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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 limited. Some sociologists' reservations about rational choice arise from a misunderstanding of the theory. The first part of this essay therefore introduces rational choice as a general theoretical perspective, or family of theories, which explains social outcomes by constructing models of individual action and social context. "Thin" models of individual action are mute about actors' motivations, while "thick" models specify them ex ante. Other sociologists' reservations, however, stem from doubts about the empirical adequacy of rational choice explanations. To this end, the bulk of the essay reviews a sample of recent studies that provide empirical support for particular rational choice explanations in a broad spectrum of substantive areas in sociology. Particular attention is paid to studies 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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