Article

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How to use Max Weber's ideal type in sociological analysis

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Abstract

The main problem that is addressed in this article is how to use Max Weber's concept of the ideal type in concrete sociological research. The ideal type was invented by Weber more than a century ago, but has rarely been used in empirical research. One reason for this is that Weber was not very clear on what is meant by an ideal type. Another is that students of Weber's work have not been very interested in presenting the ideal type in such a way that it can be used. Instead, it has been surrounded by an air of difficulty and unresolved theoretical questions, something that has made the average social scientist confused and unable to use Weber's concept in his or her own research. In this article, it is argued that despite existing difficulties, we know enough today about the ideal type to use it effectively. A practical guide for how to construct as well as use an ideal type is provided. As a background to this argument, the development of the ideal type in Weber's work is presented, drawing on a suggestion by Alfred Schutz that Weber originally designed this concept with history in mind, but then switched to sociology.

Keywords

concepts, ideal type, meaning, Alfred Schutz, values, Max Weber

The main problem that is addressed in this article is how to use Max Weber's concept of the ideal type in concrete sociological research. The ideal type was invented by Weber more than a century ago, but has rarely been used in empirical research. One reason for this is that Weber was not very clear on what is meant by an ideal type. Another is that students of Weber's work have not been very interested in presenting the ideal type in such a way that it can be used. Instead it has been surrounded by an air of difficulty and unresolved theoretical questions, something that has made the average social scientist

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confused and unable to use Weber's concept in his or her own research. In this article, it is argued that despite existing difficulties we know enough today about the ideal type to use it effectively. A practical guide for how to construct as well as use an ideal type is provided.

Weber's two versions of the ideal type

Max Weber's well-known formulation of the concept of ideal type, made in 1904, which he himself calls "sketchy and therefore perhaps partially incorrect" is indeed fragmentary because it has in mind chiefly the ideal type of *his theory of history*. It must be strongly emphasized that once Weber's thought makes *the transition to sociology*, the conception of the ideal type undergoes a thorough change. Unfortunately, this is only hinted at in a few statements in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, e.g. on p. 10.

(Alfred Schutz)[1]

In addressing the issue of how to use Max Weber's concept of the ideal type in concrete research, the point of departure in this article will be taken from the quote above, which can be found in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* by Alfred Schutz (1967: 244, n. 26).[2,3] Schutz' statement contains an observation that also many others have made, namely, that Weber's thinking on the ideal type can primarily be found in two different places in his work: in his essay on Objectivity from 1904 and in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1949, 1978, 2012b, 2004).

Schutz, however, also adds two original points. The first is that Weber's version in the Objectivity essay was primarily made at a time when he was preoccupied with a historical type of analysis, while the second version was the result of Weber's thinking during his transition to a sociological type of analysis, later in his life. To this argument by Schutz can be added that Weber assigned an important place not only to the element of meaning in the historical version of the ideal type but also to that of values. In his later sociological version of the ideal type, as will be shown, he decided to exclusively focus on the element of meaning. Through this move, some of the ambiguity in Weber's first version of the ideal type was removed.

Schutz's second original point is his observation that Weber himself considered his first version of the ideal type to be "sketchy and therefore perhaps partially incorrect" (Weber, 2012a: 85, n. 1; 1988: 131, n. 1). This important statement by Weber is rarely cited.[4] Schutz clearly agrees with Weber's verdict and adds that his early presentation is also "fragmentary." The main reason for this fragmentation, Schutz suggests, is that Weber's ideas on the ideal type were at this stage closely linked to a special kind of the ideal type, namely, the one used in history.

According to Schutz, the ideal type that we find in *Economy and Society* is the result of a "thorough change" in relation to the 1904 version (Schutz, 1967: 244, n. 26). This later version, to repeat, was fashioned exclusively with sociology in mind. What is nonetheless problematic with the sociological version, according to Schutz, is that it was never fully explicated by Weber, only "hinted at." This makes it difficult to state with full assurance how Weber viewed the kind of ideal type that sociologists should use. As will

be shown later, however, it is nonetheless relatively easy to piece together what the sociological ideal type looks like and how it should be used.

Version 1: The ideal type in the objectivity essay from 1904

Weber's discussion of the ideal type takes up some 20 pages in the Objectivity essay and is generally considered to be *the* main place where this concept is discussed in his work (Weber, 1949, 2012b).[5] The fact that this is the most important source for our general knowledge about the ideal type is correct. Anyone who is interested in Weber's ideal type therefore needs to read this essay carefully.

