

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 breathe 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.

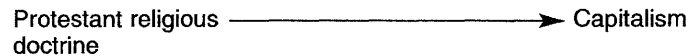


Figure 1: Macrosociological reconstruction of Weber's thesis

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