

## Conceptualizing Public Trust Through Descriptive Research

Shagun Gupta  
Ph.D. Candidate  
American University, Washington, D.C

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Qualitative researchers have long relied on ‘thick description’ to not only describe what they see, but also engage in the interpretive task of engaging with the experiences of research participants in distinct cultural settings. As a first year graduate students, I was introduced to the term through the seminal works of Ryle (1968; 2009) and Geertz (1973; 2008) and found it rather confusing. As Ponterotto (2006) points out, this confusion is echoed by other scholars like Holloway (1997) and Schwandt (2001). The virtue of thick description is almost always presented as a contrast with ‘thin description’, but more importantly its use in methods beyond ethnography is poorly understood. As I navigate these issues in my research, I always find it useful to return to an excerpt from Holloway (1997) for a richer definition:

*This type of description aims to give readers a sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions that research participant’s experience. It deals not only with the meaning and interpretations of people in a culture but also with their intentions. Thick description builds up a clear picture of the individuals and groups in the context of their culture and the setting in which they live ... Thick description can be contrasted with thin description, which is a superficial account and does not explore the underlying meanings of cultural members. (1997, p. 154)*

As a researcher who employs mixed method designs in her work, thick description occupies a unique space in my methodological toolkit. Given the variation in available definitions however, I rely on Ponterotto’s (2006) effort to integrate existing work:

*“Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report’s intended readership.” (2006, p. 543)*

I have utilized description and interpretation to understand the cultural space inhabited by my research participants as well as transform ideas into concepts. In my work on public trust and urban governance in India, description is an essential pathway towards conceptualizing “trust” and what it means to people living in conditions of urban informality. Descriptive work is uniquely positioned to contribute theoretical richness to multi-method work, and help researchers make sense of original quantitative data. While political scientists, sociologists and even anthropologists are interested in concepts such as trust in institutions or within communities, it is inherently

difficult to translate such concepts across language contexts and apply existing definitions that reflect specific cultural assumptions about how people relate to each other and to their institutions. However, I argue that “telling it like it is” isn’t enough for conceptualization. Description is useful in developing a detailed sketch of the landscape, but interpretation eventually adds color.

This memo aims to develop a framework for conceptualization that is sensitive to local context and builds on existing “knowledge networks” within communities to achieve possible synergies between established academic definitions and locally produced variations of social science concepts. I will focus on insights from preliminary fieldwork in 8 unauthorized colonies<sup>1</sup> in Delhi, India. By 2031, an estimated 600 million Indians will be living in urban areas, including megacities such as Delhi, as well as smaller cities and towns that have emerged to meet the demands of a rapidly urbanizing population. Unauthorized colonies alone house approximately 30% of the city’s population (Mehra 2022). While existing literature on governance and decentralization establishes that citizens’ trust in local governance bodies is essential for effective delivery of public goods and services, we also know that state capacity to respond to India’s rapidly urbanizing population remains limited. Based on an original survey of 250 households as well as qualitative interviews conducted in June-July 2022 in Delhi, India, I develop a typology of trust based on how the concept is understood by respondents themselves. In subsequent fieldwork, I aim to test whether horizontal ties among households, and vertical ties between households and neighborhood-level organizations shape levels of political participation and thereby predict different types of trust in local government institutions.

During preliminary fieldwork, I found that using description for conceptualization supported better data collection since there is no existing dataset that directly captures a snapshot of trust in a local governance body in a major Indian city, contributing to a highly iterative process that is often characteristic of the study of concepts such as trust or social capital in highly informal urban spaces. In addition, description combined with interpretation revealed the everyday trade-offs residents face between engaging with the state directly, through existing neighborhood-level organizations or other forms of collective action. The findings push the boundaries of scholarly work on the sub-national determinants of trust and its relationship with governance in rapidly urbanizing spaces characterized by high levels of informality.

The memo is organized as follows: Part I develops a framework for using *both* description and interpretation for conceptualization, Part II provides some vignettes from recent fieldwork in Delhi, India, and Part III concludes with a brief discussion of language and researcher positionality while operating in contexts where there is an inherent cultural power dynamic between the researcher and research participants.