But a few qualifications are also in place. One is that Weber's discussion of the ideal type in this essay is hard to follow, not only due to the complexity of his thought but also because it is deeply embedded in various social science issues that were discussed at the time in Germany. To this should be added Weber's own statement that his argument about the ideal type in the Objectivity essay was "partially incorrect." And finally, the Objectivity essay attempts to simultaneously discuss the use of the ideal type in *all* of the social sciences, while the account in *Economy and Society* only deals with its use in sociology.[6]

It is also clear that Weber's presentation of the ideal type in the 1904 essay was deeply influenced by his idea that the social sciences differ from the natural sciences. In his view, the social sciences, or as he called them *the cultural sciences*, differ from the natural sciences on two crucial points. The first is that they have to deal with something that the natural sciences do not have to take into consideration, namely, that their objects of study – human beings – have values and assign meaning to what they do, and that this influences their actions.

The second point is that while the natural sciences typically try to establish laws, under which individual phenomena can be subsumed, the social or cultural sciences are primarily interested in studying and explaining *individual phenomena*. Reality was in Weber's view inexhaustible from the viewpoint of the analyst; and although cultural values direct human actions to certain aspects of this reality, this does not diminish the fundamentally individual quality of these actions.

By the time that Weber wrote on the ideal type in *Economy and Society*, he would assign the analysis of individual phenomena exclusively to the historians (Weber, 1978: 19–29). The fact that Weber took this position may be one reason why Schutz would later argue that Weber's first version of the ideal type was influenced by "his theory of history" (Schutz, 1967: 244, n. 26).

But let us return to the Objectivity essay. There also exists a very useful and practical quality to Weber's discussion of the ideal type in this essay that is rarely emphasized in the secondary literature but which deserves close attention, especially by those who are interested in how to use the ideal type in concrete research. What Weber has to say on this point is grounded in his general view of concepts, which is Kantian in nature. He notes that "the basic idea of modern epistemology, which goes back to Kant, is that concepts are, and can only be, theoretical *means* for the purpose of intellectual mastery of the empirically given" (Weber, 2012b: 134–135, emphasis added). By "means" is meant the opposite of "ends." Concepts, in other words, are *tools*, and not the end point of the analysis.

Weber then proceeds to give advice on how *not* to use social science concepts in an analysis (including ideal type concepts). What he says on this point can be summarized as follows:

- It is not possible to establish a perfect concept that truly captures the essence of what is going on in empirical reality. To believe this represents an illusion.
- It is imperative not to confuse the concepts that are used in the analysis with the reality that is being analyzed.
- You should not force empirical reality into a concept as into a procrustean bed.
- It is not possible to proceed in the direction of an ever more precise system of social science concepts, and in this way create a deductive science. One reason for this is that society moves on, and social scientists choose new topics to study.
- The concepts that can be found in everyday language are not suitable for use as scientific concepts since they are confused and contradictory.

Weber's own special type of concept to be used in social science research, the ideal type, was constructed to overcome these and other deficiencies. It has the following qualities:

- It allows the social scientist to take a first step in the analysis of a topic that is little known or explored. Or in Weber's (2012b) metaphor, the ideal type may function as an "emergency safe havens until one has learned to find one's bearings while navigating the immense sea of empirical facts" (p. 133).
- It helps the social scientist to get a better handle on empirical reality, and this is done primarily through a comparison of reality with the ideal type.
- When such a comparison is made, the social scientist may also make discoveries. Weber repeatedly says that the use of the ideal type is heuristic, and that this constitutes the most important reason for using this kind of concept.

From what has just been said, it is clear that the ideal type can help the social scientist to successfully approach a new topic; to advance the analysis through a comparison of the ideal type to reality and, by doing so, discover something new. But all of this is only possible if the ideal type has been constructed in a correct way, and this is where we come up against what to my mind represents a confusing aspect of Weber's notion of the ideal type in the Objectivity essay.

What is at issue here is how the element of values-meaning in the object of analysis should be handled when you construct an ideal type. I use the expression "*values-meaning*" to refer to Weber's close association of these two concepts in his Objectivity essay. Culture, he says, is a value concept; it *also* involves meaning. Culture and values are in other words closely related.

This becomes problematic when Weber mentions a special operation that has to take place when you construct an ideal type. This is something he refers to as "*gedankliche Steigerung*" and it involves the values-meaning. This operation is generally seen as being absolutely central to the creation of the ideal type. It has alternatively been translated as "analytical accentuation" (Shils and Finch), "*theoretical* accentuation" (Bruun), and "conceptual accentuation" (Tribe; see Weber, 1949: 90; 1988: 190; 2004: 387; 2012b: 124).

