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# A Unified Approach to Theory Reconstruction

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Generalized concepts in the literature rarely align exactly with observations in the field. Yet for researchers who come across significant discrepancies between theory and practice, there is a lack of formal guidance for revising concepts. Here we draw on our own experiences, including Walton's research on social movements and Meade's research on populism. In both cases, our research emerged from the observation that a key concept, which was meant to help explain the outcome we were initially interested in, appeared to work differently in the field than what was described in the literature. Yet as emerging scholars, we lacked a methodological framework to help us center our research around this discrepancy.

Such a research design, which is centered around a type of concept 'reformation' cuts across the typical dichotomy scholars refer to as theory building versus theory testing. If theory building is research where scholars collect data to create a theory, then testing is where one uses data to determine whether a theory has explanatory power. Our approach, which we call *theory reconstruction*, focuses on a specific type of theorizing: concepts, yet differs from both theory building and theory testing. Theory reconstruction is instead about the rebuilding of existing concepts based on empirical observations, for the purposes of challenging or revising these concepts in the literature. Using examples from existing scholarship, we propose theory reconstruction as an accessible research design to highlight entrenched assumptions in the discipline and encourage more theory based research.

Outdated or unexamined assumptions constitute both a political and a methodological problem for the discipline, furthering inequities in the field while also leading to empirically deficient explanations and concepts. Whether we realize it or not, many of the categorizations and concepts used today in American political science have roots in unexamined assumptions that shape our understanding of the global south, communities of color, as well as the politics of the poor and working class.

Yet today's mainstream advice on research design discourages scholars from using their research to revise existing theories and concepts. For example, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) caution students against revising theories on the basis of their data, warning

that such adjustments should be done "rarely and with considerable discipline." (21) Moreover, Sartori (1970) famously advises against "conceptual stretching" of theories, suggesting that theories initially developed in the West should not be extrapolated beyond their original context. Yet this standard caution towards revision stands in tension with real-world practice in the discipline. For instance, as Kapiszowski et. al. (2022) argue, most political scientists who do fieldwork engage in revision based on their data throughout the research process.

Our argument builds on several recent works that highlight approaches to case selection and field work, and encourages scholars to make methodological assumptions more transparent. Scholars have described these nonstandard research paths alternatively as the "extended case method" (Burawoy 1998), "elucidating concepts" (Schaffer 2015), "casing a study" (Soss 2018; 2021), "creative comparisons" (Simmons and Smith 2021), and "iterative fieldwork" (Kapiszewski et. al. 2022), among others.

## What is Theory Reconstruction?

Here, we define theory reconstruction as a type of theory based research that uses empirical findings to challenge and revise key concepts in the literature. It is a research design with an explicit focus on rebuilding, or 'reconstructing' existing concepts using new mechanisms, categories, processes, or perspectives.

At its core, the literature that we highlight as having utilized this approach has at least two things in common. First, the authors identify a key, or "thick" (Coppedge 1999) concept, that is important to their field observations and in the relevant literature. Secondly, the authors observe that the key concept works differently in practice than how it is conceptualized in the literature. This discrepancy can be at the level of mechanisms, about the amount of variation in different instances of the concept, or about how the concept is applied. Importantly, while this approach can be used to challenge assumptions in the existing literature, it does not necessarily discredit or falsify other uses of the concept. Similarly, in terms of external validity, the researcher should be clear about the applicability of their observations to outside cases. For the sake of clarity, we have simplified theory reconstruction into three steps:

1. *Establish the discrepancy*: Using an inductive approach,

the researcher identifies a significant discrepancy between how a key concept is understood in the literature and how that concept appears in the researcher's observations, experiences, or preliminary data.

2. *Identify the Source*: Using their data, the researcher pinpoints where the conceptualization in the literature falls short and demonstrates how the concept appears to actually work in practice. Here, the researcher identifies prevailing or taken-for-granted assumptions that influence how the concept has previously been applied.

3. *Revise the Concept*: The author then develops a new conceptualization that can clarify mechanisms, provide scope conditions, or highlight the limits of the existing literature.

### Varieties of Theory Reconstruction

There are several possible ways that researchers might identify a discrepancy and attempt to reconstruct a concept based on their observations. In order to simplify these patterns we describe four different varieties of theory reconstruction: *revising*, *extending*, *narrowing*, and *disrupting*. These groupings are neither exhaustive, nor meant to be mutually exclusive categories, but simply useful distinctions between different approaches to theory reconstruction.

Revising is the broadest type of approach. Revising is when, upon close inspection, one observes that a key concept works differently in practice than how it is assumed to work in the literature. The researcher identifies the mechanisms or features that are inconsistent with the literature and develops a 'revised' concept. An example of this is James Scott's (1985) work on class relations. Using observations in a Malaysian village, Scott challenges a popular conception of class relations at the time, which assumed an ideological domination of subordinate classes. Instead, the author revises this conception of class relations, highlighting everyday forms of peasant resistance.

The other three groupings (*extending*, *narrowing*, and *disrupting*) are consistent with revising, but represent more niche approaches that are also common:

Extending is when an understudied phenomenon is found to be a good example of a key concept in the

literature that it is not typically associated with. In order to address this, the researcher applies, or 'extends' the existing concept into the understudied context. One example is Soss (2018), where the author extends the concept of political participation to describe interactions between recipients and the state in the U.S. welfare system.

Narrowing is when a single, monolithic concept exhibits significant variation or contradictory features in practice. In order to address this, the researcher specifies, or 'narrows' the use of the concept, either by or dividing it into distinct subcategories, or distinguishing between the existing concept and a new one. An example of this is Soss and Weaver (2017) who 'narrow' the conception of the state into two 'faces': the first, liberal democratic face (e.g. electoral representation) and the second face of social control, noting that the second face is particularly prevalent in poor and communities of color.

Disrupting is where a common dichotomy or spectrum between different categories fails to hold up in practice. In order to address this, the researcher highlights these limitations and "disrupts" the set of existing categories, either by proposing a new category that expands the spectrum, or by demonstrating the limits of the overall concept. An example here is Linz's (1964) seminal essay on regime type, where he challenges the dichotomy between democratic and totalitarian regimes that was prevalent at the time, arguing that cases such as Franco's Spain involve aspects of both categories, but fit into neither. Instead, Linz disrupts this conceptualization of regime type, introducing the hybrid concept of an authoritarian regime.

### Conclusion

We argue for theory reconstruction as a modest, coherent framework to substantiate and encourage further explorations of theory based research. Moreover we argue for placing concepts and concept formation front and center as the premise of the analysis. Whether *revising*, *extending*, *narrowing*, or *disrupting* concepts, researchers have long used theory reconstruction to address unexamined assumptions, and open up future avenues for more in-depth analysis.

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