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# Working with Max Weber's 'spheres of life': An actor-centred approach

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## Abstract

Max Weber introduced the idea of separate, historically evolving spheres of life as a way to analyse social formations on a societal level. This article develops the notion of spheres of life on the level of actors themselves. It proposes answering the questions of what spheres of life exist and how they relate to each other by looking at the actors' perspectives. Using the concept of articulation outlined by Hans Joas, the article proposes that ideas about spheres of life are shaped in continuous processes of articulation by elites and laypersons alike. By elaborating Joas' distinction between 'attractive-motivating' values and 'restrictive-obligatory' norms, the article suggests that spheres of life can be distinguished analytically according to their experiential quality and relation to morality. The notion of spheres of life can thus serve as a useful theoretical lens for analysing how social and moral orders are (re)produced and changed in everyday life.

## Keywords

Life orders, morality, spheres of life, value spheres

## Max Weber's spheres of life: Is there a definitive typology?

In his famous essay *Zwischenbetrachtung* (*Intermediate Reflection*), Max Weber introduced the idea that, in the course of history, social life has become separated into various spheres: economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, intellectual ([Weber, 1978a](#)). These spheres of life are also called 'value spheres' and 'life orders', and their genesis and complex interaction are seen by many authors as one of the main themes in Weber's work (e.g. [Hennis, 1987](#): 72f.; [Scaff, 1992](#): 93; [Schwinn, 2003](#): 96). According to Weber, every sphere has its own 'internal and autonomous working' which leads to 'irreconcilable conflict[s]' with religion and its ethics ([Weber, 2004](#): 219 [[1978a](#): 541]; [Weber, 2009b](#): 147 [[1988](#): 603]).<sup>1</sup> These tensions, Weber believes, inevitably increase as the spheres of life undergo a progressive rationalization and intellectualization – something Weber considered the 'fate of our times' ([Weber, 2009b](#): 155 [[1988](#): 612]).

Despite the importance of the idea of spheres of life in Weber's work, he is less clear about the question of what each of the different spheres are and whether they constitute a fixed set. Nor is there a consensus in the literature about Weber. The five spheres mentioned above are listed in Swedberg's *Max Weber Dictionary* (2005: 290). Many authors treat religion as an additional separate sphere (Gorski, 2013: 545; Oakes, 2003: 28; Scaff, 1987: 743; Schwinn, 1998: 271). Oakes (2003) goes so far as to claim that Weber was 'certain' and 'confident' that only these six spheres existed (p. 28). Some interpretations add the 'familial' sphere (Gorski, 2013: 545; Scaff, 1992: 94, 1987: 743) or kinship, 'die Verwandtschaft' (Schluchter, 1998: 91) to the list.<sup>2</sup> Still other authors, who include other works of Weber, add a sphere of law (e.g. Tyrell, 1993: 124; Tyrell, 1994: 394). This is, however, contested by Schwinn (1998: 312f.), who argues that the law cannot be regarded as a separate sphere but as a mechanism of coordination that is relevant for all spheres of life.

The question of what spheres of life Weber distinguished is at the same time a question of whether Weber's distinctions were 'intended to be comprehensive' or not (Scaff, 1992: 96). As Scaff (1992) notes, there is 'evidence on both sides of the issue' (p. 96). Those who regard the list as final – without or with 'religion', 'family' and/or 'law' – may refer to *Science as a Vocation*, where Weber describes the orientations which constitute spheres of life as the 'ultimately possible attitudes toward life' (Weber, 2009b: 152 [1988: 608]; emphasis by author). This formulation seems to suggest that the number of spheres is a closed set determined by the 'ultimately possible attitudes toward life'. However, Weber (2003) was 'surprisingly casual', as Oakes remarks critically (p. 29), in defining the ultimate attitudes or an 'internally consistent set of values that underpins each of the six value spheres' (Oakes, 2003: 41). This gap in Weber's (1992) writings may also support a more flexible interpretation, such as that of Scaff: 'on balance the most persuasive view seems to be that any number of competing orders or value spheres at different levels of generality may be formed out of modern experience' (p. 96). Similarly, Schwinn (2014: 261) and Tyrell (1993: 123) argue that Weber leaves open the question of how many spheres of life there are, and Tyrell warns against any hasty final systematization.

This more open-ended interpretation, which forms the starting point for the argumentation in the following sections, can also be defended in light of Weber's methodological considerations on ideal types. At the beginning of the *Intermediate Reflection*, Weber describes the spheres of life in terms of a 'schema' that is constructed in order to serve 'as a means of orientation' (Weber, 2004: 215 [1978a: 537]), that is, every sphere of life has to be understood as an ideal type. An ideal type is an 'analytical construct' that tries to order the manifold manifestations of the empirical world 'by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view' (Weber, 1969a: 90 [1988: 191]). With reference to spheres of life that means that Weber 'elaborated [them] as rationally closed wholes' (Weber, 2004: 215 [1978a: 537]), that is, he constructed them 'through the elaboration of the internally most "consistent" forms of a practical behaviour' (Weber, 2004: 216 [1978a: 537]). Although ideal types are theoretical constructs, they are not simply the product of intellectual exercises but have to be rooted in the empirical world – or as Weber writes in relation to spheres of life: 'to be sure, they could so appear and have done so in important historical cases' (Weber, 2004: 215 [1978a: 537]). Hence, Weber's list of spheres of life can be regarded as a typology of historically discovered modes of orientation (Schwinn, 2001: 420f.). Analysis of other historical situations might yield a different set of spheres of life.

Furthermore, the spheres of life distinguished by Weber can be seen as the product of his specific research interest. The title *Intermediate Reflection* refers to the placement of this essay in Weber's work on the *Economic Ethics of World Religions*. He wanted to compare

these economic ethics with the help of distinctions between different spheres of life. In his methodological reflections, Weber emphasized the linkage between research questions and conceptual tools. He warned against the ‘temptation to do violence to reality in order to prove the real validity’ of a particular ideal type or ideal-typical classification ([Weber, 1969a](#): 103 [[1988](#): 204]). In such a case, one risks artificially imposing the classification on the empirical world. For Weber, ideal types were not to be regarded ‘as an end’ in themselves, but only ‘as a means’ for producing scientific insights ([Weber, 1969a](#): 92 [[1988](#): 193]). But in order for them to be fruitful as heuristic means for analysing empirical phenomena, one has to adjust ideal types according to historical situations as well as to one’s particular research interest ([Weber, 1969a](#): 105 [[1988](#): 207]).

