# From Conceptual Misalignment to Reconceptualizing: Demonstrating the Process of Reconceptualization

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In collecting data, analyzing data, or writing up, researchers can find that the concepts they had decided to use and the available concepts in the literature are mismatched with what they seek to explore and/or explain. This misalignment between concepts and observations can create analytical and theoretical blind spots, foreclosing the opportunity to delve deeper into and articulate the specificities and complexities of what they observe. Researchers experiencing such misalignment of concepts need strategies to help them reconceptualize existing concepts, which we hope to provide here to help researchers develop more nuanced and better-adapted concepts that provide more analytical, theoretical, and empirical leverage. This article suggests a four-step process of reconceptualization, a method for developing and iterating the concepts we employ in designing, conducting, and writing up research. This method of reconceptualization addresses a gap in the existing literature on concepts by providing a new, practical, accessible, and pedagogically oriented solution for this problem of misaligned concepts. We illustrate how to implement reconceptualization by working with the concept of "local" and offer two examples of how we reconceptualized this concept in two projects in Dominica and Moldova. We show how, by reconceptualizing an initial concept, we can move forward in developing new and reconceptualized concepts. Hence, this article also offers two concepts: "local-international" and "internationalized local," that are more attuned to what we observe and richer in their empirical and analytical potential.

Los investigadores recopilan, analizan y redactan datos, lo que conlleva que, a veces, tanto los conceptos que habían decidido utilizar como los conceptos disponibles en la literatura no coinciden con lo que buscan estudiar y/o explicar. Este desajuste entre los conceptos y las observaciones puede crear puntos ciegos, tanto analíticos como teóricos, que le impiden poder profundizar y articular las especificidades y complejidades de lo que observan. Los investigadores que se enfrentan a este desajuste de conceptos necesitan estrategias que les ayuden a reconceptualizar los conceptos existentes. En este artículo esperamos proporcionar estas estrategias con el fin de poder ayudar a los investigadores a desarrollar conceptos más matizados y mejor adaptados y que proporcionen una mayor capacidad analítica, teórica y empírica. Este artículo sugiere un proceso de reconceptualización de cuatro pasos, así como un método para desarrollar e iterar los conceptos que empleamos en el diseño, la realización y la redacción de la investigación. Este método de reconceptualización aborda un vacío en la literatura existente sobre conceptos debido a que proporciona una solución nueva, práctica, accesible y con orientación pedagógica para poder abordar este problema de conceptos desajustados. Ilustramos cómo se puede implementar la reconceptualización trabajando con el concepto de «local» y ofrecemos dos ejemplos de cómo reconceptualizamos este concepto en dos proyectos, en Dominica y Moldavia. Demostramos cómo, al reconceptualizar un concepto inicial, podemos avanzar en el desarrollo de conceptos nuevos y reconceptualizados. Por eso, este artículo también ofrece dos conceptos: «local-internacional» y «local internacionalizado». Estos conceptos se encuentran en una mayor sintonía con lo que observamos y son más ricos con respecto a su potencial empírico y analítico.

Quand ils recueillent des données, les analysent ou rédigent, il arrive que les chercheurs se rendent compte que les concepts qu'ils avaient décidé d'utiliser et les concepts existants dans la littérature ne correspondent pas à ce qu'ils souhaitent approfondir et/ou expliquer. Cette absence de correspondance entre concepts et observations peut créer des « angles morts » analytiques et théoriques, excluant la possibilité d'approfondir et d'articuler les spécificités et complexités de leurs observations. Les chercheurs qui rencontrent ce type de situation ont besoin de stratégies pour leur permettre de reconceptualiser les concepts existants. Nous espérons leur en fournir dans cet article pour les aider à développer des concepts plus nuancés et mieux adaptés qui présentent plus d'intérêt analytique, théorique et empirique. Cet article propose un processus de reconceptualisation en quatre étapes, une méthode de développement et d'itération de concepts que nous employons dans la conception, la conduite et la rédaction de travaux de recherche. Cette méthode de reconceptualisation vient combler une lacune de la littérature existante sur les concepts en fournissant une nouvelle solution pratique, accessible et tournée vers la pédagogie à ce problème d'absence d'alignement des concepts. Nous illustrons la mise en œuvre de la reconceptualisation en travaillant avec le concept du « local ». Nous proposons deux exemples de notre reconceptualisation de ce concept dans deux projets en Dominique et en Moldavie. Nous montrons comment, en reconceptualisant le concept initial, nous pouvons développer de nouveaux concepts reconceptualisés. Aussi cet article propose-t-il deux concepts : le « local international » et le « local internationalisé ». Ils correspondent mieux à nos observations et possèdent un potentiel empirique et analytique plus riche.

## Introduction

There are as many ways to conduct an empirical research project as there are researchers. But most follow a similar pattern: they start by formulating their research problem that outlines the issue of interest. Then, they conduct a literature review and identify a gap in the literature that aligns with the research problem. Subsequently, they design their research by formulating their research question, identifying concepts that pertain to their object of interest, thinking about how empirically to observe (or operationalize) their concepts of interest, and developing a data collection and data analysis strategy. After iterating through

these stages, they set upon conducting the research. However, at various stages, whether in collecting data, analyzing data, or writing up, researchers might identify a conceptual misalignment where they identify that concepts they had set upon using, and the available concepts in the literature, fall short, lack nuance, or are mismatched with what they seek to explore, explain, and/or make legible. Here, researchers have a choice: to keep using the concept despite the misalignment or develop better-attuned concepts. Researchers might often opt for the first choice. But doing so might misrepresent what we are observing, and diminish our analytical richness and our capacity to articulate it.

