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**MAX WEBER, ACTION, AND SOCIOLOGICAL
EXPLANATIONS:
METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM IN SOCIOLOGY**

INTRODUCTION¹

In the thirties of the 19th century Auguste Comte developed the term “sociology” to denote a new scientific field distinct from Adolphe Quételets “social physics.” For Comte, sociology’s object of discussion and investigation had to be society. Decades later, in the 1890s, Emile Durkheim introduced the term “fait social” as the core topic of sociology. His definition of “fait social” [Durkheim 1919] is far from being absolutely precise [see König 1961] but it can be translated as “social facts” or “social phenomena.” This means that sociology is the science of social life and social structure. Therefore, sociology is concerned with the emergence, structure, and effects of social facts or social phenomena.

In this respect, Max Weber went one step further. He took for granted that sociology serves as a science of social facts but he insisted that there can be no understanding and explanation of social facts without reference to individual action. At the first glance, this idea seems to be in opposition to Durkheim’s methodological structuralism or collectivism, but it is not difficult to find many individualistic hypotheses within Durkheim’s own arguments and interpretations [see e.g. Lindenberg 1975]. Part 1 of this paper is based on Weber’s focus on human action as an important sociological topic. Part 2 will discuss the basic elements that a sociological explanation based on methodological individualism has to take into consideration.

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1. ACTION AS SOCIOLOGICAL TOPIC

Weber explicitly focussed sociological investigation on **human action**. In the 1920s, his definition of sociology was: “Eine Wissenschaft, welche soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will” [Weber 1976: 1]. With this definition, he expressed two main objectives of sociological work. On the one hand, sociology has to promote the understanding and interpretation of social action. On the other hand, sociology has to explain the processes and consequences of social action.

On this background, Weber highlighted the importance of several **features of action** as basic types of action and action orientations. They were supposed to serve as descriptive and analytical categories. Since then, his definitions of basic types of action and action orientations have become common currency in the social sciences. For Weber, the basic types of action are behaviour (“Verhalten”), action (“Handeln”) and social action (“soziales Handeln”).

In his definition, everything a person does is **behaviour**. What a person does is exclusively behaviour (and explicitly not action or social action) when it is not connected with conscious meanings or goals. For instance, a jogger stumbles, a sleeping person snores, or all human beings breath unconsciously and rhythmically – this is behaviour in Weber’s sense.

For Weber, **action** is defined as subjective meaningful behaviour. An individual instance of behaviour can be called action when the individual has a goal in mind or when this behaviour is meaningful for the acting person. For instance, eating an apple, thinking about life, or enjoying the sound of singing birds are all action according to Weber’s definition.

Finally, **social action** goes one step further. In Weber’s widely accepted definition, an actor takes other relevant actors into consideration: “Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course” [Weber 1954: 5]. The individual’s goals or the meaning of the individual’s action are related to the action of other persons. For instance, buying a railway ticket, kissing a friend, or discussing sociology are social action as Weber defined it.

Weber’s distinction between behaviour, action, and social action implies that it is impossible to categorize anything a person does without any information about the **person’s motives and goals**. Therefore, the investigation of social phenomena implies that a sociologist has to identify himself with the actors, their motives, intentions, and goals. For Weber, this guideline of research creates a fundamental difference between social and natural sciences.

On this background, phenomenally **one and the same behaviour** of a person can be interpreted either as behaviour, action, or social action. For instance, a person falls down in a summer meadow. This observation cannot be established as behaviour, action, or social action without information about the person’s motives. It is possible that the person was ill and fainted. In this case, it is behaviour in Weber’s sense. It is also possible that at the end of a hiking tour the person enjoys falling down and lying

in the sun. Thus, this is action because we can detect goal direction. Finally, if the person is joking and playing a Charlie Chaplin slapstick episode for his friends, it is undoubtedly is social action.

A categorization like this is not possible without **understanding** (“Verstehen”) of the person’s motives. Or as Wrong [1970: 19] puts it: “The postulate of Verstehen can be interpreted as directing us never to overlook the goals or ends-in-view in the mind of the actor, never to fail to find out how he himself ‘defines the situation,’ and to treat his purposes and judgments as causally relevant, or as key ‘variables,’ in explaining his action.” This conclusion illustrates why empirical research about individual action is important. Finding out how the actor defines a situation or gathering any information about the actor’s motives and goals is hardly possible without empirical data.