Given these considerations, it does not seem to make sense to insist on a final classification of spheres of life or to an ultimate and universal definition of the essence of any particular sphere. Quite to the contrary, Weber’s methodological reflections encourage using the idea of different spheres of life as a flexible heuristic tool. That is not to say that one should dismiss Weber’s set of ideal-typical spheres altogether. Rather, they can be used at the onset of research in order to focus one’s attention while confronted by ‘an infinite multiplicity’ ([Weber, 1969a](#): 72 [[1988](#): 171]) of possible perspectives. Yet, at the same time, one has to be open to changes in the particular meaning of specific spheres, the decline of some spheres and the formation of new ones, increases or decreases in each sphere’s significance in relation to other spheres and the diminishing of former or the emergence of new tensions between spheres. Many authors have thus built fruitfully on Weber’s idea of spheres of life in order to analyse social formations at the macro and meso levels (e.g. [Eisenstadt, 2003](#); [Kalberg, 2001](#); [Schluchter, 1981](#); [Swedberg, 1998](#)).

## Dropping the notions of ‘functional differentiation’, ‘rationalization’ and ‘irreconcilable conflict’

In contrast to analyses which apply Weber’s idea of spheres of life at the macro and meso levels of the social world, the approach outlined in the following sections aims to conceptualize spheres of life from the perspective of individual actors: What spheres of life do they *imagine*? How do they *experience* spheres of life and the relations of these spheres to each other? By raising these questions, the actor-centred approach suggested here deviates in some important regards from Weber’s original idea and the interpretations of some of his followers.

First, this approach does not assume that the existence of any single sphere is a given, whether these spheres are the ones differentiated by Weber or the ones added in the literature on functional differentiation, like ‘education’, ‘medicine’ or ‘health’ ([Schimank, 2011](#): 261; [Schützeichel, 2011](#): 73); ‘military’, ‘journalism’ (or ‘media’) and ‘sports’. Hence, the approach followed here departs from a tradition of interpretation which sees Weber’s *Intermediate Reflection* as a founding text for theories of (functional) differentiation ([Joas, 2017](#): 230). Instead it asks whether and in what sense actors themselves experience the world as differentiated (or not) into separate spheres.<sup>3</sup> Hence, this approach allows for the possibility that actors perceive spheres that were separated in Weber’s original typology as being inextricably intermingled (for instance, ‘economy’ and ‘politics’); or that actors regard other distinctions than the ones mentioned above as important (for instance, they might feel that

there are separate ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres or discriminate between ‘friendship’, ‘leisure time’ and ‘work’).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the suggested approach treats differentiation as an empirical question which can only be answered by looking at people’s ideas and experiences about spheres of life.

Second, this conceptualization moves away from Weber’s thesis of an ever-growing ‘rationalization’ of spheres of life (Weber, 2004: passim [1978a: passim]), which Weber thought resulted in an ‘irreconcilable death-struggle’ between spheres (Weber, 1969b: 17 [1988: 507]). This struggle, in turn, could be resolved in only particular ways, namely, by development of the spheres in directions that further advanced their ‘rationality’. But such a perspective allows for neither ‘relativization nor compromise’ between spheres (Weber, 1969b: 17f. [1988: 507]). For instance, regarding the conflict between the religious and the economic sphere, Weber saw only two ‘logical’ (*konsequente*) solutions: in both of them, the tension was resolved by switching off the logic of one sphere and enhancing the ‘rationality’ of the other (Joas, 2017: 391). Although Weber was aware of the rich varieties of the empirical world and the manifold ‘compromises’ that appear ‘at every point’ in one’s life (Weber, 1969b: 18 [1988: 507]), he neglected them in favour of his ‘exaggerated typological proceeding’ (Joas, 2017: 391). As a consequence, he did not take seriously the experiences of a majority of people, to whom he simply ascribed a state of mind in which they ‘do not become aware, and above all do not wish to become aware’, of the fact that they are in the midst of an ‘irreconcilable death-struggle’ (Weber, 1969b: 17f. [1988: 507]).

This argumentation by Weber raises the question of where this ‘death-struggle’ exists or is to be located if not in the lived experiences of empirical actors. If tensions and conflicts do not resonate – at least partly – with their experiences, they might simply be the product of an intellectual fantasy. Just as it did for the question of ‘differentiation’, this article suggests taking the actors’ perspective as the starting point when considering the relations and potential tensions between spheres of life. It therefore asks the following: how do actors themselves perceive the relations between spheres of life? What kinds of tensions do they experience? How do they deal with and resolve these conflicts? How do their ‘relativizations’, ‘compromises’ and other solutions change both spheres involved in a tension?

Since the answers to these questions are determined by how actors imagine and experience spheres in the first place, the main aim of this article is to develop a theoretical frame for understanding these images and experiences. To this end, the article treats spheres of life as ideas ‘in the minds’ of individual actors. This approach is inspired by Weber’s treatment of so-called ‘collective entities’ and his emphasis on looking at individuals’ ideas about them. Hence, the translation of Weber’s notion of spheres of life to the micro level can be grounded in parts of the Weberian methodology itself – this will be the topic of the next section. However, developing the idea of spheres of life into an actor-centred approach requires going beyond Weber in two regards. First, a theoretical language is needed which makes it possible to capture those processes which lead to articulations and hence the emergence and (re-)production of images about spheres of life in the first place. This includes articulations which take forms other than the intellectualized and ‘rationalized’ versions of elites on which Weber focused. Second, it is useful to further elaborate the distinction – stated implicitly at best in Weber’s writing – between two types of spheres of life (value spheres and life orders), since different types of imagined spheres imply different kinds of tensions within and between spheres. For both of these arguments, the article will draw on ideas from the work of Hans Joas.

# Spheres of life as ideas in the minds of people

On the first pages of *Economy and Society*, Weber addresses the question of how a sociology that aims to explain social phenomena through understanding (*Verstehen*), should deal with 'social collectivities such as states, associations, business corporations, foundations' or 'a nation, [...] a family, or an army corps' (Weber, 1978b: 13f. [1972: 6]). Because, for Weber, 'there is no such thing as a collective personality which "acts"' (Weber, 1978b: 14 [1972: 6]), he treats 'these collectivities [...] as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action' (Weber, 1978b: 13 [1972: 6]). That is not to say that Weber thought of these collective entities as the direct product of intentional actions. What is more important here is the following: if one looks at individual actions which (re)produce a social entity and tries to understand them, one will often also be confronted with social collectivities – albeit in the particular shape or form in which they appear in the minds of individual persons. At a crucial point in his argumentation, Weber draws attention to

a fundamentally important fact. These concepts of collective entities [...] have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority. [...] Actors thus in part orient their action to them, and in this role such ideas have a powerful, often a decisive, causal influence on the course of action of real individuals. (Weber, 1978b: 14 [1972: 7])

Using the example of the collective entity 'state', Weber illustrates this point:

Thus, for instance, one of the important aspects of the existence of a modern state [...] consists in the fact that the action of various individuals is oriented to the belief that it exists or should exist, thus that its acts and laws are valid in the legal sense. (Weber, 1978b: 14 [1972: 7])

Hence, from Weber's methodological perspective, collective entities can be treated not only as 'the resultants of particular acts of individual persons' but *also* as the belief of persons that such entities are real, or should be real. They exist as ideas 'in the minds of individual persons'. These ideas and images, in turn, are important for the courses of action people take and thereby also for the reproduction and change of social entities themselves.

