The vast literature on clientelism is marked by the struggle to explain the difference between the formal, impersonal, and universally applicable channels and institutions that are identified with democracy in theory—and ostensibly implanted in practice—and the more personalized exchanges (ranging from benign to sinister) that occur in real politics, all efforts to eliminate them to the contrary. Searching for the causes and effects of these exchanges is crucial to understand political realities and to improve the development and practical application of theoretical ideals. However, the concept misformation (to cite Sartori 1970) or—more aptly, in this case—deformation that has occurred in the evolution of research into clientelism does not aid the cause.

Contemporary research on clientelism has its roots in 1960s and 1970s sociological and anthropological studies of traditional societies. Originally considered as an intricate personal relationship involving norms of reciprocity between two individuals engaged in the exchange of goods and services, clientelism has gradually come to be applied to a broad variety of political exchanges. Social scientists began to observe behavior like that described by the traditional clientelism in activities linking agricultural villages to central markets; representing villages and urban low income settlements in central politics; and facilitating the exchange of information and resources, negotiation of policy, and filling of positions in political and governmental institutions. The desire to describe these phenomena and to compare their
significance across historical periods and geographical as well as hierarchical space caused a broadening use of the term clientelism.

However, discarding or altering characteristics defining the traditional clientelism has voided the concept of descriptive power in a result opposed to the desired effect. Despite calls for specification (Graziano 1976; 1983), the problem persists. Some researchers continue to use clientelism to indicate diffuse, long-term interactions involving shows of personal concern and liking between the parties involved; others label it an interest-maximizing exchange of goods and services and apply it to incidents ranging from vote-buying to pork-barrelind; some use it to label organizations and political systems; and yet others use it with little explanation of what it is intended to convey. Clientelism is no longer clearly differentiated from neighboring terms, making it a poor concept difficult to operationalize and to use for theory-building (see Gerring 1999).

The goal of this chapter is to identify the core attributes of clientelism and the analytical level at which it operates. In addition to being an exchange in which individuals maximize their interests, clientelism involves longevity, diffuseness, face-to-face contact, and inequality. That is, it is a lasting personal relationship between individuals of unequal sociopolitical status. Establishing these characteristics facilitates differentiation from concepts such as vote-buying and corruption and determines clientelism’s analytical position at the microsociological level. Clientelism can be contained in mesosociological and macrosociological organizations and structures, but the latter are more complex than clientelism. In fact, the internal form of clientelism varies partially with external, macrosociological structures—being more democratic or authoritarian depending on the levels of competition and participation in the system—making the labeling of a system as clientelistic per se awkward.

To be sure, analytical categories and levels are not airtight. Empirical cases will often cross the line between categories and levels, combining characteristics (Smelser 1997). The separation between theoretical abstraction and empirical complexity does not, however, render the exercise of generalization unproductive. It provides a heuristic starting point from which to undertake empirical research and to organize comparative study.

**Some Guidelines for Concept Creation**

Sartori’s (1970) and Collier and Mahon’s (1993) are among the most widely cited analyses of concept building in political science. According