On the other hand, if researchers want to develop better-attuned concepts, to date there has been little practical guidance. This lacuna might be acceptable for some researchers, but it can be a challenge if not a source of struggle for many. We argue that researchers experiencing such misalignment of concepts need strategies to help them reconceptualize existing concepts and to help them develop better-attuned concepts that are more aligned, and have better empirical, analytical, and theoretical leverage.

This article provides such methodological and pedagogical guidance by suggesting a new four-step process of reconceptualization, a method for developing and iterating the concepts we employ in designing, conducting, and writing up research. This method is designed to be a practical, accessible, and pedagogically oriented solution. Our point of departure is not that developing concepts is a new idea (since it is not). Instead, our point of departure is that researchers often need guidance on developing, adapting, and innovating existing concepts.

Our method of reconceptualization bridges two bodies of literature. First, we draw inspiration from Sartori (1970), who cautions against stretching concepts by taking them down the "ladder of abstraction." Second, we take inspiration from linguistic approaches to concepts for their reflexive attention to the use of language (Guzzini 2013; Berenskoetter 2017; Ish-Shalom 2021). These approaches may seem antagonistic since they view language differently and typically relate language to concepts, and vice versa, in ways that otherwise appear contrasting.[1] Inspired by our methodological and pedagogical impetus, we aim to bring together these two diverging approaches. In doing so, we demonstrate the areas in common across these two seemingly diverging approaches. We also demonstrate the need for practical and accessible solutions to concepts that supersede scholarly disagreements over language. In designing this process of reconceptualization, we take an ecumenical and pluralistic stance on how scholars might conceive of the relationship between concepts and language. However one approaches this relationship, we intend for reconceptualization to help provide guidance that otherwise might not exist.

Hence, our first aim for reconceptualization is that it is widely accessible, especially to those whose projects do not require them to be or become experts in the use of language. Assistance for developing and adapting concepts should not only be the purview of linguistically-oriented scholars. After all, all scholars can experience the problem of misalignment regardless of whether they devote themselves to language or not. Second, we aim that reconceptualization is useful and relevant regardless of one's epistemic priors. Positivist, interpretivist, and critical scholars can all experience challenges regarding concepts and deserve accessible and implementable guidance.

Turning to the "local," the example we take in this article, we also see how scholars can often critique this concept in terms of how we understand its relations to other concepts like "international." Yet they keep "local" intact as a concept. Thus, we seek to offer a process that can help innovate and alter existing concepts, not least when they are misaligned to understand, analyze, and explain the complexities of the social world. As a result of reconceptualization, we can better attune our concepts to what we observe and seek to explain. In doing so, this article offers two new concepts: "local-international" and "internationalized local."

This article proceeds, first, by briefly reviewing Sartori's and linguistic approaches to concepts to show that drawing these together provides a solid foundation for reconceptualization. Second, we detail the four-step process of reconceptualization. Third, we demonstrate how to implement reconceptualization via two examples of how we came to reconceptualize "local." In each, we trace how we realized we needed to reconceptualize this concept and the steps we took to reconceptualize it. We show how, by reconceptualizing an initial concept, we can move forward in developing a reconceptualized concept that is more attuned to what we observe and richer in its empirical and analytical potential.

## Existing Approaches to Working with Concepts

This section reviews two existing approaches in political science and IR to working with concepts: those inspired by Sartori's ladder of abstraction and those that follow a more linguistic and reflexive approach to concepts. Here, our goal is not an exhaustive review of all relevant literature within or beyond these approaches. Instead, our goal is to bridge these approaches that can often seem quite disparate, to unpack how each engages with concepts, and to consider how each offers solutions for developing concepts.

### *The Ladder of Abstraction*

For Sartori (1970), concepts function descriptively as "data containers" and as the first step of research design, preceding measurement and empirically deploying such measurements. Sartori (1970) advocated a taxonomic approach to concepts. A taxonomic approach is borrowed from the natural sciences, where biologists seek to distinguish between and thereby classify different species. Using this metaphor, for Sartori, concepts need distinct attributes that allow one concept (A) to have distinct attributes so that it is mutually exclusive and can be discriminated from another concept (B). We could also see this approach as a medical diagnostic tool to distinguish between condition A's common symptoms (attributes) from those of condition B.

To maintain this taxonomic approach, Sartori (1970) cautioned against concept stretching, where a concept's definition gradually expands to enable more cases to be fitted within that concept. The result would be that we cannot determine between an instance of one concept (A) or another (B). Sartori's solution was the "ladder of abstraction," as a process of moving from more universalizing first-order concepts to more specific second-order subtypes of concepts. Sartori's ladder of abstraction has been

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[1] These diverging approaches might seem to model the two stages of Wittgenstein's approach to language, from his early first approach (his "picture theory of language") to his later approach, which critiqued such an approach, inspired much of postmodern scholarship, and took a "meaning in use" approach to language (Fierke 2010; Epstein 2013; Grimmel and Hellmann 2019). Those inspired by and aligned with Wittgenstein's later approach can see those aligned with his earlier approach as ostensibly wrong or mistaken. We take a more pluralist approach where we aim to provide guidance to reconceptualization regardless of one's own approach to language, or expertise therein.

particularly influential among positivist scholars in political science and IR (Gerring 1999; Mair 2008; Schmitter 2008; Collier and Gerring 2009; Kasten 2017). For example, Collier and Levitsky (1997) provide a prominent example by taking the concept of "democracy" down the ladder of abstraction to introduce sub-types of democracy "with adjectives" (such as "hybrid democracy").

