

## IDEAL TYPES OR EMPIRICAL TYPES: THE CASE OF MAX WEBER'S EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

by  
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**Résumé. Types idéaux ou types empiriques: la recherche empirique de Max Weber.** Dans la discussion méthodologique, le concept de type idéal est associé de près avec le nom de Max Weber. Cet article présente le travail empirique de Max Weber au début du siècle et son utilisation du terme "type" dans cette recherche. Il semble que ses descriptions d'un type idéal comme "une construction du chercheur", comme une "utopie" construite en utilisant et amplifiant certains aspects de la réalité sociale, et comme une "construction artificielle" sont en effet opposées à celle d'un type empirique. Cet article montre que les articles de Weber écrits en relation étroite avec sa recherche empirique entre 1905 et 1912, montrent un usage différent du terme type. **Type idéal, Type empirique, Max Weber, Analyse classificatoire.**

**Abstract.** In methodological discussion the concept of the ideal type is closely related to the name of Max Weber. This paper discusses Weber's own empirical research at the beginning of the century and his application of the term "type" in this research. It seems that his description of the ideal type as a "researcher's construction", as "utopia" constructed by composing and enhancing certain aspects of social reality, as an "artificial construction" is indeed the opposite of empirical types. This paper shows that Weber's articles, which were written in close relationship to his empirical research between 1905 and 1912, use the term type in a different manner. **Ideal Type, Empirical Type, Max Weber, Classification Analysis.**

### INTRODUCTION

It is remarkable that in spite of the renaissance of Weber's ideas during the last decade his "interpretive sociology" is not continued anywhere. It was Tenbruck (1989) who mentioned this astonishing fact. For several decades Weber's concept of the ideal type has not played a role in social research. One searches in vain for mentions of the use of ideal type methods in modern social science research techniques; only in Germany have some attempts been made recently to introduce this methodological concept (again) in practical empirical research (Gerhardt 1986, Kirchgässler 1988). The reason for this comeback may be the controversy between qualitative and quantitative methodology, and reminds us that this was one of the first debates on methodology in the history of social sciences. The history of social research has attracted more and more interest and Weber's position was of great interest because he integrated both methods, quantitative and qualitative, into one theoretical concept as shown in his well-known definition of interpretive sociology as the science that combines "verstehen" and causal analysis.

In the secondary literature on Weber it is quite common to associate the methodological chapters of his last work, *Economy and Society*, and his program of "Interpretive Sociology" with his concept of the ideal type. Concerning the ideal

type he leaves no doubt: the ideal type is "a construction, a utopia, won by 'one-sided exaggeration' of certain aspects of reality" (Weber 1973c:191).

According to Weber it is a "homogeneous structure of ideas". This makes it quite clear that the ideal type is an **artificial** construction and not an empirically grounded concept that can be obtained by induction.

It is often forgotten that Weber's concept of the ideal type was developed in the course of his historical research. With Weber's programmatic formulation in *Economy and Society* - that his sociology furnishes descriptions of "understandable types of actions" and thereby arrives at causal Interpretation of typical action - it is often assumed that Weber means ideal type whenever he uses the term type or typical.

This paper will address two problems:

- first I intend to destroy the idea which takes for granted that Weber himself used ideal types and not empirical types in his empirical research;
- the second intention is to emphasize the relevance of typological methods for social science methodology as an alternative to the quantitative paradigm which splits up social reality in atomized variables.

## **WEBER'S EMPIRICAL RESEARCH BETWEEN 1890 AND 1910**

Tenbruck has already mentioned that Weber never dealt with methodology in an abstract way - his methodological writings have no independent status and are always closely related to the specific subject on which he was working. For this reason, one should look very closely at Weber's own empirical research and the research techniques he used.

In his biography two periods can be identified in which he was intensively occupied with empirical research of a modern type.

The first period was in the beginning of the 1890's: commissioned by the "Verein für Sozialpolitik" he carried out a survey on the social situation of farm workers in eastern Germany entitled "Die Lage der Landarbeiter im ostelbischen Deutschland".

In the course of this work his interest in social science research methods was awakened. But when he accepted a professorship in Freiburg in 1894, this interest decreased and was neglected for about 15 years.

