

Ideal Type

Ideal types are CONSTRUCTS used for data analysis in qualitative social research. The idea that ideal types can be used for systematic comparative analysis of historical data (including life-history data) was originally developed by Max Weber. Weber's methodology of ideal types has been adapted in ideal-type analysis to fulfill the requirements of multi-case study research. Through the use of ideal types, life history data are analyzed systematically on a case-by-case basis, arriving at structural explanations. Ideal-type analysis is a branch of interpretive social research dealing with narrative (textual) data materials that are organized in multiple case trajectories.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The idea of ideal type was originally devised by Max Weber to explain sociologically individual cultural phenomena. That is, Weber (1904/1949) constructed ideal types as explanatory schemes when he wished to understand individual case material taken from the “infinite causal web” of social reality (p. 84). Alfred Schütz, another theorist who also used ideal types in his research, realized that not only are ideal types valid constructions for microsociological theory, but the social world itself is organized in ideal-type structures (Schütz, 1932/1967, 1955/1976).

Against this background, Gerhardt (1985, 1994) introduced ideal-type analysis into qualitative research. She applied it in two major studies, demonstrating its systematic scope (Gerhardt, 1986, 1999). The approach has become established in Germany and elsewhere (e.g., Leisering & Leibfried, 1999).

LEVELS OF CASE ANALYSIS

Cases are the focus of ideal-type analysis in three stages of the research act. For one, cases are units of analysis established through data processing; second, cases are selected for their relative capacity of ideal-type representation; and third, case explanation is the ultimate goal of ideal-type analysis. The three levels of case work are the following:

1. ***Case reconstruction***, which entails the construction of all cases in the data set as a sequence of stages following an analytical scheme. Case reconstruction arranges cases as sequential patterns such that each case can be compared with all other cases in the data set.
2. ***Selection of paradigmatic cases***, which is the outcome of comparative analysis of cases (following systematic case reconstruction). When clusters of similar cases emerge, within each cluster, one or more paradigmatic cases can be chosen that epitomize the respective typical pattern.
3. ***Case explanation***, which is the eventual objective of the research act, follows structural explanation (see next section). For Weber and also for modern ideal-type analysis, the aim is to explain systematically the developmental dynamics of empirical cases.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Through analytical procedures on two separate levels, on both of which ideal types are used, descriptions as well as structural explanations are reached. The descriptions serve to construct descriptive types that epitomize the dynamics of the cases. The explanations are geared toward understanding the structural patterns that explain the dynamics of the case material. The use of ideal types to understand patterns of social life on both a descriptive as well as a structural level has two separate stages in the analytical procedure:

1. ***Descriptive Ideal Types*** . Through comparison between cases as they are reconstructed using the analytical scheme, clusters of similar cases emerge. These may be pictured choosing a paradigmatic case taken as ideal type. The ideal-type case epitomizes the case dynamics in the respective cluster. Through comparison between a paradigmatic case (ideal-type case) and all other cases in the cluster, applying the same procedure to each cluster of cases, a rich picture of case dynamics emerges. This picture shows the pattern in each group as well as that of all groups on a comparative basis. This allows for a variety of comparisons in the empirical material, yielding a tableau of variation of patterns epitomized in ideal-type paradigmatic cases.
2. ***Structural Ideal Types*** . If the question is asked, “Why do cases

develop as they do?” social structures come into the picture. Structural explanation of pattern dynamics is needed. Only through ideal-type-based structural explanation can explanation of individual cases be accomplished. Such explanation determines why a case follows a structural pattern dynamics, which it does more or less closely. To arrive at the selection of ideal-type cases that can be used for structural pattern explanation, a catalogue of case characteristics must be set up that—under the analytical perspective of the research project—defines what would be the features or composition of an optimal case. The ideal-type case chosen on this basis is to be found in the empirical material. The ideal-type case epitomizes the structural pattern, the latter being mirrored in its case characteristics as closely as possible. In-depth analysis of the ideal-type case reveals the structural dynamics of the “pure” type in the structural pattern. Heuristically, to use a Weberian term, the ideal-type case represents the structural pattern for analytical purposes. Analytically, however, not only an optimal case but also a worst-case scenario should be established. Juxtaposing the analytical pictures derived from the best-case as well as the worst-case analytical scenarios yields a prolific tableau of patterns. These patterns define the structural backgrounds of potential case dynamics in the analyzed case material. High-versus low-class status groups and multimarriage versus never-married family background, to name but two, are social structural patterns whose dynamics may be investigated using ideal-type analysis.

