PUTTING ORDINARY LANGUAGE TO WORK

A MIN–MAX STRATEGY OF CONCEPT FORMATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

John Gerring and Paul A. Barresi

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a ‘min–max’ strategy of definition applicable to all concepts intended for general usage within some language region. The min–max strategy relies on the conjoined use of minimal and ideal-type definitions. A minimal definition identifies the bare essentials of a concept with traits sufficient to bind it extensionally while maintaining all non-idiosyncratic meanings associated with it. An ideal-type definition includes all attributes that together define the concept in its purest, most ‘ideal’ form. Minimal definitions are minimal in their attributes but maximal in their phenomenal range, while ideal-type definitions are maximal in their attributes but minimal in their phenomenal range. This min–max strategy serves to bind a concept in semantic and referential space, providing the most satisfactory general definition for that concept. We illustrate this strategy with the keyword ‘culture’. We identify the minimal and maximal definitions of ‘culture’, within which all definitions developed in particular research settings fall, thus resolving the conceptual ambiguity that has plagued the use of the term ‘culture’ and demonstrating the utility of the min–max approach as a strategy of general definition.

KEY WORDS • culture • concept formation • definition • ordinary language

Decades after Giovanni Sartori’s path-breaking work, and a century after the linguistic turn in philosophy, the process of concept formation in the social sciences is still an ad hoc, largely intuitive affair. Although scholars are aware of the importance of defining key terms and using those terms in a consistent manner, few of them have sought to specify the grounds on which one should prefer one term over another or one definition over another. Are all stipulative definitions equally sound as long as they are clearly defined and consistently employed?

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Scholars usually resolve this question by an appeal to context, but this appeal is itself highly ambiguous. Which context or contexts are relevant, and which aspects of that context or contexts are determinative? At some level, all semantic questions appeal to context. What is clear, however, is that appeals to the proximate context of a work are insufficient to resolve questions of definition, for key terms are embedded in a linguistic context that is much broader than the work itself. A term may be employed clearly and consistently within a given work but remain ambiguous in the corresponding field or sub-field because it is used differently in other language areas. If we are to avoid definitional solipsisms, then we must think about concept formation as a discipline-wide problem, not a problem limited to particular authors or research contexts.

For some time, it has been a standard complaint that the social science vocabulary lacks the clarity and consistency of the natural science vocabulary (e.g. Wilson, 1998: 198). Disturbingly, we find that key words in the social science lexicon often are defined in different ways (polysemy); that different terms often mean approximately the same thing (synonymy); and that these terms and meanings undergo continual revision. As a result, knowledge cumulation – or even productive argumentation – is difficult. Indeed, lexical confusion may be regarded as both a primary cause of the ongoing fragmentation of the social sciences at the turn of the 21st century and a principal medium through which that fragmentation occurs. Because we cannot achieve a basic level of agreement on the terms by which we analyze the social world, agreement on conclusions is impossible.

Regrettably, social scientists have not paid much attention to concept formation. This lack of attention is all the more remarkable given the resurgence of interest in questions of research design and qualitative methodology (King et al., 1994). One reason for this neglect is the relatively un-integrated state of concept research. Most work on the subject relates to particular fields, concepts or conceptual problems. The relevance of this methodological spadework, although potentially great, has been easy to ignore. Synthetic approaches to concept formation are often difficult to interpret and, more importantly, are at odds with one another. Too often, research on concepts has mirrored the very fragmentation that we observe in its subject matter, the social science lexicon.

Building on earlier studies (Gerring, 1997, 1999, 2001), we attempt a synthesis of work on concept formation as it relates to definition. Our argument hinges on a fundamental distinction between general and contextual definitions – the former pertaining to broad linguistic contexts, the latter to particular research contexts. Observing this distinction, we then elaborate a method of deriving a general definition that relies on the conjoined use of minimal and ideal-type definitions – a ‘min–max’ strategy. We then illustrate this strategy by defining the keyword ‘culture’, a term which has plagued the
social sciences for over a century. Finally, we discuss the utility of a general
definition in stipulating contextual definitions and in resolving conceptual
ambiguity in the social sciences.

**Putting Ordinary Language to Work: The Importance of General Definitions**

Whatever its ambiguities, the world of natural language is not random. Indeed, norms embedded in everyday usage may be looked upon as a
source of regularity, if not always logic. Rather than endeavoring to
‘straighten out’ natural language, philosophers in the ordinary language
tradition suggest that we figure it out. Natural language makes sense to its
users, they reason; why should it not make sense to academics? It is clear,
writes Wittgenstein,

> that every sentence in our language is ‘in order as it is’. That is to say, we are not *striving after* an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptional sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us. – On the other hand, it seems clear that where there is sense there must be perfect order. – So there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence. (Quoted in Oppenheim, 1981: 178)

Wittgenstein’s critique of logical positivism is strongly stated and is itself sus-
ceptible to criticism. He fails to define ‘perfect order’, for example. Yet, the
ordinary language critique seems a useful corrective to the enthusiasms of
various reconstructive efforts, from Wittgenstein’s own early work (the
aptly titled *Tractatus logico philosophicus*) to the classificatory approaches
embraced by Oppenheim (1981), Sartori (1984) and others.

It is less clear, however, what ordinary language philosophy portends for
the practice of the social sciences. What would it mean to practice a social
science rooted in ordinary language? Would it entail a social science limited
to *natural* language? Or would it mean respecting terms and definitions as
understood within specialized language regions (e.g. within subfields of a
particular social science)? Once we have engaged in an ordinary language
analysis of key terms, how should we define those terms? This last question
is crucial, for the strength of ordinary language analysis has been in eluci-
dating the complexity of terms, not in bringing order to that complexity.
As Pitkin (1967: 8) notes: ‘the problem is not to state the correct meaning
of the word, but to specify all the varieties of its application to various con-
texts’. Ordinary language analysis, as pioneered by John Austin and others,
is usually an exercise in ‘splitting’, not ‘lumping’. Definitions are collected,
usages reviewed and meanings parsed, but Humpty Dumpty is left on the
ground.
If ordinary language analysis is to facilitate empirical analysis by elucidating usable concepts, then we must make an effort to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Our lexicon must respect the normal usage of key terms, such that the meanings that we give them resonate with the ordinary meanings of those terms but also elucidate their meanings in a manner concise enough to restore a greater sense of stability and focus to the social science lexicon. It also must move beyond the extreme polysemy offered by standard lexical treatments of a word, such as those found in dictionaries or in more extensive analyses of usage such as ordinary language studies. It must take account of the fact that reportive or customary lexical definitions are not definitions per se but rather sets of definitional options.

Our approach to improving the utility of the social science lexicon is situated between the classificatory (Sartori) and ordinary language (Wittgenstein) camps. It seeks to employ the insights and techniques of ordinary language philosophy in the service of social science analysis. It seeks, in other words, to put ordinary language to work in social science settings.

