Conceptualization and Construction of Concepts in Sociology: An Analytical Approach

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Abstract:
Engaging in scientific research is a complex process that must adhere to a set of theoretical and methodological guidelines, foremost among them being the correct selection of the research question and the identification of the fundamental concepts governing it as independent and dependent variables.

Perhaps the most complex steps are those related to conceptualization and construction, as they directly influence the identification of the key indicators upon which the survey or any research tool is built. Consequently, they directly and indirectly influence the research outcomes.

Observing reality and developing inferential capabilities to understand it can only come through thorough scrutiny of its components and realities beyond mental assumptions. This imposes on sociological researchers, in particular, the necessity of having a logical and realistic imagination capable of naming phenomena by their terms, without relying on moral judgments or general mental conclusions.

Hence, the crucial stage of conceptualization and construction becomes paramount in order to achieve realistic results that express the truth of the phenomenon. Concepts, therefore, are the key to social research because their construction represents the transition from abstraction to the tangible and, consequently, to results capable of relative generalization.

In this paper, we will discuss a set of elements that serve researchers to distinguish between a set of intertwined concepts such as term, concept, and definition on one hand, and on the other hand, we will attempt to focus on an important point overlooked by researchers in the social sciences, which is the distinction between the stages of concept identification and concept construction.

Keywords: Conceptualization, Concept, Term, Concept Determination, Concept Construction.

INTRODUCTION

Conducting scientific research is a complex process that must adhere to a set of theoretical and methodological guidelines, most importantly the correct selection of the initial research question and the definition of the fundamental concepts that govern it as independent and dependent variables. Perhaps the most complex steps are those related to defining concepts, because they directly control the determination of the essential indicators that form the basis of the questionnaire or any other research tools, and thus they control both directly and indirectly the results of the research. Observing reality and developing inferential abilities to understand it can only be achieved through deep scrutiny of its real components rather than mental perceptions. This demands, especially from a sociological researcher, to possess a logical and realistic imagination capable of naming phenomena accurately, without relying on value judgments and general mental conclusions. Hence, the importance of a stage that is crucial in determining and controlling concepts to achieve realistic results that truthfully represent the phenomenon, as concepts are indeed the key to the language of science because their construction represents the transition from abstract to concrete, and thus to a product capable of relative generalization.

1. The Nature of the Concept:

Mastering concepts requires us as academic researchers to understand their meanings and dimensions, as the boundaries used to pose the initial question in any research fundamentally relate to the meanings of the concepts we start with. These concepts vary depending on the environment in which they are formed. Therefore, it is essential for the seasoned researcher to know the context of the concept before defining its dimensions.

Upon reflecting on our Islamic intellectual heritage—derived from the Holy Quran and the Noble Sunnah—one indeed notices the importance of precise word and phrase control, especially those related to specific intellectual or active contexts, to the extent that there is complete diligence in obliging Muslims to use certain terms and phrases, and prohibiting deviation from them or renaming them, even if the two expressions are very similar (*O believers! Do not say, "Râ'ina." But say, "Unẓurna," and listen ˹attentively˺*) [Al-Baqarah: 104].

1.1 Basic Concepts Related to the Concept:

Maurice Angers defines a concept as "a mental perception of one or more phenomena and the relationships existing between them (Angers, 2006, p. 158).

"He also deconstructs concepts into dimensions that serve them, defining them in turn as "one of the components or aspects of the concept which refers to a certain level of the latter's reality (Angers, 2006, p. 160)."

Angers considers an indicator to be "an element of a dimension that can be observed in reality (Angers, 2006, p. 161)."

Webster's dictionary defines a concept as "a general term that expresses a homogeneous group of things, which is an abstraction of reality allowing us to express this reality through it (Abrash, 2008, p. 236).

"It also defines a term as "the symbolic means by which human's express different meanings and ideas, aiming to convey them to others."

Thus, the term carries the scientific content in language; it is a tool for interacting with knowledge and the basis for communication in the information society, highlighting its significant importance and crucial role in the knowledge process (Al-Qasimi, 2008, p. 922).

1.2 The Difference between a Concept and a Theory:

A concept is an abstraction of reality and describes events, things, and individuals (for example, colors, tastes, emotions, and morals, etc.). On the other hand, a theory is an organized accumulation of research knowledge that attempts to explain and answer the causes of phenomena and predict them by linking them to each other in a specific ideological framework.

Thus, a concept is an expression of homogeneous things, without meaning something singular; it is an abstract description of observed facts, but does not speak of a specific incident. This integration between concepts, dimensions, and indicators reflects the harmony between them from general to specific. A researcher who cannot read between the lines does not understand the realities of social life. Hence, mastering the concept is crucial for a successful researcher.

