

Question 3 of Assignment 7

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The rational choice theory approach to explain people's behavior was challenged by many criticisms. Many social scientists argued that this theory assumed actors make decisions with rational "preferences, knowledge, and computational capabilities", which couldn't fully predict people's real behaviors (Watts, 2014, p.320).

Watts (2014, p. 327) argues that using commonsense theories of actions has the problem of validity, as explaining the observed outcome doesn't lead to the "causal mechanisms" that are universal and interpretable. People's commonsense knowledge is not necessarily accurate as we learn from the minor mistakes without realizing them. Thus, theorizing the commonsense knowledge would probably be invalid for understanding general social behaviors (Watts, 2014).

Watts (2014, p. 335) proposes the solution that sociologists should pursue "more scientifically rigorous" explanations instead of the "empathetic sense". One approach is to apply experimental methods in sociology research, including field experiments, natural experiments, quasi-experiments, and laboratory experiments. They could also use the models and methods in causal inference, econometrics, statistics, and computational methods to analyze the non-experimental data. In addition, the predictive ability of the models should be more emphasized when evaluating the explanations (Watts, 2014).

(Addendum)

Title: Defending the theoretical models

Understanding human behaviors, which is the main theme of social science, is challenging both for social science theorists and data scientists. The paper criticizes sociologists' over-reliance on common sense and urges the more scientific methods for explanations and predictions.

However, the paper doesn't give enough credit to the theoretical models in the scientific knowledge discovery process. Although researchers are able to discover interesting patterns and facts by analyzing the large data, they will possibly encounter problems such as replication crisis if their results are not associated with the generalizable theories. The theoretical models also provide researchers with insights to put causal inference and prediction to work by answering questions in a more meaningful manner.

Reference

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