

Western Philosophy of Social Science

Lecture 4. Frameworks for the social sciences

Professor Daniel Little

University of Michigan-Dearborn

delittle@umd.umich.edu

www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/

V. What is an identity?

- An identity is a concrete psychological reality: moral framework, social ideology, affinities and allegiances, worldview, emotions
- An identity is a set of self-understandings, norms, and ideas possessed by a person; that hang together as a cluster in a group at a time; and that lead members of that group to identify and act as such.

Identity: the individual level

- Each individual arrives at a **durable** set of values, narratives, cognitive frameworks, narratives, and assumptions of commonsense;
- The various components of identity can be culturally **variable**; so identities can be diverse and historically plastic. The fact of human cognitive and moral plasticity has large implications. Individuals and communities can rewrite the code.

Identity: the group level

- There are significant variations in each of these ensembles across time, across culture, and across group;
- There are important similarities in these sets in individuals in a time and place, because of common experiences, common institutions, and common historical settings;
- There are also significant differences within a community for identifiable subgroups;

Identities influence social action

- An identity is to some extent motivational or behavioral: persons sharing an identity have some level of preparation for cohesive action and they have a common set of assumptions about the world that encourages similar behavior.
- These complexes of values, beliefs, and traditions influence action and behavior (e.g., traditions of solidarity among miners), so identities can have significant historical effects.

How are social identities created and reproduced?

- Microfoundations: What is involved in the “making” of a group identity? What is involved in sustaining it?
- An identity is the result of a personal series of experiences, emerging from concrete and historically specific institutions and circumstances.
- Specific institutions contribute to the socialization described here. Education, socialization, and maturation are concrete social processes.

I. Micro-macro social analysis

- Macro-social is the level of high-level structures: social class, state, economic system
- Micro-social is the level of individuals in concrete social relationships.
- What is the relationship between “macro-social” and “micro-social” analysis, explanation and structure?
- What is the relationship between social phenomena and individual phenomena?

Inter-level positions

- Reductionism
- Supervenience theory
- Microfoundations
- Methodological individualism
- Holism
- Structuralism
- “Methodological localism”

Reductionism

- Higher-level entities should be reduced to ensembles of lower-level entities.
- We can and should replace higher-level concepts with lower-level concepts.
- Explanation requires that we demonstrate how the higher-level outcomes derive from pure lower-level processes.

Particularism and “local knowledge”

- There are no higher-level facts or structures; there are only individuals in small social groups, in direct interaction with each other.

Holism

- There are social facts that “govern” individuals.
 - The norms of protestantism govern the behavior of calvinist entrepreneurs (Weber) and protestant suicides (Durkheim)
- There are “emergent” properties or irreducible causal powers among social phenomena.

Structuralism

- Structures (states, markets, kinship systems) exercise causal roles independent of individuals
- "large structures like the state or the market exert autonomous social / causal influence."
- Structures are scientifically analogous to "cognitive computational systems": concerning the latter—we don't need to know the specific neuroanatomy in order to have a scientifically defensible theory of pattern recognition.

Supervenience theory

- Higher-level entities and properties “depend” upon the properties of entities at lower levels.
- “No difference in higher level property or entity without a difference in lower-level properties.”
- The causal properties of the higher-level entity depend on the causal agency of the compounds of lower-level entities upon which it “supervenenes.”
- [Does the effect the beauty of the painting has on us really reduce to the physical properties of the paint?]
- Jaegwon Kim

The framework of methodological localism

- The view I've come to ...
- **METHODOLOGICAL LOCALISM**
- Socially situated individuals in local contexts constitute the “molecule” of social phenomena.
- This level of description has greater realism than **EITHER** description at the global level and the a-social individual level.



II. Realism, nominalism, and reification

Doubt about social kinds

- Terms like feudalism, proto-industrialization, revolution should be understood nominalistically, not essentially or realistically. They do not refer to a real and unchanging class of instances. Rather, they serve to pick out historical instances which show similarities and differences to paradigm cases.

Doubt about social kinds

- We can be realist about social things--relations, institutions, practices, organizations--in particular settings, but nominalist about the groups of such things across contexts.

Reification

- the error of reification consists in the social scientist's assumption that, because he has a concept of X, that X really exists and has an underlying coherent essence. Because the concept of feudalism can be applied to Britain, Japan, and China, the historian may be led to assume that there is a common essence among these.

Reification

- Instead, the terms are nominalistic groupings.
- The concepts are more like ideal types or descriptive concepts than kind terms.

III. Naturalism

- Naturalism is the view that the social sciences should resemble the natural sciences.
- Social science should consist of general comprehensive theories of social phenomena.
- Social science should seek out exceptionless generalizations about social phenomena, across groups and societies.

Problems with naturalism

- Social phenomena are not similar to natural phenomena
- Individuals are not similar to atoms
- Social structures are not similar to natural structures
- Social regularities are not analogous to laws of nature

The essential differences

- Agents are adaptive and free
- Individuals take shape as a result of previous social changes (through education and socialization)
- Institutions change over time

IV. Justification and testing

- evidence
- inference
- conclusions
- critical evaluation of data

Empiricism

- Social science hypotheses can and should be tested and empirically evaluated.
- Karl Popper: falsifiability
- Carl Hempel: confirmation theory / inductive logic
- Imre Lakatos: progressive research programmes

Objectivity

- Thesis: social science is potentially “objective”.
- Social science and historical inquiry has the ability to put forward descriptions and explanations that are approximately true.
- Objectivity involves two separate characteristics:
 - a rationally compelling justification can be made for one hypothesis over another;
 - social phenomena are sometimes independent from the ideas and understandings of participants.

