Ideal type in sociological research

Abstract
This opinion paper aims to present a contribution on the use of ideal type as a research strategy, with the purpose of contributing to the discussion of the advantages, but also the limitations, difficulties, and challenges to the application of this methodological tool. In conclusion, there is the need to select some specific dimensions of the object, with pertinence and rigorous justification, taking care of neither over-simplify reality, nor bringing complexity to it, to the point that this concept becomes unintelligible and without heuristic capacity.

Keywords: ideal type, research, sociology

What is ideal type?
Comparison (for example, between empirical information, between theories, between researchers) is a procedure widely used in scientific research. A specific type of comparison consists of the ideal type (original proposal of the classical sociologist Max Weber), while: “A simplified and schematic framework of the object of research with which systematic observation of the real must be confronted”, through typological analyzes which, with “stylization or accentuation of essential features in fact, allow for the synthesis of research acquisitions in order to extract the fundamental characteristics or to elaborate an abstract model with which the ducts can be compared”. The realization of this typological analysis, which still raises doubts, implies being awake to two great inherent difficulties, and to which Schnapper draws attention: if it is too abstract or close to macroscopology, if it is too general, it explains everything, therefore it explains nothing, and its operative value is weak, if it is too close to empirical data and concrete realities, it is not distinguishable from historical narration, systematic description or orderly presentation of examples, and provides little understanding. For these reasons, Schnapper concludes that “it is necessary to define a degree of abstraction that is fair, that is, heuristically fruitful at a given moment for a particular object”. On the other hand, and according to Schnapper, the typologies should not focus on individuals, which could lead to processes of labeling people, nor should they disregard the basic principle of typology elaboration, which is to enable a comparison of situations or relationships through an abstractly elaborated mental scheme of reality.

Some questions about the use of ideal type

The ideal type is not much used in sociological empirical research. In the ideal type of application, it means being awake for some care to be taken in the delimitation of the concept and in the operationalization of it, in order to be able to respond to the research objectives. Whatever the information gathering procedure, it is essential to select and systematize the documentation according to its relevance, all the information collected, considering the purposes of the research, the theoretical framework and the type of material collected, and always with a posture of incompatibility with emerging tracks, preparing it to be worked on in a more systematic way. The collection of empirical information, during which we sought to bear in mind that “the processes of collecting information are themselves social processes”, which are not limited to the mere mechanical application of a instrument, which poses risks of bias in the information collected.

It then becomes necessary to delimit features as defining dimensional attributes of the ideal (or ideal) types defined and/or to be defined (as the research has a greater deductive or inductive dominance, respectively) through the construction of typology(s), in an analytic combination of deduction and induction, in which “there is a confrontation between historical and theoretical reflection and the data collected on the ground”. In addition to this work of collecting and analyzing information, whenever possible and necessary, an effort should be made to compare information from different sources. The comparison, at various levels, in this research logic is a key process continuously present in research. Whenever feasible, a triangulation of the obtained information is sought, crossing it in several sources.

In order to respond to the guiding objectives of research, the receptivity to receive unexpected clues that emerge from the information emerging from empirical work should not obscure the respect for what Almeida calls “the role of theory in empirical research, referring also to the role of theory in induction: “It is not excluded, in the first place, that the collection of information on a concrete situation, which is always to some extent unique and the condensation of an infinity of determinations, while being guided by the previous theoretical framework of reference, need to adjust, specify or even reformulate the latter, in order to make it a more accurate and effective guide to the observation of reality “. Conclusion

In sum, the mobilization of the ideal type of investigative logic implies the need to select some specific dimensions, as “the result of a specific kind of induction”, being careful not to oversimplify reality or to complicate it to the point that the concept in question becomes unintelligible. Only in this way has the potential to function as a heuristic instrument in sociological research and other social sciences.
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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


