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ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY (/content/journals/soc) Volume 23, 1997 (/content/journals/soc/23/1)

Sociological Rational Choice Theory

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Although rational choice theory has made considerable advances in other social sciences, its progress in sociology has been limite d. Some sociologists' reservations about rational choice arise from a misunderstanding of the theory. The first part of this essay the refore introduces rational choice as a general theoretical perspective, or family of theories, which explains social outcomes by cons tructing models of individual action and social context. "Thin" models of individual action are mute about actors' motivations, whil e "thick" models specify them ex ante. Other sociologists' reservations, however, stem from doubts about the empirical adequacy o f rational choice explanations. To this end, the bulk of the essay reviews a sample of recent studies that provide empirical support f or particular rational choice explanations in a broad spectrum of substantive areas in sociology. Particular attention is paid to studi es on the family, gender, and religion, for these subareas often are considered least amenable to understanding in terms of rational choice logic.

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