

An Explication and Application of Max Weber's Theoretical Construct of *Verstehen*

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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, sociologists debated epistemologies especially as they related to people, whether groups or individuals. Today's social workers can benefit from a deeper understanding of "*Verstehen*," or "interpretive understanding," as it both combats scientific positivism and values cultural competence.

Keywords: Weber, *verstehen*, cultural competence, theory, epistemology

Introduction

Participants in the social science disciplines—anthropology, psychology, social work, sociology, and others—rely on theoretical constructs to better inform their continued work, whether in research or practice. Among those of us who operate in the field of social work, we tend to favor certain theoretical constructs, and their subsequent therapeutic models, over others. This is especially so for those theoretical constructs that operate best in the realm of direct, micro practice: Piaget's cognitive development theory, Freud's psychodynamic theory, Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

Other theoretical constructs offer social workers a broader framework, one that can bridge the micro-macro divide. These so-called alternative constructs may not be used as often in daily practice, but their appropriate use may guide social workers to new solutions, and new conclusions. In this article, the author will explore the nature and practical applications of Max Weber's interpretive

understanding, known best by its original German name *Verstehen*.

Life and Work of Max Weber, in Brief

Born in 1864, Karl Emil Maximilian Weber was a prominent German academic, operating in the fields of philosophy, sociology, and economics. Considering the time and place of his birth, Weber came one generation after Karl Marx, and he was a contemporary to Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud. He died in Germany in 1920, meaning he witnessed the Great War (World War I) in its entirety. He also witnessed the peak of the industrial revolution.

Because Weber was interested in philosophy as it applied to society, he familiarized himself with the work of Immanuel Kant, and would later identify himself as, at least partially, a Neo-Kantian (Kim, 2012). Throughout the course of his many writings, Weber would try to find a place for the rational positivists—those who believed that all things can be known and fully quantified. Ultimately, he was unable to do so, and his resonance with Kant's nominalism led him to develop the concept of *Verstehen*.

Throughout Weber's life, he was active in collaborative—or some might say, competitive—scholarship with his peers. He was a well-known public figure, and at the end of the Great War, post-war Germany looked to Weber for answers. Unfortunately, as Kim notes, Weber's "stark political realism" led him to state that he had no answers

for the people (2012). The *Gemeinde*, or community, would have to find their own way in a new, open political marketplace. Had Weber lived longer, he would have seen the result of the struggle: The Third Reich.

Verstehen

The literal translation of the word *Verstehen* is “understanding” in its noun form, or “(to) understand” in verb form. By itself, *verstehen* is an extremely common word in German, as much as “understanding” is in English. However, when Max Weber began using the word, he had in mind a particular meaning with its own parameters. The first step to *Verstehen* is, thus to understand what he who coined the term meant when he called on others to understand (*verstehen*) the word *Verstehen*.

One way to approach *Verstehen* is to consider the levels of knowledge implicit in the German language. The English verb “(to) know” can be translated by two separate verbs in German: *wissen* and *kennen*. The former can only be used to describe one’s knowledge of facts, concepts, and ideas. The latter is reserved for when one knows a person, when one knows their way around a city, or generally to express familiarity. The former is great for positivist forms of knowledge: memorized facts, mathematical formulae, etc. It would be incorrect to say “Ich weiss dich” (I [factually know] you), just as it would be incorrect to say “Ich kenne Regen” (I [familiarily know] rain)—though the latter might be used for poetic effect. The latter begins to lead us to what drew Weber to coin his own usage of *Verstehen*.