Sartori's technique of a "semantic field" is especially useful for helping scholars refine, specify, and articulate a concept's sub-types (Masullo 2021), including more critical scholars (see Herborth 2022). Identifying a concept's semantic field helps us identify the attributes of the initial concept and contrasting concepts (Rauta 2021). Hence, we can determine where the boundary lies, for example, between "peace" (initial concept) and "war" or "conflict" (contrasting concepts). To identify a concept's semantic field, we pinpoint those concepts and terms related to the initial concept, such as synonyms (alike terms) and antonyms (opposite terms). Here, "conflict" and "war" are antonyms within the semantic field of "peace," or "authoritarianism" is an antonym within the semantic field of "democracy."

Three limits, however, persist in Sartori's approach that we address in developing our method of reconceptualization. First, Sartori's approach can take concepts—and the dichotomies they imply (e.g., democracy and authoritarianism)—at face value. Instead, Collier and Adcock (1999, 545) advise a more "graded approach" of using "multiple cut-points" and a more iterative approach to concept specification that responds to cases and observations (Adcock and Collier 2001). Second, Sartori's taxonomic approach can be too restrictive by assuming clear boundaries between concepts, as if all cases of a concept must share the same "defining properties" (Collier and Mahon 1993). Collier and Mahon (1993) suggest a looser approach where all instances do not necessarily have to share *all* properties of an ideal type form of a concept. Third, Sartori's approach, including his adherents cited here, aligns more with a positivist approach to research. Hence, its usefulness can be limited for post-positivist researchers—e.g., those within interpretivist and critical traditions—who may have a different understanding of the relationship between a researcher and their object of analysis, and the language they use to describe such an object.

These limits highlight how, in developing the method of reconceptualization, we need to offer tools that allow for (1) iteration when developing and redeveloping concepts, (2) concepts to exist beyond—and also across—a binary, and (3) be relevant for researchers regardless of their epistemologies (i.e., whether they are positivist or post-positivist). Hybrid concepts, for example, that combine elements pertaining to terms within an otherwise opposing binary (or spectrum)—such as democracy and authoritarianism, or peace and war—are both possible and productive, and we aim to provide tools for developing them.

### Linguistic Approaches to Concepts

Since the linguistic turn in IR, scholars taking a linguistic approach to concepts critique Sartori for taking the language used in concepts at face-value rather than interrogating it (Bevir and Kedar 2008; Çapan and Grzybowski 2022). Proponents of this approach emphasize concepts' central and necessary communicative role in providing the "language" and "frameworks" of what we seek to explain and understand (Berenskoetter 2017, 152). Here, concepts are

the "ontological building blocks of theory" (Guzzini 2013, p. 535). Chiefly, linguistic approaches highlight the socio-political and spatio-temporal embeddedness of concepts and underline the need to understand and situate a concept's meaning within its broader socio-political contexts (Somers 1995; Guzzini 2013; Owens 2016; Mitrani 2021; Wilkens and Kessler 2021).

First, linguistic approaches highlight how language matters because if we fail to contextualize concepts, we can miss their role in guiding, determining, or constraining what we observe in the first place (Reus-Smit 2016; Powel 2020). We can overlook how norms, morals, and preferences are embedded in concepts. For example, linguistic approaches argue that concepts of "peace" and "war," or "democracy" and "authoritarianism," are not neutral terms devoid of context. Rather, they are embedded in moral hierarchies that position one as more desirable, superior, and in opposition to the other. If we fail to account for these norms, or explore their origin, we can repeat these dichotomies uncritically, without accounting for the messier and more nuanced reality that does not align with such neat dichotomies (Ish-Shalom 2021, 16).

Second, language matters when translating and using concepts across different socio-political contexts and languages. We should not expect one concept to work equally or be transposable from one context to another (Costa Lopez et al. 2018). Indeed, scholars precisely study the process of "vernacularization," whereby global norms, such as human rights, are translated by actors into everyday practices and discourses in different contexts (Merry 2005; Zimmermann 2016). The solution offered by linguistic approaches is to prioritize a more reflexive and critical engagement with the concepts we use, often via conceptual analysis (Reus-Smit 2016; Berenskoetter 2017; Wilkens and Kessler 2021).

However, this solution has two limitations for our purposes. First, to our knowledge, linguistic approaches do not provide practical tools for researchers who seek to adapt existing concepts to situations that do not fit (or develop new concepts). Instead, linguistic approaches offer conceptual analysis as a solution, a method for analyzing the history of how a concept has been used in the social world by actors (Peltonen 2019). Conceptual analysis, for example, might unravel a concept theoretically (Berenskoetter 2017), expose how the meaning of concepts has changed over time (Bueger 2021), or analyze the looseness, vagueness, and hollowness of many concepts in use (Mitrani 2021). But conceptual analysis does not meet the needs of all: many researchers want to employ concepts rather than prioritize analysis of them or commit to training in conceptual analysis. The method of reconceptualization, therefore, needs to be accessible by all those who seek to refine their own use of concepts and implementable within the design of a specific project, rather than constitute a secondary project on its own.

