

Assignment #7-3

MACS 30000

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In the first part of the article by Duncan Watts (2014), the author analyzed critiques to the sociologists' reliance on common sense as foundations of explanations of human behaviors.

Watts defined the assumption of "rationalized actions" as the argument that individual and collective entities' actions could be explained "in terms of their intentions, beliefs, circumstances, and opportunities" (Watts, 2014, p314), and he specifically emphasized the case of rational choice theory in the following section. Watts summarized some early literature about the rational choice theory, which is an approach that aims to explain human behaviors, social phenomena, and empirical facts by analyzing the actions of hypothetical agents under simplified, theoretical assumptions about resources, constraints, and incentives and deducing their actions to give real-world implications (Watts, 2014, p319).

Watts also reviewed criticisms of such approach in this section. First, assumptions made in the framework of rational choice theory that rule actions of hypothetical agents might be based on common sense instead of empirical evidence (Watts, 2014, p320). Therefore, predictions made by such "hypothetico-deductive" (p319) models might fail to reflect real-life scenarios. In addition, one of the main characteristics of the traditional rational choice theory - the utility maximization - has been questioned by researchers later to inaccurately describe all human behaviors as purposive and driven by stable, consistent preferences (p320). In a word, social scientists have not been very cautious in avoiding the use of common sense in establishing causal inferences and deriving explanations (p316). Thus, rational choice theory has been criticized frequently for being based on invalid assumptions that are incongruent to empirical evidence and for failing to provide accurate explanations and predictions on social actions.

One major problem with using commonsense theories of action in sociological research is related to validity. As Watts demonstrated (p327), commonsenses theories of action usually arrises in everyday situations to help people make sense of actions (understandability, p327) and explain them (causal mechanisms, p327). However, when the situation has changed and the understandability could not be mapped perfectly into the causal mechanisms of certain actions, the validity of such commonsense theories will be problematic because the understandability of certain action cannot be generalized to causal mechanisms of that action across situations (p327). Thus, both the causal mechanism and the prediction drawn from those theories could be invalid. The author went further to elaborate on three main problems that contribute to the low validity of commonsense theories of actions: the Frame Problem (the problem of unable to encompass all factors that influence social actions, p329), the Indeterminancy Problem (the problem of unable to separately analyze and to determine factors that contribute to a social action), and the Outcome Problem (the problem of unable to separate an event in time to analyze its causes).

Watts offered some partial solutions to these problems (p335). First, sociologists should distinguish empathetic, commonsensical explanations of actions from scientific causal explanations (p335). In specific, they should rely on experimental methods, such as field experiments, natural experiments, quasi-experiments, and laboratory experiments, as well as empirical data more to draw causal inferences. Moreover, they should pay more attention to the predictability of models rather than merely the understandability of models when evaluating them (p339).

Addendum:

The Use of Theories in Modeling Causal Inferences and Making Predictions

Although this current paper has elaborated extensively on the drawbacks of unacknowledged, commonsensical theories as explanations of social actions, it is imprudent to reject the value of theories as a whole in conducting sociological research. First, as mentioned in the article (p335) that researchers have been more cautious in making unacknowledged assumptions about human actions and have adopted psychological experiments to test the accuracy of such pre-existing assumptions (p323). In that case, commonsensical assumptions have provided sociologists and social psychologists crucial research ideas and hypotheses. Second, theoretical models can sometimes benefit later experimental designs as they propose a possible set of variables for causality analysis and reduce the likelihood of overfitting when seeking explanations of certain social actions. Therefore, it is worth to note that cautiously using theoretical models in the process of researching for causality could help sociologists draw causal inferences and make predictions.