Figure 1

WEBERS EMPIRICAL RESEARCH	
Project: The situation of farm workers in the east provinces of Germany	
1890	Weber was asked by the "Verein für Sozialpolitik" to cooperate and to carry out the study on Eastern Germany
Dec 1891 - Feb 1892 survey with 2 questionnaires	
1892	Weber's research report
[1892	Weber's habilitation on the history of Roman agriculture
1902	Article on "Roscher and Knies and the logical problems of national economy"
1904	Travel to USA
1904	Article on "Objectivity"]
Project: Selection and Adaptation (choice of profession and professional career) of the workers in modern large-scale industry	
1908	4 articles on "Psychophysics of Industrial Work"
1908	"Methodological Introduction" for the survey of the "Verein für Sozialpolitik" on "Selection and Adaptation"
1909	Article "Socialpsychological Surveys: Methods and Practice"
[1913	Article "On some Categories of Interpretive Sociology"]

Fifteen years elapsed after the research on farm workers and the second period of empirical research that started in 1907. Weber was involved in a survey on the working and living conditions of workers in modern large-scale industries, a survey also initiated by the "Verein für Sozialpolitik". In the course of this work he did in-depth work on the methodology of the social sciences. Weber's writings in both empirical periods, from 1890 to 1893 and from 1908 to 1910, have not been sufficiently taken into consideration. Most important, his studies in industrial sociology are not that well known, especially in the USA: for example Reinhard Bendix did not find these writings worthy of note in his major biography of Weber (Bendix 1977).

## THE FARM WORKERS SURVEY

The survey "The situation of the farm workers in eastern Germany" was not only Weber's start with empirical research, it was also a turning point for his professional career since he changed his scientific discipline from jurisprudence to national economy (see Riesebrodt "Vorwort" in Weber 1984:VII). This study includes a wide

range of themes concerning the social and cultural situation of the farm workers in the eastern provinces of Germany.

Two different questionnaires (a so-called "general" questionnaire and a "specific" one) were mailed to the farmers. The specific questionnaire is printed in the complete edition of Weber's writings: it includes more than 9 pages, and attempts to get a complete and exact description of the situation of German agriculture, the life of the farm workers, their income, their origin, their ethnic affiliation and their cultural and political interests.

Weber's data analysis is based on more than 2,000 cases (3,180 questionnaires were mailed and 71.6% were returned). His report contains of more than 900 printed pages and also includes some methodological reflections.

For our concern it is quite interesting that his analysis is mainly oriented towards quantification. It is obvious that he did not use the method of ideal types: I could not find the term ideal type once in this work consisting of about 900 pages.

Weber uses the term "type", but in another sense, when he argues that with his survey he does not intend to do social statistics in an exact way. According to Weber, this could only be done with a complete census. Weber claims to do research on what is "typical" in the farm workers situation - thus in modern terminology one could say that Weber claims representativity for his study. His results should be representative, "typical" for the farm workers - the term "type" would be used as an equivalent to the term "representative" in today's methodology.

Figure 2

Project:	The Situation of Farm Workers in the East Provinces of Germany
Themes:	Situation of Agriculture (Number of farms, number of farm workers, products etc.) Situation of farm workers (income, contracts working time, women's working etc.) Cultural and political Situation of farm workers
Cases:	N=3180 farmers (specific questionnaire) 71.6% sent back N=562 correspondents (general questionnaire) 51.8% sent back
Research Techniques:	Semi-standardized Interview
Data Analysis:	Quantitative analysis: detailed statistics for each district

This survey apparently provoked Weber's interest in empirical research. He had not yet finished the data analysis when he planned a second farm workers survey together with Paul Göhre. This project was done for the "Evangelisch-sozialer Kongreß" - a religious organization. Weber tried to introduce some methodological

innovations; in order to get better access to farm workers, this time priests and not the farmers were interviewed. More than 15,000 priests participated in the study.

## THE RESEARCH ON INDUSTRIAL SOCIOLOGY

In the case of the farm workers survey it may be argued that the lack of the term ideal type and the methods related to that concept are due to the fact that Weber developed these methods later on when he started historical research, especially with the sociology of religion. There can be no doubt that this logic is mistaken in the case of the industrial workers survey started in 1908. Weber's book on the *Agrarverhältnisse des Altertums* is written during the same period and can be considered as a model for working with precisely defined ideal typical terms.

In 1908 the "Verein für Sozialpolitik" decided, at the suggestion of Alfred Weber, the Brother of Max Weber, to start a survey on industrial workers entitled "Selection and Adaptation (choice of profession and professional career) of the workers in modern large-scale industry".

Figure 3

Project:	Selection and Adaptation (Choice of Profession and professional career) of the workers in modern large-scale industry
Themes:	What influence modern large-scale industry has on the professional career and the life style of the working class? To which extend modern industry is bound to the traditionally given characters and personal attributes of the workers?
Cases:	Unknown The field research was done by 12 researchers with different success - the main problem was to get the cooperation of the workers.
Research Techniques:	Questionnaires were distributed by the field researchers
Data Analysis:	Weber's suggestions: "Methodological Introduction" "Methodology of Socialpsychological Surveys."

