Chapter 7 Rubin & Babbie (2008)
Conceptualization and Operationalization

*Conceptualization* is the mental process whereby fuzzy and imprecise notions (concepts) are made more specific and precise. It involves specifying the meaning of the concepts and variables to be studied.

*Operationalization* is one step beyond conceptualization. Operationalization is the process of developing operational definitions.

*Operational definitions* refer to the concrete and specific definition in terms of the operations by which observations are to be categorized. The *operational definition* of "earning an A for this course" might be "correctly answering at least 90% of the mid-term and final exam questions correctly."

*Variables* are logical groupings of attributes (attributes are characteristics of persons or things). The variable sex is made up of the attributes male and female.

- *Independent variable* -- taken as a given; presumed to cause dependent variable
- *Dependent variable* -- presumed to depend on or be caused by another variable
- *Extraneous variable* -- possible alternative cause of effect on dependent variable
- *Control (moderating) variable* -- variable held constant in effort to identify independent variable
- *Mediating variable* -- comes between independent and independent variable in chain of causation

Types of relationships among variables

- *Positive relationship*--high value on one variable associated with a high value on a second variable
- *Negative (inverse) relationship*--low value on one variable associate with a high value on a second variable
- *Curvilinear relationship*--nature of relationship changes at certain levels of the variables

(Example: stress and performance)

*Conceptualization* > *nominal definition* > *operational definition* > *measurements in the real world*

A researcher must avoid gender and cultural bias in developing operational definitions.

Many choices for operationalizing exist, including range of variation and variations between extremes. Different dimensions of variables should be considered.

Examples of operationalization in social work research include self-reports, direct observation, and examination of available records.

Many existing scales can be used to measure different variables (p. 168).

Qualitative studies do not develop operational definitions "up front," focusing more on predetermined observations to discover deeper subjective meanings.