

Concepts and Terminology

Every discipline has its own idiom replete with vocabulary, grammatical structures, and other linguistic conventions. This inevitably leads to confusion for those conducting interdisciplinary research or speaking across disciplinary boundaries. A political scientist and an anthropologist may, for example, mean very different things when they say “participation” or “order.” Moreover, these fields may attach very different normative valences to particular terms. You must prevent such differences from prematurely sinking your proposal. Understanding how your language is likely to be interpreted by reviewers and being very clear about the way you use terms and concepts will help your proposal be understood and respected across disciplines. You may also want to consider the following more specific points:

Whenever possible, avoid neologisms. The invention of new words and concepts is a necessary part of keeping social science language dynamic and current. The Academy, moreover, provides strong institutional incentives for developing new and catchy phrases. While there is no rule for when such genesis is justified, it must always be done with a great deal of care. Unless you are quite certain that what you are describing—or what you think you are describing—is a genuinely new phenomenon, creating new words may come across simply as “old wine in new bottles.” Moreover, defining new terms may draw attention (and space) away from other concerns.

Be conceptually consistent. Social science terminology is often ill defined and sloppily used. In a proposal, such inconsistency may be grounds for dismissal. If you are using a term or idea that is open to multiple interpretations, be sure that you define the term and stick to that definition. This may sound obvious, but it is not uncommon for serious slippage to occur. If you are writing about “civil society” but mean “nongovernmental organizations” (NGOs), why not just use that term. If in some places you mean NGOs but also mean citizen choral groups, bowling clubs, etc., you will need to be clear about that from the get-go. The same can be said of a myriad of other terms (e.g., “sustainable development,” “peasant,” and “democracy.”) Being inconsistent may not only baffle your readers, but may leave them with the impression that you don’t really not what you are talking about. Perhaps most importantly, conceptual clarity and consistency prove invaluable in crafting your research design.

Carefully consider and justify typologies and categories. The creation and use of typologies—coordinated sets of terms that provide labels for different components of the analytic domain of interest to the scholar—is often at the heart of social scientific analysis. The way in which you categorize the social phenomena you seek to describe must, however, be linked to both your theoretical foundations and the empirical reality. Be careful, however, for even those typological schemes that appear most unproblematic often carry with them notable levels of bias, both normative and analytical (e.g., democracy vs. authoritarianism). Carefully considering the typological categories you employ can have important analytical payoffs and will ensure that you are searching for meaningful distinctions.

Below is a brief bibliography on conceptualization in general, followed by links to bibliographies on specific concepts. These should not be read as the final word on any of the topics, but rather as examples of the complexities and challenges associated with conceptual clarity. They may also provide important bibliographic and historical background for your own efforts to reach a concise and researchable definition.

Works on Conceptualization

Concepts in Social and Political Philosophy. 1973. Richard E. Flathman (ed.). New York: Macmillan.

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Selected Bibliography of Specific Concepts

Agency

Sen, Amartya. 1985. "Freedom and Agency." *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. LXXXII (4): 203-221.

Anarchism

Pennock, J. Roland and John W. Chapman (eds.) 1978. *Anarchism*. New York: New York University Press (Nomos 19).

Atrocity

Jacob, Phillip E. 1955. "A Multi-Dimensional Classification of Atrocity Stories." In Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Morris Rosenberg (eds.) *The Language of Social Research: A Reader in the Methodology of Social Research*. Glencoe: The Free Press: 54-57.

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Linz, Juan J. 1964. "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain." In Erik Allardt and Yrjo Littunen (eds.) *Cleavages, Ideologies, and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology*. Transactions of the Westermarck Society, 10: 291-342.

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Haas, Ernst. 1953. "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?" *World Politics*. Vol. 5(4): 442-447.

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Beetham, David. 1987. *Bureaucracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Barbalet, J.M. 1988. *Citizenship: Rights, Struggles, and Class Inequality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Biener, Ronald (ed.). 1995. *Theorizing Citizenship*. Albany: State University Press.

Halisis, C.R.D., Paul J. Kaiser, and Stephen N. Ndegwa. 1998. "Guest Editors' Introduction: The Multiple Meanings of Citizenship -- Rights, Identity, and Social Justice in Africa." *Africa Today* Vol. 45: 337-350.

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Haas, Ernst B. 1990. *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Pennock, J. Roland and John W. Chapman (eds.). 1972. *Coercion*. New York: Aldine-Atherton Press.

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Friedrich, Carl J. 1959. *Community*. New York: The Liberal Arts Press (Nomos 2).

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Pennock, J. Roland and John W. Chapman (eds.). 1979. *Compromise in Ethics, Law, and Politics*. New York: New York University Press (Nomos 21).

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Williamson, Peter. 1985. *Varieties of Corporatism: A Conceptual Discussion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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Collier, Ruth Berins and David Collier. 1991. *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Patrick, Glenda M. 1984. "Political Culture" in Giovanni Sartori (ed.) *Social Science Concepts: A Systemic Analysis*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

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Schwartz, Alan. 1992. "Feminism: A Case Study of a Contested Concept" in Alan Schwartz *Contested Concepts in Cognitive Science*. Berkeley: University of California, Program in Cognitive Science.

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Gray, John. 1986. *Liberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Chapman, John W. and Alan Wertheimer (eds.). 1990. *Majorities and Minorities*. New York: New York University Press (Nomos 31).

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Virtue

Chapman, John W. and William A. Galston (eds.). 1992. *Virtue..* New York: New York University Press (Nomos 34).

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