Our point of departure is the distinction between general and contextual definitions. The first sort of definition seeks to determine what a term means within a general context of usage – usually, a language or language region – while making few judgements about the correctness of any particular definition or definitions, except when required by general patterns of usage. General definition is thus a refinement of standard lexical (i.e. dictionary) and ordinary language approaches to definition.

Contextual definition, in contrast, asks what a term means or should mean within a narrower context, perhaps a specific research site or research problem. It reaches beyond the myriad semantic possibilities offered in a general definition towards a particular resolution of attributes and referents. A contextual definition may be single-purpose or multi-purpose but is never all-purpose. It is the sort of definition that we are likely to find in studies of particular subjects and is sometimes referred to as a stipulative definition or definition-in-use (Robinson, 1954).

Granted, the difference between general and contextual definitions is not always clear-cut. While general definitions aim to be of use in particular research contexts, contextual definitions strive for general status. Both sorts of definition are liable to general criteria of concept formation (Gerring, 2001: Ch. 3). Nonetheless, the distinction between a definition that is crafted for general use and one that is crafted for use in a specific context is essential.

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1. This distinction is similar but not identical to the ‘two-level’ approach associated with the work of Manfred Bierwisch (1981; see also Bierwisch and Schreuder, 1992). See also discussion in Taylor (1995: ch. 14).
To understand why this is so, consider that the contextual range and empirical utility of concepts tend to vary inversely. General definitions maximize the former; contextual definitions maximize the latter. Because of its specific empirical content, a contextual definition will travel awkwardly outside its home turf. Because of its grand purview, general definitions will usually require some specification when applied to a particular empirical task.

Social scientists may be tempted to see general definitions as *merely* definitional – which is to say, of no empirical value. Yet, we must know what a word generally is understood to mean before we can define it contextually. Concepts that cause the most trouble in the social sciences – e.g. ‘justice’, ‘democracy’, ‘power’ and ‘ideology’ – are problematic because we do not know what they mean generally, not because we lack contextual definitions. Indeed, there are hundreds if not thousands of contextual definitions circulating for each of these terms. Many are quite specific. But this specificity has not clarified matters. Indeed, it has clouded the situation. Insofar as empirical work on justice employs different definitions of the term or different labels for the same general concept (in order to escape ambiguities that have crept into the term), it is impossible to integrate work on this subject. This semantic confusion and disciplinary parochialism is the sort that we want to avoid.

Concepts, like theories, are best approached from a wide-angle perspective. If we do not take into account the many definitional options available for a term, we risk constraining our understanding of a phenomenon. We also risk ending up with a highly idiosyncratic definition – one that will not travel to other research sites, that will not cumulate with other work on the subject and that, for both of these reasons, will not advance the field.

**A Min–Max Strategy of General Definition**

How, then, shall we go about crafting a general definition for a multivalent concept? This task may be broken down into three steps, as specified in Table 1: (1) sampling usages; (2) typologizing attributes; and (3) constructing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The Process of Min–Max Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sample (sample representative usages and definitions within a linguistic context)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Typologize (arrange non-idiosyncratic attributes in a single typology)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Define</td>
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<tr>
<td>(a) Minimal (identify those few attributes that all non-idiosyncratic uses of the term have in common)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(b) Ideal-type (identify those attributes that define a term in its purest, most ‘ideal’, form)</td>
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minimal and ideal-type definitions. The goal is not only to interrogate usage norms but to integrate them into a coherent, concise and unified framework.

The first step is relatively unproblematic, having precedent in ordinary language analysis and most conceptual analysis (e.g. Sartori, 1984). It involves obtaining a representative sample of formal definitions and usages of a chosen term from relevant fields or subfields and from natural language. Usages may bring to light meanings that are not contained in formal definitions, perhaps because they are so obvious, and may clarify meaning when formal definitions are vague. Usage also entails discussion of the referents of a concept, which cannot reasonably be segregated from its definition.

Wherever different senses of a word are radically disparate and seemingly unrelated – e.g. ‘pen’ (writing instrument) and ‘pen’ (enclosure) – we must restrict our survey of definitions and usages to one or the other. Of course, homonymy (of which the two radically different meanings of ‘pen’ are an example) and polysemy (where a word invokes a number of closely related meanings) is sometimes a matter of degree. In borderline cases, the analyst will have to judge which sense should be split off, and considered to be an independent concept, and which should be retained, so as to create a concept or concepts of maximum coherence.

Representativeness in the sampling process is achieved by searching for whatever variation in usage and formal definition might exist within a language region and keeping track of the frequency of these various usages and definitions. Thus, if it is suspected that a word is used differently in a particular subfield, then the hunt ought to extend to that subfield. In the near future, one may be able to employ digitized texts to sample language regions randomly, enabling one to reach a more exact measurement of the frequency of usage and definitional variation. Yet, mechanized sampling probably will not alter our understanding of key terms significantly, for language is extraordinarily regular. Moreover, our intent is to discard only idiosyncratic usages and definitions. As long as the sample is sufficiently large and reasonably well balanced we are likely to encounter all common usages. The principle of redundancy may serve as an indicator of sufficiency – when we reach a point where new definitional attributes and usages begin to repeat those that we have already encountered, then we may call off the hunt.

The issue of scope – how many language regions to survey – is also crucial. Here, the twin criteria of contextual range and coherence must guide our decisions. A sampling is better if it covers more language regions – perhaps extending to related languages, related fields and even the etymology of a term. Yet, if this broad search reveals significant differences in meaning – differences that correspond to different language regions – then the analyst may restrict the scope of the investigation in order to preserve the coherence of the concept. Any sampling is likely to have a home turf – perhaps a particular field of social science – that is extensively canvassed and other areas
that are surveyed more superficially. In any case, the scope of the survey will
determine the scope of the resulting definition. As long as the scope of the
survey is specified, this aspect of the definitional process should not cause
confusion.

The construction of a typology rests on the assumption that although
definitions for a given term are, in principle, infinite (because attributes
can be combined in an infinite number of ways), most definitions juggle
and re-juggle the same set of attributes. By combining near-synonyms, and
by organizing them along different dimensions, we ought to be able to
reduce this definitional profusion into a single table of attributes. We may
regard this table as a term’s lexical definition because it merely reports the
many meanings of the term extant in a broad linguistic context.  

To stop here, however, is to leave the term relatively undefined. If the term
is ambiguous in normal usage, then this ambiguity will be reflected in the
typology. A term may even possess blatantly contradictory attributes, as
with ‘ideology’ (Gerring, 1997). Thus, in order to restore a semblance of
coherence – in order, that is, to create a usable concept – we shall have to
go further. This step, we argue – the step from lexical definition to general
definition – is the critical step in establishing clarity and consistency in the
social science lexicon. It involves two complementary definitional strategies,
minimal and ideal-type.

