

Question 3

According to Watts (2014), some critics of rational choice theory argue that this theory relies on improbable assumptions about the “preferences, knowledge and computational capabilities” (page 320) of individuals in society. Additionally, they also argue that predictions based on rational choice theory oppose the real, observed data. However, advocates of rational choice theory have sought to accommodate these criticisms by setting aside some characteristics of rational choice—abandoning the assumptions that actors aim to maximize utility, that actors have “exogenous, stable and consistent preferences” and that actors are “forward-looking and purposive” (page 320). Furthermore, rational choice theorists have also decided to use this theory as more of an approach, than using it to develop a more falsifiable hypothesis. In making these changes, Watts notes that these advocates of rational choice theory have “shifted from a scientific to an empathetic view of explanation” (page 321), letting common sense intuition seep into these explanations, and therefore making inferring general causal explanations from this use of rational choice theory, to be problematic.

Watts (2014) argues that although commonsense notions seem “generally valid in everyday situations” and therefore, a theory based on commonsense notion seems to have an “aura of universal validity” (page 327), these theories may not actually be valid when we aim to make causal explanations. Specifically, because an explanation seems commonsensical, does not mean that we can make a valid, broad causal claim from this explanation, even though we naturally do so in our everyday life.

Watts (2014) proposes that to make more valid causal explanations using rational choice theory, sociologists must “confront the difference” (page 335) between these theories based on common sense and actual causal explanations, to produce more rigorous science. To elaborate, he proposes that sociologists rely on experimental methods like field experiments, with random assignment of participants to isolate the causal mechanism. If not, he also recommends that sociologists can use natural experiments and quasi experiments that have naturally occurring randomness to also make more valid causal explanations. Additionally, he also proposes that sociologists can use non-experimental data with a large sample size, although making such causal claims from this data may still be problematic. Alternatively, he also suggests that sociologists can evaluate explanations based on their ability to predict. However, Watts also highlights that by incorporating all these techniques and thereby making more scientifically valid causal inferences, sociologists may also become less intellectually satisfied from a sense-making perspective. Therefore, he predicts that moving forward, sociologists will have to “increasingly choose between unsatisfying scientific explanations and satisfying but unscientific stories” (page 344).

Although Watts (2014) makes valid arguments relating causality to prediction, Watts could have further elaborated on how theoretical models, although simplified with specific conditions about human nature, can still be a useful in making causal inferences and predictions. For example, to investigate how political information spreads and persuades others in a social network, we have to assume that actors within the model act in a “rational” way – that individuals who are in constant interaction with each other will spread information to each other, that individuals with only one connection will not spread information within others in the network, the network is relatively unchanging etc. Although these assumptions, like those in traditional rational choice theory, are arguably, not reflected in real life, modelling such behavior with these restrictions could still be useful for causal inference and prediction. To elaborate, the model could be used to understand the dynamic process of how individuals absorb and transfer political information externally to another individual, or even reemphasize their existing knowledge if another individual transfers the same information to them, which may persuade them to vote for a specific candidate during an election. This provides more insight into the dynamic process of persuasion within a social network and how

it may even affect the outcome of an elections in an area. Additionally, according to Watts' (2014) interpretation of prediction, we do not necessarily have to predict how political information will spread in other elections, as it may be inherently unpredictable, but we can perhaps predict from the model, that in the 2018 senate elections for example, networks with more initially informed individuals about a specific candidate, increases the number of informed people in the network which therefore also increases the candidate's success in the election at time, t . Although this model holds specific assumptions about human behavior, using these models that simplify complex human behavior could be a useful first step into investigating and predicting these causal effects. After modelling this behavior, researchers can then employ research designs that Watts (2014) suggests, such as using field or natural experiments, to make more scientifically valid causal explanations and predictions.

References:

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