**CONCEPT, THEORY, CASE**

**Deciphering the Differences**

|  |
| --- |
| **AIMS**:* To establish basic definitions and deepen understanding of what concepts, theories, models and variables are.
* To establish academia as an ongoing debate.
* To sensitise students about different approaches to research (qualitative vs. quantitative)
* To furnish students with a vocabulary and conceptual grasp that will help them navigate and position texts within larger bodies of academic literature, as well as self-reflect on their own conceptual and theoretical positioning in their own writing.
 |

Many students initially struggle to grasp some of the more abstract and technical aspects of academic writing and vocabulary. This lecture aims to:

* Provide and deepen academic vocabulary.
* Provide students with the tools needed to place texts within academic debates and bodies of literature.
* Increase awareness of how their own theoretical and conceptual positions matter to their own arguments.

**Lecture**

Outline the four components of the lecture (definitions; the nature of academia; different approaches to research; and cases), show relevance to their own academic reading and writing by relating the lecture to their assignments through examples.

**SECTION ONE: Definitions [15-20 minutes]**:

We are dealing with some core vocabulary in academic writing and are going to clarify what concepts, theories, frameworks and variables are.

1. **Concept**
* A concept is one word, or phrase, that suggests an abstract idea or phenomenon in the social sciences.
* Concepts tend to be highly contested. Often there is robust debate about what the limits of a concept should be.
* For example, “democracy” is an important concept in Political Studies. It seems to capture a set of ideals at face value and many agree that “democracy” is an ideal political system. However, upon further discussion, it may become clear that people include different things in their sense of “democracy”. Some may use it to only mean “free and fair elections”, while others think that a country is a “democracy” only once there has been a peaceful transfer of a power between different ruling parties after free and fair elections.
* Since concepts can be ambiguous it is very important that students clearly define what they mean by the significant concepts that they use in their papers. They should get into the habit of clarifying what they mean by these terms – for example, if they are writing a paper about “freedom” they need to make it clear what they mean by it. “In this paper, ‘freedom’ means…”
* Other concepts include: “conflict”, “greed”, “grievance”, “civil war”, “political”, “power”, “neopatrimonialism”, “post-colonialism”, “freedom”, “poverty”, “class”.
* Stress that it is important to be very clear about what is meant by the key concepts used in a paper since they are the building blocks for theory.

|  |
| --- |
| ***Class activity***: consider a concept, e.g. “freedom”. Ask students to write down how they conceptualise “Freedom”. Ask them to volunteer to say their definitions. Can the class reach a consensus on the concept or does it mean slightly different things (or have different elements/features) for different people? Show that all concepts are, to some extent, contested. (see slides) |