Weber furthermore viewed human action from yet another perspective by developing the notion of four **basic types of action orientations**. For Weber, “traditionales Handeln” is tradition or habit oriented. In the case of such a habitual action, a person follows traditional expectations. For instance, going to church on Sunday and acting in a certain way in church can be traditional action. “Affektuelles Handeln” is affect directed. This means a person follows his or her present feelings. For instance, the reactions of highly involved football fans in a stadium or in front of a TV can be regarded as affectual action. “Wertrationales Handeln” is value oriented. A person follows certain external or internalized values. Action is oriented towards the realization of a value. For instance, although a street is covered with rubbish, a person does not throw away an empty plastic bottle because this action would not match up to his values of order and cleanliness. “Zweckrationales Handeln” is rational action, directed towards certain ends or goals. A person has a goal in mind and looks for means to achieve this goal. For instance, a person is thirsty, goes to the supermarket, and chooses the drink with the best relation of price and taste.

In the case of the basic types of action orientations it is also possible that phenomenally **one and the same action** can be interpreted differently. If we look into the example of the thirsty supermarket customer it is possible that his decision is the result of tradition (he always buys drink x), of affect (he was so thirsty that he took the first drink he saw in the supermarket), of values (he wants to buy regional products instead of drinks made by multinational firms), or of the rational pursuit of personal goals (he wants to save money and buys the special offer).

To summarize, Weber shows how important it is to have hypotheses and information about the actor’s motives and goals. Nevertheless, motives and goals may not be viewed as the sole determinants of action as might be through from the standpoint of a crude “psychological reductionism” [see Hummell & Opp 1968, Raub & Voss 1981: 63ff.]. Sociological research has to take into consideration both **individual and social factors**. Wrong [1970: 21] illustrates this with a nice example: “To say that people decide to have more children because they like babies, while ignoring the specific social and economic considerations (...), is like saying that a man who has been shot died because his heart stopped beating. But to say that social and economic factors alone explain childbearing behaviour is like saying that the fact that someone fired a gun at a man is a complete explanation of his death.” Individual and structural factors

are interconnected, and so sociological research should consider both of them. A sociological programme that posits a strong connection between the individual and the social or structural level is **methodological individualism**.

2. METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

According to Weber, a sociological explanation of a given phenomenon must include and connect individual and social variables. But how? McClelland [1961: 47ff.] and Coleman [1990: 6ff.] give an **example**: They both reconstruct the main ideas of one of Weber's most important works, "The **protestant ethic** and the spirit of capitalism" [Weber 1978]. First step of the reconstruction is Weber's observation that capitalist economic organization started earlier in societies that became protestant in the Reformation. Thus, for Weber, there is a causal connection between protestant ethic and capitalism. This relation can be visualized as shown in figure 1.

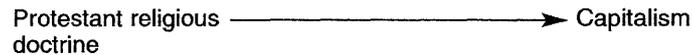


Figure 1: Macrosociological reconstruction of Weber's thesis

A macrosociological analysis would stay on this level. But for a sociological argumentation in Weber's sense, it is not enough to argue on a macrolevel. The explanation has to include **individual variables and individual action**. Coleman [1990: 8] gives an example of three propositions serving as a connection between individual and collective variables within Weber's argumentation:

"1. Protestant religious doctrine generates certain values in its adherents.

2.

Individuals with certain values (referred to in proposition 1) adopt certain kinds of orientation to economic behaviour. (The central orientations to economic behaviour are characterized by Weber as antitraditionalism and duty to one's calling.)

3.

Certain orientations to economic behaviour (referred to in proposition 2) on the part of individuals help bring about capitalist economic organization in a society."

With these three propositions Coleman [1990: 8] constructs the **micro-macro model** as shown in figure 2. Within the model, the arrows indicate causal relations between the variables of argumentation. Now, there are two levels of analysis. On the one hand, there is a macro level, including a religious doctrine in a society and a specific economic organization of this society. On the other hand, there is a micro

level, that indicates individual values and individual actions. According to Weber's methodological individualism, within a complete sociological explanation both levels have to be interconnected.

