

# **Towards an Interpretive Sociology of Animals. On the Possibilities of Conceiving Animals as Social Actors from the Perspective of Max Weber's Sociological Approach**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There are two main methodological approaches to empirical research in the social sciences: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative is closer to the natural sciences and deals with phenomena that can be translated into numbers and statistics. It typically focuses on phenomena of a mass nature (e.g. class structure of society, voting behaviour of people, etc.). Its strength lies in the use of mathematical statistical procedures to reveal the connections between phenomena. Qualitative ones are closer to humanistic disciplines (e.g. literary science, aesthetics, linguistics) and seek to understand the subjective meaning that orients the actions of actors. The strength of the qualitative approach lies primarily in explaining unique events (e.g., the interpretation of a work of art, a particular religious ritual, or understanding the lives of people in a small community) that cannot be mathematized.

The origins of the qualitative approach in sociology are associated with a German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber laid the foundations of so-called interpretive sociology, i.e. an approach that explains social events by reconstructing the subjective meaning that is reflected in the actions of social actors. The interpretive approach can be useful in IIC research because a substantial part of IIC relates to the reconstruction of the animal's subjective view of the world; it seeks to understand how the animal perceives certain situations; in the course of IIC, the animal's subjective motivations, feelings, desires, decisions, reasons, etc.-that is, the structures of subjective meaning-are reconstructed. Although there are strongly divergent ideas about what animal subjectivity actually is, and the nature of the different types of information obtained from IIC, there is essentially no doubt among animal communicators that animals orient their actions according to subjective meaning.

The subject of this paper is the problem of the possibility of a general human understanding of the subjective meaning of animal actions from the perspective of Max Weber's sociological approach. Such an understanding would theoretically and methodologically justify the establishment of an interpretive sociology of animals, despite the fact that sociological research

focuses almost exclusively on humans. Weber himself paid only marginal attention to the problem of understanding the subjective meaning of animal behavior. He concluded his reflections on this topic by stating that "the problems of animal psychology, however interesting, are very thorny ones" (Weber 1978 [1921]: 16).

The present text is based on a comparative analysis of two of Weber's key methodological studies (Weber 1983 [1913], further referred as W13; and Weber 1978 [1921], further referred as W21). It focuses on his key concepts of "meaning" (*Sinn*) and "understanding" (*Verstehen*) and their applicability to the study of animal behaviour and interactions with humans. In this short paper, we will focus primarily on what Weber considers the subjective meaning of social action to be, how we achieve an understanding of this meaning, and whether understanding of animals and humans differs.

Although Weber published the texts analysed here more than a century ago, they are still relevant today. The reason lies in the fact that while empirical research becomes outdated very quickly, in the field of general theory and methodology, the ideas of the classics are still worthy of attention and do not become obsolete. That is why biologists know Darwin and philosophers still read Aristotle or Kant and use them to address current issues in their disciplines. For the same reasons, sociologists return to Marx, Durkheim, or Weber in the 21st century.

## **THE MEANING OF ACTION AS A BASIC SOCIOLOGICAL CATEGORY**

The basic building block of Weber's interpretive sociology is his conception of sociology as the science of social action (*soziales Handeln*), which has a subjective meaning (*subjektiven Sinn*) (this distinguishes action from reactive behaviour) and relates to the behaviour of others (this distinguishes social action from other forms of action):

„We shall speak of „action“ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is „social“ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.“ (W21: 4)

In the above quotation we have before us the conceptual triad of action, social action and behaviour. The important distinction is first of all between conduct (*Handeln*), whose attribute is subjective meaning, and behaviour (*Verhalten*), which lacks subjective meaning and for which Weber sometimes deliberately uses the term reactive walking. Sociology achieves an understanding (*Verstehen*) of conduct by interpreting (*deutende Erfassung*) its subjective sense, which gives this conduct an orientation, i.e. a direction of action. By interpreting the subjective meaning, it contributes to the causal explanation (*Erklären*) of the action.

An initially simple situation becomes opaque when Weber begins to thematize the semi-conscious and even unconscious subjective sense of action. According to Weber, the fact that the actor is not clearly aware of it should not prevent sociology from reconstructing it:

„In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate **half-consciousness** or actual **unconsciousness of its subjective meaning**. The actor is more likely to „be aware“ of it in a **vague sense** than he is to „know“ what he is doing or be explicitly self-conscious about it. In most cases his action is governed by impulse or habit. (...) The ideal type of meaningful action where the meaning is fully conscious and explicit is a marginal case. (...) **but the difficulty need not prevent the sociologist from systematizing his concepts by the**

**classification of possible types of subjective meaning.** That is, he may reason **as if** action actually proceeded on the basis of clearly self-conscious meaning.“ (W21: 22, emphasis by the author)

I think that if we were to add the term "animal" instead of the term "actor" in the above quotation, most readers would not feel the embarrassment over the whole paragraph that the phrase "animal sociology" might at first glance arouse.

