

Examining framings of geoengineering using Q methodology

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Abstract

Despite (or perhaps reflecting) widespread awareness of its ambiguity, the term 'geoengineering' has in recent years become massively more prominent. Academic, policy and civil society circles routinely use this term to describe, support or oppose a diverse range of techniques and ideas. This study aims to contribute to understandings of ways in which variously-envisaged approaches to 'geoengineering' of the global climate are currently being framed. It asks not only about variously-viewed implications of geoengineering itself, but also what these diverse framings can reveal about wider politics in contemporary debates around climate change, science and technology. Rather than pretending to fix this (anyway intractable) ambiguity, we instead apply Q methodology to analyse geoengineering as a subjective discursive construct, the bounds of which are continually negotiated and contested. 34 participants from a variety of disciplinary and institutional backgrounds in the UK, US, Canada, Japan undertook a 'Q sort' of 48 opinion statements about geoengineering. Four distinctive framings emerged from this analysis, labelled: '*We are the planetary maintenance engineers*'; '*Geoengineering is a political project*'; '*At the very least we need more research*' and '*Let's focus on Carbon.*' Results indicate a strong polarity around divergently-construed pros and cons of geoengineering as a whole – underscoring the political salience of this term. But additional axes of difference suggest a more nuanced picture than straightforward pro/anti positioning. The ambiguity of the term is argued to offer interpretive flexibility for articulating diverse interests within and across contending framings. Questions are raised over ideas that increasing terminological precision will necessarily facilitate greater clarity in governance discussions or public engagement. Merits of any given form of precision, will depend on particular framings. Much ambiguity in this area may thus be irreducible. The challenge lies rather in realising the wider implications of the political pluralities this reveals.