The same reasoning can be applied to spheres of life. One way of dealing sociologically with phenomena like 'economy', 'politics' or 'religion' is to ask whether and in what sense they exist as ideas 'in the minds of individual persons'. If people have the idea that particular spheres exist or should exist in certain ways and in specific relations to each other, these ideas will influence their practices within spheres and how they handle potential tensions between them. Thereby, people's ideas and images about spheres of life will be part of the processes by which spheres are (re)produced or get changed. In other words, people's ideas and images about spheres of life, and thus about 'society', address a dimension of meaning which works as a 'hinge' (*Scharnier*) between individual actions, on the one hand, and processes on a societal level, on the other (Bahl, 2014: 11).

Of course, that is not the only way of approaching spheres of life sociologically. Just as Weber not only analysed how people imagine a collective entity like the 'state', but was also

interested in its internal workings, one can look at particular institutionalized practices and structures when researching spheres of life. In fact, where organizations and institutions exist, actors seem to be more likely to imagine spheres of life that are connected with these institutions, for example, an economic sphere centred around corporate actors like firms, banks and business associations; similarly, one could posit the possible existence of a sphere like ‘health’ that centres around hospitals, medical practices, health insurance and the like. Hence, due to the specific constellations of organizations and institutions, the particular spheres of life that people imagine are not completely random, nor are they entirely idiosyncratic. However, in the microsociological approach suggested here, organizations and institutions enter the analysis *as they are perceived* and experienced by actors themselves – and that can be quite different from what they are from the perspective of, say, organizational sociology. When the latter focuses, for example, on formal and informal processes that work towards the aims of an organization, actors in everyday life have more personal associations with the workings of a particular organization: they may perceive it negatively as an impersonal machinery in which their ‘case’ is processed, or, more positively, as a fair proceeding which meets their idea of equal treatment. In that sense, their ideas express the particular meanings organizations have *for them*, and it is these meanings that the approach here is interested in. Furthermore, spheres of life are more than just perceptions about organizations and institutions. This becomes obvious when spheres are less institutionalized or even seem to resist institutionalization – like, for instance, the erotic and aesthetic spheres in Weber’s original typology ([Schwinn, 1998](#): 275–283) or a possible sphere like ‘friendship’ that is not discussed in his work. But even for things like ‘politics’ or ‘economy’, additional ideas and images are needed to make them into spheres of life: ideas like ‘what politics is about’ or ‘how the economy works’.

## Spheres of life as articulations

When social scientists have studied ideas and beliefs about spheres of life, they have often focused on a particular kind of group, namely, the elites. They have studied, for instance, how political elites imagine the economic sphere and how these ideas shape their perceptions about the tensions within economy and its relation to politics ([Hall, 1993](#); [Moore, 1947, 1950](#)) or the (changing) ideas of economists about the economy (cf. [Mitchell, 1998](#)). Weber justified his own focus on elites by emphasizing in the *Intermediate Reflection* that ‘religious interpretations of the world’ which ‘have been created by intellectuals according to rational purposes [...] have been strongly exposed to the demand for consistency’ ([Weber, 2004](#): 216 [[1978a](#): 537]). Hence, Weber thought that one can best research the essence and inner logic of a sphere as well as its tensions with other spheres by looking at elites. Their ‘rational’ and ‘consistent’ articulations supposedly reveal the inner logics and tensions most explicitly. Besides this methodological argument, elites are often seen as having a particularly important influence in creating and shaping spheres of life. For instance, [Eisenstadt \(1982\)](#) argues in his reflections on the civilizations of the Axial Age that a ‘new type of intellectual elite’ was able to articulate ‘a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders’ and, consequently, together with ‘cultural elites and political elites’, they ‘were the most active in the reconstruction of the world’ ([Eisenstadt, 1982](#): 294, 299) – a world that became differentiated into separate spheres.

For some research questions, the focus on elites and experts is surely appropriate. But for understanding spheres of life from the actors’ perspective, it has two shortcomings, at least in the Weberian version. First, Weber’s focus on elites let him see only one particular *mode of thinking* about spheres of life. When elites formulate interpretations ‘according to rational

purposes', they often do so as experts and professionals whose daily business it is to reflect upon spheres of life and how they work and relate to each other. Thus, elites may in fact produce fairly consistent and well-elaborated systems of interpretation. But besides such intentional reflections, elites and especially laypersons may also create ideas and images about spheres of life in their daily practices. Even if these practices are partly shaped by clearly articulated frames of interpretation, these frames are adjusted and changed in concrete situations and in ways that do not necessarily follow a rational logic. One needs a conceptual tool that includes such modes of imagining and shaping ideas of spheres of life as well. Second, Weber focused on processes in which elites create *interpretations* about spheres of life. This focus neglects the processes which lead to the need for new interpretations in the first place. Interpretation does not take place unless there is something in need of it. The Weberian perspective refers to tensions, but it lacks the vocabulary to describe such tensions as experiences of concrete actors and to understand what is happening on that level.