The very language Weber spoke, then, suggested that human individuals cannot be quantified. They cannot be known in the same way one knows the periodic table of the elements. And, though some futurists hope to someday quantify the data in the human brain, and scientists have already mapped the human genome, Weber’s analysis remains true for the present. If positivism cannot apply to the individual, then, how much less so would it apply to collections of humanity: communities, cities, nation-states? Weber struggled to give the positivist

philosophy as much ground as possible, but in the end, he had to join with anti-positivist thought to acknowledge the complex creature that is the human. In one of his later (posthumous) works, *Economy and Society*, Weber (1978) writes:

All interpretation of meaning, like all scientific observations, strives for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension. The basis for certainty in understanding can be either rational, [...] or it can be of an emotionally empathic or artistically appreciative quality. [...] Empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place. [...] On the other hand, many ultimate ends or values toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented, often cannot be understood completely, though sometimes we are able to grasp them intellectually. The more radically they differ from our own ultimate values, however, the more difficult it is for us to understand them empathically. Depending upon the circumstances of the particular case we must be content either with a purely intellectual understanding of such values or when even that fails, sometimes we must simply accept them as given data. (pp. 5-6, emphasis added)

Here Weber makes plain that a paradox lies in the nature of *Verstehen*: To understand one another, we must acknowledge that we will never fully understand one another. For twenty-first century social workers, Weber’s statement above resonates with ideas around cultural competence, compassion, and empathy. True empathy can never be fully attained, because we can never fully adopt the perspective of another person or group of people.

The goal in learning to understand that which we do not understand is surrendering the notion that there is an end in sight, and to practice what Weber's translators would later call *Verstehen*: interpretive understanding. Whether considering the concept of "participant observation" in cultural anthropology, "Human Action" in sociology, or "cultural competence" as noted above, all streams lead back to the anti-positivist source of *Verstehen*. It is worth noting that, in terms of vocabulary alone, Weber would likely not recognize the many branches *Verstehen* has gone since he planted the seed and allowed it to take root. But, given some time to contemplate, we can imagine that he would, as our academic disciplines have, be able to see and build the connections.

Analysis and Applications in Modern Social Work

How does *Verstehen* help shape and inform practice in social work today? The obvious answers have already been stated: *Verstehen* acknowledges our inability fully to understand one another, and at the same time demands we follow certain practices to know best, in the *kennen* sense, other people. First, let us consider what this looks like in direct practice. The following example utilizes a "host" environment for social workers, a nursing home, but its universal application is made plain.

The clinical lens

Any direct practice, micro-level social worker can apply the theoretical construct of *Verstehen* by utilizing models such as cultural competence. Cultural competence has no single definition, but we can see its use in practice. Quickfall describes its use in a Scottish nursing home as part of her ethnographic study that she describes as an interpretative theory of culture, to determine where and to what extent cultural competency is practiced in this clinical setting. Her own theoretical view of cultural competence is broken into three parts: cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural knowledge (Quickfall, 2014). Consider the following: in this scenario, many of the nurse practitioners

and social workers in the nursing home are from not just the same region, but the same city (Glasgow) as the residents. Nonetheless, Quickfall acknowledges that if they do not use cultural competence as a starting point to address weaknesses, unlearn biases (such as ageism), and treat every individual as someone new and different, not based on a simple mold or pattern, better care can be achieved.

The macro lens

When *Verstehen* jumps from micro to macro, the language changes in modern English from "interpretive understanding" to "interpretive sociology." In 1967, Alfred Schutz developed new applications for Weber's work with his publication "The Phenomenology of the Social World" (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012). Schutz argued that too many sociologists were using *Verstehen* in an introspective way, applying it to the individual level only. In his own model, which Robbins et al. describe as "extremely complex," Schutz speaks of the world in terms of objects and inanimate structures ("umwelt") and the social world, the world of person-to-person interaction ("mitwelt") (p. 326). The purpose of differentiating these two worlds was to allow us to consider not just the interactions within the *mitwelt*, but also the interactions between *mitwelt* and *umwelt*, and how the *mitwelt*-only interactions affect *umwelt*. In the realm of social work, it would not be too great a leap to think of *mitwelt* as the Social Environment, and *umwelt* as the Physical/Ecological Environment.

