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Analytical Sociology and Rational Choice Theory¹

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The relation between analytical sociology and rational choice theory is unclear to many people. Some critics of analytical sociology (Gross 2009, Little 2012) presume that analytical sociology is just a version of sociological rational choice theory, and some advocates of rational choice sociology share the same assumption (Kroneberg & Kalter 2012, Opp 2013). Partly this confusion is understandable as there are some clear overlaps: some advocates of analytical sociology have in the past been advocates of a rational choice approach in the social sciences (Hedström was one of the original associate editors of *Rationality and Society* when it started, for example), the analytical sociology movement still involves many people who employ rational choice theory (Demeulenaere 2011), and some of the central arguments and ideas have their origin in a broadly understood rational choice tradition (Hedström & Swedberg 1998). Thus it is correct to say that analytical sociology shares an historical lineage with the sociological rational choice tradition (Hedström & Swedberg 1996).² However, as we will show in this chapter, there are fundamental differences as well. Most importantly, analytical sociology is based on ideas about what proper sociological explanations should look like, and these explanatory principles are rather different from those usually associated with rational choice theory. The explanatory principles of analytical sociology also have other

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² But it should also be noted that rational-choice theory is not unique in that respect. Analytical sociology also shares an important lineage with the social-network tradition, for example.

general implications that further sets analytical sociology apart from the rational choice vision of the social sciences.

The aim of this chapter is to articulate these differences so that the relation between analytical sociology and rational choice sociology becomes clearer. We begin by examining what people mean when they talk about rational choice theory (Section 1), especially in the context of sociology (Section 2). The next sections (3 and 4) present the basic ideas of analytical sociology. Section 5 and 6 are the core sections of the chapter in that they articulate the key differences between analytical sociology and rational choice theory. The paper concludes with some more general reflections about the nature of analytical sociology and the future of rational choice sociology, and an itemized summary of what we see as the most crucial differences between analytical sociology and rational choice theory.

1. Rational choice theory

The diversity of approaches assembled under the rubric of rational choice theory (RCT) makes a general discussion of the approach rather difficult: no matter what argument is leveled against RCT, there is always an alternative version or interpretation of RCT that avoids that particular challenge and the critic often is accused of not having understood RCT properly. It is not our task to provide a general definition of RCT, nor to set boundaries for the proper use of the term. However, it is generally agreed that neoclassical economics provides a prototypical example of RCT. In most social scientific discussions, the term RCT refers to ideas prominent in economics. Advocates of alternative versions of RCT might dispute the adequacy or fruitfulness of the economists' version of RCT, but it is undeniable that the economic approach is the most visible and influential example of RCT and that it has been a source of inspiration for rational-choice theorists in the other social sciences.

However, even in economics the idea of RCT can refer to quite different things. For example, there is a combination of expected utility theory and revealed preference theory that gives us the idea of "thin rationality" as consistency of choices. In principle, this version of RCT does not appeal to any psychological assumptions about human motivation as it relies on a purely formal account of consistent choice behavior. Thus, unlike most other versions of RCT, this version is not a formalized version of everyday folk psychology (Lehtinen & Kuorikoski 2007: 119). However, for most explanatory purposes this theory seems to be all too thin: if we reconstruct the preferences from the choices the agent makes and then cite those preferences

as an explanation for those choices, we are moving in an all too small circle to acquire any explanatory insights (Lovett 2006). Thus, in most explanatory applications of RCT economists are indeed also making assumptions about individuals' beliefs and desires. Similarly, sociologists employing RCT are invariantly treating it as a theory of action.

A theory of rational action makes a number of stringent assumptions. As argued by Elster (1986, 2007), a rational action is the action that best satisfies an individual's desires, given the individual's beliefs, and is usually accompanied by three sets of assumptions. First, although rational choice theorists usually make no judgments about the desires or preferences as such, they assume that they are complete, transitive, and independent of irrelevant alternatives. RCT is not a theory about substantive rationality so it remains silent about the rationality of the things that the individual desires.

The second set of assumptions concerns the individual's beliefs. In the simplest models it is assumed that individuals have perfect information, i.e., they know everything (relevant) there is to know and all beliefs are true. An alternative assumption is that the individual's beliefs are the best that can be formed in the light of available evidence, and this allows for the existence of false beliefs.

