

Conceptual engineering as a method in the social sciences

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Current debates in conceptual engineering (CE)—the method of optimizing concepts—may be divided into two groups: (1) metaphilosophical studies of dimensions of CE as a method and its general feasibility, (2) particular applications of the method to specific domains, e.g. social, political or legal contexts (philosophical case studies). Both versions of CE are typically philosophical in nature. This state of affairs—together with the normative aspiration of CE—has generated the problem of the practical real-world realization of CE and its potential impact on the societal level. One of the paths to solve this problem is to find new ways that socially implement the outcomes of CE via public institutions. Other path is to show that CE as a competence is something achievable by the social scientists. The impact of the latter on social world is indirect in the sense that it depends on the general ability of the practically engaged social sciences to deal with the so-called grand challenges.

In this talk, I would like to take the second path which so far has not been noticed in the debates on CE. I intend to show that in several aspects the basic competence of CE is already exercised among social scientists (although it does not meet all the criteria that make this method unique in philosophical terms). To justify this claim, I focus on two areas of research: theory development and the so-called ‘conceptualizations’ and ‘reconceptualizations’—common strategies of doing social research. Evaluation of the competences in CE among theorists in the social sciences leads to the view that their conceptual standards should be improved. This is the task in theory development that calls for the revival of the classic philosophy of science. In the last part of the presentation, I briefly describe key aspects of this task, its limitations and the challenges it must face if CE aims to enter the area of the social sciences.

Recommended reading:

- P.T. Makowski (2020). Optimizing concepts: Conceptual engineering in the field of management. The case of routines research. *Academy of Management Review* (in press). DOI:10.5465/amr.2019.0252.
- H. Cappelen & D. Plunkett (2020). “A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics.” In: A. Burgess, H. Cappelen & D. Plunkett (Eds.). *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*. (pp. 1-34). New York: Oxford University Press. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198801856.003.0001.