Minimal definitions identify the bare essentials of a concept, sufficient to
bound it extensionally while maintaining all non-idiosyncratic meanings
associated with the term. Minimal definitions embody all definitional attri-
butes that are necessary and, therefore, are always present. Sufficiency, as
we shall see, cannot be determined outside of a particular context and is
best ignored in the min–max strategy of general definition. The resulting
minimal definition should be capable of substituting for all non-idiosyncratic
uses of the term and should be fairly parsimonious.  

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2. We should note that the choice of labels for each of the primary attributes of a term is
almost always arbitrary because a number of near-synonyms generally vie for our attention.
Thus, in the illustration of the min–max strategy of general definition that follows we have
said that ‘culture’ is social; but we might also have said that it is ‘learned’ or ‘non-natural’; or
that it is a ‘heritage’ or ‘tradition’. Each of these near-synonyms expresses the sense in which
culture is created and passed on, and makes clear that it is not merely instinctive or reactive.

3. Definitional strategies similar to the ‘minimal’ strategy have been employed by various
writers, although not always by this name. See, e.g., Debnam (1984) on ‘power’, Freeden
on ‘basic meaning’ and Murphey (1994: 23–4). Sartori endorse minimal definition in early
work (1975: 34–5, 1976: 61) but drops the matter in his classic work on concept formation
(1984). It should be noted that minimal definition is similar, though not identical, to a ‘pro-
cedural minimum’ definition (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). In the latter, the search is for an
operationalization that satisfies all definitional requirements of a concept.
Ideal-type definitions, in contrast, aim for a collection of attributes that is ‘maximal’ in that it includes all non-idiomatic characteristics that together define the concept in its purest, most ‘ideal’ form. As Weber describes it, ‘an ideal-type is formed . . . by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct’ (Weber, 1949: 90; see also Burger, 1976). Ideal-types, as the term suggests, need not have a real empirical referent, although they always have an ideal one.

Minimal definitions are minimal in their attributes but maximal in their phenomenal range, while ideal-type definitions are maximal in their attributes but minimal in their phenomenal range. By combining these two definitional strategies, we invoke a well-known feature of concept formation – the inverse correlation that exists between intension and extension. Over a century ago, Stanley Jevons (1877/1958: 26) pointed out that when the definitional attributes of a word are expanded (e.g. when ‘war’ becomes ‘foreign war’), its empirical breadth generally is narrowed. Otherwise put, more focused definitions encompass fewer phenomena. Weber also noticed that ‘concepts with ever wider scope [have] ever smaller content’ (quoted in Burger, 1976: 72). The relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

Although intension is inversely correlated with extension, the same relationship does not necessarily exist between the number of attributes

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4. See also Angeles (1981: 141); Cohen and Nagel (1934: 33); Collier and Mahon (1993); Frege, quoted in Passmore (1961/1967: 184); and the now-classic treatment, Sartori (1970: 1041).
encompassed by a definition and its empirical range. The empirical range of a short definition can be very constricted, depending on the attributes that are included in it. It is the identity of those attributes, and not merely their number, that determines the extension of a concept. Perhaps the inverse relationship between intension and extension is best understood not as a function of the length of a definition but rather as a product of the different goals of minimal and ideal-type definitions. Ideal-type definitions aim to identify the ideal properties of a concept (and thus its smallest extensional range), whereas minimal definitions aim to identify the minimal properties of a concept (and thus its greatest extensional range).

‘Culture’

To illustrate the application of the min–max strategy of general definition, we offer a min–max definition of culture. Social scientists have been concerned with the culture concept since the 19th century, and continue to be so today. Among the many scholarly works on culture, one stands out as comprehensive and authoritative. Kroeber and Kluckholm’s *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, which appeared originally in 1952, has been cited repeatedly as a primary source for discussions about the meaning of that term. Regrettably, it is also somewhat dated. Thus, we supplement this survey with an examination of a wide variety of more recent discussions of the concept in the social sciences (see, e.g., Freilich, 1989; Harrison and Huntington, 2000; Münch and Smelser, 1992; Shweder and LeVine, 1984). From each of these sources, we culled not only definitions of culture (‘Culture is . . .’) but also uses of the term.5

Based on this analysis, we argue that culture can be understood along three dimensions: (1) how it is produced and transmitted; (2) the characteristics that it exhibits; and (3) the functions that it performs. Each of these dimensions offers several definitional options (attributes), as listed in Table 2. The minimal definition, of course, specifies only those attributes that are common to (or at least implied by) all non-idiiosyncratic definitions and usages. The ideal-type definition includes all attributes belonging to the concept in its purest, most ‘ideal’ form.

We argue that culture, minimally defined, is any phenomenon that is social, ideational or symbolic, patterned and shared by the members of a social group. Culture as an ideal-type includes all minimal attributes and

5. We have posted these definitions and uses on the online blackboard of the American Political Science Association’s Committee on Concepts and Methods at www.concepts-methods.org/blackboard.php.
**Table 2. ‘Culture’: Min–Max Definitions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimal Attributes:</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<td>Production and transmission:</td>
<td>Ideational or symbolic</td>
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<td>Characteristics:</td>
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<tr>
<th>Ideal-Type Attributes:</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production and Transmission:</td>
<td>Human</td>
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<td>Non-interest-based</td>
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<td>Implicit</td>
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<th>Functions:</th>
<th>Causal</th>
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many more besides. It is social, human, ideational or symbolic, patterned, shared, enduring, cumulative, coherent, differentiated, comprehensive, holistic, non-interest-based, implicit, causal and constitutive. These contrasting definitions – one narrow, the other capacious – delimit the usage range of this vast and protean concept in the contemporary social sciences.

Several cognate and usage distinctions must be clarified before we continue. The minimal definition refers to culture without a modifier. If we speak of specific cultures (a culture or the culture), we must add an additional feature to the definition – differentiation. Culture may be universal, but a culture must be distinct from other cultures. The minimal definition focuses on the first, more general usage of culture; the ideal-type definition encompasses both usages.

The term culture sometimes is used to refer to mere evidence of culture or of a culture, such as a stone found at an archaeological dig. As with mere manifestations of culture, the cultural-ness of mere evidence of culture is derived from its relationship to a larger set of phenomena deemed to be cultural. Thus, this usage is parasitic on the general definition.

Neither the minimal definition nor the ideal-type definition of culture encompasses cognates such as ‘cultured’ and ‘cultivated’ (in the sense of civilized) or ‘cultivation’ and ‘cultivating’ (in the sense of growing or tend-
ing). These meanings are sufficiently distinct to be regarded as separate concepts.

