



ANALYSIS OF THE PREREQUISITES FOR OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE RATIONAL ACTION CONCEPT OF MAX WEBER

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ABSTRACT

The subject of the article is the concept of rational action in M. Weber, stated in his methodological writings. The main goal is studying the prerequisites for its operationalization through theoretical and empirical indicators. Analytical specification of the concept of rational action in Weber can help overcome the conceptual and terminological differences on issues of rationality. It is taking a stand on controversial issues such as: subjective and objective rationality, action and actor, a logical criterion in the four members' typology of social action, reason to distinguish "zwekrational" and "wertrational" action, the interrelation of "rational action - rational thinking", regarding the isolated study of rational thinking in contemporary psychology through delimitation from the IQ. It is recognized that Weber's interest in social relations, including the economic subtype, is highlighted in the concept of "objective rationality of the proper operate" and it is distanced from the personal prerequisites for rational behavior. As far as Weber's typology of social actions is constructed in accordance with his conception of ideal types, the breach of its methodological limitations causes reification of the rational action, which, according to T. Parsons, Weber was unable to avoid. Eventual operationalization of the concept of rational action (for which significant landmarks can be found in M. Weber), it could become a productive cognitive tool with a dual function: for researching and training.

Key words: conceptual and terminological differences, theoretical and empirical operationalization, reification, cognitive tool.

Max Weber's concept of rationality and of rational action in particular, puts the beginnings of the sociological conceptualization of a various set of problems with rationality being the principal term. The categorical conceptualization in the logical methodological works of Weber has been performed in the stage of formation of sociology as a scientific discipline when its theoretical tools are also in a primary amorphous state. At the background of contemporary sociology, whose theoretical tools are "far more reliable and precise" (5) arises the logical question of why are we going back to distant classical paradigms.

Aim of the study

The main purpose of this work is to make an attempt to answer the methodological question whether the concept of Max Weber for rational action contains prerequisites for theoretical and empirical operationalization. The theoretical operationalization of the Weber's rational

action concept could serve as a systemic structured analytical construction that could be completed with newer conceptualizations not only in the field of sociology. If we pass from the theoretical operationalization level to that of empirical operationalization with the respective subjective and objective indicators, a research tool with practical application could be designed. It could then have both a research and educational application. There is a viewpoint according to which the rational behaviour is a "socially formed ability" (the opinion of Weber developed in his work Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (4), and terminologically defined by N. Genov). In a more recent time, after differentiation between IQ and rational thinking ability, it is affirmed that rationality could be purposefully built as a property of thinking (7, 8). It could be assumed, taking consideration on the difference between thinking and action, that a rational action and

behaviour could be decisively formed. It is true that the success of some variants of cognitive therapy for correction of irrational ideas (Aaron Beck, REBT of Albert Ellis, Reality Therapy of William Glasser etc), is achieved in a very specific (therapeutic) bilateral and long-term interaction. The fundamental possibility for extraclinical correcting and shaping behaviour rationalization should be however *a priori* excluded.

Why do we need to look back to Weber

In general, the answer is that social sciences are not developing in a “linear and cumulative manner, as wished by pragmatic practitioners” (5). As acknowledged, the contribution of Weber for the sociological conceptualization of rationality and more specifically of rational action is fundamental and important as stated in both his logical methodological and sociological works.

Logical impediments

Some logical difficulties arise to the problem of theoretical and empirical operationalization of Max Weber’s concept for rationality, in particular rational action, because of the variable use of the term rationality by Weber himself. This lack of equivalence has been observed as early as Weber’s time by renowned sociologists as T. Parsons and A. Schutz, but it remains within the analytical range of vision of newer studies which affirm that “the rationality concept is used in a different sense in Weber’s works” (6).

It is true that when classifying the social action, Weber has not explicitly indicated a criterion for classification. Nevertheless, the careful acquaintance with the description in general detects an implicitly repeated universal sign that could be used to compare and distinguish the different types of action. There is reason to believe that this universal sign is awareness. In a respective manner, the classification is structured according to an implicit logical criterion termed “increasing extent of awareness”. Not by chance, the different types of action were logically arranged according to the increase in awareness.