It goes beyond the scope of the present article to fill these gaps comprehensively, but some brief remarks will outline what can be regarded as a promising solution for both problems. The discussion will draw on Hans Joas' ideas about *The Creativity of Action* (Joas, 1996), *The Genesis of Values* (Joas, 2000) and the formation of ideals (Joas, 2017). Following the pragmatist tradition, Joas regards creativity not as a particular type of action but as a quality of all human actions in situations in which people experience a tension. This can be not only a tension between different spheres of life, as addressed by Weber, but also a tension within a single sphere. What is common in all cases – and of most interest for this investigation – is that the routinized repertoires of action fail, with the result that people have to look for new, that is, creative, solutions to handle the situation. That is why Joas speaks of 'human action as situated creativity' (Joas, 1996: 144). Part of such tensions is a gap between familiar interpretations and the situation, that is, the former do not fit smoothly to the latter. In such moments, people strive for articulations which are able to harmonize the two and which give their experiences a particular meaning. Joas emphasizes that such articulations are not 'the task of a few geniuses, but [...] an everyday problem for every human being' (Joas, 2002: 509). In other words, articulation is an effort undertaken by anyone who tries to make sense out of experiences of tension. Elites' frames of interpretation – for instance, their images about spheres of life – certainly offer *possibilities* for interpretation and articulation. But these frames are not simply applied mechanically to specific situations, neither by elites themselves nor by laypersons. Instead, frames have to be adjusted, and parts and pieces of them are recombined according to the situation. In this process, they may be re-articulated and reproduced, but new articulations may also change frames of interpretation. Accordingly, Joas' approach allows for conceptualizing images and ideas about spheres of life not only as reflected and 'rationalized' interpretations but also as the result of continuous efforts at articulation in the face of recurring tensions between available interpretations and experiences in concrete situations. These articulations neither follow 'rational purposes' nor are they restricted by 'the demand for consistency'. Instead, they strive for an 'attunement' of interpretation and experienced situation (Joas, 2002: 513f.). Thereby, articulations may also change ideas about spheres of life in directions other than the 'rationalization' posited by Weber.

While many such modifications will be gradual (initiated by relatively small tensions), Joas' approach also offers a way to grasp fundamental changes in the meanings and relations of spheres of life and even the emergence of new ones. Weber also seemed to regard such processes as possible – for instance, at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*, he speaks vaguely about the rise 'of entirely new prophets or a mighty rebirth of ancient ideas and ideals' (Weber, 2011: 177 [1978a: 204]) – and his reflections on charisma may be seen as describing

a particular variety of such processes. However, Joas' theory about the formation of ideals ([Joas, 2017](#)), which is a refinement and development of his earlier work on *The Genesis of Values* ([Joas, 2000](#)), is more promising, since it outlines a general approach to understand how new values or ideals may come into the world. In both books, so-called experiences of self-transcendence are a central part of the argument. While Durkheim describes such experiences in the context of collective rituals, Joas' theory allows for many other social contexts in which they emerge. Besides experiences of religious awakening, he mentions examples like falling in love, losing a beloved person, becoming aware of one's own or others' vulnerability in sickness, being overwhelmed by nature or being the victim of violence ([Joas, 2017](#): 432f.). In such experiences 'selves are opened, they transcend themselves and alter their fundamental relations both to the world and to themselves' ([Joas, 2000](#): 65). They have this potential because they are emotionally intense experiences, and thus people have a strong urge to articulate them, but if they are of an unprecedented quality, they often resist existing frames of interpretation. In such gaps, new articulations – and thereby sometimes even new spheres of life – may emerge.

It is helpful to differentiate two levels at which new spheres of life may develop – although these levels are deeply intertwined. On a societal level, the emergence of a new sphere is a contingent and long-term process which can only be illustrated here in a very simplified way. If one thinks of a potential sphere like 'friendship', one may get a rough idea of how it might have been created in a complex interplay between experiences of self-transcendence in encounters with 'non-kin' others, the transference and re-interpretation of ideas of 'familial' commitment to these 'non-kin' others, the successful resistance to counteracting forces from other spheres and the generalization and dissemination of an ideal of 'friendship' as a culturally available frame of interpretation. On the individual level, the emergence of a new sphere in a person's life is complicated, too, but the process is a bit more approachable for the sociologist. Take, for instance, conversion stories told by animal rights activists. These often contain a reference to an especially moving and disturbing situation which becomes – in the process of its articulation – a turning point in the activist's life ([Jacobsson and Lindblom, 2016](#): 85–90). The trigger for these experiences of self-transcendence is often a confrontation with pictures or movies showing animals' suffering. Nowadays, such experiences can be articulated within a frame like 'animal welfare', which itself may be part of larger frames like 'nature protection' or 'dignity of all living beings'. During a person's transformation into an animal rights activist, these or similar frames may become the core of a new sphere of life. This, of course, is a long process in which interpretations and meanings are adjusted and changed by many possible articulations. This applies not only to the emerging sphere but also to the previously existing spheres in a person's life. It seems to be a common experience of activists that once important areas of life like family, friendship or work lose significance and change their meaning dramatically ([Jacobsson and Lindblom, 2016](#): 94ff.). In these cases, the emergence of a new sphere leads to a fundamental reconfiguration of one's world – a process accompanied by strong tensions.

Yet, the anticipation or even the vague expectation of such tensions may also make people refrain from articulating their experiences in a particular direction. As [Joas \(2017\)](#) writes, 'often this whole process of articulation does not happen in solitude, but in direct interaction with others who encourage or prevent our attempts at articulation' (p. 437; translation by author). Therefore, experiences of self-transcendence do not necessarily lead to specific changes. People who were deeply moved and horrified at the sight of suffering animals may also, for instance, become vegetarians (but not activists), which might entail only relatively minor tensions with their other spheres of life. And still others may try to make sense out of their experiences by pressing them into frames that are already available and thereby changing

these frames slightly. Thus, suffering animals may be seen as a regrettable but inevitable side effect of a food industry which supplies everyone with meat. Perhaps, a nagging feeling of unease remains – which indicates that articulation did not succeed completely in attuning interpretation and experienced situation – but the previous emotional turmoil and its transformative potential fades away for the time being. In other words, experiences of self-transcendence only bring with them the *potential* for change and the emergence of new spheres in a person's life. The process and direction of articulation is open, yet at the same time influenced by the conditions of the social context a person is living in: on the one hand, the frames of interpretation this context supplies, and, on the other hand, the power structures, dependencies, affiliations and other relations which encourage or prevent particular articulations.

In sum, the concept of articulation may be a useful heuristic tool for capturing how ideas and images about spheres of life are (re)produced in continuous processes of articulation in everyday life. These images are not completely detached from the ideas elites and experts have elaborated about spheres of life; however, they are not just simpler versions of these ideas, either. Instead, everyday life ideas and images about spheres of life develop throughout situations in which already available frames of interpretation that have been articulated to a greater or lesser degree are gradually adjusted and transformed and at times – following experiences of self-transcendence – fundamentally change their meanings and relations to each other. During such minor and major changes, the kinds of experiences attached to a particular sphere may also shift. The next section focuses on these kinds of experiences and suggests differentiating between four types of spheres of life. So, while up to now the suggested actor-centred approach to spheres of life asked *which* spheres of life people imagine, it now turns to the question of *how* these spheres are experienced.