**Minimal Attributes**

*Social*

Social scientists generally agree that culture is a social product (Almond and Powell, 1978: 25; D’Andrade, 1984: 91–2; Patterson, 2000: 208; Spiro, 1984: 323). As such, it is also ‘extra-genetic’, ‘extrasomatic’, ‘outside-the-skin’ or ‘extrinsic’ to the human organism (Geertz, 1973: 44, 52, 92). Indeed, perhaps the most important point of departure for modern conceptions of culture is the nature/nurture distinction. Unfortunately, few scholars agree on how we should parse this complex dichotomy. Presumably, the more we learn about the human genome, the more we will learn about how genetics conditions thought and behavior and, thus, about the nature/nurture divide. If we reach a point in history where humans begin modifying their own genotypes or the genotypes of their offspring – as seems increasingly likely – then we will create a reciprocal relationship between nature and nurture that will destroy the distinction between them. Be that as it may, ‘culture’ – according to its current usage – refers only to beliefs or behaviors that are produced socially and, thus, are non-natural.

In a related vein, social scientists also agree that culture is something that is transmitted socially or ‘learned’ (Barnes, 1988: 18; D’Andrade, 1995: 212; Goodenough, 1989: 94; Greif, 1994: 915; Kroeber, 1948: 253; Patterson, 2000: 208; Schein, 1985: 9; Verba, 1965: 550). Accordingly, they often describe culture as the product of ‘socialization’, ‘education’, ‘media exposure’ or ‘social transmission’ (Almond, 1990: 144; Spiro, 1984: 323; Verba, 1965: 551); as something that is ‘taught’ to or internalized by individuals (Almond and Verba, 1989: 13; Freilich, 1989: 10); or as a phenomenon into which individuals are ‘induced’ (Almond and Verba, 1989: 13). Most writers view this learning process as a process of inheritance whereby a culture is passed down from generation to generation (Freilich, 1989: 8; Geertz, 1973: 89; Lewis, 1961: xxiv; Patterson, 2000: 209; Pye, 1965: 7; Richerson and Boyd, 1989: 121; Shweder, 2000: 163; Verba, 1965: 551). This attribute of culture has led some writers to speak of culture as a ‘heritage’ or ‘tradition’ (D’Andrade, 1995: 212; Freilich, 1989: 9; Spiro, 1984: 323).

*Ideational or symbolic*

All definitions and usages of culture assume that it has an ideational or symbolic component, even if only implicitly. Social scientists consider ideas and
symbols to be cultural by themselves (Dittmer, 1977: 557; Freilich, 1989: 8; Geertz, 1972/2000: 198, 201) but consider rules, behavior and material objects to be cultural only when they signify something other than merely themselves (Benedict, 1934: 53). Berger (1995: 9) captures this distinction when he writes:

Not all of the facts of social life are 'cultural', but some are ... meanings, many of which inhabit a quasi-sacred realm, revealed and conveyed by custom, utterance, and other symbolic evocations.

Other scholars have drawn a similar distinction (Eagleton, 1991: 28).

The distinction between culture and institutions is the hardest to discern, for these two terms often are used to refer to identical or overlapping phenomena. Institutions usually are understood to include formal rules, norms and patterns of behavior (Peters, 1999). These formal rules, norms and patterns of behavior are socially generated, patterned and learned. It is no surprise, then, that culturalists and institutionalists often claim the same phenomena as their own. The only clear point of difference between cultures and institutions is that cultures have an ideational or symbolic component and need not include formal rules or behavior patterns. Thus, as the emphasis of a topic shifts from informal to formal rules, and from ideas to behavior, it likely will shift from the realm of culture to the realm of institutions. The line is not clear and bright but it is the only line that we can draw.

Thus, the minimal definition of culture does not exclude material objects, behavior, rules or institutions from its realm. It simply indicates that these subjects must have ideational or symbolic significance in order to qualify as cultural. Despite widespread disagreement among social scientists about how to define culture, general agreement does exist about its essentially ideational or symbolic nature. Ideas and symbols can stand on their own as cultural phenomena (provided that they meet the other criteria of the minimal definition) but other phenomena must have ideational or symbolic significance in order to qualify as cultural. Behavior, as such, is not culture.

Patterned

Social scientists generally agree that cultures are patterned (Almond and Powell, 1966: 50; Dawson and Prewitt, 1969: 27; Fagen, 1969: 5; Verba, 1965: 520), an attribute that they also capture by near-synonyms such as ‘ordered’ or ‘organized’ or when they describe culture as a ‘system’ (Alexander, 1992: 295; Freilich, 1989: 9; Geertz, 1973: 92, 363). Ruth Benedict (1934: 53), for example, observes that

a culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there comes into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each person further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behavior take more and more congruous shape.
For structuralists such as Levi-Strauss (1963), the patterned quality of culture is its dominant feature. For interpretivists such as Geertz (1973), it is less important. For post-structuralists such as Clifford (1988), it is even less so. Nevertheless, all social scientists seem to agree that it lies somewhere in between pure voluntarism and pure structure. It exhibits a chosen-ness, insofar as cultures are humanly created and undergoing continual change, as well as a given-ness, insofar as humans are born into a culture and thus inherit (rather than choose) its rules, obligations and understandings. The given-ness of culture imposes a degree of order upon an otherwise random assemblage of traits.

Consider Oscar Lewis’s (1961: xxiv) presentation of the idea of a culture of poverty:

In anthropological usage the term culture implies, essentially, a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation. In applying this concept of culture to the understanding of poverty, I want to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something. It is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines. The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members. It is a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and becomes a subculture of its own.

Lewis conceives of poverty not as an inchoate and entirely reactive phenomenon but as one with an underlying structure. He also believes, however, that poor people have volition. Other social scientists have made similar observations (Berger, 1995: 15–6; Freilich, 1989: 10).

To be sure, cultural patterns are not always obvious, and not always evident to the individuals who are adherents of a particular culture. ‘Etic’ analysis may be necessary to elucidate an underlying pattern (Pike, 1967: 38). For present purposes, what is relevant is that the existence of a pattern qualifies a behavior or idea as cultural. According to standard usage of the term, randomly occurring phenomena – whether ideational or non-ideational – do not qualify as cultural.

*Shared by the members of a social group*

Social scientists recognize that culture is something shared by the members of a social group (Barnes, 1988: 2; Goodenough, 1989: 93; Jackman and Miller, 1996: 635; Kluckholn, 1951: 86; Lane, 1992: 364; LeVine, 1984: 67; Macridis, 1961: 40; Schein, 1985: 7; Shweder, 2000: 163; Sil, 2000: 358; Thompson et al., 1990: 1; Wildavsky, 1987: 5). For Elkins and Simeon (1979: 129), for example, ‘[p]olitical culture is the property of a collectivity –
nation, region, class, ethnic community, formal organization, party, or whatever. Individuals do not have cultures, although they partake of culture and, hence, are carriers of culture. Nations are the social groups with which the culture concept is most commonly associated (Almond and Verba, 1989: 13; Brown, 1977: 1; Dogan and Pelassy, 1984: 58), although it also is frequently applied to subnational groups. Thus, social scientists write of Navajo culture or American culture but also of woodworker culture, Yankee culture or law student culture. Increasingly, social scientists recognize a ‘world’ culture (Jepperson et al., 1996: 34).