Particularities of Weber’s classification

It is accepted that the leading principle for the entire construction of Weber’s classification of social action, distinguishing four ideal types, is the source of their determination. The principle

could be formulated as the question “What determined the specific type of action?”.

With regard to the classification of four types of action – goal-instrumental (zweckrational), value/belief-oriented (wertrational), affectual and traditional – Weber makes important methodological clarification that should remain in the mind during the reconstruction of its conceptualization of rationality with regard to action. Methodological clarifications, being logically formulated as constructive signs, could be presented as follows:

1) ideal typicality – the types of action are ideal or conceptually pure, i. e. mental constructions that are not empirically observable.

2) instrumentalism – the classification is created “only .. for sociology purposes”, for sociological survey; ideal types are a tool for comparison of reality with them; without this cognitive procedure, the orientation of the researcher in the infinite variety of the empirical social reality is not possible.

2) incompleteness – the classifications does not pretend to be complete.

4) difference between “ideal type” and reality – the real action does not match the ideal type, but “more or less comes near” it.

5) complexity of the real action – the real, “especially social action”, is very rarely one of these types, but is commonly composed of them (1)

It could be hypothesized that methodological clarifications of Weber aim to prevent a possible reification of ideal types. As known, it could be sequel to an unconscious intellectualistic attitude with its typical inclination to substitute “the logic of things” with “logic’s things”.

As, in the view of Weber, sociology is generalizing but not a historical science, its concepts – ideal types – are inevitable “relatively content-empty compared to the concrete reality of historical” (3). The said content “emptiness” is especially typical for the four ideal types of social action. At the same time, this “flaw” is compensated by the “higher extent of synonymy” as cognition tools.

From a methodological but not ontological point of view, the most important type of social action in the goal-instrumental type. This is because the “strictly goal-instrumental action, by virtue of its obvious

comprehensiveness and ... based on rationality-synonymy, being an ideal type ... is most appropriate for understanding of 'real action, influenced by all possible irrationalities (affections, fallacies) (3). Weber specifies that the method of "comprehensive" sociology is "rationalistic" only from a methodological point of view as far as it applied the comprehensiveness with the purpose to compare real action with ideal types. The comprehensive procedure is, however, "only.. a methodical tool" , and neither a rationalistic prejudice, nor "a faith in the real dominance of rational over life" (3)

Two possible approaches for operationalization of rationality

The operationalization of rationality as a property of human action occurs through recognition and concretization of theoretical and empirical signs of the term, i.e. on theoretical and empirical levels.

The description of the very signs of rational (zweckrational) action could occur in two ways: direct and indirect. The direct way consists in logical description of positive signs of the goal-instrumental action. Being proper to it, their recognition happens by the "what is" question. The indirect way described logically the negative signs of the goal-instrumental action, recognized by the "what is not" question. They are proper to opposite action types and in general, to non-rational action. The direct and indirect approaches presume the understanding of the four action types as a unified system, in which every single type is further elucidated when compared to the others. The Weber's approach for construction of the typology is comparative, i.e. it does not describe the different types in an analytical isolated way.

Prerequisites for logically positive operationalization

The initial definition made by Weber in chronologically later work "*Primary Sociological Concepts*" states that „ Similarly to every action, social action could be determined as: goal-instrumental: through expectations about the behaviour of objects from the outer world and other people and the utilization of these expectations as "conditions" or "tools" for rational, desired and evaluated own goals; 2) value-belief oriented: by conscious faith – ethical, esthetic, religious or other – in the incontestable *own* value of a

behaviour as such, regardless of its success, 3) affectual: particularly emotional – by actual affections and feelings; 4) traditional: by firmly established habits” (1).

