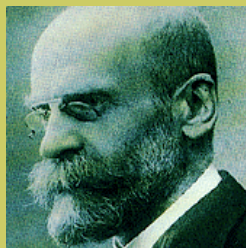# The Comparative Strategies of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber:
Between Positive and Interpretative Social Sciences

<u>Guidence:</u>

1. Read the background material on Emile Durkheim and Max Weber using the following linkages

[Emile Durkheim]

[Max Weber]

2. The TEXT
Read the following text on the Comparative Strategies of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Avilable also in Word Format

3. Use the tables below to help you organize the new knowledge you acquire.

4. The major text for this part of the course is based on Neil Smelser's Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences, Prentice-Hall, 1976. For additional reading you may want to use Ragin and Zaret's paper Theory and Method in Comparative Research

5. Follow the assignments for this unit in the assignments page of the course

Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are commonly and correctly regarded as two of the foremost comparative analysts in the history of sociology. In their work they faced a number of common problems that arise in comparative analysis, and attempted to overcome them in ways that are still instructive. Both of them, moreover, had occasion during the course of their careers - Durkheim in 1895 and Weber in 1904 - to produce major theoretical and methodological statements on the program for sociology. Each statement was incomplete in many ways; for example, while both theorists assigned comparative sociological analysis a central place in their programs for sociology, neither developed a detailed, explicit statement of strategies for comparative analysis. Nevertheless,

their reflections, considered together, expose the major methodological dilemmas encountered in comparative analysis. Their methodological writings are further instructive in that while they began with methodological perspectives that were radically opposed to one another, each made a number of significant modifications of these starting points in the course of his argument. As a result, their practical programs for sociological investigation - to say nothing of their actual empirical research - resemble one another much more than their methodological perspectives.

In this part of the course we will examine the methodological contributions of Durkheim and Weber, with an eye to identifying certain general issues in comparative analysis. More particularly, Durkheim and Weber will be contrast under the following headings:

(1) The character of scientific knowledge and its relation to other kinds of knowledge and cultural values;

(2) The appropriate range of data to be investigated by sociologists;

(3) Classification in sociological investigation;

(4) The nature of sociological explanation; and

(5) Verification in sociology.

(1)
The character of scientific knowledge and its relation to other kinds of knowledge and cultural values;

Emile Durkheim:

While insisting that the subject matter of sociology is distinct from that of other sciences, Durkheim also insisted that the sociologist should approach his subject matter in the same state of mind as the natural scientists. Regarding the social sciences of his day as analogous to alchemy before the rise of the natural sciences, he condemned them as having dealt "more or less exclusively with concepts and not with things".

The investigator should free his mind of all preconceptions, take a more passive relationship to social reality, and deal with phenomena "in terms of their inherent properties" and their "common external characteristics" Classifications should not "depend on [the sociologist] or on the cast of his individual mind but on the nature of things.

Durkheim's positivism is understandable as an expression of his impatience with unfounded and unverified theories of his day, and as a strategic appeal for empirical observation. Yet as a general methodological program, it evidently presents serious problems. The decisive problem concerns the possibility of ridding oneself of all preconceptions and letting the real world of empirical phenomena speak for itself. How is it possible to perceive a single set of external characteristics without actively selecting from among all the possibilities?

Max Weber:

Unlike Durkheim, Max Weber regarded scientific knowledge of society and culture as emanating from a number of "one-sided" (that is, selective) views of different aspects of cultural life. It was by selecting, over-emphasizing, and simplifying certain aspects that bodies of scientific knowledge were generated. Selectivity is not determined by the "nature of things," as Durkheim held, but by the initiative of the investigator.

But by what criteria is this selection - this reduction to the finite made? According to Weber it is not made by nature, as Durkheim might argue. Historical configurations interest the investigator, rather, because they are culturally significant for him. This implies further that the investigator has a "value-orientation" toward historical events and situations.

Accordingly, the "presuppositionless" approach to empirical reality was, for Weber, an impossibility. To attempt to be empirically exhaustive "is not only practically impossible - it is simply nonsense" . It is essential to bring order out of chaos by selection of aspects of events, and we select only those parts of reality that are "interesting and significant to us, because only [those parts are] ...related to the cultural values with which we approach reality" . Social or cultural reality is not that which presses itself on the uncluttered mind of the investigator; it is "a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance."