Ideal-type Attributes

Having discussed the minimal attributes of culture, we now proceed to those additional attributes that define culture in its ideal-type form. Minimal and ideal-type definitions differ not only in the number of attributes that they encompass but also in another important respect. Minimal definitions have relatively clear borders and, thus, delineate relatively crisp concepts. Ideal-type definitions are much fuzzier. Because ideal-type definitions are not necessarily a function of phenomena that exist in the real world, membership in the conceptual universe described by an ideal-type definition is a matter of degree.

Human

Social scientists generally consider culture to be a distinctly human phenomenon (Benedict, 1934: 53; Freilich, 1989: 8; Goodenough, 1989: 95). To be sure, the sacrosanct distinction between humans and higher mammals has broken down in recent years, largely due to the work of biological anthropologists (de Waal, 1996, 2001; Whiten et al., 1999). Even so, culture is quintessentially a human creation.

Enduring

Implicit in the learned, patterned and shared attributes of culture is its enduring quality. As Barnes (1988: 16) notes: ‘Unless populations are physically eliminated, cultures are seldom created or destroyed by political power. It is true that power-holders are important interpreters and manipulators of culture . . . but . . . cultures resist manipulation; people defend their assumptions.’ To be sure, cultures are often in flux, changing over time as the social groups that bear them adapt them to new circumstances (Freilich, 1989: 9; Goodenough, 1989: 96; Keesing, 1974: 75–6; Kroeber, 1948: 253; Verba, 1965: 520). Nevertheless, one thinks of a strongly ‘cultural’ phenom-
enon as one that endures the onslaughts of time (Geertz, 1973: 408; Inglehart, 1988: 1203; Jackman and Miller, 1996: 635; Wildavsky, 1989: 61).

**Cumulative**

Social scientists sometimes define culture as cumulative. Geertz (1973: 46, 363), for example, defines it as ‘the accumulated totality’ of ‘organized systems of significant symbols’. For him (1973: 408), “[c]ulture moves rather like an octopus – not all at once . . . but by disjointed movements of this part, then that, and now the other which somehow cumulate to directional change’. Indeed, the cumulative nature of culture is implied by its patterned quality. Cumulation is what happens when the center of gravity and boundaries of this pattern change over time.

**Coherent**

Social scientists frequently remark on the coherence of culture (Geertz, 1973: 17; Jackman and Miller, 1996: 634–45; Pye, 1965: 7). Culture is ‘logically interconnected’ (Freilich, 1980) or ‘interlocking’ (Spiro, 1984: 323); these attributes are of course implied by the patterned quality of culture, already discussed. Ruth Benedict (1934: 53) observes that

> cultural behavior . . . tends . . . to be integrated. A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behavior take a more and more congruous shape.

As a symbolic phenomenon, a culture must ‘make sense’. The sense-making may be imposed from within – by the members of the social group that bears the culture – or from without – by an ethnographer. Of course, sense may be reconstructed for a congeries of ideas and actions in different ways – too many ways, some might argue. Of the world of anthropology, LeVine (1984: 72) remarks:

> No ethnographer who has followed Malinowski’s (now standard) program for intensive fieldwork has failed to find increasing connectedness and coherence in customs – particularly in their ideational dimension – as he or she becomes better acquainted with their meanings in vernacular discourse and practice. There is controversy about the degree and kind of coherence – claims that cultures are deductive systems, pervasive configurations, seamless webs, have been repeatedly made and just as often disputed – but even those most skeptical of cultural coherence would not return to the earlier view of customs as discrete traits.

Frequently, the coherence of a culture is simply assumed without being proven. Even so, the assumption of coherence lies just below the surface of
any assertion about culture. Ideas, practices and symbols that are coherent are more cultural for being so.

**Differentiated**

Cultures often are assumed to be differentiated from one another and, thus, unique to particular social groups (Inglehart, 1988: 1203; Kluckholm, 1951: 86; Schein, 1985: 7, 9; Schneider, 1976: 206; Shweder, 2000: 163). This external differentiation is the flip side of internal coherence. If cultures are internally coherent, then they must be distinct from other internally coherent cultures. ‘[C]onflict among cultures is a precondition of cultural identity’, Wildavsky (1987: 7) writes. ‘It is the differences and distances from others that define one’s own cultural identity.’

To be sure, different cultures may have elements in common. Indeed, to the extent that we compare cultures at all, we do so with a common vocabulary that reflects the minimal and ideal-type definitions of culture, implying that any given culture can be described by reference to the same set of attributes. If two sets of beliefs and practices are to be described as distinct cultures, then any common elements either must be combined with other elements that the putative cultures do not have in common or must themselves either be put together in different ways or possessed to different degrees.

**Comprehensive**

Social scientists generally consider culture to be more or less comprehensive (Boas, 1930: 75; D’Andrade, 1995: 212; Pye, 1965: 7; Williams, 1981: 11). If a putative culture were to encompass beliefs and behaviors of relevance to only one or two issues – e.g. abortion, or abortion and taxes – then it would not be a culture but merely an issue position or positions. A culture, in contrast to an issue-position, encompasses beliefs and practices of relevance to a wider swath of experience. D’Andrade (1995: 212), for example, defines culture as ‘the entire social heritage of a group, including material culture and external structures, learned actions, and mental representations of many kinds’. Indeed, the greater the range, the greater the confidence that a putatively cultural phenomenon qualifies as a culture. To be sure, cultures may be borne by subsocietal groups and individuals may belong to more than one culture-bearing social group – hence, ‘woodworking’ culture, ‘railroad’ culture and ‘Wall Street’ culture. Yet, each of these cultures qualifies as such only because its beliefs and practices are of relevance to a broader array of topics than the activity at its core – shaping wood, running railroad cars or buying and selling securities.
Holistic

Some social scientists characterize culture as holistic, a quality consistent with its more or less comprehensive nature. Dittmer (1977: 555), for example, observes that ‘political culture should be conceptualized as an emergent variable, whose properties transcend the sum of its members’ belief- and value-systems’. Other social scientists have made similar points (Benedict, 1934: 53).

Non-interest-based

To say that a belief or behavior is cultural is to imply – at least within the context of an ideal-type definition – that this belief or behavior is not merely a function of self-interest (Wildavsky, 1987: 4–5). To be sure, ‘self-interest’ can be interpreted in many ways. Some scholars would claim that self-interest is itself a culturally contingent fact (Citrin and Green, 1990; Kingdon, 1993; Mansbridge, 1983). Nevertheless, to the extent that social scientists are able to identify beliefs and behaviors as interest-based, they are less likely to consider them as cultural.

Implicit

Social scientists sometimes define culture as non-formalized thought or behavior. Barnes (1988: 15), for example, asserts that culture

\textit{at a minimum, . . . suggests the ‘easy’ behavior. That is, cultural patterns provide the routine, largely unexamined options followed by most people most of the time. In programming language, culture provides the ‘default option’, followed when there are no particular reasons for choosing another pattern of behavior . . .}

Other social scientists have made similar points (Elkins and Simeon, 1979: 128), sometimes describing culture as ‘taken-for-granted’ or as a ‘background’ phenomenon (Goldstone, 1991: 434). The distinction between a purely formal rule and an informal cultural norm highlights the implicitness of culture, as does the distinction between the formal ideology of a political party (as expressed, for example, in its platform or constitution) and that party’s political culture (Freeman, 1986).