Weber's willingness to regard the unconscious sense as relevant and full of meaning in terms of the orientation of social action and thus worthy of sociological reconstruction is particularly important from the perspective of practical IIC, in which translation from the language of feelings and images to the language of words and concepts takes place. According to Weber, the explication of the implicit meaning of action is possible and important for the scientific explanation of action. According to Weber, how can a correct understanding of meaning, whether implicit or explicit, be achieved?

### **UNDERSTANDING and DETERMINATION OF THE CORRECTNESS OF THE UNDERSTANDING**

The key and most problematic concept in analyzing the process by which we achieve understanding of meaning is the concept of evidence (*Evidenz*). While in the first study, understanding is elaborated by considering the "qualitative self-evidence (*Evidenz*)" (W13: 151) of interpretation and different degrees of evidence and intelligibility are distinguished, in W21 we find both a typology of evidentiality and a typology of understanding: „All interpretation of meaning, like all scientific observations, strives for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension (*Evidenz*). The basis for certainty in understanding can be either rational, which can be further subdivided into logical and mathematical, or it can be of an emotionally emphatic or artistically appreciative quality.“ (W21: 5)

Rational evidence leads to intellectual understanding, whereas „Empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place.“ (W21: 5) Rational evidence has the advantage that it can be more easily converted into formalized rules, e.g. mathematical proof or calculus of propositional logic. However, evidence by empathy, i.e. emotionally reenacted evidence, is probably even more important for understanding animal behaviour.

The notion of evidence is fundamental to understanding sociology because it is a necessary element of understanding the context of meaning. At the same time, however, it is a kind of "devil's hoof". It does mischief if the evidence is not equally evident to all, which is more common, especially in the case of evidence by empathy.

The basis of the evidence is Weber's similarity. In several places Weber notes that the evidence for the meaning of another's action is based largely on similarity and analogy with ourselves. We understand most easily those internal processes, e.g., even mistakes “that we ourselves are liable to“, e.g., when someone utters a logically correct judgment "according to our accepted modes of thinking", or we understand easily when someone draws certain consequences from facts of experience that correspond to "our experience" (W21: 5-6). Conversely, a number of experiences to which we ourselves do not have access either prevent the understanding of the meaning of an action, or even make it impossible to speak of a certain behaviour as a meaningful action: „In the case of some psychophysical processes, meaningful, i.e., subjectively

understandable, action is not to be found at all; in others it is discernible only by the psychologist. Many mystical experiences which cannot be adequately communicated in words, for a person who is not susceptible to such experiences, not fully understandable.“ (W21: 5)

In his discussion, Weber indicates how the way of understanding a phenomenon changes with increasing strangeness, from reexperiencing it by empathy (through empathic fantasia), to intellectual interpretation, to simple acceptance. That which we are not able to understand by reexperiencing can be grasp intellectually, and if even this fails, we can simply accept it as a given data (W21: 5-6). In this last case, partial evidence can be used to construct a partial understanding of certain aspects of the phenomenon, and the resulting intellectual recognition of a certain mechanism in action, „which is, however, adequate for most purposes of explanation“ (W21: 5).

Before turning to the problem of recognizing the adequacy of understanding, for the sake of completeness let us summarize Weber's typological elaboration of the concept of understanding, which he presented in the final version of his study on sociological concepts. According to him, understanding can be either (1) an "direct observational understanding" of the meaning of the action that is currently taking place (whether it is a rational understanding of thoughts or actions or an irrational understanding of affects through their manifestations), or (2) an "explanatory understanding" according to the understanding of the motivation that the actor puts into the action or utterance that he or she has implemented. In the latter case, we situate the meaning of the action in an “understandable sequence of motivation, the understanding of which can be treated as an explanation of the actual course of behavior“ (W21: 9). "A motive is a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question.“ (W21:11)

A rather fundamental problem is to distinguish between a correct understanding of meaning and an incorrect understanding. While qualitative evidence is the basis of understanding, the understanding itself may be of varying degrees of adequacy.

In the analytic philosophy of language in the second half of the twentieth century, there has been an intense debate about the foundations of confidence in correctly understanding what other people say. The arguments of W. V. O. Quine (1960) concerning the so-called indeterminacy of translation show quite convincingly that we have no possibility of any objective proof that the meanings we intend are understood by others in the same way, i.e. that they understand our words in the same way as we do. The indeterminacy holds in the other direction as well. In principle, there is no objective proof that we understand others as they understand the expressions they mean. J. Searle's (1987) main counter-argument to the arguments about the indeterminacy of translation does not question the logical soundness of Quine's argument, but its practical relevance. After all, it is clear that we understand practically (e.g., when discussing the indeterminacy of translation) that people are capable of understanding the language and world of members of quite different cultures. We might add that it is equally obvious that we are able to communicate practically with, for example, riding horses where we are going, with blind, hunting or rescue dogs where we are to be led, or with geese or sheep where we are to go grazing. But proving that our understanding and communication with animals is fundamentally different from our understanding and communication with humans is fundamentally impossible.