(2)

The appropriate range of data to be investigated by sociologists

The subject matter of Social Sciences	Emile Durkheim:	Max Weber:
	Durkheim regarded the proper subject matter of sociology as "social facts." These are to be distinguished from both biological (eating, sleeping, for instance) and psychological (reasoning, for instance) facts. They include those aspects of society (for example, a society's religious system, its language, and its system of currency) which have an existence independent of the individual consciousness of society's members and exercise a constraining influence on their behavior. The existence of social facts is (1) to be defined independently of individual consciousness, (2) to be expected to manifest regularities peculiar to themselves and not expressible in	Weber by contrast to Durkheim incorporated a distinctively psychological level into his definition of the basic substance of sociology and social action. Action is defined as such "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". Weber's concern with subjective meaning implies that he regarded the individual as motivated, assessing his environment in terms of its significance for him, and organizing his behavior

psychological terms. and (3) to be expected to impose their influence on the individual's behavior.

Thus Durkheim was concerned to set the social level apart from the psychological, and to insist on their independence. Social facts differ from psychological facts in quality, in substratum, and in milieu, and he reiterated that the substance of social life cannot be explained by purely psychological factors.

accordingly; furthermore, social action cannot be understood, described, or analyzed without reference to this subjective meaning. Durkheim may have agreed, but would have insisted that such meaning is relevant for psychology but not for sociology.

Approaches to Empirical Data:	Emile Durkheim:	Max Weber:
	Durkheim focused upon the observable and the measurable. A social fact such as social solidarity, he noted, "is a completely moral phenomenon which, taken by itself, does not lend itself to exact observation nor indeed to measurement." He was drawn to study various observable kinds of statistics, which record "the currents of daily life" (for example, market statistics); costumes, which record fashions; and works of art, which record taste. Psychology suffered on this count, Durkheim added, because psychological facts are "internal by definition," and therefore inaccessible; "it seems that they can be treated as external only by doing violence to their nature. For Durkheim, the preference would be to regard statistical series as standardized expressions of definite "things" distinct from any meaning that individuals attached to them.	Weber, because he focused on subjective meaning, was less prepared to treat socio-cultural phenomena as "things." The phenomena of the social sciences involve "a problem of a specifically different type from those which the schemes of the exact natural sciences in general can or seek to solve." These phenomena are "psychological and intellectual" and call for "empathetic understanding." Accordingly, Weber discussed different types of understanding, the ways in which meaning can be sensitively and accurately grasped. Weber was also interested in statistical uniformities, but only in so far as they can be regarded as manifestations of subjective meaning of a course of social action. Furthermore, the two scholars leaned toward a different approach to their data. For Weber a statistic would be reflective of the subjective-meaning complex of an actor, and would derive its significance from that complex rather than from any "external" or "superficial" characteristic".

Most of the significant contrasts between the two theorists, as reviewed up to this point, may be understood in terms of how each conceptualized the role of the investigator (observer) and the role of the actor (observed) in the generation of knowledge

Emile Durkheim:

Durkheim assigned a passive role to both. In his insistence that facts are "things" he held that they cannot be modified by a "simple act of the [observer's] will"; in his insistence that the observer free himself of all previous preoccupations, he called on him not to attempt to influence empirical facts, but to let them impress themselves upon his mind according to their inherent properties. In these ways the observer is regarded as passive. And because facts are "social," they enjoy an existence independent from the individual, work their influence upon him despite his efforts to resist, and are governed by laws specific to the social level. In these senses, actors as individuals contribute little to sociological knowledge

Max Weber:

Weber contrasts with Durkheim on both counts. By insisting on the impossibility of a "pre-supposition-less" sociology, he afforded the observer a more active role in the generation of scientific knowledge. The precise role of the observer, moreover, is guided toward empirical data and problems, which are significant to him from a cultural point of view. And by insisting on the centrality of subjective meaning as the basic ingredient of action, including social action, Weber gave both the actor and the investigator a more active role. In regarding the actor as meaningfully oriented to his environment, Weber insisted that a significant portion of the variables that "explain" human behavior had to be found in the pattern of meanings given to his environment and behaving in accord with these meanings. The actor's own definition of the situation, in short, contributes to explaining his behavior. Also, by insisting on the importance of subjective meaning, Weber saw the task of the observer - that of empathetic understanding - as calling for a more active effort than observing and recording the phenomena that nature produces.

(3)

Classification in sociological investigation

Both Durkheim and Weber were committed to the principle that sociology should be a generalizing science, as contrasted, for example, with history. A necessary preliminary to such statements, moreover, is to develop concepts which apply to more than one case. How did Weber and Durkheim come to terms with the necessity of generating general descriptive and classificatory categories, and how did their efforts square with the paradigmatic assumptions each embraced?