In macro-level social work practice, we can analyze large-scale human behavior, from consumerism to time management to protests and rioting, within the context of Schutz's expanded *Verstehen*. We can observe how group interactions bring positive or negative results, as well as how groups of people affect the non-human (ecological) world and whether any negative counter-effects result, and then use this information to inform data. In all cases, Weber's anti-positivist caveat remains: The structures of politics, government, economics, class struggles, and racial oppression are all worth taking the time to understand via models of cultural

competence; we will fail, however, if we do not remove our assumptions first, and we will also fail if we set the standard of success at exhaustive, perfect knowledge.

Critical analysis, in six questions

Just like physical scientists who have tried in vain to find a “Grand Unified Theory” to describe all of physics, no single theoretical construct in the social sciences will give a unified picture of human behavior in the social environment. An apropos meta-application of *Verstehen*, however, is that if we cannot fully know human behavior, so likewise, no one theory would satisfy us in full. To think otherwise, as economist F. A. von Hayek (1975) would say, is “the pretence of knowledge.”

What specific aspects of human development and human relations does the theory address and emphasize? Weber’s *Verstehen*, like modern offshoots of the concept, simultaneously emphasizes the human desire fully to know one another and the frustrating acknowledgement that the best we can expect is secondhand understanding, glimpses and attempts at experiencing what the other person(s) experience(s).

What is the theory’s relevance and application to individuals, families, groups, organizations, institutions, and communities? As demonstrated above, *Verstehen* can be scaled from micro to macro and back again without trouble. Cultural anthropologists use it at mezzo and macro levels when they attempt participant observation. Clinical social workers apply it implicitly via cultural competence.

How consistent is the theory with social work values and ethics? In brief, *Verstehen* is wholly consistent, but it is not wholly encompassing. Practical models based on *Verstehen*, including the two noted in the previous subheading, are rooted in observation. This observation comes with an expectation of a best-attempt *tabula rasa* on the part of the observer, and with an expectation of cultural sensitivity and humility at every juncture. However, *Verstehen* is primarily, and perhaps only, a tool for observation. The role of the social worker

as a helper, and being part of the helping profession, requires some kind of action. *Verstehen*, having its roots in sociology, does not lead to action on its own.

What are the theory’s philosophical underpinnings? As stated above, Neo-Kantian nominalism and anti-positivism are *Verstehen*’s philosophical underpinnings. With *Verstehen*, we assume that knowledge of any one human, and any collection of humans, can never be fully captured via observation, and that observation is best done not as “data collection” but through relational and social norms.

What are the methodological issues and evidence of empirical support? Because *Verstehen* focuses on explaining, rather than predicting, human behavior, the evidence for its empirical support is self-evident. Practicing cultural competence, compassion, and empathy in direct social work practice prove out the value of Weber’s contribution.

On what grounds does the theory base its appeal for acceptance? *Verstehen*, better translated here as “interpretive understanding,” bases its appeal for acceptance – at least in part—on its rejection of positivism. Comte placed sociology aside physics and chemistry as fully knowable, fully submissive to the scientific method; the ephemeral fields of knowledge, including philosophy and theology, were full of unanswerable questions (Robbins et al., 2012). *Verstehen* forces sociology to, at the very least, straddle the dichotomous fence of fully knowable and unknowable, if not fall entirely to the “unknowable” side.

Conclusion

Interpretive understanding, interpretive sociology, and other modern forms of *Verstehen* have allowed all of the social sciences to move away from positivist, determinist endeavors—all of which have fallen flat in social and behavioral science—and toward a more nuanced, humanized form of study. Weber’s successors found ways to practice interpretive understanding and sociology without sacrificing scientific rigor; nonetheless, interpretive understanding is not beholden to strict

scientific method. It instead provides a way to allow us to change lenses and try and make them align with the lens of another person: to see and learn their worldview, so that all knowledge can be interpreted through that "other" lens.

Max Weber's body of work is enormous, and while his *Verstehen* has had crossover appeal in various academic disciplines, he offers up other concepts in his many works that may too be of value to the social work discipline. Social work students interested in *Verstehen* may find further benefit by exploring some of Weber's other concepts in his other works.

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