But what exactly does analytical accentuation mean? What parts of the empirical phenomenon do you remove, if this is what you do; and what do you add when you carry out the accentuation? Values and meaning are not the same thing. The former refer to something we hold in high esteem and would like to see realized, the latter to how we understand things in general. Weber does not give a clear answer. Was this perhaps the reason why he later would say that his portrait of the ideal type in the Objectivity essay was "sketchy and therefore perhaps partially incorrect"?

We do not know, and on this point we can only speculate. We do know, however, that at about the same time as Weber wrote his Objectivity essay, he also worked on *The Protestant Ethic*, in which he makes an important use of the ideal type. If there exists a confusing mixture of values and meaning in the Objectivity essay, we should expect this to be the case also in *The Protestant Ethic*.

Weber has described how he constructed the concept of "the spirit of capitalism" in the following way:

> A specifically historical formation like [the spirit of capitalism] can only be raised to conceptual clarity ... through the synthesis of its individual components, as historical reality presents them to us. We do this in such a way that from the reality of the historically given we select in their sharpest, most consistent form those individual features which we find exerting their effect there in a variously arranged, fractured, more or less consistent and complete way, more or less mixed with other heterogeneous features, and combine them according to how they belong together, so producing an "ideal-typical" concept.
>
> (Weber, 2001: 106–107)

A close reading of this passage shows that Weber strove for "conceptual clarity" with his historical ideal type, and that this was accomplished through a "synthesis" of "individual components." Exactly how Weber went about this is however somewhat unclear. Again, do you separate out the values of the actors from the meaning they invest their actions with, or do you merge the two in the ideal type? In the early stages of the formation of the spirit of capitalism, values and meaning tended to converge, as exemplified by someone like Benjamin Franklin who viewed his economic actions in ethical terms. Later in history, we also know that the meaning and the values diverged. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so" (Weber, 1976: 181).

Another question that is of importance in this context is the following: Does the way you proceed when you construct an ideal type for an individual historical phenomenon, such as the spirit of rational capitalism in the West, differ from the way you proceed when you construct an ideal type for some phenomenon that is not historical in character, say, the way that the members of a religious sect behave? Again, Weber does not tell.

Version 2: The ideal type from 1920 in economy and society

The second important place in Weber's work where he discusses the ideal type is in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*. This chapter was written in 1920, the year Weber died. According to Schutz, as we know, Weber only hints at the "thorough change" that

the concept of the ideal type by this time had undergone in his work (Schutz, 1967: 244, n. 26). Anyone interested in Weber's ideal type will agree with Schutz on this point: Weber's ideas about the ideal (or pure type, as he now also calls it) clearly deserve more of a discussion than they get in the two and a half pages that are devoted to this topic in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978: 19–22).

To these two and a half pages (in Section 11 in Paragraph 1 in Chapter 1 in Part 1 of *Economy and Society*), it is important to add a few passages elsewhere in Paragraph 1 and in other writings from around the same time.[7] Still, the material is small in size, not least in comparison to the 20 or so pages devoted to the ideal type in the Objectivity essay.

Weber, as we know, felt that his presentation in the Objectivity essay had perhaps been partially wrong on some points because it had not been properly worked out; and presumably he tried to remedy this defect in the version he presented in *Economy and Society*. As Schutz notes, he now also switched the focus from a theory of history to one of sociology. Nonetheless, there also exists a distinct continuity between Weber's general approach to the ideal type in the Objectivity essay and the version in *Economy and Society*. If nothing else, this is clear from Weber's positive reference in *Economy and Society* to his depiction of the ideal type in the Objectivity essay (Weber, 1978: 22).[8]

For the moment, however, let us focus on the shortcomings of Weber's theory of the ideal type in the Objectivity essay. First, he did not explain how the element of values is related to the element of meaning in the concept of culture. Second, it was consequently not clear what he meant by the analytical accentuation that is at the very heart of the ideal type, and how it should be carried out in practical terms. Must an ideal type be centered around values as well as meaning or how should you proceed at this point?

In my view, it is clear that Weber had thought these problems through by the time he wrote the section on the ideal type in *Economy and Society*. In starting with the concept of meaning, it is important to stress that Weber is presenting us with a very specific type of sociology in *Economy and Society* which he calls interpretive sociology. In outlining the basic structure of this kind of sociology, as Weber carefully does in Paragraph 1 in Chapter 1, he eliminates *all* references to values and *exclusively* speaks of meaning. The concept of culture which tied them together has also vanished.[9]

It is clear that Weber still considered the notion of values extremely important for sociologists to work with when he wrote Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*. This can, for example, be illustrated by his concept of value-rationality in Paragraph 2. Still, values (as well as culture) are conspicuously absent from the basic unit of Weber's sociology, namely, his concept of social action. Action, according to Weber's definition, consists of behavior invested with meaning by the actor. And action is social when it is oriented to the behavior of others. Values and culture are nowhere mentioned.