Stemming from this first limitation is a second limitation whereby linguistic approaches, principally, align with post-positivist epistemologies (e.g., interpretive and critical); that is to say, they are harder to implement for positivist scholars, just as Sartori's approach is harder to implement for post-positivist scholars. We aim to build bridges between Sartori's and linguistic approaches and, more concretely, between positivist and post-positivist approaches. Hence, reconceptualization needs to be implementable by a broad range of scholars, regardless of their epistemic priors.

Having reviewed these two bodies of literature in terms of how they approach concepts and noted their limitations, we now shift to how we build the method of reconceptualization by bridging these two approaches.

### Beyond Sartori's and Linguistic Approaches to Concepts: A Framework For Reconceptualization

Reconceptualization is a method for adapting, innovating, and iterating the concepts we employ in the context of designing, conducting, and writing up research after we identify a conceptual misalignment, i.e., we identify that the initial concept is neither the best analytical nor linguistic tool to describe, understand, analyze, and/or explain what we seek. On the one hand, we bridge Sartori's and linguistic approaches to concepts. Our method of reconceptualization emphasizes that these two approaches are not as disparate as they may appear. One may emphasize language and sociopolitical contexts more than the other, but those inspired by Sartori are also attentive to language (e.g., considering a concept's semantic fields).[2] On the other hand, we take these approaches further by offering a method that is accessible, implementable, and flexible to researchers' different needs and constraints.

First, reconceptualization builds on Sartori's emphasis on a conceptual "ladder of abstraction" by moving down from universalizing first-order concepts to more specific second-order concepts. Our starting point is a concept's semantic field: its antonyms and synonyms. Second, drawing on linguistic approaches to concepts, we also emphasize attention to language and discourse and a need to be reflexive about how concepts are used and their socio-political contexts. Third, however, our method of reconceptualization moves beyond only considering language and discourse. In particular, we advocate for incorporating a "sociological imagination" (Mills 2000) to consider actors' socio-political practices and behaviors (alongside discourses) where relevant to our concept and what we seek to explore.

One key aim of reconceptualization is to offer less restrictive options than a taxonomic approach. Therefore, when reconceptualizing, we encourage researchers to be attentive to (potentially) unhelpful binaries, i.e., terms positioned as if they are opposing, when considering a concept's semantic field (e.g., peace vs. war). Such binaries may imply that concepts are mutually exclusive. However, as we engage in reconceptualization, we can consider and create hybrid sub-types that might blur the boundary between existing concepts.

#### *Reconceptualization As a Cumulative Four-Step Method*

Reconceptualization consists of four steps. At each step, the researcher should ask themselves: Does this reconceptualized concept improve the initial concept? If yes, the researcher can stop and employ their reconceptualized concept; if no, the researcher should proceed to the next step.

**Step 1.** *Identify conceptual misalignment.* This realization might occur at any stage of the research process (e.g., collecting data, analyzing data, writing up).

When we identify a misalignment—a mismatch between the concept we are using and what we seek to explore or explain, between our concept and research problem, or a shortcoming in the concept for our needs—we should progress to step 2. If we do not identify a misalignment, we might not need reconceptualization and can continue with the initial concept. Still, we can return to this process if we identify a misalignment later in the research process.

**Step 2.** *Identify the initial concept's semantic field to map concepts to which the initial concept may be related.* In this step, we need to evaluate the concept's linguistic and conceptual synonyms and antonyms by reviewing its dictionary definitions. We should also review existing literature on those concepts we identify as belonging in our original concept's semantic field. One of these alternative concepts from the semantic field might offer an improvement versus the original concept; if not, they should proceed to step 3.

**Step 3.** *Evaluate existing sub-types of the initial concept and concepts in the semantic field.* If available, we should review existing literature on these sub-types. If unavailable, we should still review existing relevant literature to help us develop our own sub-types. If existing sub-types are unsuitable, we should think creatively in developing our own sub-types of the concept that match what we seek to explain. Researchers might identify or innovate a sub-type that is an improvement on the initial concept, at which case they can stop; if not, they should proceed to step 4.

**Step 4.** *Consider hybrid sub-types. Hybrid sub-types nest within the initial concept.* However, they also combine attributes from other concepts in the semantic field (e.g., antonyms). In doing so, hybrid sub-types can blur existing binaries in ways that might be helpful. Again, existing hybrid sub-types may be available; in which case, we should review relevant literature on these existing sub-types. If these existing hybrid sub-types do not exist, we should think creatively in developing our own sub-types of the concept that align with what we seek to explain. Researchers might identify or innovate a hybrid sub-type that improves the initial concept, and they can stop. But we still might not be convinced that the options we produced are sufficient. At this point, we recommend exploring alternative concepts and, if needed, returning to step 2 of the process of reconceptualization with this alternative concept.

For ease, we present these steps in a flowchart (figure 1). We also offer examples of what reconceptualization might look like for "democracy" and "peace" (table 1). Here, we provide some non-exhaustive but illustrative examples of antonyms within the semantic field. For other concepts, synonyms might be more useful.