Causal

1975: 121; Spiro, 1984: 323, 324, 328; Verba, 1965: 517). Culture is said to exert a bounding influence, setting limits on the range of possible behaviors that are considered to be acceptable (Elkins and Simeon, 1979: 128, 131; Goodenough, 1989: 95). Ian Lustick (1997: 12), for example, defines culture as ‘the array of symbols, shared expectations, and interactive patterns that limit and stabilize the boundaries of variation observable within groups as individuals within those groups perform life functions’. Other social scientists look upon culture as ‘integrative’, binding members of a community together and establishing separate roles and identities (Schein, 1985: 9). Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive of any pattern of ideational or symbolic activity that was shared by the members of a social group but had no effect on any other aspect of the group’s life. Culture is not merely inert; it does things.

Constitutive

For some social scientists, culture performs not only a causal function but a constitutive one as well (Wendt, 1999). It not only constrains human behavior as a more or less mechanical matter of cause and effect but also infuses human beings or their experiences with an essence that helps to make them what they are. Talcott Parsons (1951: 34), for example, observes that ‘culture is not merely “situational” relative to action but becomes directly constitutive of personalities as such’. Similarly, Wildavsky (1987: 17) emphasizes that ‘cultures constitute our political selves’. Still other social scientists note the constitutive role that culture plays in shaping human thoughts, beliefs and emotions, as well as the ways of life to which individuals are deeply attached (Shweder, 2000: 163; Spiro, 1984: 324, 328; Williams, 1981: 11).

Reflections on the Min–Max Strategy of General Definition

Having elucidated from the social science literature minimal and ideal-type definitions of ‘culture’, we may now reflect on some of the general properties of the min–max strategy of general definition. Our observations fall into five categories: (1) the replicability of the strategy; (2) the resonance of definitions produced by the strategy; (3) the implications of the min–max strategy of general definition for cluster strategies of definition; (4) the consistency of the min–max strategy with the results of recent research on language cognition; and (5) the implications of min–max definitions for contextual definitions.
Replication

First of all, it should be emphasized that the min–max strategy is just that – a strategy, not a formula. Different researchers applying the min–max strategy to the same term are likely to produce different minimal and ideal-type definitions. Ideal-type definitions are especially likely to vary. In elucidating an ideal-type definition of ‘culture’ from the social science literature, for example, we have been forced to make many choices along the way – e.g. how to group near-synonyms into coherent and comprehensible categories, what to label these categories when a parcel of near-synonyms are more or less interchangeable, and so forth. Nevertheless, the definitional peculiarities produced by these choices are likely to be minor. They do not mitigate the viability of the min–max strategy as a way of reducing semantic plenitude down to manageable proportions and of creating ‘bounding’ definitions. Indeed, the variation that we might expect to find among different min–max definitions is probably less than the variation found among dictionary and ordinary language definitions; and is much less than that found among social scientific definitions in works on a given subject (see later discussion). In sum, the min–max strategy of general definition can be replicated (to the degree, at any rate, that any qualitative work in the social sciences can be replicated).

Resonance

The first virtue of the min–max strategy is that it trespasses lightly on ordinary usage. Min–max definitions resonate with natural language and, more importantly, within the lexicon of the social science community. In contrast, stipulative definitions often fail to resonate with either, thus creating a well-known problem in social science discourse – idiosyncrasy.

To be sure, departures from commonly used terms and definitions are justified when no existing term or definition captures a concept for which a term or definition is sorely needed. Nevertheless, these situations are relatively rare in the social sciences. More typically, neologisms result from a failure to survey the existing field of terms and definitions adequately. Thus, Geertz (1964/1973: 220) identifies ‘maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience’ with the term ‘ideology’ rather than culture – an odd choice given the normal understandings of these two terms. Merelman (1969), Mullins (1972) and Wilson (1992) make similar choices, which we would prefer to call errors. Min–max definitions based on general surveys of usage preclude, or at least discourage, this sort of nonsense-making, identifying the boundaries that rightly constrain all sensible definitions.
Of course, min–max definitions are not merely reiterations of standard usage. If they were, then we would halt the process of definition after constructing a typology of definitional attributes, thus approximating the approach of lexical definitions and ordinary language analysis. The min–max strategy is ‘reconstructive’ but minimally so. As we have suggested, it is probably best understood as a marriage of the ordinary language and classificatory approaches.

Readers might wonder whether the min–max strategy adequately preserves the plenitude of meanings contained in ordinary usage. Are all social science concepts two-dimensional? Family-resemblance concepts, Wittgenstein (1953) points out, have no attributes common to all usages – or at least none that would be considered sufficient to define a concept, even in a minimal sense. Collier and Mahon (1993) offer the example of ‘mother’, noting that a genetic mother, birth mother, nurturing mother and stepmother share only one attribute in common – being female. Clearly, a minimal definition of mother must consist of more than simply being human and female (Taylor, 1995: ch 3). This objection might be damaging to the min–max strategy if ‘mother’ were a key social science term. It is not, however. In general, concrete terms like ‘mother’ are more likely to suffer from definitional ambiguity than the more abstract terms that are the staple of social science discourse. The abstract nature of the latter reduces – but does not eliminate – the problem of multiple usages without shared attributes. ‘Culture’, for example, has no nominative attributes that could be included in a minimal definition. Yet, we were able to identify three adjectival attributes – ideational or symbolic, patterned and shared – that were sufficient to bound the culture concept extensionally and thus to provide a minimal definition. Other social science terms probably could be handled in a similar manner.

Abstract concepts pose a different sort of problem, however. Consider ‘justice’, which may be interpreted as a matter of rights, needs or deserts; as aggregative or distributive; as equality, variously understood; or as an action that benefits the least advantaged (there are, of course, many other options). Concepts of such great complexity do not seem to map neatly into two-dimensional space. Yet, despite its multiple meanings, we may construe a minimal definition for this complex term. Justice is ‘treating equals equally’ and ‘to each his due’. These Aristotelian maxims are consistent with all definitions of justice and all non-idiomatic uses of the term. We might also construct an ideal-type definition by combining all or most of those qualities traditionally attributed to acts of justice, with a paradigmatic example of justice-in-action serving as a model. Saving Holocaust victims presumably satisfies every possible definition of justice. It thus offers an exemplar of justice in its most ‘ideal’ form, from which we might extract a set of ideal-type attributes.
Other concepts also could be subjected to this accordion-like definitional strategy.6 ‘Equality’, for example, might be defined minimally as ‘a relationship which obtains among persons or things which have been measured and found to be identical by reference to such standards of comparison as are deemed relevant to the inquiry at hand’ (Westen, 1990: 181). Maximally, equality presumably would refer to ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ equality, a state in which all things that matter are enjoyed equally. ‘Political party’ could be defined minimally as an organization that nominates individuals for elective or non-elective office. An ideal-type definition presumably would encompass many other attributes, including a shared ideology, an organizational apparatus, a well-defined membership and endurance over time. ‘Democracy’ could be defined minimally as rule by the people, and maximally by all the attributes traditionally associated with this word, including the social, political and civil dimensions of democracy.