## Experiencing spheres of life: A preliminary typology

At the beginning of the *Intermediate Reflection*, Weber introduces two terms when he speaks about spheres of life: 'value spheres' (*Wertsphären*) and 'life orders' (*Lebensordnungen*). In the course of the essay, he most often speaks simply of 'sphere(s)' and 'order(s)'. At times, he also uses phrases like 'cosmos' (*Kosmos*), 'powers (of life)' (*Mächte (des Lebens)*) and 'realm' (*Reich*). Since Weber never explicitly defines all these terms, a close reading of the passages in which Weber employed them might show whether he regarded them as synonyms or not. However, it is not the aim here to determine what Weber most likely meant. It is, however, striking that with these terms, he addressed phenomena that are quite different as seen from the perspective of actors themselves. Hence, it is suggested to distinguish more precisely the ways that spheres of life can be experienced. The discussion is inspired partly by Joas' distinction between attractive values and restrictive norms, yet it moves beyond Joas by differentiating norms into several types. This results in a distinction between (attractive) value spheres, on the one hand, and three kinds of (restrictive) life orders, on the other, that is, between a total of four kinds of spheres of life. It is argued that these kinds of spheres of life imply different experiential qualities and relations to morality and, thereby, the potential for specific tensions within and between spheres. However, this is meant as a preliminary typology that may be subject to refinement in the course of further research and discussion.

The idea of differentiating between value spheres and life orders is not new. In the literature on Weber, Schwinn, in particular, argues for the necessity of this differentiation ([Schwinn](#),

1998), but he interprets it differently than is suggested here. For Schwinn, the term ‘value sphere’ refers to the particular value meanings associated with a sphere of life, and he sees Weber’s *Intermediate Reflection* as being dedicated to this topic. By contrast, the term ‘life order’ would emphasize the institutional and organizational dimension of spheres of life, as elaborated in Weber’s *Economy and Society* (Schwinn, 2003: 97). Using this distinction, Schwinn discusses each sphere of life’s potential for developing from a value sphere into an institutionalized life order, as well as the tensions between a sphere’s value meaning and its institutionalized order. Schwinn (1998) is thereby able to conceptualize, for instance, the economic sphere as a value sphere which is constituted by value-rational motivations for economic activities, and as a life order with a particular institutional structure that follows its own logic (Schwinn, 1998: 300–310; Schwinn, 2001: 185–198).

The present article takes a different route by grounding the distinction between value spheres and life orders on the perspective of actors themselves and their everyday life experiences. How do they *experience* particular spheres of life? Thereby, it is interested in the typical meanings not only of value spheres but also of life orders: what kinds of experiences qualify a sphere of life as a life order? What distinguishes these experiences from the ones that constitute value spheres? Furthermore, the position taken here posits that the organizational and institutional dimension is not just a quality of life orders, but of value spheres as well. The most important question is, however, how these organizations and institutions are perceived by actors themselves, that is, which meanings they have for them. But like Schwinn, this article uses the term ‘sphere of life’ as an overall term that includes ‘value spheres’ and ‘life orders’ (Schroeder, 1992: 31f.).

The contrast between the actor-centred perspective here and previous approaches to the differentiation between value spheres and life orders can be illustrated briefly using the example of the economic sphere. Although previous approaches differ in their judgements about this sphere, they all rely on a similar but too narrow concept of ‘meaning’. While Schwinn insists that modern economy is a value sphere and life order, Tyrell (1993) states that ‘modern economy is without doubt a “life order” with a distinctive immanent logic; but it can hardly be called a “value sphere” sui generis, and ethics are alien to it’ (p. 124; translation by author). Both authors thus restrict meaning to ethical value meanings and do not take into account the fact that life orders may have particular meanings for actors too. The approach that comes closest to one followed here is that of Brubaker (1984), who notes that the economy was experienced as a value sphere ‘by Puritan ascetic entrepreneurs, but it is not experienced in this way by hedonists’ (p. 84). With this observation he indicates an awareness that the same sphere of life may have different meanings for different groups of people: what is a value sphere for some may be a life order for others. But if hedonists, unlike Puritan entrepreneurs, perceive economy as an ‘objectified institutional order’ (Brubaker, 1984: 85), one also has to ask about the specific meanings and experiences related to such a life order. Hence, in an actor-centred approach, any judgement about a particular sphere depends on the experiences of particular actors.

Joas’ distinction between values and norms offers a starting point for examining the difference between value spheres and life orders on the level of experiences. This distinction is a recurring element in Joas’ work, although he is more interested in values than norms. This is why it will be necessary to move beyond Joas at a certain point. But this does not affect the usefulness of the basic idea, according to which values have an ‘attractive-motivating’ quality in contrast to the ‘restrictive-obligatory’ character of norms (Joas, 2000: 184). Following that distinction, it is argued here that value spheres are experienced as attractive while life orders are experienced as restrictive. Weber (2011) himself touched upon this difference when he

writes, '[t]he Puritan *wanted* to be a person with a vocational calling, we *must* be' (p. 177) or, to follow Parsons' translation, '[t]he Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so' ([Weber, 1978a: 203]; Weber, 1992: 123). In other words, Weber thought that for the Puritans, the economic sphere (or sphere of work) was experienced as valuable and constituted by actions oriented towards attractive values which one wants to live up to, while for his contemporaries, it was a restrictive life order to which one complies (for various reasons, see below). One may also say that the distinction between value spheres and life orders designates different modes of being moved to follow the rules and objectives which are perceived as typical for a particular sphere.

Weber himself can be interpreted as having elaborated this idea of different modes of following the rules of a particular sphere in his distinction between legitimate orders that are guaranteed 'purely subjective[ly]' (*rein innerlich*) and orders that are 'guaranteed also (or merely) by the expectation of specific external effects, that is, by interest situations' (Weber, 1978b: 33 [1972: 17]). This distinction between internal and external motivation will be useful at a later stage in this discussion. But in his conception of 'subjectively' guaranteed orders, Weber conflated two other modes of motivation that should be treated as being different. The conflation goes back to Weber's ambivalent conception of value-rational action, in which, drawing on the work of Joas, both modes can be identified.

On the one hand, Weber regarded value-rational action as fuelled by a person's inner conviction, that is, as 'determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success' (Weber, 1978b: 24f. [1972: 12]). Although broader than Weber's concept due to the inclusion of both reflected and not-yet-reflected values (Joas, 2000: Chapter 8), Joas' (2000) idea of values in the sense of 'ideals that attract us' (p. 125) recalls Weber's formulation. Similarly, Hitlin uses the metaphor of 'Bright Lights' because values or ideals are 'representations' of what we 'view as worth striving toward' (Hitlin, 2008: 20). But values are not simply desires, interests or preferences. Instead '[i]n the dimension of values, we take up a position towards ourselves as well' (Joas, 2000: 16). Values evaluate our desires, they 'designate something as desirable, and not only as actually desired' (Joas, 2000: 129). Due to this special attractive quality, Joas (2000) argues, 'we experience the feeling of "I can do no other" [...] as the highest expression of our free will' (p. 5). Hence, value commitments are not experienced as constraints. Although they 'articulate boundaries', these boundaries designate 'what we want to be' (Hitlin, 2008: 44).