1. **Theory and Models**
* Theories are an attempt to logically and systematically explain real-life phenomena in an accessible and clear way.
* Theories fulfill four major roles in the social sciences:
	+ They make **generalisations** about and classifications of the world, i.e. they serve to simplify and group things. For instance, people have come up with theories of what states are. These theories define abstract ideal-types and generalize.
	+ They build **hypotheses** which are then tested through empirical research.
	+ They aim to **explain** phenomena and identify/propose potential causal mechanisms and other interactions between phenomena.
	+ They enable us to **draw connections** at an abstract level which might not be at first sight observable in the real world and thus guide research in new directions.
* In this course, we use theory because it helps to make the complex simple; it gives us the analytical tools to understand certain phenomena in the world, such as conflict.
* In short, grand theories aim to provide general explanations of how the world works, e.g. Realism, Marxism, Rational Choice Theory.
	+ As theories are used to simplify and explain reality, they must **change** as our reality changes. Over the years, one can observe certain trends of which theories were particularly fashionable and certain points in history. This has to do with the problems scholars were dealing with, but also with the general mindset of the time. Prevalent theories that shape the academic agenda are also referred to as **paradigms***.* Paradigms shift over time as new perspectives are gained and historical circumstances change.
* All theories are based on **premises**, i.e. core assumptions. Theoretical debate often revolves around the validity of these core assumptions. E.g. a realist theory of international relations is based on the assumption that states behave as unitary, rational actors in the international system. Social constructivism criticizes this view by problematizing the premise, that states can simply be seen as unitary actors and that domestic political climate matters in a state’s international behaviour.
	+ Theories evolve over time and with critique
		- E.g. realism 🡪 neorealism; liberalism 🡪 neoliberalism
* **Models** are mid-level theories. They do not have a fully-fledged conception of human behaviour and do not aim to explain how the world works in general. Rather, they aim to explain more specific phenomena. *[NB models are often also called theories; it is worth noting that the line between them is rather blurry.]*
* Models work as analytical tools, simplifying specific phenomena, and use a set of specific concepts to look at a phenomenon.
	+ E.g. The security dilemma is often considered as a model rather than a theory (or at least a mid-level theory rather than a ‘grand’ theory)
		- It uses set conceptual markers to analyse real-world phenomena, such as the indistinguishability of offence and defence.
		- Models can be embedded in a particular grand theory, e.g. the security dilemma is part of the greater theoretical tradition of realism. However, at the same time scholars with different theoretical standpoints can use the same models, or versions of the same model, e.g. realists as well as liberal institutionalists have used the security dilemma in their analyses of international relations.
		- A theory generally has a hypothesis about how actors are going to behave. A model can be used to test this hypothesis in more specific circumstances.
1. **Variable**
* We just established that theories often try to explain relationships between different phenomena, e.g. does poverty lead to more crime? What are the effects of nuclear proliferation?
	+ Theoretical statements often follow along the lines of “If this, then that”
	+ “This” and “That” are variables that a theory tries to relate to one another.
* Variables, in that sense, are concepts that are defined in such a way that they are **observable** and/or measurable in some way.
* As the emphasis here is on measurability, variables are more pertinent to quantitative research than qualitative research.
* Questions can arise about:
	+ The **validity** of a variable, i.e. is it measuring what it’s actually supposed to measure? E.g. is monetary income a good variable to measure poverty?
	+ The **reliability** of a variable, i.e. is the measurement itself reliable, or are the measurement errors?
* We can distinguish between dependent and independent variables:
	+ E.g., if we have a research question like “Which factors lead to an increase in crime?” and then look at a variety of factors such as poverty, inequality and lack of education, we look at crime as the **dependent variable** and the different factors as **independent variables**, as we want to find out if, and in which way, crime **depends** on poverty, inequality, etc.

***Class activity:*** try to get the class to suggest how a quantitative and qualitative approach might conceptualise “democracy” differently.

**SECTION TWO: Debates in Academia [5 minutes]**

Academia itself is an ongoing debate where both concepts and theories develop and shift over time; the grand ideas we are asking you to ponder are open for debate!

* E.g. what ‘realism’ was understood as before World War 2 is not necessarily what neo-realism became after the Second World War.
* Pre-WWII the world was in a constant state of multi-polarism. The Western powers were aggressively expanding to further their own interests 🡪 colonialism.
* After WWII, a bipolar global political system emerged, leading to different calculations of what would further national interest entails.
* Instead of a push for power, states were making moves to protect their own security.

For example, this lead **realism and neorealism to view the causes of conflict differently**:

 - Classical realism puts an emphasis on the self-interested and unchanging human nature, which makes states self-interested and power-seeking units.

 - Neo-realism explains conflict by the state of anarchy in the international sphere. It is less power-seeking, but survival-seeking behaviour that leads to conflict.

