



The Importance of Concepts in the Social Sciences: Between Theoretical Frameworks and Real-World Determinants

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Abstract

In light of the knowledge and technological explosion and intense competition among nations for leadership, the biological, physical, technological, social, and human sciences have become essential for control, prediction, and foresight. While fundamental sciences are required to keep pace with technological development, social sciences are needed to understand human beings and societal problems. An established principle in the social sciences is that the researcher cannot isolate the phenomena to be studied from their general context, grasp them as autonomous entities, and analyse them into their basic components for understanding and interpretation. This is due to the nature of social phenomena, which are characterised by complexity and interconnection. Therefore, the researcher engages with these phenomena and expresses them through various mediating tools, such as theories, methods, and concepts, which allow the studied problem to move flexibly between reality (the tangible) and the mind (the abstract).

Keywords: *abstraction; theory; verification; concept; social research.*

L'importance des concepts dans les sciences sociales : entre cadres théoriques et déterminants du monde réel

Résumé

Compte tenu de l'explosion des connaissances et des technologies et de la concurrence intense entre les nations pour le leadership, les sciences biologiques, physiques, technologiques, sociales et humaines sont devenues essentielles pour le contrôle, la prévision et la prospective. Si les sciences fondamentales sont nécessaires pour suivre le rythme du développement technologique, les sciences sociales sont indispensables pour comprendre les êtres humains et les problèmes sociétaux. Un principe établi en sciences sociales veut que le chercheur ne puisse isoler les phénomènes à étudier de leur contexte général, les appréhender comme des entités autonomes et les analyser en leurs composantes de base pour les comprendre et les interpréter. Cela tient à la nature des phénomènes sociaux, qui se caractérisent par leur complexité et leur interconnexion. Par conséquent, le chercheur s'engage dans ces phénomènes et les exprime à travers divers outils de médiation, tels que des théories, des méthodes et des concepts, qui permettent au problème étudié de passer avec souplesse de la réalité (le tangible) à l'esprit (l'abstrait).

Mots clés : abstraction ; théorie ; vérification ; concept ; recherche sociale.

Introduction



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The concept serves as the foundation of human communicative language and as a means through which individuals express specific ideas, states, and conditions. It is a symbolic medium that the researcher uses to convey various ideas and meanings to others. Acting as an intermediary between the mind (theory) and reality (verification), it functions as a key that enables the researcher to access the research problem and identify its aspects, boundaries, and components.

While symbols and terms in the natural sciences are generally characterised by stability, precision, and clarity, the situation in the social sciences is quite the opposite. The latter is replete with concepts and terms that differ in meaning, with multiple definitions and interpretations assigned to them depending on ideological positions, political doctrines, and intellectual schools of thought. A single concept may have multiple definitions, which can create confusion and disorder in scientific research.

Concepts play a pivotal role in the process of social research. Through their precise determination, the researcher can delimit the information to be collected, and the reader can, from the outset, understand what the researcher intends for a given concept. Many concepts may have multiple meanings or be interpreted differently. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to clarify the various meanings of a single concept if multiple interpretations exist or if its meaning changes over time. This, indeed, is a characteristic of social concepts, which reflect social behaviours and phenomena that shift over time owing to rapid transformations and developments in human behaviour.

Consequently, the researcher must define the terms used in the study to prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations. As previously indicated, concepts and meanings associated with some terms in social research often multiply, making it necessary for the researcher to specify the meanings and concepts that align with the aims and procedures of the study and to define them. This approach provides a reference framework for the researcher to address the research problem, enabling a deeper understanding and interpretation.

From this standpoint emerges the epistemological concern that this research paper seeks to examine.

1. Types of Concepts in the Social Sciences

What are the types of concepts in the social sciences? How can researchers transform concepts from their abstract, general theoretical state into operational concepts whose dimensions can be measured in reality?

The importance of addressing such a topic lies in the difficulty of defining concepts in scientific research, in general, and social research, in particular, owing to differences among researchers stemming from their diverse scientific and research backgrounds regarding the meanings and connotations of a given concept. On the basis of the analytical method adopted in this research paper, we explore the nature of concepts in the social sciences, their types and modes of formation, and how one may move from general concepts to specific ones whose dimensions can be measured in reality.

2. Defining Concepts

Linguistically and semantically, a concept refers to "a logical linguistic structure or a specific designation



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indicating a thing, phenomenon, or meaning. ¹ In its original Latin root, *conceptus* means “the act of containing.”² A concept is a term that signifies a general, abstract idea and allows the grouping of different subjects.

Technically, definitions of the concept have revolved around the idea that it is “a mental and cognitive image formed through the direct observation of more than one indicator derived from the field of research.”³ This definition considers the concept to be the result of a process of abstraction on the basis of observing multiple empirical indicators, whereby such observation leads to the construction of a mental image through which reality is apprehended.

It is also defined as “a general and abstract mental representation of one or more phenomena and of the relationships existing between them.”⁴ This definition indicates that the concept is an abstract mental meaning associated with a set of characteristics that distinguish phenomena or the relationships among them.

According to Landshere, the concept is a symbolic representation composed of the common properties shared among a group of concrete objects.