On the other hand, Weber's category of value-rational action contains an element that is in tension with this notion of attractiveness. He writes that value-rational actions are also experienced as being 'required by duty' that they involve 'commands' and 'demands' (Weber, 1978b: 25 [1972: 12]). These formulations more closely resemble approaches which conceive of morality 'as a sense of duty and the experience of the "Ought", a viewpoint discernible [...] in all [...] writers oriented to Kant (and Nietzsche)' (Joas, 2000: 162). Such authors emphasize the 'struggle' and 'tension' actors experience if they follow moral prescriptions (Bergson, 1935: 11) or social rules in general because they see the inclinations, desires and interests people have to overcome while following (moral) rules. This is not to be denied empirically, but following Joas, one should speak then of (moral) norms which are experienced as constraints, that is, as something that limits one's actions.

Joas' distinction between attractive values or ideals, on the one hand, and constraining norms, on the other hand, can be traced back to Durkheim's (1961) work on *Moral Education*. Although Durkheim (1961) uses a different terminology, the basic idea is the same when he

writes that there are ‘two quite different things in morality, currently designated by the words *good* and *duty*’ (p. 96). He elaborates, the ‘good is morality conceived as a desirable thing that attracts our wills to it spontaneously, quickening our desire for it’ (Durkheim, 1961: 96). Morality in the sense of the good is ‘a splendid ideal’. It ‘constitutes a richer reality than our own individual selves and in which we cannot be involved without enriching ourselves’ (Durkheim, 1961: 96). In contrast, ‘[d]uty is morality insofar as it commands. It is morality conceived of as an authority that we must obey because, and only because, it is authority’ (Durkheim, 1961: 96). Morality in the sense of duty ‘almost necessarily implies the idea of resisting one’s inclinations’ (Durkheim, 1961: 97) because duty ‘imposes rules on us, specifies limits to our natural inclinations’ (Durkheim, 1961: 96). Furthermore, ‘[a]t the bottom of the notion of obligation is the idea of a moral constraint’ (Durkheim, 1961: 97).

Durkheim emphasized that these two elements, the good and duty, cannot be reduced to each other, but one can and should ask how they influence and shape each other – on a societal and individual level. For the latter, he assumes that a person ‘never act[s] completely out of duty, nor ever completely through love of the ideal’ (Durkheim, 1961: 99). Nevertheless, he states that ‘it is always the one or the other of these sentiments that dominates and colors in a special way the person’s moral temperament’ (Durkheim, 1961: 99). Modifying this idea, it is argued here that a specific sphere of life often has a particular dominant ‘colour’ from the perspective of an individual. It is either experienced as a predominantly attractive value sphere or as a predominantly constraining life order. But there may also be phases in which a sphere is experienced as having both attractive and constraining qualities to roughly the same degree. In any case, the presence of both qualities brings with it the potential of tensions within a sphere. Alternatively, it may happen that obligatory norms and attractive values pull in the same direction, that is, that they are complementary. Thus, in some situations, the former (obligating norms) may appear as a necessary means to reach the latter (attractive ideals).

However, when Durkheim speaks of ‘duty’, this captures only one possible way in which one may feel a ‘must’ in following the rules and regularities of life orders. Durkheim’s main concern was with morality as a set of *internalized* ideas of the good and duty. From this perspective, (moral) values and (moral) norms have an effect because they are part of a person’s inner life. If one violates them, internal sanctions in the shape of moral emotions (for instance, guilt and shame) are evoked – and it is a question for further research whether values and norms imply different emotional reactions to transgressions. Yet, in both cases, one can say with Weber that spheres of life whose rules are internalized qualify as subjectively guaranteed (*innerlich garantierte*) legitimate orders. Actors ascribe to them legitimacy (Weber, 1978b: 36 [1972: 19]) because they either regard them as good or as a duty. But (moral) rules do not always become internalized. One may feel the force of social norms without developing an inner attachment to them. In that case, the perceived rules of a life order remain an *external* condition. Nevertheless, one often takes them into account since disregarding them may have negative consequences. This may be illustrated with Weber’s example of a thief who ‘orients his action to the validity of the criminal law in that he acts surreptitiously. [...] [H]e cannot violate it openly without punishment’ (Weber, 1978b: 32 [1972: 16]). Even if the thief does not share the moral idea that stealing is bad or that one should not steal from others, he or she orients his actions towards this idea because he knows it is institutionalized in law – and maybe also because he knows that it is a moral ideal or moral norm to others. But the thief orients towards this idea only as an external fact that has to be taken into account if the plans are to be successful. By anticipating sanctions by the law and perhaps resistance or disapproval by others, he limits his actions to secret ones.

Yet, the experience of a sphere of life as an external constraining life order does not necessarily result in (hidden) deviations from it. Instead, the anticipated adverse consequences, be they legal sanctions, disapproval by others or material losses, often restrain an actor from violating rules. Although these actions are then, as Durkheim (1961) pointed out, ‘in substantial agreement with moral rules’, they cannot be called moral (p. 30). They are oriented to a moral order only insofar as an individual thinks that some people regard the behaviour in question as morally good or as a moral duty. But from that individual’s perspective, this is just knowledge about other people’s morality and not genuine moral commitment. He or she is only motivated to follow the rules due to non-moral considerations. With Weber, one can say that from the point of view of those who experience an order as an external social facticity, this order is stabilized by the interest situation ([Weber, 1978b](#): 33f. [[1972](#): 17f.]). The person complies with the rules of this imagined life order only as long as the costs of violating them appear too high or as long as there are benefits to be expected from compliance. This second reason points to the fact that constraints imposed by the rules of life orders may also create opportunities, which may even imbue constraints with a sense of attractiveness. In other words, they are experienced as attractive because they are seen as useful to reach other ends. This should not be confused with ideals or values which are attractive in themselves. Nonetheless, one may assume that people or groups for whom sphere-specific constraints produce opportunities are open to articulations which frame the underlying rules in a language of obligatory duties or even appreciated ideals. This may in turn initiate shifts in how they imagine and experience this sphere. Beyond that, such articulations may even influence those for whom spheres do not provide opportunities in the here and now, so that they start hoping for such opportunities in the future.