1.3 The Importance of Concepts:

The significance of concepts generally stems from their role as containers through which ideas are expressed. If the control of this container is disturbed, its expressive meanings altered or diluted, the intellectual structure itself becomes unstable and its values waver in people's minds. Therefore, controlling terminology and concepts is not merely a formal procedure or an artificial approach, but rather a process that directly affects the essence of the content and extends its dimensions to methodological and intellectual outcomes.

In scientific research, it is fundamental to define the concepts that will be tested and studied, or those that appear in the hypotheses and questions of the research. Many concepts indicate different meanings; a single concept may mean something specific in one discipline but something different in another. For instance, the term "theater" in the context of literature and art refers to the known art of theater, whereas in military sciences, "theater" often denotes the place of combat or battle (theater of operations). Similarly, the term "gravity" in physics refers to earthly or magnetic attraction, while in psychology, it might signify characteristics in a personality that attract or impress people.

Furthermore, a single concept can indicate more than one meaning within the same field. The concept of "function" might refer to a person's profession or the job they perform, as well as to internal psychological processes like thinking and reflection. At the same time, there are closely related concepts such as "motive," "drive," and "need" in psychology, and concepts like "opinion" and "attitude." Because of this, it is crucial to define the (concepts) used in scientific research, otherwise chaos ensues and misunderstandings arise.

Dr. Ammara discusses the significance of the particularity of civilizational contents of concepts:

If we consider any term as a "container" in which "content" is placed and as a "tool" that carries a "message" of meaning, we will find the appropriateness and suitability of many terms to act as "containers" and "tools" across different civilizations. However, if we view terms from the perspective of the "contents" placed in these containers and in terms of the intellectual messages carried by these "tools: terms," we will find ourselves in urgent and intense need to control the terminology; because we will find ourselves facing "general containers" and "common tools" among civilizations and intellectual systems, yet at the same time facing "specific contents" and distinct messages that differ and are characterized by these general containers and common tools among the people of each distinguished civilization (Amara, 1996, p. 04).

1.4 How to Build Concepts:

A sociological researcher can utilize the practical procedure established by Lazarsfeld (1901-1976), which facilitates the transition from a theoretical abstract concept to a practical concrete one. This procedure consists of four essential steps (Boudon, 1980, pp. 48-52):

1.4.1 Conceptualizing and visualizing the concept:

This means that the concept is recognized and mentally absorbed. A concept is a general and abstract mental perception of a phenomenon. For example, the concept of social integration is an abstract mental construction that we do not observe in tangible reality. It mentally translates certain levels of social reality, and this applies to the concepts used in sociology.

1.4.2 Specifying the concept or defining its dimensions:

This is the stage of moving from abstract to concrete, expressing the abstract concept that is not directly observable in tangible reality with levels of reality that serve as components of this concept. Generally, a concept consists of a complex set of phenomena, not just a simple phenomenon that can be directly observed. For instance, the concept of social change could have the following dimensions: political, economic, cultural, and social.

1.4.3 Indicators of the concept dimension:

An indicator is a characteristic or relationship that allows the researcher to observe the phenomenon under study. An indicator is the observable manifestation in reality of a concept dimension. It enables the transition from abstract to tangible reality, which allows for the commencement of hypothesis testing (Saboun & Jeradi, 2012, pp. 117-119).

To find indicators for each potential dimension, the researcher must continually ask (Ager, 2006, p. 162): "What are the observable signs in reality that can help define this concept? "

In this context, it is not possible to talk about tabulating or classifying conceptual indicators, especially since concepts in sociology are taken relatively, whether from the researcher's perspective, from the angle of the studied society, or even from the theoretical approach used in the study. Therefore, defining indicators for concept dimensions in sociology primarily depends on readings and observations in the exploratory phase of the research.

Here is an example of defining indicators for the dimensions of the concepts related to the dependent and independent variables for the following hypothesis: "The deviant behavior of a teenager is determined based on the social status of the family." Here, the dependent variable

is deviant behavior, whereas the independent variable is the social status of the family. In this case, we need to translate these concepts into tangible, observable indicators in reality.