The concept, according to R. Legendre, is “a general mental representation of the shared and constant postulates

¹ Ṭāriq ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Samarā’ī, *Manhajīyya ḥadītha fī al-baḥṯ al-‘ilmī al-akādīmī li-l-dirāsāt al-jāmi‘iyya al-‘ulyā* (Beirut: Dār al-Anwār), 61.

² Akoun and Pierre Ansart, eds., *Dictionnaire de sociologie* (Paris: Le Robert, 1999), 100.

³ Ma‘n Khalīl ‘Umar, *Manhajīyyat al-baḥṯ fī ‘ilm al-ijtimā‘* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004), 56.

⁴ Maurice Angers, *Manhajīyyat al-baḥṯ al-‘ilmī fī al-‘ulūm al-insāniyya*, trans. Būzīd Ṣaḥrāwī et al. (Algeria: Dār al-Qaṣaba li-l-Nashr, 2004), 158.

among categories of observable subjects, which can be generalised to every subject possessing the same features. It is an abstract idea that can be applied to various experiences or subjects with common characteristics.”

Galison R. D. maintains that the concept is based on two properties: abstraction and generalisation. Abstraction involves moving from the concrete to the conceptual. In contrast, generalisation is the process of identifying common properties among subjects within a single concept and applying them to an infinite category of similar subjects.⁵

Concepts are “an explanation of the meaning of a thing, a term, or a word, or a specification of its definition. The precision of research depends on defining all the concepts and terms contained within the problem with exactness, whether regarding the problem itself or the terms related to the hypotheses.”⁶ Clarifying the intended meanings of the terms used in research to prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations is essential.⁷

The sociologist Lundberg, who opposed subjective and multiple definitions of concepts in sociology, stated that “the only way to define something objectively is to define it through the operations it requires.”⁸ Concepts are therefore abstractions of real events and observable facts. Their definition enables the delimitation of the characteristics that

⁵ Abd al-Karīm Gharīb, *Manhaj al-baḥṭh al-‘ilmī fī ‘ulūm al-tarbiyya wa-l-‘ulūm al-insāniyya* (Casablanca: ‘Ālam al-Tarbiyya, 2012), 155.

⁶ Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Qādir Ṣāliḥ et al., *Al-Murshid fī i’ dād al-buḥūth wa-l-dirāsāt al-‘ilmiyya* (Khartoum: Jāmi‘at al-Sūdān, 2001), 10.

⁷ Sa‘īd Jāsīm al-Asadī, *Akhlaqiyyāt al-baḥṭh al-‘ilmī fī al-‘ulūm al-insāniyya wa-l-ijtimā‘iyya wa-l-tarbawīyya* (Iraq: Wāriṭh Cultural Foundation, 2008), 50.

⁸ Madeleine Grawitz, *Manāḥij al-‘ulūm al-ijtimā‘iyya*, trans. Sām ‘Ammār (Damascus: al-Markaz al-‘Arabī li-l-Tadrīb wa-l-Tarjama, 1993), 55.



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distinguish social reality. They are mental structures encompassing the stable features of reality.

3. Views of Some Researchers on the Importance of Defining Concepts in Social Research

Rabi Mustafa 'Alyan and others stated that "it is essential for the researcher to clarify the intended meaning of some of the terms and concepts used in the study in order to prevent misunderstanding or misinterpretation. For instance, the term *academic achievement* has several connotations. Defining terms helps to establish a reference framework that the researcher uses in addressing the research problem. The researcher may sometimes adopt a definition for certain terms on the basis of a specific reference or a previous study, and in such cases, this must be clearly indicated."⁹

For example, in a study entitled *Rates of Teachers' Use of Praise or Reprimand in Modifying the Behaviour of Disabled and Non-Disabled Children*, an observational tool was developed to determine the extent to which teachers used reprimand or praise. Previous studies were consulted, and the tool was composed of two parts. The first part included operational definitions of the study variables: "nonacademic classroom behavior," "academic classroom behavior," "reprimand," and "praise." These variables were defined as follows:

- **Academic classroom behaviour:** any response given by the student that relates to the content of the lesson. Examples include answering a teacher-posed question, explaining the solution to a problem, or asking a question related to the subject matter.

⁹ Rabiḥ Muṣṭafā 'Alyān et al., *Manāḥij wa-asālib al-baḥṡh al-'ilmī: al-naẓariyya wa-l-taṭbīq* (Amman: Dār al-Ṣafā', 2000), 171.

- **Nonacademic classroom behavior:** any response given by the student in the classroom that is not directly related to the content of the lesson. In other words, this behaviour refers to actions related to classroom discipline, such as sitting quietly, not leaving one's seat, not talking to others, not sleeping in class, not looking back, and refraining from fighting, among others.

Praise: Positive verbal behaviour issued by the teacher expressing approval or appreciation of the student's behaviour, such as "Excellent," "Well done," or "I like the way you work." Praise does not include any neutral expressions or nonverbal responses.

Reprimand: Negative verbal behaviour issued by the teacher, including admonishment, criticism, or any expression that reflects disapproval or disagreement with the student's behaviour, or indicates the need to change that behaviour, for example, "No, this is not correct," "Stop this inappropriate behaviour," or "This is disturbing behaviour."¹⁰

In this study, the research instrument was an observation conducted by a group of observers with their own definitions of the study variables. The operational definition alone can unify these definitions of the study variables. This is consistent with the view of Issam Abdelwahab Boub, who stated, "The researcher must specify the terms and concepts that will be used and relied upon in the study, clarify their meanings, and indicate how they are to be observed or measured through the necessary operational definition."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 180–181.