We should note that many apparent deviations from normal usage are best characterized as commentaries on normal usage. As commentaries, these deviations retain the connotations normally associated with a term, even while they stretch the concept to which the term refers to fit new contexts. Schaffer (1998a: 2) reports that ‘democracy’ is sometimes used in contexts far removed from politics, and hence departs from the minimal definition of ‘rule by the people’. Affordable gourmet ice cream, one columnist writes, is ‘street-corner democracy in action: for five gooey mouthfuls, a secretary could eat as well as Donald Trump’ (quoted in Schaffer, 1998a: 2). Despite the non-political context, ‘democracy’ as used to describe gourmet ice cream recalls the general definition – ‘rule by the people’. Indeed, this usage of ‘democracy’ is intentionally ironic and, like all ironic comments, depends for its sense on the ‘straight’ reading of the word.

Min–max and cluster strategies

The min–max strategy of general definition initially seems quite different from a ‘cluster’ strategy. The latter seeks to break down complex words into their component parts – separate usages that demonstrate a higher degree of internal coherence than the concept signified by the complex word itself, and which are well differentiated from each other. For example, David Miller (1976) employs a cluster strategy of definition in arguing that social justice is really three concepts misleadingly packed into one, according to whether one considers the question from the perspective of rights, needs or deserts. Similarly, Hanna Pitkin (1967) argues that representation contains at least three dimensions: (1) descriptive; (2) symbolic; and (3) substantive.

6. We are indebted to David Waldner for suggesting this metaphor.
Collier and Levitsky (1997) discuss different kinds of democracy, including social democracy, parliamentary democracy and illiberal democracy. One could perform a similar analysis on most abstract terms in the social science lexicon.

The crucial question is: How distinct are the multiple usages of each of these terms? If they are sufficiently distinct – if there is little overlap between social justice as ‘rights’ and social justice as ‘needs’, for example – then we are justified in considering these meaning-clusters as separate concepts. These separate concepts, in turn, might be analyzed according to the min–max strategy of general definition. If, however, the meanings of these multiple usages turn out to be similar once they are disaggregated into their basic attributes or if the separate usages are not well established, then we might be justified in treating them all as parts of a single concept. The question of whether multiple usages of a term signify a single concept or multiple concepts is an empirical one. For example, if we were trying to define the word ‘case’, then we would want to distinguish between separate concepts signified by the usages of the term that differ radically from one another. When used as a synonym for ‘circumstance’ (e.g. ‘in the first case’), ‘case’ means something quite different from what it means in methodological contexts, where it is used to refer to an observation that provides evidence for a proposition (Gerring, 2001: Ch. 8). Accordingly, ‘case’ signifies a cluster of at least two distinct concepts. Alternatively, we could treat these multiple meanings as ‘subtypes’ that revolve around a single general definition. This alternate strategy would be easier if these subconcepts could be distinguished from one another and from the general definition by separate terms – e.g. ‘social democracy’, ‘liberal democracy’, and so forth (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). In any case, cluster strategies of definition are not viable substitutes for the min–max strategy of general definition but may be viewed as complementary to it.

The min–max strategy and language cognition

The lexicon of the social sciences is not autonomous from natural language. Indeed, virtually all of the key terms of the social sciences are adapted from natural language (Mahon, 1998; Schaffer, 1998b). Moreover, the process of concept formation in the social sciences, while not identical to concept formation in ordinary language, is still liable to cognitive constraints. Thus, it is important to consider the extent to which the min–max strategy of general definition conforms to recent research on language cognition (D’Andrade, 1995; Lakoff, 1987; Rosch et al., 1976; Taylor, 1995).

One of the most important discoveries in this fast-developing field is the role of the prototype in imposing conceptual order on the infinite complexities of empirical reality (Rosch, 1975). In a series of early experiments
Rosch and her colleagues explored common nouns like ‘bird’ in order to discern the extent to which different pictorial representations of this family accorded with respondents’ ideal notions of what a bird should look like. Respondents strongly embraced certain birds, such as the robin, over others, such as the penguin, that exhibited fewer of the qualities of ‘birdness’ (Rosch et al., 1976). The general conclusion drawn from this research is that human beings perceive the world through filters in the form of idealized cognitive models (ICMs) rather than through abstract ‘definitions’.

What is striking about this research is how closely the workings of the prototype mirror the workings of ideal-type definitions. Although our emphasis has been on the formal definitional attributes of the ideal-type, these attributes often are drawn from real exemplars. We can hardly conceive of ‘fascism’ without conjuring up images of Nazi Germany. Nor can we conceptualize ‘justice’ without some putatively real examples of justice-in-action. Many other social science concepts have exemplars or paradigm cases around which their definitions revolve. Idealized cognitive models may or may not exist in the real world but they are always ideal-typical. Again, the workings of natural language and the social sciences seem to be in tandem. A Lockean/Platonic circularity underlies the use of key concepts in both. We apprehend the real in terms of the ideal; and the ideal in terms of the real.

Minimal definitions are both more austere and more abstract than ideal-type definitions or prototypes. Yet, minimal definitions also have a direct parallel in cognitive linguistics. Langacker (1987: 373) considers that words are learned through a process of association and definitional adjustment, in which one instance of a concept (e.g. ‘tree’) is associated with another, and another, until a single abstract concept – or ‘schema’ – encompassing all such instances is formed. The contrast between a prototype and a schema reproduces many of the elements of min–max definitions. Langacker (1987: 371) explains:

A prototype is a typical instance of a category, and other elements are assimilated to the category on the basis of their perceived resemblance to the prototype; there are degrees of membership based on degrees of similarity. A schema, by contrast, is an abstract characterization that is fully compatible with all the members of the category it defines (so membership is not a matter of degree); it is an integrated structure that embodies the commonality of its members, which are conceptions of greater specificity and detail that elaborate the schema in contrasting ways.

Social science speech and ordinary speech are not identical. Sartori (1984) is correct to point out that the social science lexicon does not, and need not, reproduce ordinary language. As cognitive research has revealed, however, some versions of social science concept formation are more compatible with natural language than others. Ceteris paribus, we ought to prefer the version that is more ‘natural’.
Min–max and contextual definitions

Properly constructed, minimal and ideal-type definitions travel comfortably across contextual borders. They are hardy. Minimal definitions are travel-worthy because they are highly inclusive. Ideal-type definitions travel easily because they eschew the hard-and-fast boundaries of minimal definitions. They take a more permissive attitude to the task of operationalization; entities fall more or less into the semantic realm of a concept.