Ideal-type cases allow for explanations linking cases with structural patterns. Because social structures are realized to a variable degree in the cases in the data material, their typicality in relation to the ideal-type case(s) helps understand their structural versus individual developmental dynamics. Comparative analysis juxtaposing ideal-type cases with other cases in the data material allows also for analysis of subgroups, and so on, which further enriches the findings achieved through structural pattern explanation.

AN EXAMPLE

Our study of biographies of coronary artery bypass (CABS) patients

investigated 60 cases (using 240 interviews). They were selected preoperatively on the basis that each fulfilled four known criteria (social and medical) predicting postoperative return to work. Slightly more than half the cases did eventually return to work postoperatively; the others preferred or were eventually pushed into early retirement. Case reconstruction yielded four patterns, namely successful revascularization/return to work, failure of revascularization/return to work, successful revascularization/early retirement, failure of revascularization/early retirement. These four groups were investigated further using descriptive ideal types (cases paradigmatic for each of the four patterns). In order to explain the case trajectories, all cases were recoded using four criteria of optimum outcome (postoperative absence of symptoms, improvement of income, absence of marital conflict over postoperative decision regarding return to work or retirement, satisfactory doctor-patient relationship). Only two cases fulfilled all four criteria—one a return-to-work case, and the other an early-retirement one. They turned out to differ with respect to a number of explanatory parameters, namely social class, age at the time of CABS, marital status, subjective perception of health status, and—expressed in their narratives—central life interest. Whereas the upper-class, older return-to-work case had a central life interest favoring his job and occupation, the lower-class, younger early-retirement case had a non-work-related central life interest (favoring his leisure and the prospect of old age without work stress). The two ideal-type cases were then used to explain the course of events in all other cases, using cross-case comparative analysis (comparing biographical trajectories against the background of parameters such as, among others, social class). One main result of the study was the following: Return to work or early retirement after CABS depends more on type of central life interest than outcome of revascularization.

IDEAL TYPES AND MEASUREMENT

Max Weber (1904/1949) made it clear that ideal-type analysis aims at measurement. He expressed it as follows: “Such concepts are constructs in terms of which we formulate relationships by the application of the category of objective possibility. By means of this category, the adequacy

of our imagination, oriented and disciplined by reality, is *judged*” (p. 93). Following on from Weber, and showing how Weber's ideas of ideal-type methodology can be transformed into a method of modern qualitative research, Gerhardt (1994) writes about case explanation as measurement of the case development in a particular individual biography whose course was pitted against an ideal-type case in the respective data material:


This case explanation may serve as an example of how the individual case often represents chance and unforeseen hazards. These emerge as specific when the case is held against the ideal-type case. Apparently irrational elements, to be sure, explain the case by making understandable its unique dynamics—just as Weber suggested. (p. 117)

—Uta Gerhardt

[Further Readings](#)

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Ideal Type

Max Weber (1864–1920) coined the concept “ideal type” as a methodological device within his brand of “interpretive (*verstehende*) sociology.” Both concepts—ideal type and interpretive sociology—have given rise to grave misunderstandings. The word *ideal*, to begin with, has nothing to do with the colloquial adjective *ideal*, as in “He is an ideal husband, she is an ideal teacher.” Colloquially *ideal* is a normative value judgment. Weber, however, meant by ideal type what he also called “pure type,” a concept that is strictly analytical—an artificial construct

that does not contain any value judgment about reality. On the contrary, ideal types are predominantly ruled by the rationality of logic. They are indifferent as to positive or negative value judgments. “There are ideal types of brothels as well as of religions.” Moreover, in a typically neo-Kantian vein, he emphasized the fact that an ideal type should not be viewed as a “picture” (*Abbild*) of reality but rather as a willful distortion of it. From a specific point of view, which is always necessarily guided by values, certain dimensions of reality are overemphasized, while other dimensions are on purpose kept in the background.