¹¹ Iṣām 'Abd al-Wahhāb Būb, *Madkhal manāhij al-baḥth al-'ilmī* (2007), 199.



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Rahim Younes Karru al. "Azzawi notes: "It is important to clarify the intended meaning of the terms used in the research to prevent misunderstanding or interpretation contrary to the intended meaning of the study. Frequently, the meanings employed in a study are multiple, and these meanings may be determined operationally (*opérationnel*), that is, through the procedures, data, and instruments specific to the study. Defining terms helps establish a reference framework that the researcher uses in addressing the research problem. The researcher may sometimes adopt a definition for certain terms borrowed from a dictionary or a previous study; in such cases, the researcher must clearly indicate that dictionary or study."

Here, the researcher means that if you encounter an operational definition that serves your purpose, that is, one that includes the same method you intend to use to measure your study variable or the same procedures you plan to follow to measure it, you may then state that you are adopting the definition found in dictionary (X), which defines it as such and such, or in a previous study, which defines it as such and such.

The researcher Karru al-'Azzawi further added that "the difficulties and factors that the researcher faces, which hinder the possibility of generalising the research results, are the study limitations (*limitation*). These are either objective, temporal, or spatial."

Study limitations can be classified into two categories:

- **The first category** concerns the study's concepts and terminology. Many educational concepts, such as teaching, achievement, motivation, personality, and intelligence, are general and can be used in different

ways. Therefore, the researcher must define them precisely, indicating the specific connotations given to them in the study. This definition determines the scope of the results and prevents the subject from extending beyond the defined parameters.

- **The second category** relates to the procedures of the study, including the method of selecting the sample, the data collection and analysis methods, the instrument development procedures, and the time and place in which the study was conducted. These are examples of such limitations.¹²

What has been said about study limitations should make you aware that when defending your dissertation and are asked whether your results can be generalised, the answer will often be "no." This is because your findings apply only to your specific research context: you selected a specific sample, used a particular instrument, worked within a specific timeframe and location, and employed an operational definition for your study variable.

For example, if in your study "intelligence" refers to the score a child obtained on the *Wechsler scale*, estimated at 160 points, another researcher might use a different score on a different measurement scale. In such a case, generalisation is not possible.

Mohammad Khalil 'Abbas and others state that "a research study usually includes a set of terms with specific meanings in the researcher's mind. To prevent these terms from being misunderstood, the researcher must define them operationally, that is, in terms of the procedures and tools used in the study. In other words, the operational definition

¹² Raḥīm Yūnis Karrū al-‘Azzāwī, *Manhaj al-baḥth al-‘ilmī* (Amman: Dār Dijla, 2008), 50–51.



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clearly specifies the details, procedures, and treatments the researcher will apply to a given variable. For example, the term “*reinforcement*” can be defined operationally by detailing how reinforcement will or will not be provided to participants in experimental procedures when they engage in specific behaviours. The researcher may, for example, praise the student for a desirable behaviour, reprimand them for an undesirable behaviour, or ignore the behaviour. All these procedures provide a detailed explanation.”¹³

Mohi Mohammad Masaad stated that “it is the researcher’s duty, when formulating the research problem, to define the concepts used. The more precise and clear this definition is, the easier it will be for readers following the study to grasp the meanings and ideas the researcher intends to express without disagreement over their interpretation. There is no doubt that many problems in human social interactions arise from a lack of mutual understanding and from differences in expressing and interpreting what is in people’s minds. Thus, if defining concepts is essential in general discussions, it becomes even more necessary and imperative in scientific research in particular.”¹⁴

Muwafaq ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Qadir adds that “clarity of thought and purpose in presenting an idea, as well as precision in analysing its elements, will lead to positive results that bring satisfaction to both the researcher and the reader. For example, if someone writes about *the*

¹³ Muḥammad Khalīl ‘Abbās et al., *Madkhal ilā manāhij al-baḥth fī al-tarbiyya wa-‘ilm al-naḥs* (Amman: Dār al-Masīra, 2007), 62.

¹⁴ Muḥyī Muḥammad Mas‘ad, *Kayfiyyat kitābat al-abḥāth wa-l-i‘dād li-l-muḥāḍarāt* (Alexandria: al-Maktab al-‘Arabī al-Ḥadīth, 2000), 29.

etiquette of assemblies in the Prophetic tradition, they must ask: What is meant by *assembly* here? Is it a judicial assembly, a scholarly assembly, a governing assembly, and so on? What is the pedagogical meaning of the assembly and its etiquette? One researcher discussed a university dissertation on 'The Etiquette of the Assembly in the Prophetic Tradition,' but the student had not clarified what was meant by the etiquette of the assembly or which type of assembly was intended. As a result, the dissertation lacked clear direction."¹⁵

Sami Ta'ab states that "when conducting a study, the researcher must adhere to specific, clear rules and procedures. Rules are usually applied to classify behaviour so that one or more researchers can follow consistent patterns. For example, when measuring the degree of television advertisement attractiveness, researchers might count the number of times a viewer changes the channel during the advertisement. This measure is considered objective because the behaviour can be observed and recorded.