The definition of instrumental action by the term "expectations" makes it indistinct and non-operationalizable. The term "expectations" precludes elusiveness. If abstracting from the personal traits of an actor, his "expectations about the behaviour" of external asocial or social objects should depend on nothing else but the available information and knowledge for their properties and relationships, about the "conditions" or the "tools". In the hypothetically extreme variant of a complete lack of information or knowledge, it is impossible for the actor to have any expectations at all. As the indefinite term "expectations" is not appropriated for rationalization, a greater theoretical determination about the instrumental action could be achieved if the term "expectations" is operationally substituted with "information and knowledge". The success of the actor in achieving his goals is, according to Weber, a typical signs of instrumental action. If leaving apart the chances of action and the personal characteristics of the actor, the success will depend on the quantity and quality of information and knowledge available for the "conditions" of the action and the "tools" to achieve its goals. Unlike the abstract term "expectations", the information and the knowledge indicate *quantifiable* properties of the actor and therefore, could be empirically operationalized.

A better definition of conceptualization is achieved by Weber by additional description of the main structural elements ("structural elements" is a term that is not used by Weber I this context), through which the actor constitutes the goal-instrumental action and the formal interrelationships between elements.

One of the aspects of the additional description is the so-called by Weber orientation of action. The term "orientation" could be analytically understood as a synonym of "takes into consideration", "accounts for", "thinks about", "believes to be" and could be respectively operationalized through them. Two points could be outlined in Weber's conceptualization:

1) The structural elements of instrumental action.

The structural elements used by the actor to "orient its action" are: "goal, tools and side effects" (1). These elements should be obligatorily present in the operationalization of instrumental action and in the extent of their awareness by the actor.

2) The relationships between structural elements.

In the view of Weber, the actor „evaluates rationally” the „goal”, „tools” and „side effects” in the possible relationships (dependencies) between them. The term "evaluates rationally" could be operationalized by the terms "is aware", "consciously evaluates" and "deliberately assesses".

The relationships (dependencies) between the structural elements are as follows:

1) tools' relationship to goals;

The operationalization could specify the relationship "goals-tools" by variants of the essential for each rationality question about the "adequacy of tools with respect to goals". These questions described exactly the specifics of every rational action. It is assumed that the rational actor asks himself, with a given frequency and extent of comprehensiveness, questions of the type "Have I the instruments needed to achieve my goals at all?", "Which instruments do I have available to achieve my goals" etc. The questions about the tools imply logically, in one variant of the tool-to-goal relationship, a *preliminary availability of goals*, that are not only desired, respectively indistinctly wanted, but also with some extent of determination and awareness.

2) goals' relationship to side effects;

The operationalization could specify the relationship between goals and side effects by questions from the type: "Which side effects could entail the achievement of desired goals?", "Will the possible side effects be beneficial or in detriment to me or to my significant others", „If side effects are adverse, could they make the achievement of the goal meaningless" i.e. this is a question about the "price" of achieving the goal or goals.

3) interrelationships of the different goals;

The operationalization could specify the relationship between the different goals by questions about their full or partial compatibility, complementarity, synergy or conflict, contradiction, incompatibility, mutual exclusion;

The other important aspect in the conceptualization of Weber refers to the "choice of goal". From the point of view of operationalization of the rational action, the analytical question is "how does the actor choose its goals?". Weber focuses purposefully its attention to the specific case of "concurrent or opposing goals" that inevitably included side effects created by the fulfillment of goals itself. As already known, out of the context of his analysis the side effects could be more or less subjectively realized or objectively determined. The *extent* of subjective realization and objective determination should be operationalized by respective scaling applied to subjective or objective empirical indicators. In a situations of "*concurrent and opposing goals*" the actor could, in the belief of Weber, *choose a goal* between two possible alternatives:

1) conscious value choice (in Weber's terms "the decision, the choice.. could be .. value-oriented"), i.e. observing „commands” and „stipulations” (1).

In this alternative, "the action is rational only with regard to its instruments", i.e. the conscious value choice predetermines the actor's behaviour that is self-obliged to apply the most appropriate tool for achievement of the goal in a conscious, aware, thoughtful manner. Here, the operationalization aims to specify the real awareness of the conscious value choice from one hand, and the real awareness about the conscious choice of a suitable instrument, on the other.

2) utilitarian choice of priority.