The very first reference to the concept of the ideal type in *Economy and Society* is also to be found in Weber's discussion of meaning and its role in sociology. He here distinguishes between three different types of meaning, each of which has been produced in a different way. While the sociologist, he says, may be interested in the concrete meaning of some actor or in the average empirical meaning of several actors, in the case of the ideal type, he or she should instead use the constructed meaning of hypothetical actors. Sociology, Weber (1978) also makes clear, is primarily interested in formulating "*type concepts and generalized*

uniformities of empirical process" (p. 19, emphasis added). History, in contrast, is interested in "*individual actions, structures and personalities possessing cultural significance*" (Weber, 1978: 19, emphasis added; cf. Weber, 1978: 29).[10] Weber does not say what he means by "cultural significance" but presumably it contains a reference to values.

How then is the artificially created meaning of the sociological ideal type to be constructed? Weber's answer is that you have to proceed in two steps. You first have to see to it that there exists what he calls "adequacy on the level of meaning" (*sinnhaft adäquat*). You then proceed to heighten or concentrate the meaning of the ideal types (*gesteigerte Eindeutigkeit der Begriffe*).

Adequacy on the level of meaning is defined by Weber in Paragraph 1 in *Economy and Society* in a straightforward manner. It is what is generally considered to be the "correct" way to act, given what someone wants to accomplish. As an example, Weber refers to a person trying to solve a problem in arithmetic. There exists a correct way of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and so on.

What is involved in adequacy on the level of meaning is that the meaning and the action have to fit each other, a bit like the hand in the glove. There exist, for example, rules in arithmetic; and these tell us how to proceed if we want to add, say $2+2$. Or to take another example, say someone wants to get somebody else's attention and decides to wave at him or her. In this case, you have to decide on the meaning (i.e. greeting someone) and also to engage in the type of action that goes with this meaning (i.e. raising your hand and waving it). Adequacy on the level of meaning, in brief, means that a meaning has to be accompanied by the action it implies.

But how do you heighten or concentrate the meaning element, something that is necessary, according to Weber, and also directly linked to the concept of adequacy on the level of meaning? How do you make it "as complete as possible"? (*möglichst vollständiger Sinnadäquanz*; Weber, 1978: 20). Weber's answer to this question is crucial to an understanding of how the ideal type is created. What the sociologist now has to do, Weber says, is make a number of artificial assumptions about the (typical) individual actor.[11] The most important of these are the following:

#1 That the typical actor acts in a rational way;

 # 2 That the typical actor has complete information;

 # 3 That the typical actor is totally aware of what he/she is doing; and

 # 4 That the typical actor does not make any mistakes.[12]

(Weber, 1978: 21–22)

Each of these assumptions deserves a sentence or two, by way of explanation and also to emphasize their importance in the construction of an ideal type. To assume that the actor behaves in a rational way is a convenient point of departure for several reasons. It is for one thing usually easy to decide what constitutes a rational action. There is also the fact that many actions are today undergoing the process of rationalization.

The assumption that the actor has complete information is clearly unrealistic and artificial. Still, just by making this assumption, one's attention is quickly drawn to a number of factors that limit the information an actor has; and to explore why this is the case is often fruitful. Something similar is true for the assumption that the actor is totally aware of what he or she is doing. Habit and tradition, for example, are often present in what we do. It is also possible to think of other factors that interfere with one's attention, from strong emotions to various factors in one's surroundings.

There is similarly a strong heuristic quality to the assumption that the actor does not commit any mistakes. Sociologists have not paid much attention to the role that mistakes play in social life, but a moment of reflection shows that it is easy to imagine a number of situations in which mistakes can take place and derail the intended action.

It should be pointed out that the ideal type also plays a role in the process of assigning causality in Weber's interpretive sociology, and that this has implications for its construction. How to interpret what Weber says on this point is contested in the secondary literature, but is fairly straightforward in my view.[13] In brief, the ideal type should be constructed in such a way that the effect of the social action it describes is clearly linked to the motivation of the actor. This way, so-called "causal adequacy" is ensured (*kausal adäquat*).

To phrase it differently, what is meant with causal adequacy is that if the typical actor carries out some action, it should lead to the sought effect in a probable and decisive way. The action, in brief, should be of such strength that it leads to the intended result. Weber's thinking on this point can be illustrated with the example that has already been used, of greeting a friend. If I want to greet a friend, I extend my hand, making in this way my action adequate on the level of meaning (the intention and the action fit each other). It is also causally adequate to the extent that it is likely to make my friend extend his or her hand in response to my action, since this was the motive for my action.