In Weber's writings done in the preparation for this survey, many formulations containing the term type can be found. In his "Methodological Introduction" (Weber 1924c) he writes that the aim of his methodological procedure is "to find out the psychological, intellectual and social attributes of a type of worker characterizing modern industrial society as a part of the modern western civilization." (Weber 1924c)

In this period of his research it seems self-evident for Weber that types could only be achieved by hard work with the empirical data and using at least some statistical

procedures. This was expressed very clearly in Weber's critique of Levenstein's work, which he wrote during the same period in 1908.

Levenstein edited memories and biographies of proletarians and had carried out two surveys of industrial workers involving more than 5,000 Cases - rather unusual at the beginning of the century.

In his critique of Levenstein's book, *Worker-philosophers and poets*, Weber pointed out that one is left the dark as to how the biographies are related to the complete material, especially whether they are selections and what are the criteria for selection: selection according to quality or selection for characteristic nature (and in which sense characteristic). (Weber 1909:952).

Weber proposes detailed techniques for data analysis: grouping the data according origin, profession, age, and income - that means in modern terminology: Cross-tabulations and analysis of variance.

"At first for each question it is necessary to classify the answers and motives in all details..." (Weber 1909:956).

In the next step Weber intends to check correlations and to form complex typologies.

"Only then, when everything that can be counted is taken out of the material and all relations are evaluated, then on this basic work the attempt can be made to discover types of proletarian thinking and feeling (...)." (Weber 1909:956).

He also proposes to separate those cases in which it is not clear where they belong, and to group the unambiguous cases - wherever it is possible - into types, combinations of types, or transitory states between types. This grouping should be done very carefully and with constant checking of the original material. Weber stresses the necessity of a reanalysis and is clearly opposed to procedures of data analysis based only on intuition.

"Levenstein is mistaken when he accepts the quite popular misconception that empathy and sensibility have highest authority in this area, and could have easily convinced himself that his material proves the contrary." (Weber 1909:955).

The kind of analysis that Weber encourages does not seem to be far from the modern statistical procedure of Cluster analysis. What he uses here are not ideal types - these are empirical types, where one can specify exactly how many cases of that type exist, how many are similar to it and how many are completely different.

Nevertheless this formation of types is not simply a statistical calculation, since every attempt to form organizing schemes exceeds necessarily the empirical data. But There is no doubt that this way of forming types is strictly empirically grounded.

Weber described this procedure of forming types only fragmentarily in his writing on industrial sociology but it should be clear that this typological approach, which

becomes visible here, is different from the quantitative paradigm developed in later social research since it works with variable differentiation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In comparison with the first empirical period of Weber's life, this second period of research in industrial sociology was much more important in his intellectual life. During this period he successfully founded the German Sociological Association, he gave a modern perspective to social research by strictly distinguishing between scientific social research and social policy (see the controversy an "value judgement"), and thirdly he gave a conceptual presentation of the notions and methods of interpretive sociology in his article "On Categories" (1973b, first 1913).

It is a neglected but not an unknown fact (cf Heckmann 1979) that Weber did not use the method of the ideal types in his modern-type social research. How should this be interpreted?

One way would be to **extend the definition of the term ideal type**: Friedeburg mentioned that Weber uses different kinds of ideal types in his work. Indeed Weber proposed that an ideal type may exist in reality sometimes but not all the time, but this is not a sufficient justification to call the empirical types discussed above ideal types.

Another Interpretation was given by Heckmann (1979) who suggested that this way of forming types is in conflict with the general approach of "interpretive sociology", a kind of Fall of Man - perhaps caused by the well-known fascination, which Weber sometimes showed towards statistics.

There is not much force in these interpretations: both agree with the basic assumption that Weber elaborated a context-free methodology. In my opinion it is particularly the context that has to be taken into consideration when reading Weber's methodological works - and the context of the concept of the ideal type is Weber's research in the history of religion.

Certainly historical data and social research data are very different - as are the research interests of history and sociology: analysis of singular events on one side and analysis of the typical on the other side.

It is misleading to identify Weber's sociological methodology with his method of the ideal types. In doing so, one will not become aware of the exceptional aspects of Weber's approach, his thinking in terms of types. This is indeed the missing link between the ideal types in historical , research and the empirical types discussed in this paper.

Since the paradigmatic debate on qualitative versus quantitative methodology changed its direction towards Integration and mixing of different methods, it is useful to call to mind the model of data analysis that Weber proposes in his empirical research.

One final remark before I will come to the end of my paper. I am quite aware of the theoretical consequences engendered by the existence of empirical types. Plessner pointed it out very clearly:

"If the material is typical in itself, then the nominalistic approach of neo-kantianism is no longer right; then there exists "universalia in rebus" and the way to phenomenology is open." (Plessner in Verhandlungen 1965:33).

It may be that a philosopher of science feels rather anxious about seeing the opening of doors that should remain closed, but if the phenomenological door has already opened, as a sociologist, I would say: Let's have a look.

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