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Concepts in New Contexts

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The development and use of concepts in social and political sciences is a key aspect to both theory and inferences (Gerring, 1999). Concepts provide researchers with a framework for what social, political, and economic phenomena are ‘out there’. They are both a language for communicating *what* we are trying to explain and part of the frameworks we use to explain *it* (Berenskoetter, 2017). In other words, concepts are analytical categories as well as the tools scholars use to build theories.

As part of the production of knowledge in academia, there is a strong demand for cross-country comparative research. One temptation in this regard is to use and test the same concepts in other contexts. The goal of this cross-contextual comparison is to test conceptual theories to see how they might play out in different settings. When broadening the scope of the research on naturalisation and citizenship from the ‘usual suspects’ in Europe, North America, and Oceania one common example of this is the binary of ‘inclusion/exclusion’ of the laws and policies governing citizenship acquisition and loss. However, one must keep in mind that how researchers describe, and label experiences will inevitably reveal biases in their research; and therefore, there is a concern for the acontextual application of euro-centric membership concepts when attempting to explain them across new contexts. With this short reflection, I consider: i) how to assess the value of a concept in a new context (historical, theoretical, or political); ii) how to improve its structure; and, iii) how to develop conceptual alternatives.

1. Applicability

Concepts are often developed by observing a phenomenon at a contextual moment. Shifting research to a new context (historical, theoretical, or political) may change both the meaning and scope of a particular concept. It is therefore important to ask whether a concept can apply to a new contextual site. As different aspects of the context change so will the applicability of the concept. An old but poignant example is with the study of the concept of the ‘family’ where researchers have had a euro-centric bias towards an individualistic orientation. This would be, for instance, using the ‘nuclear family’ as a universal concept which in much of the world, would miss the bigger picture. For example, Getrude Dadirai Gwenzi has recently shown how the meaning of ‘family’ in Zimbabwe is constructed and defined by care leavers – finding a more complex set of social relationships (Gwenzi, 2020). John Gerring (1999) defines four criteria for conceptualisation in comparative research: the term, its attributes, its indicators, and its phenomenon. When the number of cases is expanded, researchers should consider all four aspects of the concept and how it then might need to be adjusted. Thus, scholars should maintain flexibility and be open to expanding a concept definition as they broaden the scope of their research.

One intriguing example in the comparative study of citizenship research is with the concept of ‘naturalisation’. Liav Orgad (2017) describes three functions to the concept of ‘naturalisation’: i) a contract between the state and its prospective citizen; ii) as a political test for entry into the bounded community; and, iii) as part of the process of nation-building. But the practice of naturalising newcomers is not limited to the liberal democracies of Europe and thus, employing this functional definition in non-European contexts may misinterpret reality. As Bronwen Manby (2021) has recently shown in the context of some of the states in Africa, naturalisation has an additional function of being “performative” – meaning that its restrictive nature acts as a

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signal “that the non-African minorities privileged during colonial rule will not be allowed to continue to dominate the political economy”. Or furthermore, looking to Noora Lori’s research in the Gulf States, naturalisation is seen by the state as a mechanism for ensuring national security (Loori, 2019). In the work on investor citizenship in small island states another function could be to support the economy and means of production (Van Fossen, 2007; 2017). Thus looking at the concept of naturalisation solely through the prism of liberal democracies would limit its explanatory power. As these examples have shown, rather than thinking about how a concept works in a new context, a better approach is to explore how a new context changes the meaning of a concept. That is to say, scholars should make room to allow the new context to challenge their conceptual assumptions rather than letting their ‘conceptual glasses’ fog what they discover in new contexts.

2. Interpretation

The second challenge to studying concepts in new contexts is the depth of local knowledge that is required to both label the concept and precisely measure the phenomenon in question. This becomes increasingly difficult when comparative research involves a large N sample as researchers may have asymmetric knowledge about their cases. One possible result is ‘conceptual confusion’ i.e., that researchers will label different phenomena with the same name (Sartori, 1970). This issue is especially acute in the study of naturalisation and citizenship; researchers should thus, be aware of two aspects of ‘interpretation’ in their empirical use of concepts across different contexts.