Or to take another example, this time from Weber's list of basic sociological concepts in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*. The concept of "power" is here defined as a form of social action that can be carried out in a social relationship, despite the resistance of the other actor (Weber, 1978: 53). This means that if one actor decides to try to overpower some other actor who does not want this, he or she will try to do so in combination with a type of action that defeats whatever resistance the other actor will muster. If this succeeds, it is a case of power and causal adequacy. We can, in other words, use the concept of power to analyze what happens in this particular case. If the action does not succeed, we may perhaps want to call the action an attempt at power, but it basically has to be conceptualized in some other way. Perhaps it can be seen as a form of traditional action, which was once an effective form of power.

Once you have constructed the ideal type, Weber says, you should proceed in the same way as was suggested in the Objectivity essay. In other words, you should now *compare* the ideal type and the phenomenon you are interested in analyzing. Or, to put it a bit stronger, you need to *confront* the ideal type with reality. If the differences between the ideal type and the empirical case are too large, the ideal type should be changed or adjusted. If not, Weber says, you need to account for the difference. The latter represents the typical situation if a good ideal type is available.

What happens as a result of this confrontation represents the main payoff for using an ideal type. You now have both a general grip on the situation (thanks to the ideal type) *and*

Table I. How to construct and use an ideal type in sociology, according to Max Weber.

 # 1. Focus on the element of social action in the object of study, that is, on the behavior as well as the meaning with which this is invested.
  Comment: No analysis of social action can be carried out without first establishing *the meaning* with which the actor invests his or her behavior.

 # 2. Check that there is adequacy on the level of meaning, that is, that the meaning of the typical actor and his/her action fit each other.
  Comment: This is a procedure that can be carried out quickly and without difficulty. When a discrepancy appears, it needs to be explained.

 # 3. Make the following four key assumptions about the typical actor:
  1. *The typical actor acts in a rational manner.*
     Comment: It is often convenient to begin the analysis by making the assumption that social action represents a form of rational action – and then study why this may or may not be the case.
  2. *The typical actor has full knowledge of the situation.*
     Comment: Most actors lack full knowledge of the situation they are in, making this assumption a useful heuristic.
  3. *The typical actor is fully aware of what he/she is doing.*
     Comment: Since the role of habit, tradition and the like are common in social action, exploring this assumption is often helpful.
  4. The typical actor makes no mistakes.
     Comment: Sociologists have not paid much attention to mistakes in social life, but these are often present and take various forms.

 # 4. In using the ideal type, check that causal adequacy is involved, that is, that the action involved (behavior plus meaning) will trigger the sought effect.
  Comment: Unless the social action is powerful enough to make the actor realize his or her intention, the ideal type needs to be changed or another one used.

 # 5. Confront the ideal type with the concrete reality of the phenomenon that is being analyzed, and go from there.
  Comment: Weber says little on how to proceed at this point, so the analyst is basically on his or her own. At this point of the analysis, it is also useful to look for side effects and totally unintended consequences of the social action.

a way to analyze the specifics or the individuality of the case. Weber, however, does not say anything about the ways in which the analyst should proceed in a confrontation of this type. Whatever the reason may be for this, the analyst is left alone also at this point.

By way of summing up Weber's argument so far in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*, we can say that he wants to show the reader how to construct and work with an ideal type in sociological research. As we know, Weber wanted *Economy and Society* to be like a textbook (Weber, 2012c: 826). His view can be presented in the form of a guide that outlines the steps that need to be taken when you use the ideal type in empirical research (see Table 1).[14]

Weber also says in *Economy and Society* that the ideal type can be of general help to the sociologist in primarily three ways. It can be used (1) *for terminological purposes*, (2) *for heuristic purposes*, and (3) *for classificatory purposes* (Weber, 1978: 21).[15] The most important of these is in my view (2) or the use of the ideal type to come up with new ideas. Clarity is always important, and classifications are useful, but the heart of a good

sociological analysis consists of coming up with new ideas in analyzing social reality, verified by the facts.

While it is possible to look at the analysis in *The Protestant Ethic* as a very striking example of how an ideal type should be constructed and used according to the Objectivity essay, there exist no equivalent when it comes to the version of the ideal type that is presented in *Economy and Society*. This, however, does not mean that we lack concrete examples of the later version of Weber's ideal type. In fact, there exist quite a few of these sociological ideal types in his work. In Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society*, the reader will, for example, find some 30 ideal types that are important to most sociological analyses. Chapters 2–4 contain many more ideal types, primarily to be used in studies of economic sociology (Chapter 2), political sociology (Chapter 3), and stratification (Chapter 4). And finally, there is Weber's use of ideal types in his analyses in the rest of *Economy and Society* and in *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions* (Weber, 1978: 311–1372; and primarily Weber, 1951, 1952, 1958). In the latter studies, we find many examples of how Weber used ideal types in empirical sociological analyses.