The third set of assumptions concerns the individual's cognitive or reasoning abilities. It is normally assumed that the individual is able to determine the best possible action given his/her beliefs and desires (even when this requires mathematical skills known to be unavailable to the most individuals in the population).

In empirical applications of RCT, social scientists often make substantive assumptions about the contents of individuals' preferences. The standard *homo economicus* assumption is that individuals are self-interested and that their main interests are pecuniary. These assumptions have some heuristic value and they make the building of economic models simpler. From the point of view of the core assumptions of rational choice theory, broadening the range of individuals' concerns to non-monetary goods and to the welfare of others is straightforward, although there is concern whether this can be done in a non-arbitrary manner.

Experimental research has shown that many of the assumptions of the standard rational choice theory are empirically false. People typically have (1) incomplete and sometimes even incoherent preferences, furthermore they (2) often miscalculate risks and discount the future

excessively, (3) they are vulnerable to framing, anchoring, priming, and other effects, and (4) they often behave in ways that are difficult to interpret as being exclusively motivated by self interest. While some of the details of these findings are still in dispute, it is clear that the standard rational-choice theory does not describe accurately human decision-making (DellaVigna 2009). The key question is what consequences this has for social scientific applications of rational choice theory, and in this chapter we focus on sociological rational choice theorists and how they have handled these problems.

2. Sociological rational choice theory

While sociological rational choice theory (SRCT) has been inspired by economics (Friedman & Hechter 1988; Hechter & Kanazawa 1997; Voss & Abraham 2000; Hedström & Stern 2008), sociologists typically employ a version of RCT that is quite different from the versions employed in economics (Baron & Hannan 1994, Kroneberg & Kalter 2012). Even the way RCT is used is different: sociologists put much less emphasis on formal model building and are more focused on empirical applications. Thus, in sociological analysis, the role of the rational-choice assumption is usually not that of an assumption or a postulate of a formal model, but rather a guide to the type of narrative to be used for interpreting the empirical results (Goldthorpe 1996). Furthermore, when compared to economists, or even RCT-oriented political scientists, sociologists typically pay much more attention to how things like networks, social norms, and socialization processes influence individuals' behavior by shaping their preferences, beliefs, and opportunities.

These differences between the disciplines mean that rational-choice sociologists often employ much “broader” notions of rational choice than economists typically do. However, there has not emerged any single SRCT model; rather, the field is characterized by a wide range of RCT-like models that all relax some aspect of the rationality assumptions of the standard RCT model. Thus current SRC theorists do not assume that individuals have full information, rather they allow individuals' beliefs to be based on incomplete, imperfect, or biased information. The preferences are assumed to involve things like altruism, fairness, a desire to act according to one's identity, values, and internalized norms. Some have also given up the requirement of consequentialist thinking (Boudon 2003, Boudon 2012) and others have considered the role of emotions (Elster 2007) and automatic processes (Kronenberg, Yaish and Stocké 2010) in decision-making.

This widening and loosening of the rational choice approach may appear appealing at first sight but is not unproblematic. As Kronenberg and Kalter (2012: 82) argue:

The wide version of RCT is able to assimilate almost any psychological concept or theory and translate it into more or less “soft” incentives or a more or less inaccurate belief.

As the core theory becomes less rigorous, it also provides less theory-guidance and constraints. Finding a RCT model that fits a particular phenomenon becomes almost trivially easy as there are no real constraints on preferences and beliefs that can be attributed to the individuals in question. It is doubtful whether analytical narratives based on such an approach can produce unique insights about the social world.

Thus, contemporary SRCT faces a number of challenges. As SRCT moves further and further away from the *homo economicus* core of RCT, it has become increasingly puzzling what role the notion of rationality plays in their approach. Why not just go fully naturalistic, and give up on the privileged role of rationality considerations, and instead adopt an account of human agency that is more directly influenced by empirical research? There is evidence that SRCT is developing in this direction (Kronenberg & Kalter 2012), but it seems that most rational-choice sociologists are emotionally or historically wedded to the idea that action must be explained as the outcome of rational deliberation. One risk with this strategy is that one loses the analytical strengths of the standard RCT model and at the same time clouds the insights about important mechanisms influencing human behavior revealed by other traditions of empirical research.