Determining if and when an improvement has been achieved, necessary to stop the process of reconceptualization, is relative to the starting point (step 1) and, where relevant, the results of the previous steps. What improvement entails also depends on the researcher's intentions, how they intend to deploy their concept, and their epistemic assumptions. The aim is *not* to find the perfect concept. Every concept involves tradeoffs between what we seek

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[2]Indeed, adherents of both have raised similar concerns, for example concerning the potential for reifying concepts (see Collier and Adcock 1999, 545; Bevir and Kedar 2008; Kaczmarska 2019; Çapan and Grzybowski 2022). Adherents in both approaches are also often inspired by Wittgenstein's approach to language, e.g., "family resemblances" (see Collier and Mahon 1993; Fierke 2002).
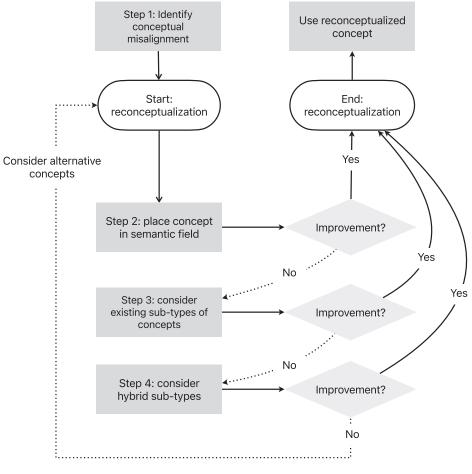
**Figure 1.** Flow chart of Steps of Reconceptualization.

**Table 1.** Examples of reconceptualization

| Identify semantic field of first-order concepts (step 2) | Second-order concepts (Examples) | |
| | "Classic" sub-types (step 3) | Hybrid sub-types (step 4) |
|---|---|---|
| **Initial** Democracy | | Illiberal democracy[a] |
| | | Hybrid democracy |
| **Semantic field** Authoritarianism | Parliamentary democracy | Quasi-authoritarian regime |
| | Federal democracy[a] | Competitive authoritarianism[b] |
| **Initial** Peace | Positive peace | Hybrid peace[c] |
| | Negative peace | Everyday peace |
| | Liberal peace | |
| | Illiberal peace | |
| **Semantic field** War | Intrastate wars[d] | Transnational conflict[e] |
| | Interstate war | Proxy war |
| | Conventional war | Remote warfare |
| | Irregular war | Cyber warfare |
| Conflict | Ethnic conflict | |
| | Religious conflict | |

Source: [a]From Collier and Levitsky (1997).
[b]From Levitsky and Way (2002).
[c]From Mac Ginty (2010).
[d]From Jackson (2007).
[e]From Twagiramungu et al. (2019).

to explain, understand, analyze, and/or make legible and the terminology we use to do so. Rather, an improvement can be seen as a reduction in these tradeoffs or a more satisfactory balance between them. In particular, we might examine whether our new concept helps us reach a closer, or richer, approximation of whatever phenomenon we

seek to describe or give meaning to.[3] Here, we have unpacked what we mean by "improvement" in abstract terms. The examples that follow from our projects in

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[3]We thank the reviewer for prompting us to unpack what we mean by an improvement.

**Table 2.** Examples of reconceptualization for "local"

| Identify semantic field of first-order concepts (step 2) | | Second-order concepts (examples) | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | *"Classic" sub-types (step 3)* | *Hybrid sub-types (step 4)* |
| **Initial** | Local | Local actors | |
| | | Local scale | |
| | | Local community | |
| | | Local/everyday experiences[a] | Local-international |
| | | | Internationalized local |
| **Semantic field** | International[b] | International actors | |
| | | International scale | |
| | | International community | |

Notes: [a]These examples are developed from Alejandro and Knott (2022).

[b]Here we focus on "international" as within the semantic field of "local," the initial concept. One could equally select other concepts within the semantic field of "local," such as "regional," "global," or "national," depending the emphasis of one's topic. We focus on "international" since this concept was the main obstacle in our research projects and, hence, is the starting point of our demonstration of using the process of reconceptualization.

Dominica and Moldova demonstrate what we mean more concretely.

### Reconceptualization in Action: Two Examples of Reconceptualizing "Local"

To demonstrate reconceptualization in action, we provide two examples of reconceptualizing "local" for research projects in Dominica and Moldova. In both examples, continuing to use "local" without reconceptualizing it would have weakened our analytical leverage. We demonstrate how we reconceptualized "local" into two more attuned hybrid sub-types of "local"—(1) "local-international," and (2) an "internationalized local" (table 2). These reconceptualized hybrid sub-types helped us to overcome the problems with the initial concept of "local" and develop a richer and more precise analysis.

We came together having both experienced this misalignment of the concept of "local" with what we observed and sought to explain. Hence, the impetus of this article was our shared challenge and desire to provide and develop reconceptualizing solutions. However, beyond our individual experiences, if we experienced this conceptual misalignment across these different projects, these difficulties may resonate with others.

Dominica and Moldova also have a common feature: they could easily be designated as what Nossal (2001) calls IR "uninteresting others" due to their liminal position in world politics. We consider that the marginal interest in these cases within IR makes them especially instructive for reconceptualization and IR's broader reflexive aims of decentering from privileged and dominant ways of seeing the world (Thakur 2021); hence, these cases might—maybe more than others—take us to unexplored cognitive spaces. We write the examples that follow in the first person and trace through the four steps of reconceptualization in each to fit this article's methodological ambition and take ownership of our experiences, struggles, and solutions.[4]

*Existing Conceptualizations of "Local"*

Before we identify the misalignment of our concept and what we seek to explain (step 1, discussed below for each case), we start by conceptualizing (i.e., defining) the concept. This step entails conducting a literature review that examines and brings together how previous scholarship has defined this concept. This section plots what this might look like for researchers via the example of "local." Given that "local" is a highly used concept in IR, our intention is not to provide an exhaustive conceptualization of "local." Rather, we engage with some major contributions in IR that conceptualize and define "local." We also seek to map the semantic field of "local" which is crucial for step 3 of reconceptualization (see below for execution of step 3 in each case and table 2).