However, it seems necessary to further distinguish two kinds of external life orders according to how the sources of sanctions against rule violations are imagined. So far, the focus has been on life orders with constraining (and at times enabling) forces that are imagined as being of a clear *social* character, that is, when there is a violation one expects sanctions from other persons or social institutions. By contrast, there are also life orders which are imagined as having a *quasi-natural* or nature-like quality; one may also speak of reified social orders whose man-made character is concealed behind a web of complex relations. Authors from many disciplines have addressed the difference between these two realms. [Goffman \(2010\)](#) speaks of a distinction between ‘social’ and ‘natural’ frames, whereby only the former is imagined as being governed by intentions and motives (p. 22). [Weiner \(2003\)](#) emphasizes that the difference ‘between human and environmental causation’ involves the perception of ‘controllable versus uncontrollable causality’ (p. 165). This aspect is also addressed by [Wuthnow \(1987\)](#), who speaks of a boundary between the realm of inevitability and the realm of intentionality: ‘On one side of this boundary are forces that the individual cannot control; on the other side is a realm subject to individual’s control, a realm in which intentions govern, rather than obdurate conditions’ (p. 74). This does not mean, as these authors point out, that quasi-natural frames are devoid of human intentions. But these intentions dissolve in a net of interdependencies that appears so complicated that it would be impossible to control its contingent causalities. Therefore, ‘unintended outcomes’ and ‘unforeseeable consequences’ of human actions ([Weiner, 2003](#): 165) are usually also perceived as belonging to the realm of inevitability: where nobody can be made responsible, a frame of being ‘natural’ is imposed ([Goffman, 2010](#): 34). These considerations also make clear that the boundary between the two realms is not an objective one, but socially constructed. As Douglas points out, ‘the line between natural and man-made causes is always drawn in a process of allocating responsibility. Consequently, it is a wavy, unsteady line, always in debate and reflecting cultural bias’ ([Douglas, 1985](#): 26f.). Hence, the judgements about and experiences of a

particular sphere of life can also vary: where one person sees uncontrollable forces at work, another may see the actions of more or less concrete actors.

In a well-known passage about the economic sphere in developed capitalism, Weber hints at the kinds of experiences evoked by quasi-natural life orders:

[T]he capitalist economic order of today is a vast cosmos into which a person is born. It simply exists, to each person, as a factually unalterable casing (*unabänderliches Gehäuse*) in which he or she must live. To the extent that people are interwoven into the context of capitalism's market forces, the norms of its economic action are forced onto them. Every factory owner who operates in the long term against these norms will inevitably be eliminated from the economy. With the same degree of inevitability, every worker who cannot or will not adapt to the norms of the marketplace will become unemployed. (Weber, 2011: 81 [1978a: 37])

An economic order which is experienced in such a way appears to 'have an objective existence' (Brubaker, 1984: 72) in the sense that it cannot be changed by the individual. This experience of an 'unalterable order of things' (Weber, 1992: 19 [1978a: 37]) is fed precisely by the impression that it is governed by powerful 'market forces' which one cannot control but only acquiesce to. Quasi-natural life orders are governed by seemingly 'impersonal forces' (Weber, 2009b: 149 [1988: 605]). If one does not comply with the rules of these forces, one has to live with inevitable consequences. Just as starving is the necessary result of not eating, there appear to be clearly determined negative effects that result from disregarding the rules of quasi-natural life orders.

One peculiarity of imagining a sphere of life in the sense of a quasi-natural life order is highlighted in Moore's work on collective protests (and their absence) in German and Russian history. His research suggests that the perception of inevitability is one of the main obstacles against the emergence of a sense of injustice. As long as people perceive the circumstances of their life as determined by apparently uncontrollable forces, they do not develop a moral sense which would enable them to question these forces or the conditions they produce from a moral point of view. Moore's (1978) description of the life of German factory workers around 1914 is a good example:

Biographical accounts are full of reports of periods of hunger, inadequate shelter [...] and other penuries. [...] While these experiences were very hard to bear, by themselves they do not appear as the sources of resentment or moral outrage. [...] They] evidently appeared to those who suffered them as part of the natural order of things. Like bad weather they were to be endured. If anything was to be done about them, the solution was to try for a better job. (Moore, 1978: 199)

While uncontrollable forces and the circumstances they produce can be bemoaned, they cannot be criticized morally. But if one cannot change the order of things, one can only live with it and try to make the best of it by acquiescing to its rules.

However, the seemingly inevitable and superhuman forces of quasi-natural life orders also carry the potential of becoming the objects of ideal formation – a process by which quasi-natural life orders may develop into attractive value spheres. 'Competition', for instance, is often seen nowadays not only as an inevitable but also as a legitimate and desirable 'mechanism for determining the fate of human beings' (Moore, 1978: 151). To some it appears to reward those who deserve it, to encourage ambition, to advance technical

innovations or to generate better conditions for all. The emergence and dissemination of such frames of interpretation probably was and still is bound to the fact that competition creates opportunities for some people – like ‘those ambitious sections of the bourgeoisie who had the means with which to compete’ ([Moore, 1978](#): 151) – and encourages others to start hoping for such opportunities in the future. But the persuasiveness of such morally loaded ideas may also be due to a particular proximity between quasi-natural life orders and attractive value spheres. Superhuman forces, on the one hand, and strong value commitments, on the other, seem to be similar in the way they are both experienced as being beyond one’s control: one can choose neither the one nor the other. For the individual, they are simply there and appear as overwhelming. But while the former are often – at least for those with scarce resources – accompanied by feelings like fear or helplessness and are experienced as energy-sapping, the latter evoke feelings like admiration or awe and bestow one with strength. These and other similarities and differences, as well as the processes they imply, pose an interesting area of investigation for further research.

But quasi-natural life orders may also develop in the other direction, that is, that of external social life orders. This happens when people start questioning their previous attribution of causality to seemingly inevitable forces and instead make other human actors responsible for social conditions. Based on his research, Moore argues that for experiencing one’s living and working conditions as unjust, it ‘is important that the apparent causes of the suffering [...] be traceable to the acts of concrete easily identified persons. That such judgements have often been mistaken goes without saying’ ([Moore, 1978](#): 470). What is important is not the accuracy of a particular judgement, but instead the fact that if human actors can be blamed – as is the case in social life orders – this opens up the possibility of moral critique because circumstances can then be imagined as alterable. [Montada \(1991\)](#) formulated a similar insight when he wrote that social conditions ‘will only be received as unjust when a person or institution is held responsible and liable to blame’ (p. 10). However, Montada’s addition of ‘institution’ has to be treated with caution, since institutions themselves may also be experienced as (part of) a quasi-natural life order. Although concrete persons are part of entities like ‘bureaucracies’, ‘governments’ or ‘corporations’, from the individual’s perspective, the internal workings of such institutions may appear so opaque that human responsibility disappears in the institutional structure. This effect is suggested, for instance, in a study by [Crosby and Ropp \(2002\)](#), who observed ‘that people are more likely to recognize themselves as the victims of discrimination when they can identify someone who perpetuates the discrimination than when they must identify structural causes’ (p. 390). So, again, it is the meanings that organizations and institutions have for people themselves which make these institutions appear as (part of) a quasi-natural or an external social life order.

