9.2: Conceptualization

Learning Objectives

- Define concept
- Identify why defining our concepts is important
- Describe how conceptualization works in quantitative and qualitative research
- Define dimensions in terms of social scientific measurement
- Apply reification to conceptualization

In this section, we'll take a look at one of the first steps in the measurement process, which is conceptualization. This has to do with defining our terms as clearly as possible and also not taking ourselves too seriously in the process. Our definitions mean only what we say they mean—nothing more and nothing less. Let's talk first about how to define our terms, and then we'll examine what I mean about not taking ourselves (or our terms, rather) too seriously.

So far, the word concept has come up quite a bit, and it would behoove us to make sure we have a shared understanding of that term. A concept is the notion or image that we conjure up when we think of some cluster of related observations or ideas. For example, masculinity is a concept. What do you think of when you hear that word? Presumably, you imagine some set of behaviors and perhaps even a particular style of self-presentation. Of course, we can’t necessarily assume that everyone conjures up the same set of ideas or images when they hear the word masculinity. In fact, there are many possible ways to define the term. And while some definitions may be more common or have more support than others, there isn’t one true, always-correct-in-all-settings definition. What counts as masculine may shift over time, from culture to culture, and even from individual to individual (Kimmel, 2008). [1] This is why defining our concepts is so important.
You might be asking yourself why you should bother defining a term for which there is no single, correct definition. Believe it or not, this is true for any concept you might measure in a research study—there is never a single, always-correct definition. When we conduct empirical research, our terms mean only what we say they mean. There’s a New Yorker cartoon that aptly represents this idea (https://condenaststore.com/featured/it-all-depends-on-how-you-define-chop-tom-cheney.html). It depicts a young George Washington holding an axe and standing near a freshly chopped cherry tree. Young George is looking up at a frowning adult who is standing over him, arms crossed. The caption depicts George explaining, “It all depends on how you define ‘chop.’” Young George Washington gets the idea—whether he actually chopped down the cherry tree depends on whether we have a shared understanding of the term chop.

Without a shared understanding of this term, our understandings of what George has just done may differ. Likewise, without understanding how a researcher has defined her key concepts, it would be nearly impossible to understand the meaning of that researcher’s findings and conclusions. Thus, any decision we make based on findings from empirical research should be made based on full knowledge not only of how the research was designed, as described in Chapter 7 but also of how its concepts were defined and measured.

So, how do we define our concepts? This is part of the process of measurement, and this portion of the process is called conceptualization. The answer depends on how we plan to approach our research. We will begin with quantitative conceptualization and then discuss qualitative conceptualization.

In quantitative research, conceptualization involves writing out clear, concise definitions for our key concepts. Sticking with the previously mentioned example of masculinity, think about what comes to mind when you read that term. How do you know masculinity when you see it? Does it have something to do with men? With social norms? If so, perhaps we could define masculinity as the social norms that men are expected to follow. That seems like a reasonable start, and at this early stage of conceptualization, brainstorming about the images conjured up by concepts and playing around with possible definitions is appropriate. However, this is just the first step.

It would make sense as well to consult other previous research and theory to understand if other scholars have already defined the concepts we’re interested in. This doesn’t necessarily mean we must use their definitions, but understanding how concepts have been defined in the past will give us an idea about how our conceptualizations compare with the predominant ones out there. Understanding prior definitions of our key concepts will also help us decide whether we plan to challenge those conceptualizations or rely on them for our own work. Finally, working on conceptualization is likely to help in the process of refining your research question to one that is specific and clear in what it asks.
If we turn to the literature on masculinity, we will surely come across work by Michael Kimmel, one of the preeminent masculinity scholars in the United States. After consulting Kimmel’s prior work (2000; 2008), we might tweak our initial definition of masculinity just a bit. Rather than defining masculinity as “the social norms that men are expected to follow,” perhaps instead we’ll define it as “the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 503). Our revised definition is both more precise and more complex. Rather than simply addressing one aspect of men’s lives (norms), our new definition addresses three aspects: roles, behaviors, and meanings. It also implies that roles, behaviors, and meanings may vary across societies and over time. To be clear, we’ll also have to specify the particular society and time period we’re investigating as we conceptualize masculinity.

As you can see, conceptualization isn’t quite as simple as merely applying any random definition that we come up with to a term. Sure, it may involve some initial brainstorming, but conceptualization goes beyond that. Once we’ve brainstormed a bit about the images a particular word conjures up for us, we should also consult prior work to understand how others define the term in question. And after we’ve identified a clear definition that we’re happy with, we should make sure that every term used in our definition will make sense to others. Are there terms used within our definition that also need to be defined? If so, our conceptualization is not yet complete. And there is yet another aspect of conceptualization to consider—concept dimensions. We’ll consider that aspect along with an additional word of caution about conceptualization in the next subsection.