However, when advertisement attractiveness is measured by observing the number of people who show signs of annoyance or negative facial expressions during the advertisement, this method is subjective since observers may differ in their understanding of what constitutes annoyance or a negative expression. If, however, a clear and precise definition of *negative facial expression* is provided, the margin of error may decrease.

It is therefore necessary to define terms precisely so that observation and measurement can be appropriately carried

¹⁵ Muwafaq ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Qādir, *Manhaj al-baḥth al-'ilmī wa-kitābat al-rasā'il al-'ilmiyya* (Mecca: Dār al-Tawḥīd, 2011), 116.



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out. Scholars must link abstract terms to the real world through direct and indirect observation and measurement tools. This linkage is achieved by establishing an operational definition as a framework. The operational definition plays a vital role in science, and a concise introduction helps shed light on the background of the subject. ¹⁶

From the researchers' statements on the definitions of research terms and concepts, it is clear that, despite their differing areas of specialisation, such as psychology, educational sciences, and Islamic studies, they unanimously agree on the necessity and importance of defining these terms and concepts.

4. Types of Concepts in Social Research

Concepts play an important role in reinforcing the scientific strength of any discipline. The more concept formulation evolves and researchers develop new conceptualisations, the more this indicates scientific progress and an increased capacity to address numerous problems.¹⁷ On this basis, concepts in science differ in their nature, formulation, and use in research. Most researchers distinguish between two fundamental types of concepts.

4.1. General Concepts

These are highly abstract theoretical concepts generated from impressions, perceptions, and complex experiences.

¹⁶ Sāmī Ṭābi', *Manāhij al-baḥth wa-kitābat al-mashrū' al-muqtarah li-l-baḥth*, trans. Salwā Fathī Aḥmad (Cairo: Markaz Taṭwīr al-Dirāsāt al-'Ulyā wa-l-Buḥūth, 2007), 5–6.

¹⁷ Muḥammad 'Alī Muḥammad, *Ilm al-ijtimā' wa-l-manhaj al-'ilmī* (Alexandria: Dār al-Ma'rifa al-Jāmi'iyya, 1986), 90.

They occupy an important place within theoretical frameworks, determining the conceptual structures of research that express and classify aspects of phenomena. They also define the correlations among these aspects and provide concise statements of fact.

Such concepts transcend time and place and are not tied to a specific situation or society. Examples include concepts such as *society*, *theory*, and *value*.

These concepts are employed by critical researchers in examining phenomena and the possibilities they investigate, enabling them to interpret aspects of reality to derive scientific benefit from the theory and to make productive use of it, thereby contributing to its development and enhancing its effectiveness.

They are also referred to as *theoretical* or *abstract concepts* and require extensive processes of deconstruction to bring them closer to the level of observation, owing to their generality and comprehensiveness.

4.2. Specific Concepts

These are concepts that refer to concrete attributes and are defined directly in terms of criteria for classifying and defining observations in a clear, operational manner.¹⁸ They represent simple, preliminary generalisations drawn from events and facts. Such concepts are of great value in research because they help identify, describe, and measure the phenomena under study.

Operational concepts occupy the lowest level of distance from reality; hence, they are closest to reality and reflect meanings derived from the actual research context. They are

¹⁸ al-Sayyid ‘Alī Shaṭā, *Al-binā’ al-manhajī li-‘ilm al-ijtimā’*: *Ṭuruq al-baḥth al-ijtimā’ī* (al-Dār al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’), 93.



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characterised by social specificity and are influenced by temporal and spatial factors, making them temporary and contingent on the study's conditions.

Many researchers argue that one of the most important functions of operational definitions is to serve as *building blocks* for developing and refining hypotheses.¹⁹ Typically, an operational concept concludes by formulating one or more questions from which the researcher derives a *general* or *central hypothesis*, followed by subhypotheses or indicators.

The relationship between the operational definition and the hypotheses is particularly close, as the operational definition helps subhypotheses become indicators and scientific foundations that interconnect to form, ultimately, the general concept.

For example, a hypothesis suggesting a relationship between *child health care* and *the likelihood of disability* requires the researcher to define operationally both concepts of health care and disability to be able to measure them. As an abstract concept, health care encompasses several aspects, including the type of care received after birth, the regularity of medical visits when the child is ill, systematic vaccination, the type of nutrition, and other factors. Therefore, a precise operational definition of these abstract meanings is essential.