Within peacebuilding, Paffenholz (2015, 861) conceptualizes "local" as "everyday resistance against the hegemonic international liberal actor."[5] For Mac Ginty (2015, 851), "local" is "a system of beliefs and practices that loose communities and networks may adopt." In Mac Ginty's understanding, "local" may have territorial or extra-territorial characteristics. Meanwhile, Kochanski (2020, 28) defines "local" as "subnational," e.g., something in relation to the "district, commune, or village levels." For Kyselova and Axyonova (2024), "local" refers to "insiders" whose "epistemic stances are grounded domestically"; for example, they conceive of a civil society organization inside a conflict situation (e.g., Ukraine) as typifying "local." It is also worth mentioning how scholars caution against instrumentalized or romanticized (or instrumentalizable) definitions of "local" to avoid permitting actors from claiming something is authentic by referring to it as "local" (Mac Ginty 2015).

Here, we can identify a lack of agreement between scholars regarding what "local" means. For some, this is a problem. For example, Kochanski (2020, 28) recommends a "shared conception" of what "local" is to ensure analytical equivalency. For other scholars, this plurality points to the elasticity of "local" and other concepts like "international" (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 770; see also Turnbull 2000, 40). Instead, Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013, 770) define "local" relationally: being what national and international are not. They also highlight that what is "local" also

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[4]Writing in the first person is common when discussing, and demonstrating reflexivity (Humphreys 2005; Davies 2012), research choices and practices (Subotic 2020).

[5]See Randazzo (2016) for a critique of eliding "local" and "everyday" as concepts.

interacts with what is not "local" via "transnational, traversal" connections (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 770). In contrast, Alejandro and Knott (2022) identify four different registers of "local" as: (1) a class of actors, (2) a space, scale, and level, (3) community, and (4) as experiences of the everyday. In other words, "local" can refer to different things, even with the same publication. In turn, registers are often implicit and taken for granted, rather than made explicit, in how scholars define "local" (Alejandro and Knott 2022).

Running through these conceptualizations is scholars' awareness, and often critique, of how "local" is defined "in opposition" to other concepts (Paffenholz 2015, 861), such as "international." Hence, "local" and "international" are often constructed as if they are "binary opposites" (Paffenholz 2015, 858). Such binaries are not neutral facts and have important consequences that need to be acknowledged. For example, Danielsson (2020, 1088) argues that this binary treats "local" and "international" as if they are "pre-formed and ontologically distinct" (see also Hameiri and Jones 2017).

Finally, recent scholarship on "local" has taken this relational approach further (Randazzo 2016; see also Hunt 2017). Millar (2021, 302), for example, suggests a "trans-scalar approach" to "reach beyond the local" by situating it in relation to "decisions, actions, and policies at higher scales—the national, international, regional, and global" and then observing the interactions across these scales. Similarly, but conversely, Mac Ginty (2019, 235, 242) suggests the notion of "circuitry" to connect "the local and the non-local," including "hyper-local" and "extra-local" scales that relate to "home and everyday." These approaches keep the concept of "local" intact. While they suggest approaches to innovate "local," they do so by suggesting ways to relationally connect "local" and other concepts. However, sometimes, we need an approach that alters concepts by reconceptualizing them rather than preserving them. Sometimes—like in the examples of "local" we provide below—these concepts do not fit whatever way we innovate their relationship to other concepts.

This brief literature review helps us identify concepts in "local's semantic field, such as "international," "regional," "national," and "global." In the case of "global," scholars have also observed unhelpful "local"/"global" binaries (see Taylor 2005; Johnson 2016). While "international" is only one of the main concepts within the semantic field of "local," it is also our focus of the examples that follow in Dominica and Moldova. In these projects, the binary of "local" and "international" represented the main obstacle, including in the discourse that we observed in each. Hence, we focus on this binary to demonstrate how we used the process of reconceptualization.

*Dominica: From "Local Versus International" to "Local-international"*

**Step 1.** *Identify misalignment Between the Concept and What We Seek to Explore and Explain*

As part of a research project in the Commonwealth of Dominica (hereby Dominica), I (Audrey) conducted a thematic analysis of the discourses made by protesters calling for the resignation of the Dominican Prime Minister and its government in February 2017 (YouTube 2017). The protests erupted in the capital, Roseau, after the broadcasting of the CBS *60 minutes* episode "Passports for Sale" on American TV focusing, among other cases, on Dominica's Citizenship Based on Investment (CBI) program and the selling of Dominican diplomatic passports to high profile international criminals. I identified three main issues raised by "local" actors:

(1) The emergence of an unproductive economic system. The speakers alleged that international corruption (resulting from the opacity of the CBI Program and the diplomatic passport scandals) had fueled clientelism to the detriment of investment in the local economy (agriculture and tourism) and infrastructure (for example roads and hospitals), resulting in the impoverishment of the general population.
(2) The normalization of criminality within the local community. The speakers accused the government of banalizing insecurity by lacking transparency and accountability, engaging with international criminals, and using national bank accounts for money laundering.
(3) The undermining of Dominica's identity and reputation. The speakers underlined how the government's irresponsible actions created a political crisis of confidence within the country and damaged Dominica's international reputation.

While these results made sense, I was not fully satisfied with using the term "local" to describe them. To put it bluntly, it felt analytically lazy and not doing justice to the complexity and specificity of the Dominican context. I did not disagree with my results. But my discourse appeared, implicitly, to carry assumptions that contradicted my informal knowledge of the situation (which is detailed under step 4).