Emile Durkheim:

One important way in which Durkheim assessed the general significance of social facts was to relate them to a conception of "normal" or "pathological social facts". Conceptions such as normal or pathological should be defined in relation to a "given species" and "only in relation to a given phase of its development." What is normal for a simple, preliterate society is certainly not normal for an advanced, complex society. For any "given species" it is the statistical generality of a social fact that gives it its normality.

The significance of a social fact - that is, whether it is normal or pathological - is to be assessed not by some intrinsic feature of the fact but by the societal context of the fact, viz., the requirements of the species at its level of development. Such a formulation calls immediately for a classification of species and of levels of development, since without it the investigator could not make the necessary assessments. Durkheim was aware of this pressure to classify that arose from his formulation and in proposing to classify, he tried, much like Weber, to steer a course between diversity and complexity of social life.

Max Weber:

Weber's "ideal type" is a methodological solution to the problem of diverse social reality on the one hand and the commitment to sociology as a generalizing science, on the other hand. An ideal type is a device employed by an investigator to facilitate empirical analysis. It is not a description of reality; it is not an hypothesis. Rather, according to Weber's somewhat cumbersome definition, it is "formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct." The ideal type is not derived from empirical reality; rather, it is the selection of the essential - indeed, one might say "decisive," as did Durkheim - features of a complex historical situation and molding them into a simplified picture. By drawing out type-elements from the myriad unique historical experiences of concrete acting individuals, the investigator makes them comparable with one another. By constructing an ideal-typical capitalistic system of pricing and marketing, the investigator characterizes in general terms the orientation of numerous actors, who may differ in detail in their concrete subjective orientations to the market. Description in terms of the ideal type selects from those orientations and makes them similar.

(4)

The   nature   of   sociological   explanation
Both Durkheim and Weber saw classification and the creation of ideal types as means for interpretation. They are only an introduction to the truly explanatory part of the science. Of what does the latter consist?.

Emile Durkheim:

Causal analysis, instead, involves the search for "a correspondence between the fact under consideration and the general needs of the social organism, and in what this correspondence consists, without occupying ourselves with whether it has been intentional [i.e., directed toward a given end] or not" . While stressing this priority, Durkheim acknowledged that knowledge of the function was "necessary for the complete explanation of the phenomena," because "it is generally necessary that [a fact] be useful in order that it may maintain itself" .

According to Durkheim the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social

facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness. The sociologist's main task is to discover features of the social milieu that contribute to the character of social life; Durkheim himself sought to explain the social division of labor by reference to social facts such as the size of society and its dynamic density, and to explain variations in the social suicide rate by reference to the ways in which groups are integrated and regulated.

Max Weber:

Weber's conception of sociological explanation is rooted in his notions of interpretation and the ideal type. In his general discussion of how subjective meaning can be understood, he spoke of the importance of "explanatory understanding." In particular this involves grasping the motive of an individual actor, or understanding "what makes him do [something] at precisely this moment and in these circumstances". Motives are highly diverse, and Weber did not conceive of them in a narrow psychological sense. They might include, for example, an individual's self-interest in a given situation, his inclination to adhere to normative standards, or his belief in the legitimacy of a given set of social relationships. In any historical situation the investigator should expect to find not single or pure motives, but a number in complex combination.

What Weber seemed to be saying is that statistical regularities between, say, aggregated rates of behavior are meaningless unless reference is made to some kind of subjective or psychological link between them. For example, the facts that various classes in French society were making irregular forward progress (a statistical regularity) and that numerous members of this class showed evidence of dissatisfaction with the French social order (a statistical regularity) bear no intelligible connection with one another until some typical meaningful connection is made. Even further, Weber appeared to suggest that the theoretical significance of regularities is to be found in the realm of subjective meaning!.

Emile Durkheim:	Max Weber:
Durkheim, embracing a "natural science" model for sociology - at least in his manifesto - envisioned the possibility in sociology of discovering causal uniformities and explaining individual facts by applying them. Sociological theory should emerge at its own level on the basis of observation of social facts. No recourse need be made to that separate realm of psychology except for "useful suggestions".	Weber, however, stressing the differences between sociology and what he understood to be the natural sciences of his day, found it essential to construct idealized psychological accounts to give theoretical meaning to social regularities

(5)

Verification in sociology
Both Durkheim and Weber addressed themselves to the empirical procedures available in order to lend empirical support to sociological propositions, and both defined this task in terms of linking causes and effects. Durkheim spoke of "establishing relations of causality," whereas Weber spoke of "causal significance" and "causally adequate interpretation". Each addressed the issue of attaining reliable empirical knowledge in the absence of experimentation.