Similarly, a too strong adherence to a particular approach may act as a blindfold. Many factors such as emotions, habits, and expressive motives are important for explaining social processes, and it would seem foolish to exclude such factors from consideration because they do not fit the RCT framework. For example, Kronenberg, Yaish and Stocké's (2010) attempt to incorporate some findings from psychological research into their decision-making model has faced widespread skepticism within the RCT community (Kronenberg & Kalter 2012: 86), not because it is claimed to be factually incorrect but because it is seen as introducing elements that appear unmotivated and *ad hoc* from the point of view of RCT. Thus, the RCT preference for parsimony in assumptions and simplicity of conceptual schemes trump considerations that are legitimate from the point of view of understanding relevant causal

mechanisms. If this is the case, there are good reason to reconsider the metatheory that motivates SRCT, and this is precisely what analytical sociology attempts to do.

3. Analytical sociology as a metatheory

Analytical sociology is not a new sociological theory or method. Rather, analytical sociology is a reform movement within sociology and social theory (Hedström 2005; Manzo 2010; Hedström & Ylikoski 2011). It is an attempt to develop a constructive framework for thinking about sociological research and its aims. Analytical sociologists start with the idea that social science should do more than describe and classify social processes; it should also attempt to explain those phenomena causally by providing clear and precise accounts of the social mechanisms producing them. This is an abstract idea that many sociologists – including most rational choice sociologists – accept. Analytical sociology takes this idea seriously, develops it systematically, and seeks to provide tools for improving theorizing and explanatory practices.

One of the main motivations of analytical sociology is the fact that outdated and poorly justified metatheoretical ideas about explanation, causation, and the nature of scientific theories have had a damaging influence on sociological research (Hedström & Ylikoski 2010; Hedström 2005). Analytical sociology brings together insights from recent philosophy of science in order to develop a consistent and fruitful metatheory for explanatory sociology. The idea is to develop a metatheory that is not just as an *ad hoc* legitimation for one's own pet theory, but a set of ideas that provides fruitful guidance for the production of explanatory sociological theories that are compatible with the results of other sciences and satisfy the criteria of clarity and precision. Thus, in relation to RCT, analytical sociology has a distinct take on issues like: (1) how RCT models explain; (2) how explanatory merits of these models are to be assessed; (3) whether RCT has a foundational role in sociological theory; and (4) how modeling should be related to empirical research. We will return to these issues after first reviewing some key ideas in analytical sociology.

4. The key ideas of analytical sociology

While the principles of analytical sociology are still developing, the key concept in analytical sociology is that of mechanism-based explanation (Hedström 2005, Hedström & Ylikoski 2010, Ylikoski 2011). Associated with it are ideas about realism, middle-range theories, and theories of action (Hedström & Ylikoski 2011). We will discuss briefly each of them, as they

have relevance for the assessment of SRCT.

Mechanism-based explanation

While many social scientists – among them RC theorists – have for a long time talked about mechanisms, analytical sociologists have taken this idea seriously and have used it as a starting-point for developing a systematic account of explanatory social science that is compatible with the results of other sciences. Thus the core idea of analytical sociology is that sociological theory explains by specifying causal mechanisms that bring about social phenomena.

The interest in mechanism-based explanation originally arose from the dissatisfaction with the traditional covering-law account of explanation that has a large number of philosophical problems, and has provided justification for the use of unsatisfactory “black-box” explanations in the social sciences. In contrast to this fundamentally empiricist account of explanation, analytical sociologists require that explanations should articulate causal mechanisms rather than simply subsume phenomena under empirical generalizations (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010).

The idea of mechanism-based explanation has been developed in parallel in the social sciences and philosophy of science (Darden 2006, Craver 2007, Hedström & Ylikoski 2010). Because the entities and processes studied by different sciences are quite heterogeneous, it is difficult to propose a mechanism definition that would both be informative and cover all examples of mechanisms. Some disciplines, such as cell biology (Bechtel 2006) and the neurosciences (Craver 2007), study highly integrated systems, whereas others, such as evolutionary biology and the social sciences, study more dispersed phenomena. For this reason, a characterization of a mechanism that applies to one field might not be informative when applied to another. Thus, contrary to what many critics assume, formulating a dictionary definition for the term should not be the main criterion of success for this approach. It is much more important to articulate what kind of principles should guide judgments about explanatory merits of mechanism-based explanations and to systematically articulate a more general and complete metatheoretical account on the bases of this.

However, some general ideas are shared by most acceptable mechanism definitions (Hedström & Ylikoski 2010). First, a mechanism is identified by the kind of effect or phenomenon it produces. A mechanism is always a mechanism for something (Darden 2006).