Concluding Remarks

Given the brief account of the ideal type that can be found in *Economy and Society*, it is not possible to reach full closure about the nature of the ideal type in Weber's work and how he wants it to be used. Still, we do know enough to make an effective use of it. It is also clear that the sociological version of the ideal type represents a clear step forward, in comparison to the one that can be found in the Objectivity essay.

There are several reasons why the sociological version of the ideal type is preferable to the earlier one. For one thing, there is a clear focus on meaning in the sociological version of the ideal type. To eliminate the link to the concept of value in the formulation of the ideal type represents in my view a positive move. Furthermore, the emphasis in *Economy and Society* is explicitly on the creation of sociological types and regularities. It is not clear what at this point had become of Weber's attempt to create "a science of unique events" (Agevall, 1999). But to the extent that it was still present in Weber's sociology, it played a subordinate role.

While Weber's ideal type is a valuable tool for sociologists to use, he developed this notion about a century ago, and there is no reason to accept what he then said as automatically valid today. To bring Weber's concept up to date is therefore something that needs to be done and should be on the agenda of today's sociology. Below I suggest that we revisit his sociological version of the ideal type with a few questions in mind.

The first has to do with the fact that sociology has gone through a revolution in terms of how data can be gathered and analyzed since Weber's death. A second issue is related to the question of how to work with the ideal type once it has been confronted with reality. The third has to do with what counts as empirical proof according to Weber.

Today, as opposed to in Weber's time, we not only have a fully developed set of techniques for how to conduct field work but also a number of sophisticated quantitative methods. Thanks to the efforts of especially the Chicago School, we can add to Weber's three types of meaning that are relevant for the sociologist (i.e. the concrete meaning of

the individual actor, the average concrete meaning of a number of actors, and the ideal typical meaning of the typical actor; Weber, 1978: 4). Through the means of participant observation, symbolic interaction, and the like, sociologists can today get at a new type of meaning, namely, the kind of meaning that the members of a group share, or the meaning that a new member of a group is socialized into. Perhaps the typical individual should be modeled with this type of meaning in mind?

Similarly, a discussion is needed of the types of meaning that can be established today with the help of quantitative methods for coding and other techniques. How are these related to the ideal type? When and how can they be used? This is not an easy question to answer, as evidenced by the important work by Richard Biernacki on this topic (Biernacki, 2012). In Biernacki's view, Weber's close reading of individual texts still represents the best way to proceed when you need to establish meaning structures. This may well be the case also today and in the near future. But with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data, new methods are rapidly emerging; and to the extent that these can contribute to an understanding of what meaning is involved, they should be used.

A second point which I think needs to be discussed is that Weber provides us with no guidelines for how to use an ideal type once it has been created. He says that the ideal type should be confronted with reality, but what exactly does this mean? What differences between the ideal type and reality should be singled out and why? Can some guidelines be provided for how to proceed here? Is, for example, what Herbert Blumer (1954) says on sensitizing concepts relevant here?

A third point that needs to be discussed is that Weber does not say very much about what constitutes empirical proof in an analysis in which ideal types are used. The problem involved is well illustrated by the case of *The Protestant Ethic*. Here, we have a brilliant argument which is closely linked to the use of an ideal type, but also one where there is next to no empirical proof. Is there perhaps a danger when you use an ideal type to become more interested in the logic of how something happens than in the actual case or cases at hand?

It is true that Weber addresses the issue of verification in *Economy and Society*, but what he says on this topic is very brief (Weber, 1978: 5–6). He basically states that empirical proof is absolutely necessary, in order to verify a hypothesis. He also says that this proof must include the element of meaning of the actors or the analysis is not complete. Nonetheless, he is much too brief. There also exists a huge post-Weberian literature on verification.

Finally, if I were to sum up my own answer to the question whether Weber's ideal type can be used today in concrete research, it would be as follows: Weber got several things right when he constructed the ideal type, especially in its later sociological version. One of his most essential insights is that we need social science concepts that assign a central place to the concept of *meaning*. The idea of making assumptions of rational action, full knowledge, total awareness, and no mistakes is also very useful. Related to this is Weber's notion that the ideal type is primarily *heuristic* in nature.