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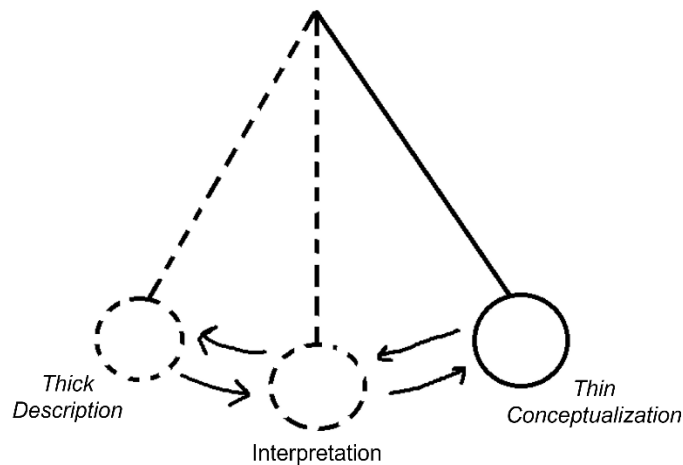
<sup>1</sup> The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) uses the term “unauthorized colonies” to classify residential colonies that have emerged in the city without formal approval from the city’s planning authorities. In 2022, a new scheme titled PM-UDAY (Prime Minister’s – Unauthorized Colonies in Delhi Awas Adhikar Yojana) was launched by the Union government to allow residents of these colonies to apply for ownership or transfer/mortgage rights over their land.

## Part I: The “Descriptive Pendulum” Framework

When I began preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2022, I was still writing my dissertation prospectus. This meant that whatever I learned in the field ended up shaping the ideas I ultimately presented to my committee. From the very beginning, I approached the process of conceptualization as if I was back on a tennis court – the concept I am trying to understand being a *very* worthy and tough opponent. My process involved a lot of back and forth between conversations with respondents in the field, my notes, my desk, and the dinner table as well. I call this process the “descriptive pendulum” because it’s certainly not linear, but neither is it circular.

What I’m proposing here (Figure 1) is an oscillation between *thick description* and *thin conceptualization*. With each swing back and forth, I engage in an active process of interpretation and reinterpretation, much like a tennis racket that swings back and forth with every shot. If you’re a tennis fan, you probably know that your body swings as a single unit, single movements don’t exist in isolation. Luckily, that is also how a pendulum works!

**Figure 1: The Descriptive Pendulum**



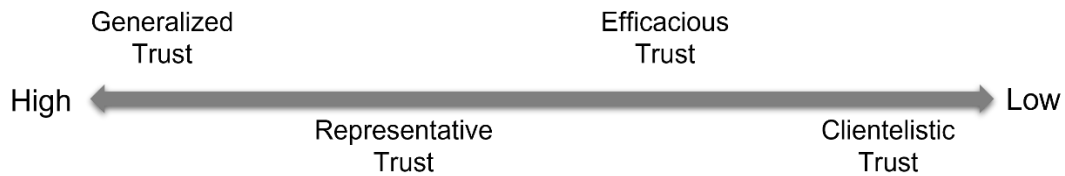
I’ve talked about thick description, but what is *thin conceptualization*? As a mixed method researcher who uses both in-depth interviews and survey experiments, I needed my concepts to be concise, testable, and replicable *yet* grounded in the specific context that I seek to explain. In my case, the context is Delhi – a highly populated and diverse city that alone comprises a microcosm of social phenomena that social scientists care about. Therefore, when I use the word *thin*, I don’t mean superficial – which is how Holloway (1997) contrasts thin description with thick description. In fact, the richness I collect through interviews undergoes a process of interpretation that has led me to concepts that I can now test further.

## Part II: A Preliminary Application in the Field

For my project, I started out with Hardin’s (1998) well-known definition of trust as “A form of encapsulated interest. A trusts B because he or she presumes it is in B’s interest to act in a

way consistent with A’s interest.” In my pilot survey, I measured trust on a 5-point Likert scale based on what had been used in existing surveys like the World Values Survey, Asian Barometer Survey, and the India Household Development Surveys I and II. However, in my interviews I found that residents living in my preliminary sample of unauthorized colonies demonstrated different types of trust that did not fit the neatly defined boundaries of political vs. social trust that we find in existing literature. Figure 2 presents the typology I ultimately developed along a high-low continuum.