Second, a mechanism is an irreducibly causal notion. It refers to the entities of a causal process that produces the effect of interest. Third, the mechanism has a structure. When a mechanism-based explanation opens the black box, it discloses this structure. It makes visible how the participating entities and their properties, activities, and relations produce the effect of interest. Fourth, mechanisms form a hierarchy. While a mechanism at one level presupposes or takes for granted the existence of certain entities with characteristic properties and activities, it is expected that there are lower-level mechanisms that explain them (Craver 2007). It is an inherent feature of the mechanism view that the entities and mechanisms of various sciences are ultimately related to each other. Although the explanatory entities and mechanisms employed by one science always bottom out somewhere (Darden 2006, Hedström 2005) and are therefore taken as fundamental, their fundamental status is relative because they are mechanistically explainable by other fields of science.

In sociology, the main *explananda* are social macro phenomena that are properties of a collectivity or a set of micro level entities that are not definable for a single micro-level entity. In other words, macro properties are attributes of entities like societies, communities, organizations and groups that are not meaningfully attributed to individuals. From the point of view of a mechanism-based explanation, the basic entities that explain these kinds of properties are human agents, their relations and their actions (Hedström & Ylikoski 2010).

The idea of mechanism-based explanation appears particularly important in a highly specialized and fragmented discipline such as sociology. Although empirical data, research methods, and substantial theories differ from one subfield of sociology to another, the general ideas about possible causal mechanisms are something these fields could share and thereby benefit from each other's work. In this vision, sociological theory provides a set of explanatory tools that can be employed and adapted to particular situations and explanatory tasks. The mechanisms are (semi) general in the sense that most of them are not limited to any particular application. This provides a novel way of thinking about unification and integration of sociological knowledge (Hedström & Ylikoski 2011).

Realism

Another key ingredient of analytical sociology is realism about methodology and the epistemic aims of the social sciences (Hedström & Ylikoski 2011). Analytical sociologists are realist about explanation. In contrast to instrumentalist views, it regards explanation as the principal epistemic aim of science. Sociological theories are not merely intellectual

constructions useful for making predictions and controlling social events. The primary epistemic goal is to represent the causal processes that generate the observable phenomena (Ylikoski 2009). This implies that analytical sociologists cannot accept the cavalier “as if”-attitude displayed by many economists and rational choice theorists. It is not enough that the theory or model “saves the phenomena,” it should represent the essential features of the actual causal structure that produces the observed phenomena. Similarly, analytical sociologists do not accept the instrumentalist attitude according to which assumptions are instruments that can be freely tinkered with until one arrives at simple and elegant models (Hedström 2005). The consistent realist attitude requires that those theoretical assumptions that have a central explanatory role should be both empirically valid and compatible with the results of other scientific fields. The considerations of elegance, simplicity, or tractability should not override this central aim. Parsimonious models with clear analytical solutions deserve praise only if they are not achieved at the cost of implausible theoretical assumptions.

While analytical sociologists fully embrace modeling as a strategy of scientific research, the realist commitment has important implications. Analytical sociologists aim for theoretical assumptions known to be at least roughly correct about the phenomenon that they are analyzing. Formalization often is required for explaining social phenomena but, if the model does not properly describe action principles observed in the real world, they are of little explanatory use. In order for the analysis to explain the social outcomes that actors bring about, it must be based on clear and empirically plausible assumptions about the actions and interactions of the individuals..

Theories of middle-range

The third important component of analytical sociology is the idea of a middle-range theory. It connects the idea of causal mechanisms to more general ideas about the growth and organization of scientific knowledge (Hedström & Ylikoski 2010, Ylikoski 2011). In a mechanism-based account, scientific knowledge is embedded in mechanism schemes and not in empirical generalizations as in more traditional empiricist accounts. According to this view, social scientific knowledge expands by adding items to or improving upon items already present in the toolbox of possible causal mechanisms. Understanding accumulates as the knowledge of mechanisms gets more detailed and the number of known mechanisms increases. This vision of knowledge does not require that mechanisms be ultimately organized into a grand unified theory. It is only required that the accounts of mechanisms provided by different disciplines be mutually compatible and that they form an integrated web in which

mechanisms at lower levels of organization explain the mechanisms that higher-level disciplines take for granted.