Emile Durkheim:

Durkheim's general answer to the issue of verification of sociological explanation was simple: when the experiment is not available, the only recourse is indirect comparison, or the comparative method. Before characterizing the particular ways in which he suggested employing it, however,

he launched a brief polemic against John Stuart Mill's observation that a given event may have different causes under different circumstances, and enunciated the principle that "a given effect has always a single corresponding cause," adding that, for example, "if suicide depends on more than one cause, it is because, in reality, there are several kinds of suicide."

Durkheim's chosen method to establish cause and effect was the method of concomitant variation or correlation. "For this method to be reliable, it is not necessary that all the variables differing from those which we are comparing shall have been strictly excluded. The mere parallelism of the series of values presented by the two phenomena, provided that it has been established in a sufficient number and variety of cases, is proof that a relationship exists between them. Such reasoning shows the necessity for Durkheim's postulate that a given effect has always a single corresponding cause, which, if correct, permits stronger inference from the correlation than might otherwise be the case

Max Weber:

Weber did not develop even as limited a statement of the strategies of comparative analysis as did Durkheim. Insight may be gained into his reasoning, however, by examining what he described as the "imaginary experiment." Listing this "uncertain procedure" after describing the experimental, statistical, and comparative methods, he characterized it as a process of "thinking away certain elements of a chain of motivation and working out the course of action which would then probably ensue, thus arriving at a causal judgment" , What sort of methodology underlies this procedure?

In one of his methodological essays, published in 1905, Weber resumed his polemic against those who argued for a "pre-supposition-less" approach to history. Rather, he argued, historical explanation - the attribution of effects to causes - involves a series of abstractions. The decisive abstraction occurs when "we conceive of one or a few of the actual causal components as modified in a certain direction and then ask ourselves whether under the conditions which have been thus changed, the same effect . . . or some other effect 'would be expected'" . Would the relevant chain of historical events have been otherwise if a given battle had had a different outcome, if a political leader had not been assassinated, and so on? To analyze these possibilities is the essence of the mental experiment. It involves disregarding what actually happened and the "mental construction of a course of events which is altered through modification in one or more 'conditions'.

Conclusions

Durkheim's and Weber's discussion of the logic of verification and proof differ a great deal from one another, because their general programs for sociology differ. Durkheim, approaching social science more from a model of natural science, attempted to modify and adapt the logic and procedures of the natural sciences to sociological inquiry; Weber, approaching social science in a manner which allowed him to escape the pitfalls of historicism, attempted to devise procedures to permit more generalizable inferences than historians typically permitted themselves. Yet the two also approximated one another in significant ways. Both settled on the centrality of comparative sociology - the comparative analysis of similarities and differences in as many empirical instances as could be assembled. Both were sensitive, moreover, to the problems of taking into account controlling, if you will - sources of empirical variation that could "contaminate" suspected causal associations, though neither produced anything like a systematic strategy designed to overcome these problems.

Source: Neil Smelser's Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences, Prentice-Hall, 1976, Chapter

3.

Note: The table aimed to provide a guide when reading the text. It should not be a substitute to the reading especially because it does not include critical evaluation of Weber's and Durkheim's strategies.

The Comparative Strategies of Durkheim and Weber

	Max Weber	Emile Durkheim
Similarity	Both advocate and use comparative methods that are consistent with their substantive conceptions of order and change, and with epistemological conceptions of social scientific knowledge.	
Comparative Strategy	Case-based Comparative Research	Variable-based Comparative Research
Epstimology	Weber's comparative methodology emerges from his preoccupation with the origins of historical diversity and neo-Kantian philosophy of science.	Durkheim grounds his comparative strategy in a substantive view of society as a system and in a positivist vision of a natural science of society.
The Goals of Research	Historical diversity as major subject of interest	Historical diversity as a hindrance
Classification tools	Ideal types	Species
Explanations	Generalizations are historically concrete	Generalizations are abstractly ahistorical
Verification	Explanations are genetic	Explanations are functional

Source: Ragin and Zaret's paper Theory and Method in Comparative Research, Social Forces, 61, 1983, 731-754. http://poli.haifa.ac.il/~levi/durkheim.html