**Step 2.** *Identify the Initial Concept's Semantic Field*

I noticed that I spontaneously anchored my analysis around the use of "local" and its opposition to "international." *Local* actors had protested their government's instrumentalization of a loophole in *international* law. They accused the government of benefiting from an *international* cash flow generated by CBI, which disrupted *local* governance and enabled high-profile *international* criminals to hide in *local* communities due to a lack of *local* regulations, etc. I, therefore, identified "international" as the main concept in the semantic field that I had to work with to reconceptualize "local" in a way that was more satisfactory and analytically nuanced.

**Step 3.** *Evaluate existing Sub-Types of the Initial Concept and Concepts in the Semantic Field*

Reviewing the literature engaging with "local," I could not find any sub-types that would address the misalignment I perceived between the common use of "local" (as a spatial dimension in binary opposition with "international") and the specific context I was studying.

**Step 4.** *Consider hybrid Sub-Types*

Similar to step 3, I could not identify specific hybrid concepts related to "local" in the literature that would fit my case. I decided to pinpoint the nature of my discomfort more precisely to develop a hybrid concept more attuned to the context I was investigating.

On the one hand, the smallness of Dominica's population and territory (the country respectively ranks 186th and 174th in the world, in size terms, with 72,000 inhabitants and an area of 750km²) makes living in Dominica a spatially, socially, and administratively *local* experience. The country has two towns and is organized through two levels of governance (10 parishes and a central government). The smallness of the population leads to a high level of informality regarding the knowledge necessary to govern and a low level of regulation. For example, while agriculture employs 40 percent of the workforce, farmers generally do not keep accounts,

and agricultural technicians and the Secretary of Trade assess the country's productive capacities visually.[6]

On the other hand, the smallness of Dominica's national market and production, as well as the historical legacy of its export-oriented agricultural model, have made Dominica a hyper-internationalized economy. Since 2001, Dominica has scored on the Trade Openness Index (∼90 percent), similar to Sweden (compared to 27 percent for the US), characteristic of a country with a small national market that is well-integrated into the global economy. Unlike Sweden, however, the value of imported goods relative to GDP was 114 percent between 2008 and 2014 (compared to 29 percent for Sweden), reflecting the dependence of small island-states on foreign goods. Despite the high percentage of Dominicans working in agriculture, the sector only contributes to 22 percent of GDP (2017), and agricultural products represent 22 percent of the imports (2015) due to the absence of a national agro-processing industry (CIA 2019; WTO 2019). Since the mid-1990s, Dominica diversified its economy by becoming an offshore financial center and selling its citizenship via investment programs, furthering its integration in the globalized economy.

As a one-island micro-state, the country-case itself is *both* very "local" *and* very "international," a specificity that the dichotomy "local" versus "international" fails to capture. Indeed, it is precisely because of the local-internationality of the Dominican context that it has become a world leader in the CBI industry, which has allowed the issues denounced by the protesters to thrive. Namely, Dominica combines a high level of localness (favoring conditions of informality and absence of regulation) and high international economic integration (partly produced due to the smallness of its national market). Moreover, the localness and internationality partly produce each other. For example, the high level of economic internationalization is encouraged by the smallness of the national market.

Above all, the spatialization of Dominica's bordering experience epitomizes the collapse of the analytical value of the "local" versus "international" binary. The furthest one can ever be from Dominica's territorial borders is around 20 km. Analyzing the protesters' concerns through a "local"—conceptually dichotomized from its alleged "international" antagonist—would artificially disentangle, in seemingly separate spaces, situations that emerge from the very jointness of localness and internationality in Dominica.

In this context, characterizing the problems raised by the protesters as "local-international" seemed to capture both the nuances and complexity of the situation and the experiences of the actors I was studying more accurately. Hence, this new hybrid concept improved on the starting point ("local") and any alternatives identified in the semantic field in later steps (e.g., "international"). And, "local-international" was an improvement because it carried with it more specificity and accuracy to capture the simultaneity of localness and internationalness in this context. As such, we define "local-international" as situations in which "local" and "international" spaces, actors, or issues are intertwined, if not enmeshed.

*Reconceptualizing "Local" in Moldova to Study Mayoral Elections: An "Internationalized Local"*

**Step 1.** *Identify misalignment Between the Concept and What We Seek to Explore and Explain*

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[6]Interviews with the Secretary of Trade, members of the Ministry of Agriculture and the National statistician conducted in July–August 2018.

In Moldova, I (Eleanor) struggled while studying what I assumed to be "local" politics, namely mayoral elections in Moldova's capital, Chişinău. Over several electoral cycles, neither politicians nor media, neither Moldovan nor Western media, characterized these mayoral elections as either "local" or as concerning "local" issues. For example, in portraying the 2015 run-off mayoral election, journalists portrayed it as a race between "Pro-European and pro-Russian politicians" (EurActiv 2015). Similarly, in 2018, one mayoral candidate was depicted as "pro-Moscow" (Ion Ceban), while the other (Andrei Nastase) was described as "pro-European" (RFE/RL's Moldovan Service 2018).

In short, I observed the infusion of geopolitical and international narratives, east versus west, within seemingly "local" elections. The emphasis on a candidate's geopolitical positioning—above all else—was striking. Such an infusion of a candidate's geopolitical positioning did not represent untruths. But these representations skated over, perhaps deliberately, a candidate's other policy positions that pertained to more Moldova-specific (e.g., support or opposition to government, support or opposition to anti-corruption reform) or city-specific issues. Moreover, this "international" infusion of mayoral elections was highly political and a form of politics that I needed to draw attention to, rather than erase, ignore, or simplify.

