential to distinguishing between what I call the positive and negative poles. Terminology is critical and signals all sorts of issues. For example, social scientists cannot agree on what to call "not-democracy" and this has varied over time, with popular options like monarchy (19th century), dictatorship,² authoritarian, totalitarian, etc. So I completely endorse his recommendation to "follow the clouds of etymology."

In short, much of Schaffer's ethnographic advice works very well in understanding how social scientists develop and use concepts.

Much of chapter 3 resonated with me as well. The analysis of historical developments and genealogy is critical to understanding social science concepts. For example, one cannot understand the polity or Freedom House datasets without an understanding of their history. Many things that seem odd or curious about these datasets arise from the fact that they were not meant to capture concepts of democracy at the beginning! They have evolved and been adapted over time, but still retain traces of their origins. Freedom House was about the concept of liberty—social, economic, and political. It eventually morphed into a democracy dataset. The polity concept of anocracy, which is now used to refer to competitive-authoritarian regimes, originated in the concept of anarchy.³

In short, much of chapters 2 and 3 is directly relevant to thinking about how social scientists and philosophers develop, debate, and use concepts and is good advice to all those interested in concept methodology.

Chapter 4 is about "elucidating power." A good example of this practice is the literature on gender and politics because one of the first moves of a gender scholar is to deconstruct and analyze the gender bias of traditional concepts. For example, it is fascinating to see how the World Bank conceptualizes "indigenous people," a concept that is very politicized and that has large real-life implications for these peoples. The discussion in the literature is reminiscent of Foucault talking about an institutionalization of "insanity-madness" (*folie* in the 18th century). To apply this practice more broadly, theories involving democracy and democratization would probably require some significant changes if women's voting were included in the major concepts and datasets, where women are quite notable by their absence.⁴ The same issue applies to minorities, e.g., African-Americans, in democracy concepts and datasets: for example, the USA in 1920 is coded a maximal democracy by polity.

Schaffer contrasts "positivist reconstruction" with "interpretivist elucidation." What "positivism" means is a hotly

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¹ Schaffer 2016.

² Przeworski et al. 2000.

³ Gurr 1974.

⁴ See Paxton (2000) and Paxton et al. (2003) for nice discussions.

contested concept itself. I see Schaffer as engaged in positivistic empirical research. His long discussion about what “family” means in different cultures is meant to be an accurate representation of these differences.

So Schaffer and I agree on many points dealing with the semantics of concepts. We part ways on the role of concepts in describing the world and their use in explaining how the world works. His book stresses the value of understanding how people use concepts and what they mean by various concepts. But concepts have an instrumental value as well. We can ask how well they describe the world and if they are useful in explaining the world.

The biggest difference between us lies in the role of explanation, causation, and causal hypotheses. I am interested in concepts because they are essential in describing the world, but also very much because they are core to explaining the world. This of course makes me a “positivist,” but some interpretivists also want to explain the world.⁵ Causal explanation is the goal of my main target group, social scientists, and is my goal in my substantive work. I work from the philosophy that high quality concepts are critical to high quality social science. Bad concepts, e.g., terrorism, lead to bad research. A very big chunk of my applied work over the years involves very serious conceptual analysis. Before I can explain international peace I needed to think very hard about the concept of peace.⁶ To analyze how people, say Wolofs in Gambia, differ in their concept of democracy, is interesting to me if that somehow “matters.” Mattering is that it influences behavior or is influenced by something. These are causal questions. I am interested in differences in meaning and concepts, but only those that somehow matter in causal explanations, hypotheses and theories.

The title of Schaffer’s book indicates that it is about “social science” concepts. To advance social science we need to know how interpretivist methodologies of concepts help or relate to causal explanations and hypotheses.

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Commanding a Clear View: Words, Concepts, and Social Science

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To lay my cards on the table at the outset: I am broadly sympathetic to Frederic Schaffer’s overall campaign in favor of conceptual elucidation: “investigating the ways in which the social world is built up linguistically and the ways in which social actors deploy concepts to pursue their goals.”¹ On numerous previous occasions I have been, like Schaffer, decidedly critical of scholarly efforts to “fix” the meaning of a concept (like *the West* or *civilization*) and then to use that scholarly reconstruction as a base from which to legislate appropriate and inappropriate practical claims using that concept—as though our task as scholars were to correct the social world rather than to explain and understand it. So Schaffer’s careful explication of techniques for elucidation, grouped under the headings of “grounding,” “locating,” and “exposing,” provides a refreshing alternative to the sort of advice about concept analysis one typically receives from scholars engaged in the kind of project I think rather problematic.

That said, in my view Schaffer’s book also illustrates—practically and performatively if not deliberately—an important liability of his approach to concepts. The version of “interpretivism” that emerges from his account, while grounded in how people in the field conventionally use the word, obscures rather than clarifies important philosophical distinctions between theory, methodology, and method, and shores up philosophically misleading but practically operative dichotomies opposing “interpretivism” to “positivism” as if those were coherent intellectual packages. Despite conventional use, I do not believe that “positivism” and “interpretivism” name such coherent packages. For that reason I do not believe that the only alternative to reconstructing a concept so that it can be inserted into a statistical study as an independent or dependent variable—which is the so-called “positivist” strategy—necessarily means taking on all three of Schaffer’s “sets of interpretivist questions”² about ranges of meaning, linguistic and historical specificity, and political context. By adhering

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¹ Schaffer 2016, 7.
² Schaffer 2016, 21.

⁵ e.g., Wedeen 2002; Foucault 1972.

⁶ Goertz et al. 2016. There are many war-conflict datasets, we offer the first peace dataset.