This mechanism-based vision of knowledge has much in common with Robert K. Merton's (1968) idea of sociological theories of the middle range. A theory of the middle range is a clear, precise, and simple type of theory which can be used for partially explaining a range of different phenomena, but which makes no pretense of being able to explain all social phenomena, and which is not founded upon any form of extreme reductionism in terms of its *explanans*. Middle-range theories isolate a few explanatory factors that explain important but delimited aspects of the outcomes to be explained (Hedström and Udehn, 2009).

Theory of action

As already suggested above, intentional action plays an important role in social mechanisms. However, the idea of a social mechanism in itself does not tell us how to conceptualize human action. Rather than relying on some preconceived ideas about human motivation or cognitive processing – as in RCT – the analytical sociology perspective suggests that our account of human agency should be based on empirical findings about human cognition and decision-making (Ylikoski & Hedström 2010). A crucial element of the analytical approach is that intentional explanation is treated as a causal explanation; thus the aim of explanation is to identify those beliefs, desires, or goals that make the causal difference to individual's behavior. Thus mere rationalization of action does not suffice.

Although the mechanism-based approach emphasizes the importance of action in the explanation of social phenomena, it does not subscribe to an axiomatic vision according to which a specific action theory should be used for all purposes. As different theories of action emphasize different aspects of human action, the choice between them should be made on empirical grounds. In line with this, agent-based simulations where the attributes and action-principles of the agents often differ significantly from those assumed by RCT are seen as important as long as the assumptions upon which they are based are supported by empirical evidence (Hedström 2005, Manzo 2012).

5. The puzzle

Now that we have articulated what we consider to be some of the basic principles of analytical sociology, we can identify some of the key differences between analytical sociology and SRCT. But let us first point to some important similarities between the two approaches.

First, both analytical sociology and SRCT regard the explanation of macro phenomena as the main explanatory goal of sociology (Coleman 1990; Lindenberg 1992; Hedström 2005). Thus, the ultimate explanatory goals are the same. Similarly, as noted above, both recognize the importance of abstraction and model-building in the pursuit of this goal. Thus the differences between the approaches are in the ways in which explanation is conceived, not in their basic explanatory goals.

Second, analytical sociologists (Hedström 2005) share with SRCT scholars a commitment to a quite loosely understood individualism that is often characterized as structural individualism (Lindenberg 1977, Wippler 1978, Coleman 1990, Udéhn 2001). According to this position all social facts, their structure and change, are in principle explicable in terms of individuals, their properties, actions, and relations to one another. Structural individualism differs from most formulations of methodological individualism by emphasizing the explanatory importance of relations and relational structures. It does not require that all explanatory facts are facts about individual agents in the strict sense. Facts about topologies of social networks; about distributions of beliefs, resources, or opportunities; and about institutional or informal rules and norms can play a significant role in the explanations.

Third, in contrast to much RCT in economics and political science, both analytical sociologists and RCT sociologists are empirically oriented, and they tend not to be satisfied with highly abstract theoretical RCT models that do not have clear counterparts in empirical reality.

These similarities give rise to an interesting and important question: Why do empirically oriented sociologists feel that they have something to gain from embracing RCT and by identifying themselves as RC theorists? As noted above, mainstream RCT, particularly in economics, is based on instrumentalist principles. While in programmatic statements these instrumentalist theorists sometimes talk about explanation and even about causal mechanisms, in practice they are methodological instrumentalists who let the considerations of simplicity, elegance, and tractability override considerations of causal realism. Furthermore, they are

often developing models for highly abstract and stylized facts that bear little relation to the social world as we know it from empirical research. The fact that a model involves strict deductive reasoning does not make it into an acceptable explanation if it does not address real-world *explanans* and *explanandum*. Too often RC theorists simply assume that their models apply to a case (or a "stylized version of it") rather than empirically justifying the validity of their assumptions.

Given this situation, one would have thought that empirically oriented RCT sociologists would build their identity and develop their research program into a different direction. However, SRCT researchers appear to have been captivated by certain metatheoretical ideas that has brought about this inertia. In the following we attempt to show that these metatheoretical ideas should be discarded and as a consequence SRCT researchers ought to adopt the more consistent metatheoretical stance that is provided by analytical sociology. Note that we do not claim that any one SRCT theorist subscribes to all the positions we criticize, but we are confident that they are well represented in the SRCT literature.