It is clear that several questions remain to be answered before we can reach full clarity on how to best use the ideal type in sociological research. Some of these pertain to the interpretation of what Weber says, and others to how to improve on his ideas. Still, it is also my view that we know enough about the ideal type today to start using it on a broad

scale. It is now more than a century since Weber created the ideal type; and hopefully, the time has come when we will start using it.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Schutz (1967: 244, n. 26, emphasis added). The critical remarks Schutz is referring to were written by Weber about a year after he had finished the Objectivity essay. They read

   On this concept [the ideal type], see my essay (Objectivity) (pp. 190ff.), I hope to continue that sketchy, and therefore perhaps partly misleading discussion in more detail at an early opportunity.

   (Weber, 2012a: 85, n. 1, 94; Weber, 1988: 131, n. 1)

2. A first version of this article was written in 2014 and appeared in a local publication in Denmark (Swedberg, 2014). I later came to understand that I had passed over some crucial aspects of Weber's argument about the ideal type and decided that the article should be thoroughly recast and rewritten. This version consequently supersedes the earlier one.
3. For a discussion of this point, as well as an introduction to the secondary literature in English on the ideal type, see Appendix 1.
4. For Weber's full statement, see Note 1.
5. I have found the translation of the Objectivity essay by Hans Henrik Bruun to be a great improvement on that of Edward Shils and Henry Finch (Weber, 1949, 2004a). I will also use the 1978 edition of *Economy and Society* since it is the standard text in English when *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* is cited (even if other translations exist of, for example, Chapter 1).
6. The Objectivity essay was written to express the views of the editors of *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, which besides Weber included Werner Sombart and Edgar Jaffé. The article as a whole was intended as a programmatic statement for the *Archiv*, now under new editorship; and it therefore addressed several other issues besides the ideal type – such as objectivity, social policy, and how to analyze socio-economic phenomena. The section that contains the discussion of the ideal type was in contrast written exclusively by Weber, and expressed only his own views (Weber 2012b: 100, n. 1; 138).
7. Besides being the main focus of Section 11 in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*, the ideal type is very importantly also discussed in Sections 4, 6, and 7. See also, for example, Weber (1988: 534–538; 2012a: 274, 330–333).
8. Weber ends Section 11 in *Economy and Society* with the following statement: "On all these questions, see 'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" (Weber, 1978: 22, 2014: 14). What Weber is referring to in this statement is his general preference for the "unreal" kind of precise ideal type concepts, as opposed to real and "imprecise" ones. This constitutes, to my

mind, an approval of the overall argument in the Objectivity essay (but it says nothing about its particulars).

9. Why Weber did this is not known or discussed in the secondary literature. For the argument that the concept of meaning suddenly become very popular toward the end of the nineteenth century in philosophy and elsewhere, see Ian Hacking, "Nobody's Theory of Meaning" (Hacking, 1975).
10. What modern sociologists refer to as "historical sociology" represents from Weber's perspective a form of interpretive sociology, as long as the focus is on social action.
11. According to Weber, to repeat, sociology is only interested in typical actors (Weber, 1978: 19–29).
12. These represent the four major assumptions according to Weber, but there exist some others as well. In the comment to Paragraph 1 in Chapter 1 in *Economy and Society*, for example, Weber mentions the assumption that the actor is not confused and also that he or she is not overtaken by emotions (Weber, 1978: 20). It is also clear that the assumption of rational action may not be useful in analyzing, say, types like the prophet, the mystic, and perhaps some others as well (Weber, 1978: 11–20).
13. For discussions of adequate causality in English, see, for example, Buss (1999) and Turner and Factor (1981) The notion of objective possibility is linked to that of adequate causality but does not play a central role in the average use of the ideal type.
14. Uta Gerhardt has similarly tried to translate Weber's ideas into a number of steps that need to be taken when empirical research is conducted. As opposed to in this article, however, her focus is exclusively on qualitative research in sociology. The ambition with her three-step procedure is to "redirect interpretive methodology in contemporary qualitative research" (Gerhardt, 1994: 85). The three steps are described as follows

    > *Step 1.* Converting the "heterogeneous infinity of social life" into focused concepts for scientific understanding …
    > *Step 2.* Converting concepts into ideal types which must satisfy three criteria of validity (1. Comprehensiveness of knowledge grounds; 2. Identifying indispensable elements and eliminating others; and 3. Verification in socio-historical reality) …
    > *Step 3.* Confronting the ideal type with observed individual cultural events. (Gerhardt, 1994: 85–91)

15. In the Objectivity essay, Weber also mentions "purposes of … exposition" (Weber, 2012b: 125). What he has in mind here can perhaps be illustrated by the way that the ideal type of "the spirit of capitalism" is discussed in *The Protestant Ethic*.

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Author biography

Richard Swedberg works since 2002 at Cornell University. His two main specialties are economic sociology and social theory. His works include Max Weber and the Idea of Economic Sociology (1998), (with Ola Agevall) The Max Weber Dictionary (2nd ed. 2016), and The Art of Social Theory (2014).