Conceptualization in qualitative research proceeds a bit differently than in quantitative research. Because qualitative researchers are interested in the understandings and experiences of their participants, it is less important for the researcher to find one fixed definition for a concept before starting to interview or interact with participants. The researcher’s job is to accurately and completely represent how their participants understand a concept, not to test their own definition of that concept.

If you were conducting qualitative research on masculinity, you would likely consult previous literature like Kimmel’s work mentioned above. From your literature review, you may come up with a working definition for the terms you plan to use in your study, which can change over the course of the investigation. However, the definition that matters is the definition that your participants share during data collection. A working definition is merely a place to start, and researchers should take care not to think it is the only or best definition out there.

In qualitative inquiry, your participants are the experts (sound familiar, social workers?) on the concepts that arise during the research study. Your job as the researcher is to accurately and reliably collect and interpret their understanding of the concepts they describe while answering your questions. Conceptualization of qualitative concepts is likely to change over the course of qualitative inquiry, as you learn more information from your participants. Indeed, getting participants to comment on, extend, or challenge the definitions and understandings of other participants is a hallmark of qualitative research. This is the opposite of quantitative research, in which definitions must be completely set in stone before the inquiry can begin.

Whether you have chosen qualitative or quantitative methods, you should have a clear definition for the term masculinity and make sure that the terms we use in our definition are equally clear—and then we’re done, right? Not so fast. If you’ve ever met more than one man in your life, you’ve probably noticed that they are not all exactly the same, even if they live in the same society and at the same historical time period. This could mean there are dimensions of masculinity. In terms of social scientific measurement, concepts can be said to have multiple dimensions when there...
are multiple elements that make up a single concept. With respect to the term masculinity, dimensions could be regional (is masculinity defined differently in different regions of the same country?), age-based (is masculinity defined differently for men of different ages?), or perhaps power-based (does masculinity differ based on membership to privileged groups?). In any of these cases, the concept of masculinity would be considered to have multiple dimensions. While it isn't necessarily required to spell out every possible dimension of the concepts you wish to measure, it may be important to do so depending on the goals of your research. The point here is to be aware that some concepts have dimensions and to think about whether and when dimensions may be relevant to the concepts you intend to investigate.

Before we move on to the additional steps involved in the measurement process, it would be wise to remind ourselves not to take our definitions too seriously. Conceptualization must be open to revisions, even radical revisions, as scientific knowledge progresses. While I've suggested that we should consult prior scholarly definitions of our concepts, it would be wrong to assume that just because prior definitions exist that they are more real than the definitions we create (or, likewise, that our own made-up definitions are any more real than any other definition). It would also be wrong to assume that just because definitions exist for some concept that the concept itself exists beyond some abstract idea in our heads. This idea, assuming that our abstract concepts exist in some concrete, tangible way, is known as reification.

To better understand reification, take a moment to think about the concept of social structure. This concept is central to critical thinking. When social scientists talk about social structure, they are talking about an abstract concept. Social structures shape our ways of being in the world and of interacting with one another, but they do not exist in any concrete or tangible way. A social structure isn’t the same thing as other sorts of structures, such as buildings or bridges. Sure, both types of structures are important to how we live our everyday lives, but one we can touch, and the other is just an idea that shapes our way of living.

Here’s another way of thinking about reification: Think about the term family. If you were interested in studying this concept, we’ve learned that it would be good to consult prior theory and research to understand how the term has been conceptualized by others. But we should also question past conceptualizations. Think, for example, about how different the definition of family was 50 years ago. Because researchers from that time period conceptualized family using now outdated social norms, social scientists from 50 years ago created research projects based on what we consider now to be a very limited and problematic notion of what family means. Their definitions of family were as real to them as our definitions are to us today. If researchers never challenged the definitions of terms like family, our scientific knowledge would be filled with the prejudices and blind spots from years ago. It makes sense to come to some social agreement about what various concepts mean. Without that agreement, it would be difficult to navigate through everyday living. But at the same time, we should not forget that we have assigned those definitions, they are imperfect and subject to
change as a result of critical inquiry.

Key Takeaways

- Conceptualization is a process that involves coming up with clear, concise definitions.
- Conceptualization in quantitative research comes from the researcher’s ideas or the literature.
- Qualitative researchers conceptualize by creating working definitions which will be revised based on what participants say.
- Some concepts have multiple elements or dimensions.
- Researchers should acknowledge the limitations of their definitions for concepts.

Glossary

- Concept- notion or image that we conjure up when we think of some cluster of related observations or ideas
- Conceptualization- writing out clear, concise definitions for our key concepts, particularly in quantitative research
- Multi-dimensional concepts- concepts that are comprised of multiple elements
- Reification- assuming that abstract concepts exist in some concrete, tangible way

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