

Assessment of Watts (2014)

When initially introduced in the 1960s, rational choice theory was criticized by many of the scholars. In these critics' perspectives, the early model builds on "implausible assumptions about the preferences, knowledge, and computational capabilities of the actors in question" (Watts, 2014, p.320). Besides, the predictions regarding rational choice theory were inconsistent with reality (Watts, 2014, p.320).

According to Watts, the main pitfall of commonsense theories of action is its validity. This is because the explanation of the observed outcome could not be generalized to the "causal mechanisms" (Watts, 2014, p.327). Watts also maintains that the reasons which seem essential *ex ante* could possibly "fail to make accurate predictions" (Watts, 2014, p.327). The mistakes inherent could be easily neglected because they are minor or quickly corrected by substitution. If applied to broader issues, commonsense theories might undermine the validity of the explanation (Watts, 2014, p.327).

To tentatively solve the issues with rational choice modeling and causal explanation, Watts proposed mainly three kinds of solutions, although none of them was "globally applicable" (Watts, 2014, p.335). The first approach regarding experimental methods is the most straightforward one in theory (Watts, 2014, p.335). Field experiments, natural experiments, quasi experiments and lab experiments could all be taken advantage of in various disciplines. Besides, "counterfactual model of causal inference applied to non-experimental data" serves as an alternative of the experimental approach (Watts, 2014, p.336). Watts also argues that explanations should be evaluated according to their predictive power (Watts, 2014, p.337).

addendum: The feasibility of theoretical models with necessary simplifications

Social issues are complicated. Any attempt to grasp the whole picture of the intricate system by taking advantage of one specific theoretical framework involving various variables could more possibly result in failure. Being aware of this, using theoretical models with simplifications and seemingly unreasonable assumptions about mechanisms could be viewed as a starting point to uncover the intrinsic logical relationship or causality behind a specific social setting which the scholars are interested in. These models serve as the baseline for the future empirical test, improvement or adjustment. A good parallel of rational choice assumptions, as mentioned in Watts (2014), in physics is the "smooth plane". Building on this extreme case, huge amount of induction could be made and step by step, the reality is revealed. The difference is that in physics, tests of the theoretical models could be done in laboratories repeatedly, while in economics, the society is the lab itself. However, this difference does not affect the truth that economic models could give ex ante predictions and ex post explanations.

Reference

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