In addition to their close connection with hypotheses, operational definitions of concepts in social research set the field framework for the steps of social inquiry. By giving abstract concepts specific meanings directly linked to material reality, this linkage accompanies most of the

¹⁹ Sanā' al-Khūlī, *Al-Uṣra wa-l-ḥayāh al-`ā`iliyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍa al-`Arabiyya, 1984), 140–141.

essential elements of social research, from the unit of analysis to the results.²⁰

This becomes evident when the researcher precisely defines concepts via clear, realistic indicators and parameters, which, in turn, facilitate the accurate and effective selection of research domains, primarily the spatial domain (the research community) and the human domain (the research sample).²¹

Defining concepts also enables and assists the researcher in formulating questions about the phenomenon under study. The empirical indicators generated by the operational definition of concepts form a question, several questions, a questionnaire, an interview guide, or any other research instrument designed to measure the concepts employed.²²

For the results, operational definitions gradually give them a broader meaning that goes beyond the sensory dimension or the statistical figure they indicate.²³

Importantly, the distinction between *general concepts* defined theoretically without being derived from social events and *specific operational concepts* arising from empirical field experimentation is important. The former concerns human behaviour in general and is not tied to a single human society, a specific time period, or a geographically limited area. They are open rather than closed concepts, for

²⁰ 'Alī Gharbī et al., *Usus al-manhajīyya fī al-'ulūm al-ijtimā'īyya* (Constantine: University of Mentouri Press, 1999), 100.

²¹ Sa'īd Nāṣif, *Muḥāḍarāt fī taṣmīm al-buḥūth al-ijtimā'īyya wa-tanfīdhīhā: Namādhij li-dirāsāt wa-buḥūth maydāniyya* (Cairo: Maktabat Zahra' al-Sharq, 1997), 24.

²² 'Alī 'Abd al-Razzāq Jiblī et al., *Al-Baḥth al-'ilmī al-ijtimā'ī: Luḡatuh wa-madākhiluh wa-manāhijuh wa-ṭarā'iquh* (Alexandria: Dār al-Ma'rifa al-Jāmi'īyya, 2003), 28.

²³ 'Alī Gharbī et al., *Usus al-manhajīyya fī al-'ulūm al-ijtimā'īyya* (Constantine: University of Mentouri Press, 1999), 100.



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example, *social mobility, social interaction, social change, or modernisation.*

The second type of social concept is operational, referring to the time and place of their study. They are thus specific, distinctive, and temporary because they depend on the particular conditions of the society under study and temporary because societies change over time and differ from one another even within the same period.²⁴

5. Difficulties in Defining Concepts in the Social Sciences

Most scholars in the humanities and social sciences agree that the importance of precisely defining research concepts lies primarily in the fact that the first criterion for designing a rigorous, well-structured study carefully considers all the variables affecting the research problem. The second criterion is accuracy in expression, which, in many cases and given the nature of the language used, is not an easy requirement to fulfil.

Unlike in the natural sciences, the difficulty encountered by researchers in the social sciences, particularly in sociology, stems from the fact that words may have different meanings for different individuals. This requires the researcher to pay close attention to the precise meanings of the terms and expressions used in the study.²⁵

²⁴ Adnān Aḥmad Muslim, *Al-Baḥṭh al-ijtimā'ī al-maydānī: Khuṭuwāt al-taṣmīm wa-l-tanfīdh*, vol. 2 (Algeria: Dīwān al-Maṭbū'āt al-Jāmi'īyya, 1985), 141.

²⁵ Ṭal'at Hammām, *Sīn wa-Jīm 'an manāhij al-baḥṭh al-'ilmī* (Amman: Dār 'Ammār, 1984), 81–82.

Another source of difficulty in defining concepts arises from the diversity of theoretical and ideological orientations among those engaged in the social and human sciences in general and in sociology in particular. There is little consensus among scholars on many of the concepts used in sociology. Differences and divergences in theoretical and intellectual frameworks are reflected in divergent concepts.²⁶

Most scientific concepts have more than one definition because a single research topic is often addressed by several scholars, each of whom formulates a new definition. This new definition typically does not contradict the earlier definition but rather complements it by highlighting an additional aspect of its underlying meaning that the other definition did not address. This is a characteristic feature of the social sciences: it is difficult for any single definition of a concept to fully encompass the reality it represents, given the apparent limitations of human cognition and language in grasping the totality of real-world phenomena.

A concept such as *culture*, for example, encompasses dozens of social phenomena, and the same applies to concepts such as *deviance*, *education*, and *development*.²⁷

Finally, a scientific concept may change over time as scientific knowledge advances. Examples include concepts such as *society*, *social change*, *community*, *social development*, *underdevelopment*, and *social relations*. Thus, scholars differ in defining a given concept in the social sciences due to the aforementioned difficulties, which hinder precise conceptual determination. This makes it essential for the researcher to

²⁶ Sa'īd Nāṣif, *Muḥāḍarāt fī taṣmīm al-buḥūth al-ijtimā'īyya wa-tanfīdhihā*, 24.

²⁷ Khayr Allāh 'Aṣṣār, *Madkhal ilā qaḍāyā al-ta'līm fī al-'ulūm al-ijtimā'īyya*, vol. 2 (Algeria: Dīwān al-Maṭbū'āt al-Jāmi'īyya, 1985), 141.



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define the study's core concepts through both an abstract and an operational definition.

6. How to move from Abstract Concepts to Operational Concepts

Maurice Angers noted that conceptual analysis is a gradual process of embodying what we aim to observe in reality. This analysis begins when the researcher starts extracting concepts from the hypothesis or research objective. It continues as the concept is deconstructed to identify the dimensions or aspects to be taken into account. Each dimension is then examined and transformed into indicators or observable phenomena.