In sum, the actor-centred approach suggests differentiating four types of spheres of life from the actor’s perspective based on the different kinds of experiences connected to them and how they relate to morality. Spheres of life are experienced differently in the sense that actors are moved in specific ways to follow the perceived rules and regularities or imagined objectives of a sphere. They can be moved to do so because they regard the rules and objectives (1) as morally good in itself (attractive value spheres), (2) because they experience them as a moral duty (internalized life orders), or because they imagine sanctions (3) by other human actors (social life orders) or (4) by inevitable forces (quasi-natural life orders). If attractive value spheres and internalized life orders are part of tensions, these tensions are experienced as internal moral conflicts accompanied by feelings like guilt or shame. In contrast to attractive value spheres, internalized, social or quasi-natural life orders may evoke tensions connected to the fact that spheres of these types are often experienced as constraining in the sense that they put limits on one’s interests and desires. But while social life orders may be criticized

morally, quasi-natural life orders are immune to moral judgements from the actor's perspective. Furthermore, the rules of life orders may also create opportunities which may bestow upon them a tinge of attractiveness because they are then experienced as useful for fulfilling one's interests or values related to other spheres. The imagination of opportunities certainly bolsters rule following, but it might also be a prelude for changes in a sphere's quality if it encourages new articulations.

However, these types of spheres of life are to be regarded as analytical categories which still have to be developed further. At the empirical level, any sphere of life will often contain elements from two (or even more) of the distinct types described here. It is an empirical question whether a particular sphere of life corresponds predominantly to one of the four categories or whether and in what proportion it is a mixture of different types. Likewise, it is a task for further research to explore how stable these images are and how they change over time.

## Conclusion

This article suggested an actor-centred approach to spheres of life which is inspired by Weber's reflections on collective entities. Just like collective entities, spheres of life may be treated as ideas and images in the minds of people. From that perspective, the controversial question of how many and what spheres of life exist may be answered by looking at these ideas and images. Building on Joas' concept of articulation, it was suggested that ideas and images about spheres of life are shaped in continuous processes of articulation. Although the ideas elaborated by elites and experts about spheres are part of the culturally available frames of interpretation, they have to be further specified if they are to 'serve as orientations in concrete action situations' ([Joas and Beckert, 2002](#): 277). In the process, they are themselves adjusted and transformed as part of recurring efforts of articulation in everyday life. In such processes, the meanings of spheres of life may be reproduced or changed over time. Using Joas' distinction between attractive values and restrictive norms, it was suggested that spheres of life can be distinguished analytically according to their experiential quality and relation to morality: Attractive value spheres designate what people regard as inherently good, obligatory life orders designate what people regard as their moral duty. The rules and objectives of both are internalized and sanctioned by moral emotions. In contrast, the rules and objectives of social and quasi-natural life orders remain external, including in the sense that the anticipated sanctions are exercised by someone or something else – by other human actors in the former, by seemingly uncontrollable forces in the latter. While social life orders imply the possibility (but not the necessity) of moral critique, quasi-natural life orders can only be acquiesced to as a fact that is beyond control and human morality.

The actor-centred approach outlined here makes it possible to capture complex empirical constellations of spheres of life. It asks what spheres actors imagine, how important or dominant they are in relation to each other, the degree to which they overlap or are separated and whether they are associated with attractive, restrictive and/or enabling experiential qualities. An actor's personal configuration of spheres of life thus constitutes the background for a variety of relations within and between spheres. While these relations may be characterized by tensions and conflicts, as discussed by Weber, this is only one possibility. Yet, tensions are of interest insofar as they may presage future changes in the meanings and relations of spheres, for these spheres are shaped by the ways actors handle such tensions. In addition to considering the tensions which emerge due to a particular constellation of spheres in a person's life, the approach used here makes it possible to incorporate other sources of

tension, too. First, people may have ideas and images not only about how spheres of life *are* but also about how a particular sphere or a particular relationship between two or more spheres *should* look. Discrepancies between such normative images and the empirical characteristics of spheres may also be a source of tensions. Second, people may realize or suspect that others have different images about spheres of life than they do: about what they are like and how they should be. Such different (normative) ideas about spheres of life may also fuel tensions and call into question the validity of their own ideas. By getting a clearer picture of how all these different kinds of tensions are processed on the micro level of everyday life, the suggested approach could improve understanding of how social and moral orders are (re)produced and changed in different dynamics over time.

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## Notes

1. Citations in square brackets refer to the German texts.
2. In Whimster's translation of [Weber's \(2004\)](#) essay, spheres of life are marked by bold type. The term 'kinship' is highlighted in the same way (p. 220), which suggests that Whimster regards it as a separate sphere as well. The earlier translation by Gerth and Mills suggests a different reading. They have inserted subheadings for the economic, political, aesthetical, erotic and intellectual spheres, but not for the familial ([Weber, 2009a](#)). Hence, they do not seem to regard it as a separate sphere of life.
3. At first glance, this seems to be similar to the approach of [Schimank \(1988\)](#), who suggests conceptualizing social subsystems as 'fictions of actors' (*Akteurfiktionen*). But Schimank works with the assumption that actors realize that their own fictions are 'simplistic abstractions' (*simplifizierende Abstraktionen*) and 'untruths' (*Unwahrheiten*) that allow them to deal with the complexities of reality ([Schimank, 1988](#): 633f.). In contrast, the actor-centred approach developed here argues that actors usually believe in the validity of their images. These images about spheres of life are expressions of how actors experience them and believe them to be 'in reality'. Of course, there are moments in which they may realize that their images are in conflict with what appears to them as 'reality'. But I would argue that such experiences ('the world is not as I imagined it') lead actors to seek further articulations until they sense the image as 'true' and 'evident' again.
4. These categories are used, along with 'family', 'politics' and 'religion', in the European Values Study and World Values Survey. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of

each one in their lives. Of course, answers to such preset questions and items need to be combined with qualitative data in order to determine whether and in what sense one can really speak of these categories as spheres of life from the perspective of respondents.

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