6. The assumed special role of RCT

It is quite common among SRC theorists to think that rational action has some special explanatory qualities that give them a privileged status. For example, Raymond Boudon suggests that

... a good sociological theory is one that interprets any social phenomenon as the outcome of rational individual actions (Boudon 2003: 2).

Similarly, he quotes James Coleman arguing that:

Rational actions of individuals have a unique attractiveness as the basis for social theory. If an institution or a social process can be accounted for in terms of the rational actions of individuals, then and only then can we say that it has been 'explained.' The very concept of rational action is a conception of action that is 'understandable,' action that we need ask no more questions about (Coleman 1986: 1).

John Goldthorpe seems to hold the same position as he suggests that rational choice explanation is

an especially appropriate terminus ad quem for sociological analysis (Goldthorpe 1998: 187).

These are strong claims that seek to set rational-choice explanations apart from all other causal explanations; a position that could be called intentional fundamentalism (Ylikoski 2013: 39). According to this view, rational-action based explanations are especially satisfactory, fundamental, or even ultimate. This is probably what Boudon has in his mind when he writes:

... as soon as a social phenomenon can be explained as the outcome of rational individual actions, the explanation invites no further question: It contains no black boxes (Boudon 2003: 3).

From the point of view of mechanism-based causal explanation, this attitude is without foundation, however. First, contrary to what Boudon claims, rational explanation is not without its presuppositions and these presuppositions are legitimate targets of causal explanation. It might be that intentional explanations are easy to comprehend or that they seem satisfactory in everyday life, but that implies only that we are fluent in employing folk-psychological interpretations. It does not give any special status to intentional explanations in scientific contexts.

A rational-action explanation is not the transparent box Boudon assumes it to be. It contains black boxes – in other words, it has a presupposition – as any other causal explanation does. Despite Boudon's worries, this is not a problem, however. He seems to be assuming the following principle: A genuine explanation requires that the *explanans* is itself explained or is self-explanatory. However, this principle is not possible to defend. The explanatory relation between the *explanans* and the *explanandum* is independent of the question of whether the *explanans* is itself explained. An explanation of Y in terms of X *presupposes* that X is the case, but it does not presuppose that X is itself explained. Naturally, we often want to have an explanation for X, but this is a separate issue from the legitimacy of the explanatory relationship between X and Y. To explain X is different from explaining Y (Ylikoski 2013: 40).

Another idea that has been used to justify the special status of rational explanations is Stephen Toulmin's idea that all sciences must presuppose an inherently understandable "ideal of

natural order” (Toulmin 1961, 42). For some rational-choice theorists, rational (self-interested) action provides such an ideal of natural order (Coleman & Fararo 1992, xiv; Fararo 1996, 306). However, this kind of special status for rational explanations would be extremely difficult to justify. Attributing such a special status to rational action is more in line with nineteenth-century hermeneutic romanticism than with a causally oriented social science. Thus it is no surprise that neither Fararo nor Coleman provided any justification for this idea.

Often the special status of rational explanation is defended by appealing to the role of rationality assumptions in the interpretation of human action (Goldthorpe 1998: 184-185). Setting aside the fact that people rarely use RCT when interpreting each other, this argument is not an argument for RCT specifically. If valid, it would support *any* theory that builds upon intentional psychology. Thus additional arguments would be required to show that RCT is the only acceptable version of intentional psychology around. Secondly, the role of rationality assumptions in interpretation is less prominent than is usually assumed. On closer inspection, the fundamental principle in interpretation seems to be that of *explicability* (Henderson 1993), rather than the principle of *charity* that is usually presented as the basis for the argument for the special status of rationality. The principle of explicability grants only a heuristic role for rationality considerations (in the early phases of interpretation) and it is ultimately based on knowledge about causal mechanisms underlying cognition rather than *a priori* rationality assumptions. In explanation of action the point is to get the causal facts right, not to rationalize it.

Finally, there is nothing in the idea of a mechanism-based explanation that would require the explanation to be articulated in terms of RCT. On the contrary, the requirement that mechanism-based explanations cite actual causes of the phenomenon to be explained often makes rational choice explanations unacceptable, as they are built upon implausible psychological and sociological assumptions. Empirically false assumptions about human motivation, cognitive processes, access to information, or social relations cannot bear the explanatory burden in a mechanism-based explanation. Thus, while some RC researchers have made important contributions to the toolbox of social mechanisms, there is no necessary connection between the ideas of RCT and mechanism-based explanations.