Since a concept is an abstract construct, embodying it requires breaking it down into its various dimensions. This involves examining its deeper meanings and acknowledging that it refers to aspects of reality that may be highly diverse.

To illustrate, consider the following hypothesis: "*The resources of spouses determine their family authority.*" The main concepts in this hypothesis are "*spouses' resources*" and "*family authority.*" *Family authority* is a concept because it is an abstract shorthand for numerous observable phenomena, including decision-making processes, recognised decision-makers, and the distribution of household tasks within the family. It is, therefore, a mental construct formed about a particular aspect of reality.²⁸

The higher a concept's level of abstraction is, the more steps are required to operationalise it and bring it closer to observable reality. From the concept of *firstborn*, for instance,

²⁸ Maurice Angers, *Manhajyyat al-baḥth al-'ilmī fī al-'ulūm al-insāniyya*, 158.

one can quickly move to designating *birth order in the family*; the transition from the abstract to the concrete is simple in this case. The same applies to the concept of *income*, which can be easily operationalised via a monetary standard.

However, the process may not be as swift with a concept such as *job satisfaction*, which may encompass elements such as the nature of tasks to be performed, relationships with colleagues and management, the work environment, working hours, and more. Thus, several concrete realities are grouped under this concept.

After the researcher has identified the concepts to be used, a provisional definition is provided for each, thereby eliminating ambiguity and clarifying the research subject. For example, at the outset, the concept of *family authority* may be defined as *the power to make important decisions within the family*. This provisional definition provides valuable assistance in deconstructing the concept and identifying its dimensions.

Returning to the hypothesis that *“the resources of spouses determine their family authority,”* a relationship is established between two main concepts: *resources* and *family authority*. In this case, several dimensions of the concept of *spouses' resources* can be derived from its definition as the sum of the financial, intellectual, physical, or social capabilities available to each spouse. These four categories of resources thus become the dimensions of the concept.

On the other hand, the concept of *family authority*, defined as the observable act of making important decisions within the family, can be broken down into distinct dimensions across the spheres of family activity: economic, domestic, social, childcare, and upbringing. This is the initial definition that leads to these dimensions. If, however, the concept of



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authority was defined differently, its dimensions would likewise be entirely different. For example, if *family authority* was defined as *the legitimate power to act within the family*, then its dimensions would reflect the domains recognised by law as granting authority over family members.²⁹

Suppose we return to the course of the conceptual analysis carried out thus far. In that case, we extracted the hypotheses' boundaries and main concepts and provisionally defined them. We then highlighted the aspects, or more precisely, the *dimensions*, of each concept that should be retained. At this stage, these dimensions must be translated into observable behaviours or phenomena. This is the role of the *indicator*.

With the remaining hypothesis *that "the resources of spouses determine their family authority,"* let us identify one dimension of the concept of *spouses' resources: financial means*. Here, it is necessary to look for observable signs, scientifically called *observables*, that provide an overview of financial means. These indicators may include income, savings, deposits, and real estate. These elements serve as indicators of the dimension of financial means, which, in turn, refers to the concept of spouses' resources.³⁰

To identify indicators for each potential dimension, the researcher must ask: *What observable signs in reality can be used to define this dimension?* In doing so, the researcher draws on knowledge, experience, and intuition. The observable phenomena that appear significant are organised since there is no standard list of universally applicable

²⁹ Ibid., 160.

³⁰ Ibid., 162.

indicators. Indicators must therefore be identified for each dimension.

For example, if we return to the concept of *family authority*, one of its dimensions relates to the domestic sphere. The observable signs might include decisions about the type or quantity of food, the methods used for housework, the distribution of tasks, and meal preparation, among others. All of these serve as indicators of decision-making related to the family's domestic activities.

Figure 1 illustrates how the concepts of spouses' resources and family authority are broken down into dimensions and indicators.

