

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

There are two important kinds of definitions:

1. Conceptual
2. Operational

Conceptual definitions are theoretical; a *concept is defined in simple words, ideas, or constructs to yield a clear understanding of the term*. For example, consider the following definitions of permissiveness and trust:

- *Teacher permissiveness* is the extent to which a teacher is lenient and relaxed in classroom interactions with students.
- *Teacher trust* is an individual's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open.

These are both examples of conceptual or theoretical definitions; they give the reader a good sense of what is meant by defining the terms with a clear and meaningful set of words.

Operational definitions turn conceptual ideas into measurable ones; that is, *an operational definition is set of operations or behaviors that defines the concept itself*. Let's examine each of the two conceptual definitions above through the lens of operations.

- *Teacher permissiveness* is the number of hall-passes a teacher issues each week.
- *Teacher trust* is the score a teacher has on the Omnibus Trust Scale.

Note that the concept has gone from a set of defining words to a set of defining operations, which has a numerical value (sometimes called operationalism). We have transformed a concept into a variable, a numerical value that represents the kind of variation (e. g. male or female) or magnitude of the variable (the higher the value the greater the property; the greater the permissiveness, trust, etc.). Of course, the transformation must capture the true meaning of the concept (be valid) and do that consistently (be reliable).

For a further explication of concepts, constructs, and variables, see (Hoy & Adams, 2016).