

In-Class Activity: Ordinary Language Interviewing and Conceptualizing Democracy¹

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Assignment originally designed for POL 201: Introduction to Political Studies at the American University of Sharjah

Learning Objectives

- Investigate how a peer understands the complex concept of democracy in everyday terms
- Compare and contrast how students and their peers conceptualize democracy, rooted in their experiences across political environments

Instructions

1. Each student finds one (1) classmate to work with. If there is an odd number of students, students in one group of three can slightly shorten the time of being an interviewer to allow all the opportunity.
2. Using the guidelines below, each student conducts an ordinary language interview about the word “democracy” with a classmate.
3. After 5 minutes, the interview and the interviewee switch roles.
4. Interviewers should take notes on what their interviewee says.
5. After ten (10) minutes, the instructor collects responses from the class and writes on a whiteboard (or type if preferred) while probing for explanations as needed.
 - a. Start with what places students identified as having democracy or not. Note whether there are cases where students disagree or are unsure—what factors do each consider as they try to classify the ambiguous cases?
 - b. Next gather core principles or institutions of democracies that students raised in their interviews. How do they relate to one another (e.g. the presence of government accountability to the people requires a free press to hold said government accountable)
 - c. Finally, collect important outcomes or conditions of life for the people living in democracies. This can be tied to other likely concepts in an introductory political science class as relevant to the specific course (e.g. did more students mention outcomes related to positive or negative liberties?).

¹ Exercise adapted from Fred Schaffer, Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, Syracuse University, 2021.

6. Conclude by asking students the extent to which their partnerships held similar or different conceptualizations of democracy, and why their conceptualizations might vary.

Notes

- This activity was designed with a multi-national student body in mind. For classes that are more nationally homogenous, the points of comparison or the sources of variation in conceptualization may differ (e.g. across lines of class, race, gender, etc.).
- Encourage students to move beyond vague responses such as a principle of democracy is “freedom.” Freedom for whom, to do what? What are the limits on that freedom, and who decides that?

HOW TO CONDUCT ORDINARY LANGUAGE INTERVIEWS: You will use a variety of question styles to understand how your interviewee defines what is democracy, what is not democracy, what are essential elements of a democracy, whether democracy exists in different contexts, etc. The goal is to encourage the interviewee to reflect on the meaning of the word.

Questions from Fred Schafer, Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research 2021, Syracuse University

1. START WITH JUDGMENT QUESTIONS.

- These questions ask someone to reveal the implicit standards they have for the word and express opinions about it.
- “Is there *democracy* where you live now?”
- “Is *democracy* good or bad?”
- “Is there a place or country in the world that does not have *democracy*?”

2. ENCOURAGE YOUR INTERVIEWEE TO EXPAND ON OR CLARIFY WHAT THEY SAY USING:

- **ELABORATION PROMPTS** help you gain more details.
 - “Can you explain?”
 - “How so?”
 - “Why do you say that?”
 - “Can you elaborate?”
- **EXAMPLE PROMPTS** make the concept you’re discussing more concrete.

- “Can you give an example of *democracy* from your community, from a place you’ve studied, from your experiences, etc.?”
- **INTERNAL LOGIC QUESTIONS** help the interviewee reflect more on what they have already said about the concept.
 - “Earlier you said that *democracy* has to do with [something], but now you are saying that *democracy* does not have to do with [something similar or related]. Can you explain what you mean?”
 - “Earlier you said that *democracy* has to do with [one thing] and [another thing]. Can you explain how those things are related?”
- **RESTATEMENT QUESTIONS** help the interviewer clarify their understanding of what the interviewee said.
 - “If I understand correctly, you are saying that....[carefully use the language the interviewee used in their own statement to the best of your ability].”

3. CONCLUDE WITH DIRECT QUESTIONS.

- These questions ask the interviewee to define the concept more explicitly now that they have reflected on the concept deeply.
- “What do you think *democracy* means?”
- “To you, what is *democracy*?”