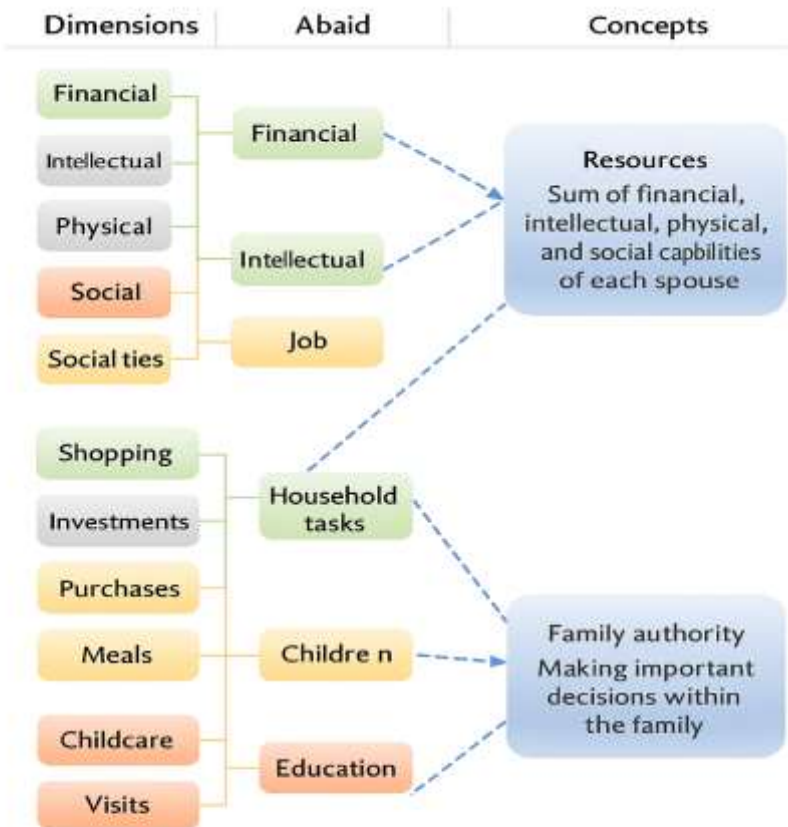


Figure 1: Conceptual analysis of the hypothesis "Resources determine family authority"

After that, the indicators identified are reexamined in light of the initial concept and dimension to assess their degree of coherence. Do they all clearly and effectively point

to what we are seeking to measure? Is it necessary to add, remove, or modify any of them? It must also be ensured that the indicators adequately cover the essential elements of the dimension.

Since indicators are specific to a given reality, the researcher must verify that indicators of a particular dimension do not extend into the domain of another dimension, which refers to a different reality. For example, purchasing a dishwasher, even though it falls within the domestic sphere, has a stronger connection to the economic dimension, as it involves a significant economic decision.

Thus, careful selection of indicators and their precise placement guarantee the coherence required for conceptual analysis. To arrive at indicators, each concept is deconstructed while accounting for its dimensions so that the terms used correspond directly to observable phenomena. If observation is not possible, this means that the terms remain too abstract, indicating that the process of breaking down the dimensions or subdimensions has not yet been completed. In such a case, analysis must continue until a concrete and observable level is reached.

Conversely, the boundaries of a hypothesis may already be sufficiently concrete at the outset and do not require a complete conceptual analysis. This is the case with hypotheses containing variables such as gender, age, income, or level of education, which can be directly used as indicators in other studies. Here, the term refers to such a low level of abstraction that it effectively merges with the indicator itself since it directly provides the sign through which the phenomenon can be observed.³¹

Conclusion

³¹ Ibid., 164.



In conclusion, defining concepts in the social sciences is an essential methodological step in scientific research. Scientific accuracy requires clear, precise definitions for every concept or term used by the researcher. Identifying various concepts and presenting the definitions offered by specialists and scholars relevant to the study topic is highly important for achieving both precision and objectivity.

This study reached several key points that help transition from an abstract concept to an operational, measurable concept, as follows:

- Referring to previous definitions of the concept.
- Arriving at the meaning agreed upon in most definitions.
- An initial definition that incorporates the ordinary meaning of most definitions is formulated while ensuring that it does not include ambiguous or unclear language, figurative expressions, or metaphors and that it specifies the essential characteristics of the concept to be defined.
- Making final adjustments to the definition on the basis of valid critique, avoiding overuse of unrelated concepts or terms, and limiting the focus to those that are central to the research title, aligned with its objectives, and embedded in its hypotheses.
- Relying on key sources for concept definitions, including Arabic and English dictionaries (and other languages where relevant), as well as specialised sociological dictionaries.
- Recognising the importance of provisional definitions provides a rich source for deriving dimensions.

- Acknowledging the value of operational definitions, which must include a set of indicators enabling the researcher to be guided in the field and to measure the concept and collect quantitative data about it.
- The number of indicators may be large or very limited, but employing multiple indicators ensures a more objective and accurate evaluation of the concept. However, these indicators must be distinctive, allowing precise identification and differentiation, with each dimension having its own specific indicators.

Through all that has been addressed in this scientific paper, the researcher recommends the following:

- More conferences and workshops aimed at guiding students and enabling them to master the use of concepts in their social research are needed.
- Preparing an academic manual to identify the most common methodological errors, particularly the weak conceptual treatment of social research, and emphasising the necessity of defining concepts and their real-world connotations when conducting research and studies. This ensures accuracy and objectivity in analysing and understanding research problems in a unified manner. The ultimate goal of all these efforts is to produce more credible and reliable results, which is the highest aim of any scientific endeavour.

