Assignment #7

MACS 30000, Dr. Evans
Due Monday, Nov. 26 at 11:30am
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3. Watts (2014)

From the paper "Common Sense and Sociological Explanations", Watts pointed out that sociologists relied on common sense a lot without awareness, which can cause scientific invalidity when explaining social actions.

The rational theory was introduced in the late 1960s and was criticized by experts in many social science fields (Watts, 2014, p.320). Models of this theory assumed that individual or collective actions can be rationalized by "the preferences, knowledge, and computational capabilities of the actors" (Watts, 2014, p.320). However, these assumptions were implausible or empirically invalid and the predictions from these models were not consistent with empirical evidence (Watts, 2014, p.320).

The main pitfall to use commonsense theories of action is that the epistemic conflation which assumed that "understandability and causality were interchangeable" has some problems (Watts, 2014, p.327). Although an explanation makes sense for some outcome, we cannot guarantee that this explanation corresponds to "generalizable causal mechanisms" (Watts, 2014, p.327). The errors in explanations of everyday behavior are minor to be detected and quick to be corrected, so we are likely to ignore them and wrongly think the prediction is accurate (Watts, 2014, p.327). However, the commonsense theories of action are applied more universally than everyday life and thus it cannot guarantee that the resulting explanations are scientifically valid (Watts, 2014, p.327-328).

Watts' proposed solutions to the issues with rational choice modeling and causal explanation are that sociologists are supposed to realize "the difference between empathetic and causal explanation" and choose to produce more scientific explanations rather than more satisfying explanations (Watts, 2014, p.335). The first specific approach to solve this problem is relying "more on experimental methods". The field experiments, natural experiments, quasi- experiments and laboratory experiments are helpful to identify causal effects, although they have some limitations in practice (Watts, 2014, p.335). The second approach is using "counterfactual model of causal inference", which can be applied to nonexperimental data (Watts, 2014, p.336). The third approach is evaluating explanations with their ability of prediction (Watts, 2014, p.337). The definition of prediction is that "in the broad sense of out-of-sample testing,

allowing both for probabilistic predictions and for predictions about stylized facts or patterns of outcomes" (Watts, 2014, p.340).

In my opinion, I think theoretical models with their necessary simplifications and their specific assumptions about mechanisms could benefit causal inference and prediction. In social science field, the process of causal inference and prediction is complicated, because the research object is human behavior. Different people have different behaviors and actions on the same thing. It's impossible to predict these actions accurate enough. However, by simplification and specific assumption, scientists can find the commonality and model these actions. And then they can relate the models to reality and alter the assumptions to make it much more empirical. For example, for the marketing models in economics, economists created the models of perfect competitive market and perfect monopolistic market. However, in reality, the perfect competitive market and perfect monopolistic market are not existed. Then economists relaxed the assumptions and created the more realistic monopolistically competitive model. Therefore, theoretical models with simplification and assumption are useful in causal inference and prediction. By altering the assumptions and refine the model, social scientists can make the model much more accurate and empirical.

Reference:

Watts, Duncan J., "Common Sense and Sociological Explanations," American Journal of Sociology, September 2014, 120 (2), 313–351.