Concept	Dimension	Indicators
Social status of the family	Educational level	Parents' educational level
		Parents' profession
		Parents'socio-cultural background
		Language spoken at home
	Economic status	Ownership of an independent house
		Ownership of a car
		Daily living standards
		Vacation destinations
		Expensive gifts for children
		Personal cars for each family member
		Enrollment in private schools
		Separate rooms for each individual
	Cultural environment	Internet availability at home
		Computers and personal phones for each individual
		Freedom of children to come and go
		Encouragement of personal freedom
		Presence of a library at home
		Recreational outings
Adolescent deviant behavior	Family relationship	Disrespect towards parents
		Moral rebellion
		Violence towards siblings
	Personal traits	Introversion
		Selfishness
	Social interactions	Associating with bad company
		Drug use
		Staying out late
		Declining academic performance

Source: Prepared by the researcher

1.4.4 Defining and Building Concepts:

Defining a concept is based on theoretical acquisitions, that is, relying on what sociological theories define about phenomena, and a specific discourse that has been developed through a scientific endeavor and process and recognized by specialists in the scientific knowledge field (Saboun & Jeradi, 2012, p. 128). It's important to note that defining concepts primarily depends on previous efforts in the theoretical sociological heritage across its various dimensions and ideologies. It's crucial to adopt concepts specific to the theoretical approach

embraced by the researcher—of course, after a thorough scrutiny and clarification of the intended meaning of the concept with precision—and not to deviate from the theoretical framework chosen by the researcher. For example, adopting the functionalist structural theory in research does not allow the researcher to adopt concepts specific to the Marxist approach or to interpret their research concepts according to the latter, as methodological constraints require defining their concepts within the theoretical framework initially adopted.

In contrast to the process of defining concepts, there is another procedure considered more important, especially from a field perspective, which is "building concepts or variables." This allows the researcher to identify tangible indicators derived from their observational and exploratory interviews. Naturally, these can be supported by what has been ascertained through a review of the literature and readings.

This process emphasizes the importance of grounding theoretical concepts in empirical evidence, ensuring that the research is both theoretically sound and practically applicable. By building upon existing theoretical frameworks and adapting them through empirical observations, researchers can develop robust and meaningful sociological studies that contribute to the field's understanding of complex social phenomena (Saboun & Jeradi, 2012, p. 128).

1.5 Concept Definition Measures:

1.5.1 Linking the Concept to Previous Definitions:

The easier it is to connect a scientific concept to its previous definitions, the easier it becomes to arrive at a precise definition for that concept. This can be achieved through:
- Referring to previous and current definitions of the concept
- Accessing the agreed-upon meaning in most definitions.
- Formulating an initial definition that encompasses the meaning agreed upon by most definitions.
- Subjecting the definition to wide-ranging criticism.
- Making final adjustments to the definition based on the valid criticism received.

1.5.2 Conditions for Defining the Concept:

In order to achieve the purpose of concepts, researchers must consider the following observations (Gharbi, 1999, pp. 103-104):
- Identifying the social dimensions of the concept.
- Avoiding personal impressions and the researcher's sensory perception.
- Refraining from using colloquial or foreign phrases and instead utilizing research language.
- Necessity of relying on and benefiting from some scientific concepts that have addressed the same concept.
- Conviction that defining concepts should not be limited to interpretation and clarification alone, but should extend to assisting the researcher in achieving the goals of their research and field studies, and bringing them closer to scientific objectivity.
- Providing a comprehensive and accurate description of the meaning or meanings of the concept, using easy, simple, and widely used expressions in sociological heritage,

taking into consideration the issue of "conceptual dynamics," where concepts may exchange positions, with the subsidiary concept becoming an original concept and vice versa, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

With attention to what could affect the concept in terms of change or distortion in its meaning, it is important to distinguish between two meanings. Changing the concept is a natural process with no harm, given the evolving nature of humans and society (such as changes in the cultural climate in which the concept exists). However, distorting the concept is a dangerous process that occurs to achieve specific goals and intellectual purposes, negatively impacting the true connotations of the concept, turning it into a false concept that corrupts the rest of the concepts forming the cognitive framework (Ismail, 1997, p. 13).

In addition to the above, the researcher must consider a set of procedural criteria that the concept should possess in social research, including:
- Conciseness.
- Expressing a single idea.
- Generality.
- Being related to the idea it represents.

2. The importance of defining concepts in scientific research and the main related problems:

2.1 The importance of defining concepts:

Defining concepts is a crucial and directive step in the path of scientific research because it directs the interpretations of indicators and the realistic dimensions of study variables. The more precisely defined the concepts are, the more accurate the results become, reflecting the social reality. Furthermore, solutions and proposals for solving the studied problem become closer to reality and more feasible for real implementation. Below is an explanation of the importance of precisely defining terms and concepts in the path of scientific research.