Footnotes



- ¹ Ṭāriq ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Samarā’ī, *Manhajīyya ḥadītha fī al-baḥth al-‘ilmī al-akādīmī li-l-dirāsāt al-jāmi‘iyya al-‘ulyā* (Beirut: Dār al-Anwār), 61.
- ¹ Akoun and Pierre Ansart, eds., *Dictionnaire de sociologie* (Paris: Le Robert, 1999), 100.
- ¹ Ma‘n Khalīl ‘Umar, *Manhajīyyat al-baḥth fī ‘ilm al-ijtimā‘* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004), 56.
- ¹ Maurice Angers, *Manhajīyyat al-baḥth al-‘ilmī fī al-‘ulūm al-insāniyya*, trans. Būzīd Ṣaḥrāwī et al. (Algeria: Dār al-Qaṣaba li-l-Nashr, 2004), 158.
- ¹ Abd al-Karīm Gharīb, *Manhaj al-baḥth al-‘ilmī fī ‘ulūm al-tarbiyya wa-l-‘ulūm al-insāniyya* (Casablanca: ‘Ālam al-Tarbiyya, 2012), 155.
- ¹ Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Qādir Ṣāliḥ et al., *Al-Murshid fī i‘dād al-buḥūth wa-l-dirāsāt al-‘ilmīyya* (Khartoum: Jāmi‘at al-Sūdān, 2001), 10.
- ¹ Sa‘īd Jāsīm al-Asadī, *Akhlaqiyyāt al-baḥth al-‘ilmī fī al-‘ulūm al-insāniyya wa-l-ijtimā‘iyya wa-l-tarbawīyya* (Iraq: Wārith Cultural Foundation, 2008), 50.
- ¹ Madeleine Grawitz, *Manāhij al-‘ulūm al-ijtimā‘iyya*, trans. Sām ‘Ammār (Damascus: al-Markaz al-‘Arabī li-l-Tadrīb wa-l-Tarjama, 1993), 55.
- ¹ Rabiḥ Muṣṭafā ‘Alyān et al., *Manāhij wa-asālīb al-baḥth al-‘ilmī: al-naẓariyya wa-l-taṭbīq* (Amman: Dār al-Ṣafā’, 2000), 171.
- ¹ Ibid., 180–181.
- ¹ Iṣām ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb Būb, *Madkhal manāhij al-baḥth al-‘ilmī* (2007), 199.
- ¹ Raḥīm Yūnis Karrū al-‘Azzāwī, *Manhaj al-baḥth al-‘ilmī* (Amman: Dār Dijla, 2008), 50–51.
- ¹ Muḥammad Khalīl ‘Abbās et al., *Madkhal ilā manāhij al-baḥth fī al-tarbiyya wa-‘ilm al-nafs* (Amman: Dār al-Masīra, 2007), 62.

- ¹ Muḥyī Muḥammad Mas‘ad, *Kayfiyyat kitābat al-abḥāth wa-l-i‘dād li-l-muḥāḍarāt* (Alexandria: al-Maktab al-‘Arabī al-Ḥadīth, 2000), 29.
- ¹ Muwafaq ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Qādir, *Manhaj al-baḥth al-‘ilmī wa-kitābat al-rasā’il al-‘ilmiyya* (Mecca: Dār al-Tawḥīd, 2011), 116.
- ¹ Sāmī Ṭābi‘, *Manāhij al-baḥth wa-kitābat al-mashrū‘ al-muqtarah li-l-baḥth*, trans. Salwā Faṭḥī Aḥmad (Cairo: Markaz Taṭwīr al-Dirāsāt al-‘Ulyā wa-l-Buḥūth, 2007), 5–6.
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- ¹ al-Sayyid ‘Alī Shaṭā, *Al-binā’ al-manhajī li-‘ilm al-ijtimā‘: Ṭuruq al-baḥth al-ijtimā’ī* (al-Dār al-Waṭaniyya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘), 93.
- ¹ Sanā’ al-Khūlī, *Al-Usra wa-l-ḥayāh al-‘ā’iliyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍa al-‘Arabiyya, 1984), 140–141.
- ¹ ‘Alī Gharbī et al., *Usus al-manhajīyya fī al-‘ulūm al-ijtimā’iyya* (Constantine: University of Mentouri Press, 1999), 100.
- ¹ Sa‘īd Nāshif, *Muḥāḍarāt fī taṣmīm al-buḥūth al-ijtimā’iyya wa-tanfīdhihā: Namādhij li-dirāsāt wa-buḥūth maydāniyya* (Cairo: Maktabat Zahra’ al-Sharq, 1997), 24.
- ¹ ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Razzāq Jiblī et al., *Al-Baḥth al-‘ilmī al-ijtimā’ī: Lughatuh wa-madākhiluh wa-manāhijuh wa-ṭarā’iquh* (Alexandria: Dār al-Ma‘rifa al-Jāmi‘iyya, 2003), 28.
- ¹ ‘Alī Gharbī et al., *Usus al-manhajīyya fī al-‘ulūm al-ijtimā’iyya* (Constantine: University of Mentouri Press, 1999), 100.
- ¹ Adnān Aḥmad Muslim, *Al-Baḥth al-ijtimā’ī al-maydānī: Khuṭuwāt al-taṣmīm wa-l-tanfīdh*, vol. 2 (Algeria: Dīwān al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Jāmi‘iyya, 1985), 141.
- ¹ Ṭal‘at Hammām, *Sīn wa-Jīm ‘an manāhij al-baḥth al-‘ilmī* (Amman: Dār ‘Ammār, 1984), 81–82.
- ¹ Sa‘īd Nāshif, *Muḥāḍarāt fī taṣmīm al-buḥūth al-ijtimā’iyya wa-tanfīdhihā*, 24.



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- ¹ Khayr Allāh ‘Aṣṣār, *Madkhal ilā qaḍāyā al-ta‘līm fī al-‘ulūm al-ijtimā‘iyya*, vol. 2 (Algeria: Dīwān al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Jāmi‘iyya, 1985), 141.
- ¹ Maurice Angers, *Manhajyyat al-baḥṭh al-‘ilmī fī al-‘ulūm al-insāniyya*, 158.
- ¹ Ibid., 160.
- ¹ Ibid., 162.
- ¹ Ibid., 164.