Weber was philosophically driven by the neo-Kantian question of how one could possibly arrive at a rational, scientifically satisfactory knowledge of a reality which is, as is the case with human behavior, predominantly irrational. His answer is not really satisfactory, as he acknowledges himself, but the best he could think of. An ideal type is in a sense an artificial model. For instance, one constructs types of human behavior that indicate how people would act if they would act in a purely functional-rational manner. Nobody acts in such a way, not even in the world of science or in modern bureaucracy. But that is precisely the point: By comparing reality as we experience it in everyday life predominantly in an irrational manner with the ideal type of a radically rationally behaving human being, we begin to *understand rationally* this predominantly irrational behavior because of the *difference* between the constructed ideal type and the experienced reality. Ideal types are, in Weber's own words, “conceptual means for the comparison and measurement of reality,” which, due to their general character, are able to highlight the particular features of the object under investigation. This throws a specific, typically neo-Kantian light on the notion of an interpretive (*verstehende*) sociology: Understanding (*Verstehen*) is *not* a method but it is the *aim* of Weber's brand of sociology. Its method is the comparison of the constructed ideal types with the experienced reality. There is thus not “a method called Verstehen.”

Usually Weber placed concepts that he viewed and used as ideal types between quotation marks. Quite often he also constructed matrices of ideal types. For example, he distinguished four ideal types of human social action based upon four ideal typically distinguishable expectations: (1) “goalrational behavior” oriented towards an explicit

aim; (2) “value-rational behavior” carried by a rational belief in ethical, esthetic, religious, or other values; (3) “affectual behavior” driven by emotional expectations; (4) “traditional behavior” founded upon deeply rooted habits. Equally well known is the ideal typical matrix of (1) traditional; (2) charismatic; (3) legal-rational legitimacy. If one focuses on actual human behavior or the actual exercise of legitimacy in historical reality, one will never find a precise duplication of these ideal types in reality. Yet, by placing the ideal typical and generalized matrix upon reality, which is a historical and experienced reality, one will begin to *understand* its typical developments and its typical constitution and thus its historical particularity.

Weber believed that the ideal typical method could be helpful to the cultural sciences, which, unlike the natural sciences, are dealing with a subject matter—human behavior, social and cultural reality—that is characterized by values and meanings and by events and phenomena that are particular and unique and in that sense irrational. He refused to abandon the natural-scientific objectivity by surrendering to the subjectivism of empathy (*Einfühlung*), yet he also realized that the neopositivist subjection to the methods of the natural sciences remained highly unsatisfactory when one deals with human beings, human behavior, social and cultural realities. The method of ideal types offered a solution: These conceptual models were natural-scientific in that they were general, in a sense timeless, yet in their confrontation with historical and experienced reality, they yielded cultural-scientific knowledge (understanding) of what is particular, unique, and specific.

There remains an irritating fact. Since they are artificial constructions, ruled by the laws of formal logic, they can in actual fact neither be verified nor be falsified. The only criterion by which they can be judged is their *heuristic use* or *uselessness*. Does the ideal typical matrix yield rational understanding, or does it not? That is the “verifying” or “falsifying” question!

This may well be the crucial test for most of social theory. Tocqueville's “aristocracy” and “democracy,” Durkheim's “mechanic” and “organic solidarity,” Toennies's “*Gemeinschaft*” and “*Gesellschaft*” Maine's “status” and “contract.” These are ideal types that for many decades

have helped sociologists grasp rationally the extremely complex, and in many respects irrational, process of modernization. One can easily add contemporary examples of such ideal types. Weber, however, was the first and actually the only theorist who designed an ideal type methodology.

—Anton C. Zijderveld

[Further Readings](#)

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Ideal Type

Max Weber argued that no scientific method could reveal all of reality or do justice to the diversity of particular phenomena. He developed the construct of the *ideal type* to deal with the dilemma created by using constructs that are too general and thus devoid of specifics or using constructs that are so particularized as to defy general application. The ideal type is not ideal in a normative sense, nor is it an average of all instances of a phenomenon; rather, it is a constructed ideal that approximates reality by selecting elements and characteristics of the phenomena. In evaluation, examples of ideal types are program, treatment, intervention, and stakeholder.

[Further Readings](#)

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