

# Construct

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In social science a construct is a theoretical entity or concept which aims at either explaining empirical data on a phenomenon or at conceptualizing unobservable elements in order to formulate (aspects of) a theory. Consequently, a construct is the result of an abstraction process and serves as an interface between theoretical and empirical social science research.

Typically, two kinds of constructs are distinguished. Firstly, a concept can be derived from a set of empirically measured variables (e.g., by use of exploratory factor analysis). This type of construct is known as an *empirical construct*. Since for this process the observed or measured variables are related to each other in order to form a construct, this method is also called the “observationist” approach (Middendorp, 1991). Secondly, a construct might reflect a theoretical concept that is not directly observable or measurable, and is, thus, called a *hypothetical construct* (American Psychological Association, 2014). Hypothetical constructs are based on a priori formulated theoretical definitions, which are then subsequently operationalized and measured (Middendorp, 1991). The term “hypothetical construct” can also synonymously be used with “theoretical construct” or “latent variable,” but must not be confounded with the empirically based terms “scale” or “index.”

The efforts of measuring a hypothetical construct may vary considerably depending on whether the construct can be assessed directly or indirectly. In communication research, indirect ways to measure constructs are more common than direct ways due to the complex nature of the investigated phenomena (Rössler, 2008). An example of a directly measured construct is media use. Measurements may include but are not limited to asking respondents about their daily media use in minutes. Media involvement, for instance, is assessed indirectly. Media involvement is a multilayered construct that comprises cognitive, affective as well as conative aspects (Wirth, 2006). To that end, indicators (e.g., questionnaire responses) and/or manifest variables (e.g., physiological responses), which are presumed to influence media involvement, are defined and measured. Deriving an operational definition for the construct is therefore decisive for the construct’s empirical measurement.

SEE ALSO: Factor Analysis, Exploratory; Measurement, Levels of; Operationalization; Scale Types; Variables, Types of

## References

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### Further reading

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