Avoid misunderstanding certain terms	Misunderstanding of a specific term in scientific research may occur due to lack of clarity or similarity with other scientific vocabulary. For example, the terms "abstract" and "summary," despite their close resemblance in terms of letters, have significant differences. The former is a concise representation of a specific topic in a few pages, while the latter consists of key points or outlines of a specific topic, which can be considered a "summary of the abstract." Therefore, defining scientific research terms is essential to avoid ambiguity and debate resulting from improper understanding

The researcher pinpointing their perspective with precision.	Creating definitions for scientific research terms contributes to clarifying the researcher's perspective in detail through the research or thesis with precision. This aids in clear vision for specialists who recognize its importance. It brings to mind the debate surrounding certain scientific research, especially those of social and educational nature, where neglecting to define research terms leads to varying interpretations by analysts.
Adopting definitions as a general rule for research elaboration.	After the researcher establishes definitions for the terms of scientific research, they should proceed within the same framework and without bias, in order to achieve the principles of unity and objectivity. For example, when defining globalization as the communication between peoples to exchange culture and news through modern media, this definition is media-oriented, and naturally, the explanations will address that aspect and consequently lead to results within the same context, as well as other research procedures. In the case of defining globalization as commercial exchange and economic openness through the transfer of capital owned by entrepreneurs, this definition originates from an economic perspective, and it is important to explain and analyze from this standpoint. Similarly, there are technological globalization, medical globalization, engineering globalization...

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (Fatoom, 2022, p. 520)

2.2 Problems Related to Concepts:

There are numerous issues that arise in defining and constructing concepts in sociology, especially considering that the concepts adopted in the scientific research trajectory belong to specific social and cultural environments and may have realistic connotations that are often different from the same concept's meaning in other societies. The correct adoption and construction of a concept require the researcher to localize it and determine its dimensions in light of its heritage first, and to link it to the real environment of its origin on the other hand. This ensures purposeful and objective dealing with the concept without distortion or falsification. The following are the most prominent problems that may hinder the researcher in adopting and dealing correctly with concepts:

2.2.1 The First Problem: Defining Concepts

Understanding the proposed solutions to social problems across different countries worldwide can only be achieved through a precise procedural understanding, identification, and definition of these concepts and terms so they can be operationalized and utilized effectively.

2.2.2 The Second Problem: Conceptual Transfer

This problem arises when concepts are transferred from one society to another that differs in culture, language, lifestyle, and level of civilization. Replanting concepts in a culturally different environment does not yield the same results as in their original environment. This phenomenon was coined by the famous Iranian thinker Ali Shariati as "geography of speech," meaning that certain speech may be accurate in one environment, but if transferred to another environment, it may not retain the same degree of accuracy it had in its original environment (IICWC, 2005, p. 07).

2.2.3 The Third Problem: Conceptual Standardization

These concepts coming from their "original environment" are considered a standard measure through which social phenomena in the environment are understood and explained. Furthermore, they govern everything, meaning that these transferred or cross-cultural concepts become universal concepts to which matters are referred, and backwardness is measured by deviation from these concepts, while progressiveness is aligned with them. Thus, the second environment ceases to be itself, but rather a copied version or an attempt to mimic the first environment, and its success or failure is judged by its proximity to the first model.

2.2.4 The Fourth Problem: Neglect of Indigenous Concepts

During the process of importing or transferring concepts and considering them as judgments and standards, a more significant problem arises, which is the neglect of authentic concepts of the second environment. As much as this substitution process occurs, the concepts of the second environment itself are ignored and bypassed.

2.2.5 The Fifth Problem: Culmination of Tragedy

This problem emerges when the concepts of the original environment are understood in light of imported or mimicked concepts under the pretext that they are universal concepts transcending continents, civilizations, cultures, and values (IICWC, 2016).

The fundamental problem related to concepts primarily begins in the researcher's mind from a conceptual perspective of the realistic dimensions of everything related to the subject of study, especially considering that concepts stem from abstract conceptions in the researcher's mind. Therefore, it should be noted that the aforementioned problems do not stop at the precise identification of the dimensions and indicators of the concept.

The most important problems related to the concept can be summarized in two basic issues: distinguishing between defining the concept and constructing the concept. Many researchers, and even academics, often fail to distinguish between the stage of defining concepts, which means placing the concept in its theoretical and ideological context and even in light of the available theoretical heritage around it, and the stage of constructing the concept, which involves dissecting it into basic dimensions and indicators based on the field data available in the reality of the studied phenomenon

CONCLUSION

Based on the above, it can be said that the stage of defining and constructing concepts in the field of social research holds significant importance. Its importance lies in guiding both theoretical and field research, and it has a directive and determinative impact on the results reached in the context and conclusion of the research. It is crucial in clarifying vision and

dispelling the ambiguity surrounding many concepts in sociology for the reader. Furthermore, defining and constructing concepts provide the researcher with a cognitive framework to understand the research problem.

The process of defining and constructing concepts is particularly crucial when dealing with contentious, similar, or even overlapping concepts. This process ensures clarity of ideas and knowledge for both the researcher and the reader, thereby fostering a coherent and objective view of real research topics.

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