For these reasons, "local" was insufficient to capture these nuances. To use "local" alone to describe how Moldovan elections were being characterized would lack nuance and analytical rigor and be a blunt tool to describe these representations.

**Step 2.** *Identify the Initial Concept's Semantic Field*

Situating "local" within its semantic field in this context (table 2), the most obvious alternative concept to consider would be "international." However, substituting "international" for "local" would not capture the nuances of what was being represented via these mayoral elections.

First, these elections were held within a city rather than a cross-border context. Realizing it would be a mischaracterization to label city elections as "international" was itself useful for understanding that reconceptualization, and further reconceptualization, was needed.

Second, media representations did not characterize a "local" that was juxtaposed to, or contending with, "international." According to these representations, "local" did not even nest within "international." Instead, "local" was *hollowed out* by and portrayed as subservient to "international."

Situating the concept in its semantic field helped me identify that the issue was one of a relationship between "local" and "international" rather than a separation between these concepts. For my purposes, "local" and "international" did not exist within a conceptual binary, and in further the steps of reconceptualization, I had to move beyond this binary.

**Step 3.** *Evaluate existing Sub-Types of the Initial Concept and Concepts in the Semantic Field*

In moving to step 3, the same problem was repeated as in step 2. Existing sub-types of "local" and "international"—e.g., "local" actors or "international" actors—did not improve the initial concept of "local." I needed a concept that challenged the binary of these concepts and allowed me to articulate a relationship between these concepts.

**Step 4.** *Consider hybrid Sub-Types*

Hence, I needed to progress to step 4 to consider potential ways to innovate concepts within the "local" and "international" binary. In doing so, I returned to what I observed: a "local" hollowed by an international. What I required was a more hybrid concept to express this relationship.

Working iteratively, I eventually came to the solution of an "internationalized local." This reconceptualized concept allowed me to signal and capture both the (1) hybrid relation between "local" and "international," and (2) hollowing relationship of "international" vis-à-vis "local."

The reconceptualized concept of "internationalized local" was an improvement because it enabled me to interrogate how and why "local" is imagined as a geopoliticized and hollow reality in Moldova and understand the potential strategies that underpin how this idea is maintained. For example, until we conceptualize an "internationalized local," we cannot grasp Moldovan politics: this "internationalized local" represents a convenient but strategic scapegoat used by Moldovan politicians. For those seeking votes, an "internationalized local" helps many mayoral candidates to portray themselves as passive to external geopolitical forces rather than accountable to voters on issues within Moldova, such as poverty and corruption.

Reconceptualizing "local" and "international" through the lens of an "internationalized local," therefore, helped me illuminate and articulate Moldovan politics in a new way, where "local" is hollowed out by and subservient to "international." In turn, we define "internationalized local" as a relational concept, where international is the object acting on and disempowering "local" as the subject. And "internationalized local" was an improved concept relative to the starting point of "local" because it was a sharper instrument to articulate the complex nuances of this situation in a language that could be legible and resonate more broadly.

## Conclusion

This article and the process of reconceptualization that it offers originated from a shared struggle among two researchers who found that extant concepts in existing literature were not well aligned with what they sought to explore or explain. We could have continued to use the initial concept, "local." However, doing so would have misconstrued the situation that we were observing, blunted our analytical nuance, and prevented us from leveraging arguments grounded in these contexts. Instead, we mobilized this struggle to develop a process of refining, improving, or developing new concepts that are better attuned, more aligned, and have better empirical, analytical, and theoretical leverage—the process of *reconceptualization*.

We aim for this four-step process to be useful and implementable by a broad spectrum of researchers across IR, regardless of topic, method, or methodology. This process builds on and bridges existing literature on concepts across different camps of IR and political science. In particular, this process offers an approach for researchers who seek to use concepts in a sociologically- and linguistically-oriented way without having to devote themselves, their research projects, and their training to conceptual analysis.

Through two cases, we illustrate how to go about reconceptualizing an initial concept as well as the results of such reconceptualization. Firstly, this article offers a new way to refine, improve, and develop concepts; specifically, we offer guidance on what this process entails. The idea and principles of reconceptualization may not seem groundbreaking. We see this as a strength of the method whereby we are formalizing something that many researchers may already agree with and hence should resonate and be relatable. In turn, reconceptualization can be helpful for a broad audience that spans both positivist and post-positivist scholars by providing and specifying what this otherwise confusing and time-consuming process might look like.

Second, this article offers two new concepts: "local-international" and "internationalized local." Grounded in our collective research in Dominica and Moldova, these concepts offer a new way to understand "local" and its relationship to "international" outside of a presumed binary. Furthermore, we offer a decentered approach to how these new concepts were derived in the first place. In turn, we offer something for relational discussions of "local." And we offer something for relational discussions beyond "local" by demonstrating that sometimes we need to move beyond keeping concepts intact and start innovating the concept itself, rather than only how we talk about or situate it.

Our intention is not to suggest the reconceptualization of "local" (or "international," "national," or "global") ends here. Rather, we aim for this article to be the beginning of a conversation about the need to develop better-attuned concepts and that explores what the results of such attunement might look like, not least in spaces far away from privileged and mainstream ways of thinking and doing IR.

## Acknowledgments

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