In this variant, the actor arranges the goals "as subjective needs... according to their consciously evaluated necessity" and with respect to this necessity, satisfies them "as consequently as possible".

The reconstruction of Weber's conceptualization of rational action should take into account the stable emphasis on the instrument (tool). It is hardly a coincidence that in his logical methodological analysis he defines the "instrumental action" as "exceptionally oriented to subjectively determine adequate tools for pursuing subjective goals" (2). This emphasis allowed some investigators to conclude that rational action was instrumental. It is important to stress here that when performing an empirical operationalization of the terms "goal" and "tool", two aspects should be considered:

1) subjective empirical indicators

They refer to the theoretical signs "identically perceived goals" and "adequate means". The empirical operationalization should use a scale to register the subjective degree of understanding both theoretical signs (variables)
2) objective empirical indicators for both theoretical signs

The comparison between data for subjective and objective variables could throw light on the "awareness" that is essential trait for rational action. Weber remembers that in most cases, real action occurs in state of vague half-awareness or unawareness of the "meaning". The actor rather "feels" the meaning than "knowing" or "realizing" it, and in most instances he acts instinctively or by habit (3). This detailed ontological thesis of Weber is extremely important but should be accepted with some reserves because of its lack of differentiation. As known, in chronologically later logical methodological texts, Weber differentiates its point of view on the issue of awareness by constructing the four ideal types of action.

Nevertheless, the thesis about half-awareness or lack of awareness about the "meaning" focuses the attention of researchers on a more precise operationalization of variables concerning the fundamental question about the awareness of the actor about the action.

Prerequisites for logically negative operationalization

The logically positive description of formal relationships (dependencies) between the structural elements of instrumental action is completed by Weber with the essential logical negative generalization. It is the methodological prerequisite for the indirect operationalization of rational (instrumental) action.

The instrumental actor "*does not act either affectually, or traditionally*"(1). The conclusion is that signs describing the value oriented, affectual and traditional action are logically invalid for instrumental actions, moreover, they are its opposites. The indirect approach implies that the recognition of signs of the types of action which are opposite to the instrumental action, indicate a non-rational or irrational action. As far as the general theoretical sign "awareness" was accepted as essential for rational (instrumental) action, it follows that the lack of awareness or some extent of awareness is just the logical indicator

of irrationality or some extent of irrationally, respectively. The exact nature of this irrationality is a subject of a specific research, current daily assessment or post factum determination according to the results, including for institutional actors.

The lack of awareness or the lowest extent of awareness is proper to the so-called "traditional behaviour (action)". Various standpoints exist with regard to whether this type of action should be discussed in historical or logical plan. According to Weber, its signs are the "firm habits background" and it is manifested as "unconscious.. reaction to usual factors" by reason of "once and forever inculcated attitude" (1). For the purpose of our analysis, this ideal type of action is discussed from logical, not from historical point of view, i.e. as an action "by habit". In the view of Weber, this type of action includes "the entity of all habitual everyday actions".

The next type of action is with low degree of awareness, often under or at the consciousness threshold – the affectual action. It is determined by affections or by the emotional state of the individual. Under its affections, the actor aspires to fulfill *immediately* its necessity for revenge, pleasure, contemplation, self-sacrifice or reacts to actual affecters.

The value-oriented action with its problem-recognizing rationality from both ontological and logical points of view is in special, complex "relationships" with instrumental action and requires a special attention. Here, we will only mention Weber's words that "from the point of view of instrumental action, value-oriented action is always *irrational* in an extent increasing parallelly as the value approaches the absolute value..." (1).

Conclusion

The research task for operationalization of the concept for rationality or more specifically, for rational action is dictated not only by logical curiosity, but from the recognition of the fact that general theoretical concepts, despite being abstractly non-differentiated, are practically useless. They could be a powerful knowledge tool for the needs of theoretical analysis, but are helpless to solve practical problems. Their superior samples could possess a big comprehension potential but they lack the instrumental potential for correction or shaping effect on individual or institutional behaviour. It could be affirmed that prerequisites for

operationalization of the rationality concept could be found not only in logical methodological, but also in object-content oriented works of Max Weber.

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