**SECTION THREE: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Approaches [10 minutes]**

* Quantitative and qualitative approaches are different ways of theory-testing or theory-building. It is also possible to use both approaches within a study – they are not mutually exclusive, but are distinct methods.
* Both may conceptualise ideas/phenomena differently despite using the same words.
* E.g. the concept of “democracy” in a quantitative study must denote something that is – of course – measurable and quantifiable, so “democracy” in a country could then, for instance, be conceptualised as a function of:
	+ Peaceful transfer of power from one party to another after elections.
	+ Voter turnout.
	+ Results of set polls and surveys on the democratic attitudes of citizens.
* There are thus decisions involved in quantitative work before a study even happens 🡪 the formulation of a questionnaire on democracy, e.g. is based on all sorts of conceptual assumptions on what democracy entails, and proxies or measurements for these concepts have to be found.
	+ These presumptions and decisions are not arbitrary, they are often grounded in previous studies and theory.
* A qualitative study could allow for a much broader conceptualisation of “democracy” and include aspects of it that are not directly quantifiable, but observable, such as:
	+ Values citizens hold.
	+ What democracy means to citizens.
	+ Values propagated and practiced by, e.g. politicians or the media.
	+ The ‘ethos’ of a country.
* Rather than presuming what “democracy” means in order to formulate closed questions, for example, a qualitative study can ask respondents directly what democracy means for them.
	+ In that way, qualitative research can also be used to support further quantitative studies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Quantitative** | **Qualitative** |
| Tests hypotheses | May start with initial hypothesis, but can also be completely grounded and build hypotheses up from the initial data gathered.  |
| Concepts are in the form of measurable variables | Concepts are often only measurable in that they are ideas that can be substantiated by observation or interviews |
| Measures are created before data collection and are standardized | Measures are created in an ad hoc manner and are often specific to the setting or the researcher. |
| Data are in the form of numbers from as good a measurement as possible. | Data are in the form of words and images from documents, observations, and transcripts. |
| Procedures are more standardized and are supposed to be more replicable, however conceptual assumptions then need to be made clear (based on different assumptions, one could interpret the same data differently).  | Research procedures are more specific to the setting or participants during fieldwork, thus replication is more complicated.  |
| Analysis uses statistics, tables, and charts and discusses how what they show relates to the hypothesis. | Analysis involves extracting themes from evidence and organizing data into themes and categories to present a coherent, consistent picture.  |

[NB the quantitative vs. qualitative debate will be revisited in the lecture “The Merits of Methodology”]

**SECTION FOUR: Applying theory to case [5 minutes]**

In this course, we apply different theories and models, employing different concepts, to analyse specific events in history, i.e. cases. Theories and models by definition are analytical tools that simplify the “reality” of a case in order to make it analysable. Thus, different theoretical lenses simplify cases in different ways, and thus can shed light on different aspects of a conflict, as they ask questions differently*.*

Work through with class:

Case: Rwanda’s involvement in the DRC in 1996.

First of all need to clarify some concepts we will be using:

* + Invasion
	+ National interest
	+ Regional balance of power
	+ Ethnic group
* Our key concepts depend on what theory we want to use.
* To analyse the reasons why Rwanda got involved in the DRC in 1996, we can employ different theoretical lenses, which lead us to ask different questions about the conflict (class exercise – see slides)
	+ Realism
		- What was the regional balance of power in the Great Lakes?
		- What was Rwanda’s national interest?
		- How did cross-border violence affect Rwanda’s perception of its own security?
	+ Social Constructivism
		- How did the politics of identity in Eastern DRC work as a catalyst in the Great Lakes conflict?
		- What made involvement in the DRC a popular action for the Rwandan government?
		- How did refugee flows impact on the outbreak of the Great Lakes conflict?

**SECTION FIVE: Wrap-Up [5 minutes]**

We hope that we have clarified some of the social science vocabulary for you. Just to reiterate, what is a… [elicit responses from class]

… concept?

… theory?

… model?

… variable?

What makes good research? Is quantitative always better than qualitative?

Theories evolve over time with continuous debate and as history moves along, therefore it is important to appreciate any theory in its historical and social context.

What is the use of applying theories to a case?

This lesson plan is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution South Africa License. To view a copy of this licence, visit [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/za/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/za/)

Or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California 94105, USA.