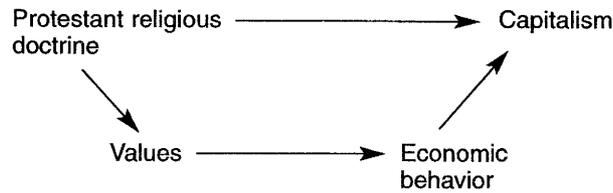


Figure 2: Micro- and macro-level reconstruction of Weber's thesis

To summarize, a **general micro-macro model** can be constructed as visualized in figure 3 [see also Esser 1993: 98, Büschges et al. 1998: 17]. A sociological explanation of a collective explanandum based on methodological individualism must answer at least three questions: How does a preceding social situation influence a relevant actor? How does this actor act? And finally, what is the collective or social result when several relevant actors act in this way?

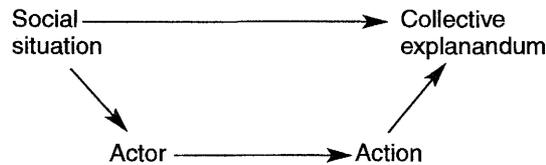


Figure 3: General micro-macro model of sociological explanation

At the first glance, this model seems to be quite easy. But it forces the researcher to take care, and look for a great many **variables** that could be **important for explanation**. Hernes [1976: 518, for a discussion see also Raub & Voss 1981: 90ff.] shows what kind of variables could be relevant (see figure 4). Important variables on the **micro level** of an actor could be his properties, e.g. his preferences, capacities, and expectations. The explanation of action is not possible without behavioural assumptions. Hernes names assumptions like optimizing and result-controlled action. Theoretically, alternative behavioural assumptions – derived from role theory or social psychological theories, for instance – are possible, too. On the **macro level** Hernes focuses on collective level structures like institutions and reward structures, the material conditions of a given situation, and aggregation data.

The **interconnection between micro and macro level** again contains two arrows. One arrow indicates the impact of macro level structures on the micro level: the macro level sets incentives, constraints, and action alternatives for the actor on the micro level. The micro level itself influences macro level results by (aggregated) individual actions and choices. Hernes [1976: 519] calls this impact “process structure.”

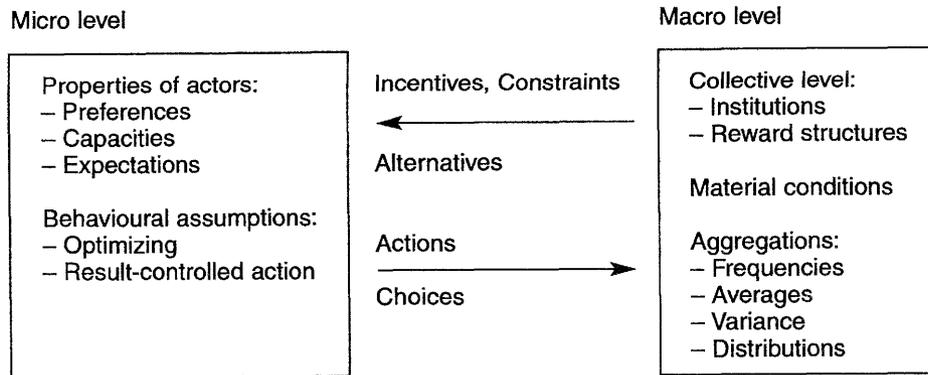


Figure 4: Relationship between micro level and macro level

Other, **similar general models** of sociological explanation based on methodological individualism are presented by Boudon [1979] and Esser [1993: 246]. Figure 5 shows core elements of Esser’s model.