Contextual definitions, by contrast, are not as broadly applicable. The distinction between the two seems obvious enough once it has been pointed out. Yet, the failure to recognize such a distinction underlies a good deal of unproductive argumentation in the social sciences. It is as if Adam were to begin associating a given set of personality traits with an individual named Eve, and thereafter to consider it a breach of conceptual validity to call other persons by that name. ‘Eve’ (Adam’s wife) is a contextual definition of a more general concept with the same name. Much the same could be said for many abstract concepts in the social sciences today. Every author seems to have a pet referent with which he or she associates a set of defining characteristics and uses in a particular research context, while giving little thought to other referents and contexts that might require other definitions. Each purports to be authoritative (Culture is . . . The state is . . . Justice is . . .); each is militant in defense of his or her key word and definition. They are jousting knights with definitional banners. Thus is semantic confusion born and conceptual disarray propounded.

Consider in this light the list of definitions of culture provided in Kroeber and Kluckholm’s exhaustive compendium (1952/1963; see also www.concepts-methods.org/blackboard.php). We are not arguing that any of these definitions are wrong. Rather, they are partial. They bring to light certain aspects of the culture concept while excluding or downplaying others. They are, in this sense, stipulative, arbitrary – but only if understood as general definitions. If, instead, we look upon these definitions as contextual, then it becomes possible to reconcile the profusion and prolixity of ‘culture’ with a central, enduring, core meaning – which we hope to have provided here.

Concluding Thoughts

A min–max general definition specifies the parameters of a concept, both a minimum and a maximum of attributes and entities. In this way, the min–max definition defines the frame within which contextual definitions should fall, a handy way of identifying the attribute and entity space of a concept. The minimal definition of a term offers a short set of attributes to which
others may be appended, while the ideal-type offers a long list of attributes from which attributes may be subtracted. Somewhere in between lies the terrain of non-idiosyncratic contextual definitions. For scholars working on culture, Table 2 offers a concise and yet comprehensive set of definitional options. We ought to be able to construct similar typologies for all social science concepts and thereby vastly reduce the time and effort that now are required to find the right term for a given research context, and the right definition for a given term in a given research context. When all concepts are so considered, the min–max strategy of general definition outlined here provides a terminological scaffolding upon which the welter of terms and meanings in the social sciences can be organized in a reasonably stable and well-organized manner.

This scaffolding is not a classificatory one, in which terms are arranged in a hierarchical fashion, defined by always-and-only attributes that establish a one-to-one correlation between words and things. Rather than a pyramid of terms, the min–max strategy establishes an irregularly structured two-dimensional space in which terms inhabit more or less fixed locations. Meanings overlap but are never perfectly synonymous. Meanings for a single term are plural but not infinite. Thus, although we cannot dispense with the twin problems of polysemy and synonymy, we can manage their ambiguities.

The two-dimensional space is mapped by minimal and ideal-type definitions – the former establishing an outer ring, and the latter establishing an inner ring, for each concept. Between these two extremes a concept’s interpretation fluctuates but without losing its essential meaning. These meanings continue to resonate even when a term is defined contextually. So understood, the signposts provided by min–max general definitions should allow us to navigate through semantic space without getting lost in our words.7

Let us consider, in this light, the oft-discussed problem of culture’s ‘residual’ status. The concept of culture, according to most culturalists (e.g. Thompson et al., 1990: 217–18), is like a scarce species threatened by well-armed poachers. The attributes and referents of this defenseless concept are being appropriated by neighboring terms (e.g. ‘structures’, ‘institutions’), leaving culture bare and unadorned, which is to say, meaningless. To be sure, there are many imperialisms at work in the fields of culture, structure and institutions. If economists are keen to claim cultural ground for their own, then so are culturalists eager to make excursions into enemy territory – into the world of ‘self-interest’ and ‘rationality’. Thus do we play musical chairs with words, defining our opponents out of existence (Sartori, 1975: 9; see also Sartori, 1984: 38, 52–3). Practitioners in any field of inquiry

7. This metaphor is a slight revision of Kaplan’s. Concepts, he writes, ‘mark out the paths by which we may move most freely in logical space’ (1964: 52).
are apt to privilege terms and definitions that allocate the greatest and theoretically most important semantic ground to themselves.

This unseemly scramble for semantic Lebensraum confirms the relativist’s view of the social sciences – mutually incompatible and incommensurable paradigms competing in a violent turf battle over what is sense and what is non-sense. The victor is that group of social scientists who struggle most aggressively to redefine the conceptual universe in a power-grab for meaning. To the extent that this view accurately describes the history and current state of the social sciences, it is a withering indictment. Where are we to look for an alternative to the incessant and apparently unproductive lexical battles that plague the social sciences?

There are many possibilities – epistemological, ontological and methodological – but only one that is sufficiently grounded in common sense and common practice to be mutually acceptable to all parties. This option, we have argued, is the ordinary language approach to concept formation, as structured by the min–max strategy of general definition.

Of course, there always will be conceptual frontiers in the social sciences and these frontiers always will be susceptible to border skirmishes among neighboring terms. Yet, the question of which among a set of neighboring terms ‘owns’ particular attributes or entities is not entirely up for grabs. Some borders are more defensible than others. Minimal definitions establish the outer boundaries of a concept and, thus, are likely to overlap with the minimal definitions of neighboring concepts. Ideal-type definitions, in contrast, are the highest walls of the strongest castle, nestled deep in the interior of a concept’s conceptual realm. Ideal-type definitions encompass fewer phenomena than do minimal definitions, but the ownership of these phenomena is less in doubt.

The min–max strategy of general definition should help us to define key concepts more easily, to define the range of those concepts (differentiating between general and contextual definitions) and to avoid sterile debates that are purely ‘semantic’ – where language gets in the way of understanding. It is often said that that the social sciences lack for having a common language, a common lexicon by which to conduct research, arbitrate disputes and cumulate discoveries. The min–max strategy of general definition can help to create that common language.

We do not mean to suggest that minimal and ideal-type definitions are permanent, fixed. Indeed, general definitions undergo continual revision. As social scientists suggest new attributes for a concept, our conception of the concept changes. These changes are incremental, however, occurring over many decades, and exhibit a high degree of subsequent stability. They do not challenge the utility of minimal and ideal-type definitions as bounding (and hence defining) devices.
Indeed, any progress in the social sciences is likely to be reflected in conceptual development; a stagnant lexicon is rarely a useful lexicon. The intention of the min–max strategy of general definition is to structure the ongoing debates over terms and meanings so that they can proceed more productively. We hope that we have demonstrated the utility of this strategy by narrowing the scope of contention with respect to one especially recalcitrant concept – ‘culture’. We now know what it is that we are talking about, at least in a general way, when we employ this complex and multivalent term. We also know where to go for a more precise meaning – the contextual definition – serviceable in a particular research setting.

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