What guarantees the correctness of understanding in these cases? I fear that we have nothing better than an inner subjective sense of correctness that we understand ("qualitative evidence" based on recognition of analogy with the familiar, "our"), and no external confirmation or corrective by practical success or failure in the material world. Not much has changed on this question since Max Weber. Weber himself devoted quite a bit of space to the relationship between inner reasoning and the external course of action. This is particularly evident when he considers the relation between reasoning and causal interpretation. Weber was primarily concerned with confronting mental interpretation with material reality (as captured by observation, statistics, etc.), which is well illustrated in the following quotation concerning causal explanation:

„no matter how clear an interpretation as such appears to be from the point of view of meaning, it cannot on this account claim to be a causally valid interpretation. On this level it must remain only a peculiarly plausible hypothesis. (...) More generally, **verification** of subjective interpretation **by comparison with the concrete course of events** is, as in the case of all hypotheses, indispensable. Unfortunately **this type of verification** is feasible with relative accuracy only in the few very special cases susceptible of psychological experimentation. In very different degrees of approximation, such verification is also feasible in the limited number of cases of mass phenomena which can be statistically described and unambiguously interpreted.“ (W21: 9-10)

In approximately two pages, Weber discusses the difficulty of linking qualitative evidence of meaning to factual success that verifies its adequacy. He argues that confirmation of the causal correctness of an interpretation is often condemned to a 'imaginary experiment' alone, which is unfortunately 'only the uncertain procedure', that the only support we have is 'striking rational plausibility of the hypothesis', and that in many cases 'there is not even a possibility of the order of verification' and that 'the interpretation [of an internal motive] must necessarily remain a hypothesis' (W21: 10–11).

The contest of alternative interpretations is decided by the degree of 'evidence' on which their persuasiveness or plausibility depends. As we have already indicated above, the internal evidentiality of meaning is very easy to disagree on in the real process of knowledge production in the form of rational discourse, because two subjective opinions are opposed to each other. This is why it is important to find an external (sensually accessible) corrective in the three-dimensional world (the factual process), the nature of which is easier to agree on, though even here the agreement may not be 100%.

A position consistent with Weber can also be expressed in such a way that our interpretation is a convincing hypothesis until practical success confirms its validity and it becomes a finding, which can be replaced by a better interpretation in the light of an even more obvious interpretation or new empirical data and verification by practice.

## **CONCLUSION AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IIC RESEARCH**

The main finding of the analysis carried out is that we have no support in the Weberian approach for drawing a clear dividing line between understanding animals and understanding humans. Rather the opposite, although Weber himself outlined but did not develop the topic of animal sociology, understanding animal behaviour and social relations to animals. He did, however, leave such an elaboration of the basic concepts of an understanding sociology - especially

meaning (*Sinn*) and understanding (*Verstehen*) - on which an understanding sociology of animals can build and further develop.

Above all, it is a differentiation of the concept of sense into a distinctly conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious sense, which the actor rather feels. Interpretive animal sociology can and should explicate the implicit meaning of social actions of animals and humans in interspecies social relations, since the unclear consciousness of meaning should not prevent sociology from constructing its concepts.

Understanding the actions of animals and humans is achieved by the same means - qualitative evidence supplemented by the control of practical success. Sceptical arguments rejecting the meaningfulness of animal action can always be successfully applied to certain human actors, especially those with whom we do not share a common language. Radical skepticism about the meaningfulness of all the actions of living creatures is possible, but scientifically unhelpful. The basis of the qualitative evidentiality of understanding meaning is the recognition of the known in the unknown, i.e., finding similarity and analogy.

The possibility of understanding the subjective meaning of animal actions implies two main conclusions for the research methodology in the field of IIC. The first is that categorizing animal species and drawing a line between humans and animals is essentially unnecessary in terms of the mechanisms of forming an understanding of subjective meaning. Rather, it may be one possible typologization of actors within an interpretive sociology that need not, or in principle cannot, restrict the notion of the social to the boundaries of the species *homo sapiens*. Its basic category for the formation of social relations is that of a subjectivity capable of orienting action according to the meaning and category of the other, or other subjectivity to which it relates in social action.

At the same time, Weber's work shows us the difficulties that a proper understanding of meaning encounters. He stresses the need to link subjective qualitative evidence with practical success, by which is implicitly meant above all success realized in the material world. Translated into the practice of empirical IIC research, this means that research on IIC phenomena needs to be oriented as much as possible towards its practical and material outcomes.

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