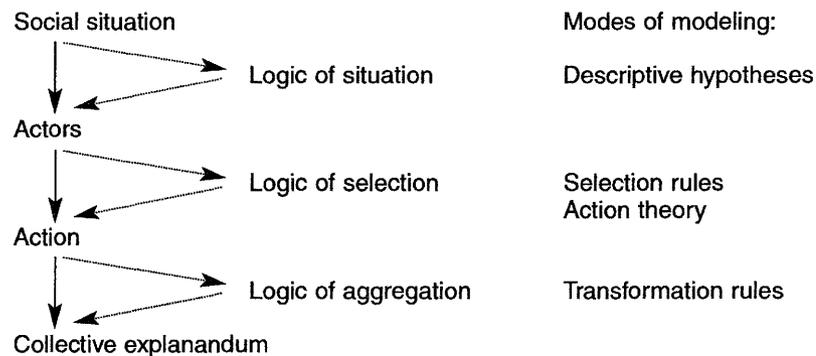


Figure 5: Relationship between micro level and macro level

The left part of Esser’s model is no more than a vertical version of the general micro-macro model as it is visualized in figure 3. Esser points out that sociological explanation has to take **three kinds of “logic”** into consideration: What is the logic of the situation that confronts the actor? What is the logic of selection that leads an actor to a certain action? And, finally, what is the logic of aggregation that is necessary to climb up from the individual level to the macro level results? For Esser, these three questions indicate **three modes of modeling**. The logic of the situation is modeled by descriptive hypotheses – on the situation and the actor’s perception of the situation, for instance. The logic of selection is modeled by selection rules or a certain action theory. And the logic of aggregation contains the application of transformation rules – sometimes one of the most problematic steps in an explanation when it is carried out precisely [Esser 1997: 97].

CONCLUSIONS

Following Max Weber's definition, sociology has to focus on social phenomena **and** individual action. General models of methodological individualism indicate what kind of macro and micro level variables can be important for a sociological explanation and how the two levels can be connected. This will influence the theoretical construction of explanation and the practical topics and modes of research.

Raub & Voss [1981: 22ff.] discuss several heuristic rules of sociological thinking based on methodological individualism. They point out how important it is to investigate the **interdependencies** of social actors in a given situation and the emergent results of this interdependencies. Against this background, it becomes clear why tools like game theory are used in this context. Although an analytic tool like game theory presupposes goal directed behaviour, the actions of a given actor cannot guarantee satisfaction in all social situations. Raub & Voss conclude that **unintended consequences** of (intended) actions are possible and represent one of the most important objects for sociological research [see also Boudon 1977]. Additionally, Raub & Voss name **institutions** as a matter of heuristic rules. What impact has a given institution on the actors? How did a given institution emerge in history and how can or will it be changed by the actors? These questions lead us to another core topic of sociology: The rise (and fall) of institutions.

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Max Weber, Action, and Sociological Explanations: Methodological Individualism in Sociology

Summary

For Max Weber, sociology is supposed to lead to the the understanding and interpretation of social action and to explain the processes and consequences of social action. This means that a sociological explanation is not complete when it uses only collective or social factor. Sociological research should take into account and connect both individual and social factors. In this paper, the implications and models of this methodological individualism are discussed. In research based on methodological individualism, data and dependencies have to be found and reconstructed on both the micro and the macro level. As a fundamental guideline, we can say that sociological explanation has to show how the social situation influences the actor, why and how he acts, and what the emergent collective result is. By answering these questions, a sociological explanation has to take into account the logic of the situation, the logic of selection, and the logic of aggregation (generalisation).

Max Weber, jednání a sociologická vysvětlení: metodologický individualismus v sociologii

Shrnutí

Podle Maxe Webera má sociologie přinášet vysvětlení a interpretaci sociálního jednání a má vysvětlovat jeho procesy a následky. Pokud sociologické vysvětlení používá jen kolektivní nebo sociální faktory, není kompletní. Sociologický výzkum by měl brát v potaz a spojovat jak individuální, tak sociální faktory. V tomto článku jsou diskutovány obsahy a modely tohoto metodologického individualismu. V rámci výzkumu, jenž má tento metodologický individualismus za základ, je nutné hledat a rekonstruovat data a závislosti na mikro- a makroúrovni. Je možné říci, že sociologické vysvětlení má ukazovat, jak sociální situace ovlivňuje aktéra, proč a jak jedná a jaký je následný výsledek jeho jednání. Odpovídáme-li na tyto otázky, musí sociologické vysvětlení brát v potaz logiku situace, logiku selekce a logiku agregace (zobecnění).