**Figure 2: Continuum of Trust at the Neighborhood Level**



I’ll briefly illustrate an example of how I arrived at *efficacious trust* as a type of trust that circulates in some communities using the “descriptive pendulum”, moving from established ideas like “encapsulated trust” (Hardin 1998) to a more everyday experience of group efficacy in the absence of adequate neighborhood representation. Here’s an excerpt from an interview with a respondent (female, 52 years old) and the analytical memo I wrote after:

***“The MCD doesn’t do anything much for us, look at our street. It’s always dirty, the drains are full of trash and the rainwater keeps entering our homes. Isn’t it their job to collect the trash every day? But have you seen the empty field behind our house? In 22 years of living here, I have never seen their truck come and pick up the garbage lying there. I know there is some committee here, but they don’t work for us, so we have to work for ourselves. We don’t have a committee, but we clean our streets and sometimes we also go to the Councilor together when the drains get very clogged – I don’t go, but my son and some other people have gone a few times. We don’t sit here and do nothing.”***

*The woman was wearing a light red saree and she sat on the steps outside her house, they were still wet from the cleaning done about an hour ago. She looked quite comfortable but wasn’t smiling at us; her hands were resting on her lap for the most part but quite animated when she wanted to emphasize something. Her son sat next to her, because he spoke some English even though everyone in my research term was fluent in Hindi. Every few minutes, a younger child would come downstairs and take a peek – the neighbors next door also listened to the entire conversation. As she pointed to the dirty drains, I spotted another female resident cleaning the street outside her house. In this neighborhood, community strength and goods provision vary by “galli” or street, each street therefore is its own*

*microcosm. The drains are clogged, but not as much as other streets I saw this morning, there's fewer plastic packets of Lays etc. It is possible that the fresh cleaning masks some of this, and if I came back in the evening it would be different.*

*It was interesting to me that even though she does not participate in this informal leadership effort, she knows about it because of her son's involvement. She has opinions on why it is important, and her lack of direct participation doesn't exclude her from this unique "knowledge network" that a lot of women seem to be a part of based on everything I've heard so far in this neighborhood. If vertical ties to an association are weak but horizontal ties among residents are strong, then there's an efficacious aspect to trust building. An alternative mechanism, in this case an informal, seemingly random group of people (?) might broker that trust relationship. In her case, it seems trust in the MCD is quite low, but that also means that perhaps if the informal organization was stronger, it could lead to higher trust?*

My full analytical memo consisted of rich details about what I saw along as the interview was being conducted, and herein having an RA who made detailed verbatim notes on the actual interview was useful so I could occasionally zone out and notice the surroundings. The "thicker" aspect of this process was that respondents came up with different accounts of what they when a neighborhood association doesn't help them or doesn't exist. These details couldn't be captured on a simple Likert scale. In some cases, they do trust the MCD to look after their local interests (aka do their job) but in others, like the respondent above, they have very little confidence. A simultaneous process of interpretation through regular memo writing helped me zoom out from such accounts to consider trust based on group efficacy, or their belief that they can help themselves access the state.

My initial coding process was manual – I just made comments in MS Word after transcribing the interview and coded the document in Hindi. This helped me find some commonality across the coding in the language of the respondents themselves, before attempting an English translation of the codes. In the context of efficacious trust, I came up with codes like *confidence, strength, horizontal, small network, informal leadership*. I moved from these thicker descriptions and interpretation to a thinner version of the concept itself – for now, I conceptualize efficacious trust as a "below average level of trust in the MCD among residents that is highly sensitive to the capacity of households to come together as a group and make up for their lack of an associational advantage through neighborhood associations." Consequently, I expect the presence of alternative informal organizational mechanisms whenever I predict the presence of efficacious trust at the neighborhood level.

In this example, I have described *one oscillation* from thick description of sorts to thin conceptualization. In actual practice of course, multiple such oscillations are required to arrive at a concept that is an adequate representation of reality, yet concise and measurable. Depending on

how preliminary or advanced your research is, you might find yourself oscillating slowly or quickly.

### **Part III: Language and Positionality**

I want to briefly touch on language and positionality because two factors have influenced my strategy so far: fluency in Hindi, and deep cultural knowledge of the context as an Indian citizen *and* former resident of Delhi.

Coding interviews in Hindi was hugely advantageous in swinging from description to interpretation to conceptualization. In addition, I purposively selected 8 colonies in a part of Delhi I was very familiar with, which increased my overall knowledge of the context. These factors combined meant that I was able to move back and forth from description to conceptualization relatively quickly, and the process of interpretation itself was quite simultaneous. I was able to consciously start interpreting respondents' experiences as they spoke instead of having to wait for a translation – and while these breaks in research can be quite good, I did not have the luxury to take a step back due to time constraints. I would be curious to build this aspect further within the framework – how do we know when its time to stop swinging?

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