Analysis

- How is empirical evidence assessed?
- How is empirical evidence used to test or evaluate factual and explanatory claims?
- Some specific challenges: measurement, definition of concepts, specification of indices
- E.g. definition of the “standard of living”

Example

- Debate over the rural standard of living in early Republican China
- Tawney; travelers and observers; qualitative and anecdotal evidence
 - Conclusion: standard of living was precarious and declining
- Rawski, Brandt: discredit anecdotal evidence. Emphasize statistical time series data.
 - Conclusion: conditions were improving.

V. Findings

- Social inquiry derives from a conjunction of inexactness and intelligibility that social phenomena almost always represent.
- Explanations are possible.
- But the social world is not a closed, determined system of variables and outcomes.

Findings

- There is scientific social inquiry.
- There are limits on the scope of social theories.
- We need to recognize the multiplicity of questions and answers that can be posed to the social world.

Findings

- contingency in social and historical causation
- conjunctural causation: multiple causes at work simultaneously
- Plasticity of social structures and entities
- meso-level of analysis rather than macro-level

End

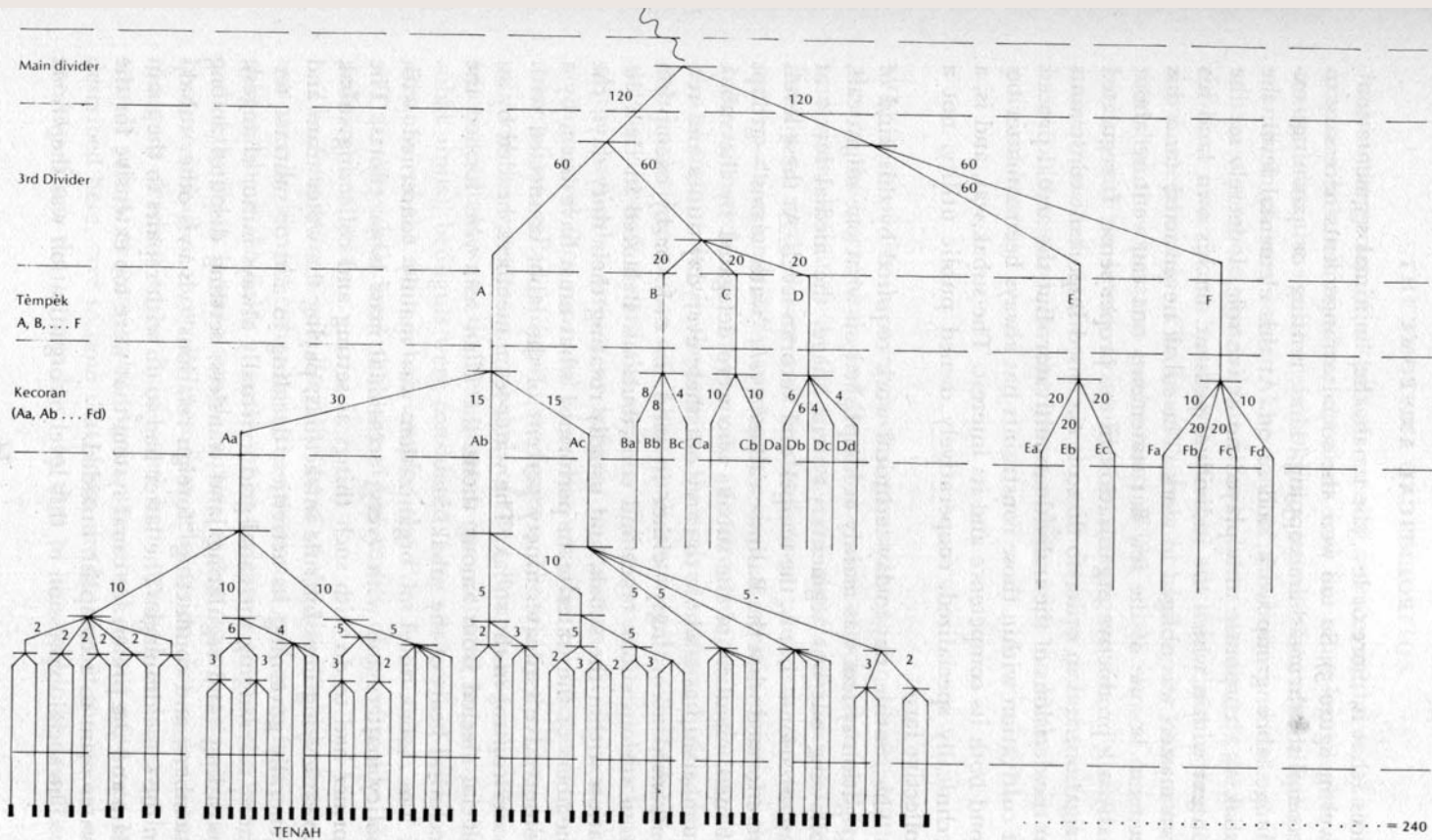


Figure 5. A Model Irrigation Grid for the Subak