Appendix 1

On the secondary literature on the ideal type

There exists today a huge secondary literature on Weber's concept of the ideal type which has come into being since Weber first launched this concept on a broad scale in 1904. No attempt, however, has been made to summarize this literature and its results. Such an attempt would have to overcome the fact that Weber's concept is hard to grasp but also that the discussion of the ideal type has taken place in several different disciplines and in many different countries and contexts. The brief account below is directed at English-speaking readers and refers mainly to studies of the ideal type in English.

There seems to exist a general agreement that Weber's concept is very difficult and in need of much explication. Many attempts have consequently been made to unlock the secrets of Weber's concept; and no interpretation is generally accepted. According to Gerhard Wagner, the editor of the forthcoming volume in Weber's *Collected Works* that will contain his methodological writings, the secondary literature on the ideal type is "a literature that has led nowhere" (Wagner and Härpfer, 2014: 217). Wagner's conclusion is that "Weber failed to explain what an ideal type is" (Wagner and Härpfer, 2014: 215).

There exists no research to my knowledge on how often, and with what success, Weber's ideal type has been used in empirical studies by sociologists. My own suspicion is that most sociologists simply view the ideal type as another name for an abstraction, that is, it is a concept that focuses on what is essential to some phenomenon. This, however, is *not* what Weber meant. The closest we come to a study of the actual use that sociologists have made of the ideal type can be found in an article by Ola Agevall (2005). Agevall has looked at the number of times that the term ideal type can be found in sociological articles. He also has statistics on the number of times that it has been used *together with Weber's name*, which is considerably less. This means that the term ideal type is many times used without any reference to Weber. The term "ideal type," in brief, has taken on a life of its own among sociologists.

To explore the exact ways in which the ideal type has been used by sociologists is however not part of Agevall's analysis. How to do this with a large number of cases is naturally difficult. There is also the fact that the place where Weber's ideal type is most effectively used is in the research that *precedes* the final analysis on which the researcher settles. And what happens at this stage is usually not mentioned when the final analysis is written up.

For helpful and solid introductions in English to the concept of ideal type, the following are recommended: Martin Albrow (1990), *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory*, pp. 149–57; Hans Henrik Bruun in his introduction to Weber's *Collected Methodological Writings*, pp. xxiv–xxv; Dirk Käsler (1988), Max Weber (1988), pp. 180–183; and Susan Hekman (1983), *Weber: The Ideal Type and Contemporary Social Theory*. For some other analyses which in my view are of very high quality, see Hans Henrik Bruun (2001), *Weber on Rickert: From Value Relations to Ideal Type* and Alfred Schutz (1967), *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, pp. 176–250. Two indispensable commentaries on the ideal type in German are Alexander von Schelting (1934), *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 325–343, and Dieter Henrich (1952), *Die Einheit der Wissenschaftslehre Max Webers*, pp. 83–103.

For the argument that Weber created two kinds of ideal types, one "generalizing" and the other "individualizing," see Talcott Parsons (1937), *The Structure of Social Action*, pp. 601–610. For a critique of this argument, see, for example, Martin Albrow (1990), *Max Weber's Construction of Social Theory*, pp. 154–157. For the ideal type from a historian's perspective, see, for example, Wolfgang Mommsen (1989), *Ideal Type and Pure Type: Two Variants of Max Weber's Ideal-typical Method*. A special mention should also be made of Uta Gerhardt's attempt to translate Weber's (Gerhardt, 1994) ideas on the ideal type into a practical tool for doing qualitative research: *The Use of Weberian Ideal-Typical Methodology in Qualitative Data Interpretation*. The steps to be taken, according to Gerhardt, are described in Note 14.

While Weber's notion of the ideal type is usually seen as a valuable contribution to the tool box of the social scientist, there also exist some critical voices. It has, among other things, been argued that ideal types are of little help to the social scientist because there exist no practical guidelines for how to construct them and how to use them – neither in Weber's own writings nor in the secondary literature (e.g. Gary Goertz (2005), *Social Science Concepts*, pp. 83–88). There is also Carl Hempel's (1965) argument in *Typological Methods in the Natural and the Social Sciences* that there is nothing special about the ideal type; it does not differ in any significant way from the kind of concepts that are used in the natural sciences. The former of these two critiques is understandable, given the exegetical and non-practical character of much of the secondary literature on the ideal type. Hempel's viewpoint is similar to the idea that an ideal type is simply an abstraction of the kind that is often helpful to use in science. It is, in other words, based on ignorance about the ideal type. Sociologists must take the meaning of their objects of study (human beings) into account when they construct an explanation, something natural scientists cannot do.