Our argument is not only that RCT is the wrong foundational theory for sociology. We are arguing that sociology does not need a foundational theory of action of its own. This position

requires some clarification since action-based explanations are at the heart of analytical sociology. As we see it, sociologists are bound to operate with some version of everyday folk psychology (such as the DBO-scheme used in Hedström 2005). However, there is no reason to commit to any specific version of folk psychology because our understanding of human intentional behavior is going to change as a result of empirical research in sociology and other disciplines such as psychology and cognitive science. Thus the idea of developing a general *sociological* theory of action that would serve all purposes is not only unappealing but also harmful. No matter whether this theory of action is based on RCT, pragmatic philosophy (Gross 2009), or whatever, it is attempting to do the impossible. As a result, such endeavors usually end up as highly abstract conceptual schemes that do not improve the explanatory power of ordinary folk psychology and whose relevance for sociological research is very limited.

7. Conclusion

From the point of view of analytical sociology, most of the unification of social scientific knowledge produced by RCT is more or less illusory. All kinds of models can be built using the RCT framework and most analytical narratives provided by social scientists can be translated into the abstract belief-preference language of RCT. This does not mean that RCT is a powerful explanatory theory, however. It merely shows that RCT uses a flexible vocabulary.

It might be the case that some scholars in the sociological RC tradition feel that our characterization of SRC metatheory does not apply to them, and that their own ideas are more similar to those of analytical sociology. Good for them, and – as many of these people do interesting sociological research – good for analytical sociology. However, this should not cloud the crucial differences that exist between the dominant metatheories of analytical sociology and RCT. There are clear and important differences between analytical sociology and the ideas often expressed by SRC theorists. These differences are real and they have real implications for sociological research.

Naturally, it would be a mistake to interpret what we say as a wholesale rejection of SRCT. There is a lot of good and interesting research within the SRCT tradition. What we are proposing is an alternative way to think about the merits and limits of this research tradition. What analytical sociology proposes is a way to move SRCT – and other sociological research traditions – in a more explanatory direction by leaving behind many of its outdated

metatheoretical ideas.

Let us conclude by briefly summarizing our position in relation to SRCT:

1. Analytical sociology is founded on a mechanism-based theory of explanation and this entails a clear distinction between explanation and mere storytelling. To be explanatory an account has to describe the mechanism actually responsible for the phenomenon. This requirement is not to be sacrificed for formal elegance, modeling convenience, or *a priori* ideas about human action.
2. Rational-choice explanations as traditionally understood are built on a very different metatheory than analytical sociology in that it allows formal unification and apparent precision to override causal realism.
3. Action-based explanations play a crucial role in analytical sociology, but this does not imply that rationality has a privileged explanatory status. What matters is that we can make sense of the individual behavior that brings about an outcome to be explained, and this is done by referring to the mechanisms that actually were at work. If the individuals truly acted on the basis of the canons of rationality, a rational-choice explanation would be appropriate, but if they did not, a rational-choice account of the behavior would not be explanatory.
4. Explanations of actions thus are at the core of analytical sociology, but that does not mean that we need a general *sociological* theory of action. The efforts to build such theories have been a failure in our view. To paraphrase Merton, such efforts have produced many concepts but no mechanisms, many approaches but no arrivals.
5. If a general and explanatory theory of action ever is to emerge, it seems highly unlikely that it would be a sociological theory of action in the sense that it would originate from sociologists working in isolation from cognitive scientists, social psychologists, etc. Much of what is done in those fields is not of much direct relevance to sociology, but that does not mean that sociology can ignore what is going on in those disciplines and seek to develop an action theory of its own. Psychologists such as Festinger, Milgram, Kahneman, and Tversky, for example, have made crucial contributions to the theoretical toolbox of sociology, and from an explanatory point of

view, their contributions appear much more important than the general action theories developed within the discipline itself.

6. In our view, for most sociological purposes a simple version of folk psychology, like the DBO framework is sufficient. This framework leaves a lot to be desired as a full theory of action, but it provides a clear and coherent vocabulary for analyzing social mechanisms in a manner that does not by necessity compromise causal realism, and it allows for systematic comparisons of different types of social mechanisms.
7. If SRCT simply is folk psychology dressed up in other terms, we have no fundamental objections to it, but if that is the case, we are puzzled as to why empirically oriented sociologists would want to identify themselves with a metatheoretical tradition that denies the centrality of empirically plausible theories.

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