The first aspect of this is knowledge of the language of the membership community in which research is being conducted as differences in language can have empirical differences in results (Koselleck, 2004). Gerring (1999: 362) points out that “semantic complications multiply when a concept’s meaning is considered historically, in different languages, in different language regions of the same language, in different grammatical forms..., and in different speech acts.” Therefore, using digital translation services to look at laws and policies may shape the findings of the study. It is further complicated in multi-lingual communities where the governing language may be different from indigenous/local languages. Even within one state a concept can have many meanings for different groups and can change over time.

The second aspect is that researchers’ own ‘positionality’ may affect their empirical application of a concept (Manohar et al., 2017). As Edward Said wrote back in 1978, “no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society” (Said, 1978: 10). In other words, ‘who one is’ will shape ‘how one interprets’ and consequently, the proceeding explanations. Positionality can be made up with aspects of the researcher that are fixed (race or ethnicity) whereas others can be subjective (personal lived experiences).

This is to say that scholars must not only keep in mind that their own research training and methodological strategies will shape results but also how their positionality in research may influence the questions they ask, concepts they use, and interpretations. While this kind of reflection seems to be taking place in other disciplines (specifically with post-colonial feminist theorists), there is little in the case of citizenship studies. Citizenship itself is an essentially contested concept with multiple meanings across scholarship. It also cannot be decoupled from its colonial history. Therefore, those themselves with a ‘first class’ passport may be biased in how they view and employ the concept from the very beginning. This needs to be both acknowledged and discussed.

3. A local viewpoint

The question of 'interpretation' inevitably leads to what can be seen as a recommendation but comes with its own set of challenges. Researchers in Europe and North America will face difficulties in their academic pursuits unless local scholars are included at every stage of their research design. This expert knowledge for the concept under inquiry is the most important aspect of a comparative conceptual study. Local scholars will have the best lenses to describe and understand the related social, political, and economic phenomena. As Giovanni Sartori's guiding phrase suggests: 'meaning before measurement' (Sartori, 1970) which will help decide if and how a particular concept can be applied and avoid conceptual confusion in interpretation.

On a logistical level, this means actively dissolving the barriers and burdens imposed on researchers and practitioners from the global South. Digitalisation and online conferences have facilitated this to an extent. This is because discussion and debate can move onto digital spaces instead of in-person. In-person conferences may require researchers to bare the burdens of travel costs or to go through expensive and bureaucratically onerous visa applications. But it also means using and citing research from local scholars. This may seem obvious however, it is not always something that is facilitated by university libraries which may only have licenses to particular types of journals where scholars from the global South are underrepresented.¹³

Conclusion

Much of the current research on naturalisation and citizenship uses euro-centric lenses, concepts, and methods and expands them broadly to other contexts. While the goal of a concept is to establish equivalence across contexts, this practice will only lead researchers to present an opaque picture of the specific contextual reality. With this reflection, I have presented several challenges to using concepts across contexts namely, i) considering the applicability of a concept by not assuming universalism; ii) keeping in mind one's own 'glasses of interpretation'; and iii) that local scholars will have the best knowledge of cases however, inclusion requires researchers to take an active role in breaking down barriers. Considering these issues will hopefully allow researchers interested in comparative research to open doors for formulating concepts that are contextually aware.

Research is a mode of scientific production and "any comparison is a construction in the sense that it discerns which elements or segments of social reality are to be related to one another and along what dimensions" (Azarian, 2011: 123). It is important to keep in mind how knowledge is produced. How concepts are used in research will give meaning to empirical phenomena and can thus be a mechanism for exercising or reproducing existing power dynamics.

All that being said, there is much to gain by expanding the scope of research on citizenship and naturalisation. However, if conducted with the assumption of universalism and without acknowledging how one's own position might influence findings there will be practical implications like compounding academic inequalities and reproducing 'blindspots'.¹⁴

13 'Global South scholars are missing from European and US journals. What can be done about it,' The Conversation 29 July 2018. <https://theconversation.com/global-south-scholars-are-missing-from-european-and-us-journals-what-can-be-done-about-it-99570>.

14 See Luicy Pedroza's intervention in the workshop for this symposium: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkKZY1XD9aU>.

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