

# MACS 30000 Assignment 7

Shanglun Li

November 26, 2018

## Problem 3.

When rational choice theory was first introduced in the 1960s, its approach to explain people's behavior was challenged by many criticisms. Many social scientists argued that the assumptions “about the preferences, knowledge, and computational capabilities of the actors in question” could not fully predict people's real behaviors (Watts, 2014, p.320).

The main pitfall of commonsense theories of action is that using commonsense theories of actions has the problem of validity, as explaining the observed outcome does not lead to the “causal mechanisms” that are universal and interpretable. In fact, commonsense explanations are conceived to be correct in our everyday life because the mistakes they make are too minor or people quickly correct these mistakes by substituting a wrong prior reason with a correct one based on the outcome. Thus, our commonsense knowledge is not as accurate as we think. Therefore, theorizing it “can undermine the scientific validity of the resulting explanations” (Watts, 2014, p.327).

The solution to this issue is that sociologists should pursue “more scientifically rigorous” explanations instead of the “empathetic sense” (Watts, 2014, p.335). First of all, Watts suggests that sociologists should “rely more on experimental methods”(Watts, 2014, p.335), which is to apply experimental methods in sociology research, including field experiments, natural experiments, quasi-experiments, and laboratory experiments. Moreover, sociologists should also rely more on statistical models for causal explanation. In addition, the predictive ability of the models should be more emphasized when evaluating the explanations (Watts, 2014).

Although this paper does a good job of relating causality to prediction, the paper disdains theory that specifically outlines the assumptions and mechanisms of process being modeled. Using theoretical models with simplifications and specific assumptions about mechanisms is the only way that we can start to study the real world. Making assumptions is just the start of the research, which give us a easy point to begin with. Then, we can relax these assumptions and refine the models to make it more consistent with reality, have more predictive power, and lead to causal inference. Take my research experience as an example, when investigating a treatment's effect on HIV patients, we always start with some simple assumptions. As the research proceed, we can have more specific assumption and refine the model that we use for the research. Thus, our finding can be increasingly approach to the reality.

## References

Watts, D. J. (2014). Common Sense and Sociological Explanations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(2), 313-351. doi:10.1086/678271