

CPR FORUM

COMMENTARY

What Do You Mean By That? In Search of Conceptual Consistency

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One of the themes for the 10th Biennial Conference of the IASCP calls for methodological innovation and introspection under the heading “Contemporary Analytical Tools and Theoretical Questions.” The theme encourages the use of methods that are relatively new to the study of common property (e.g., game theory) or have been developed relatively recently (e.g., qualitative comparative analysis based on Boolean algebra). It also promotes the use of multiple methods as a way of triangulating findings. Greater methodological innovation and sophistication offers the potential for considerable analytical progress. Yet methodological innovation can improve analytical leverage only if there is some degree of agreement on concepts. Thus, the full version of this theme encourages “theoretical syntheses of past work to clarify conceptual issues.” (See Announcements Section for info on the meeting and the call for papers.) We need conceptual consistency to communicate and make sense of our findings. At the same time, the very existence of conceptual inconsistency can be helpful, in that it prompts the probing of assumptions and meanings associated with the search for conceptual consistency.

The IASCP grew out of a multidisciplinary effort to clarify concepts used to describe property rights and types of goods. The terms “commons” and “communal property” had been used to describe goods owned collectively by some defined community as well as the absence of property rights. The conceptual confusion obscured the possibility of successful communal management and provided support for policies that effectively destroyed successful systems of common property, often substituting ineffective systems of state property that in practice amounted to open access. A wide-ranging intellectual movement responded to this misleading discourse, challenging the meanings of terms used in discussions about property rights, and ultimately clarifying those concepts.

Distinctions have been drawn between common property and open access, public goods and common-pool resources, and types of goods and types of property rights. The clarification of concepts, and consistent adherence to more fully specified definitions of terms, allowed scholars to recognize the possibilities for sustainable management of resources under common property as opposed to open access, to discern conditions that characterize successful development and maintenance of common to raise questions about the the supposed superiority of private property rights for the management of common-pool resources. It seems uncontroversial to argue that the emergence of a consensus on these concepts laid the foundation for progress in understanding relationships among types of goods, types of property rights, and management outcomes.

These successes should inspire striving for conceptual decentralization, indigenous, globalization, and yet these terms are used to refer to very different things. Or, perhaps worse, concepts are used loosely, without explicit definition, so that it is not clear what is meant. Inconsistency in the use of concepts increases the likelihood that people will talk past each other. Use of the same terms to mean different things makes divergent conclusions more likely - not because consistent patterns do not exist empirically, but because our language lacks the precision needed to bring any patterns that do exist into focus.

Numerous factors contribute to conceptual inconsistency and make the development of consensus difficult. Disciplinary divisions, the politics of policy-making, and the rise of new but related debates present three important challenges to conceptual consistency.

Just as physical separation promotes different dialects, disciplinary separation of faculties, professional associations, and professional journals encourages the approaches as adhering to the conventional wisdom by development of discipline-specific understandings of adopting the catchword or phrase. Thus, “community-concepts. These conceptual dialects emerge gradually based resource management” might describe devolution of authority over a resource to a group with a history of and unintentionally. Refinement of concepts within disciplines decreases conceptual consistency across working together to manage a resource. But the term is disciplines. Disciplinary subdivisions only exacerbate also used to describe benefit-sharing arrangements in this tendency. Although interdisciplinary programs exist, which the “community” beneficiary has no involvement in disciplinary training remains the norm, and career decision-making and consists of people who do not identify with each other. “Participation” may involve advancement generally occurs within specific discipline.

To flourish professionally, we need to speak the language repeated meetings with local residents to discern local of our specific concerns and develop disciplines. Disciplinary strategies for addressing training inculcates fluency them through local in disciplinary dialects, initiative. Yet short public thereby reinforcing those meetings to describe dialects.

I don't want to overstate these divisions. Overlaps exist, especially within the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. IASCP draws together representatives of diverse disciplines and is not the only professional organization to do so. Interdisciplinary dialogue occurs, countering the dialect-producing effects of disciplinary separation. But it also involves an increased likelihood of miscommunication, because participants often do not recognize that they are either using the same words to refer to different things or using different words to refer to the same things. Who among us has not asked a colleague, “What do you mean by that?” Or experienced the epiphany that an apparent disagreement boiled down to a difference in terminology? Sometimes, differences in terminology reflect more significant differences, not only about definitions, but also about perspective. Exhausting though the debates about “what do you mean?” can be, the broadened perspectives that often result are well worthwhile.

Where disciplinary divisions contribute inadvertently to conceptual inconsistency, the politics of policy-making encourage loose application of concepts. International agencies promote particular types of policies or approaches to governing, often adopting a catchword or phrase to market their approach. With aid and international public opinion on the line, governments and development workers portray their own policies and described as “participatory.” Some degree of cynicism about the motivations for such expansive application of concepts is warranted.

The incentives for field officers and governments of developing countries to appear to conform to a conventional wisdom can be quite high, even as international agencies do not even come close to having the capacity needed to check for actual conformance. Nonetheless, cynical behavior is not the only source of conceptual inconsistency in policy applications. Policy frameworks often use language vague enough to support multiple interpretations. And the agencies themselves develop multiple versions of concepts as they balance association with an international conventional wisdom with the need to differentiate themselves from other agencies. For all of these reasons, policy applications generate conceptual inconsistencies. Just as scholars grapple with differences in disciplinary dialects, they also must confront and overcome inconsistencies in concepts used in scholarly and policy circles.

Even where interdisciplinary consensus forms, as on concepts related to property rights and types of goods, its survival cannot be guaranteed. Despite the advantages of conceptual consistency, survival of a consensus may not even be desirable. Current controversies about intellectual property rights over seeds and access to information, for example, bring with them divergent terminology. The injection of new terms and new examples into the discourse on property rights upsets the comfort of conceptual consensus. The disruption occurs, even as those studying intellectual property rights look to the conceptual framework developed by scholars of common property for insights, as David Bollier pointed out in last June’s CPR Forum Commentary on the Information Commons, because the substantive concerns and assumptions differ in important ways.

The conceptual distinction between common property and open access accepted the need for property rights to avoid exhaustion of a resource and promote investment in provision and maintenance. The fervor about intellectual property rights, on the other hand, reflects not only a concern with privatization of ideas and genetic content by firms, but also a suspicion that leaving access relatively unrestricted can be advantageous. We are not necessarily talking about purely open access. After all, open source software commits users to share their innovations. Participation in seed-sharing also rests on expectations of reciprocity, even if those expectations are not formalized. Still, talk about an “information commons” raises important theoretical questions. Is this a move back toward equating “commons” with “open access”? Can the distinction remain meaningful even if membership in the commons is not well-defined? By disrupting the consensus, the introduction of new topics and new voices forces reexamination of assumptions.

As representatives of diverse fields interested in diverse substantive issues, many of which

have policy implications, members of IASCP deal with conceptual inconsistency on a regular basis. We need some degree of conceptual consistency to communicate effectively. Even if no consensus forms, the effort to clarify concepts stimulates the questioning, adaptation, and innovation through which learning occurs.

For Further information:

Alchian, Armen, and Harold Demsetz. 1973. "The property rights paradigm," *Journal of Economic History* 33(1): 16-27.

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