

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY:**

**Rational choice theory: its merits and limits in explaining and predicting cultural behaviour**

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The questions this dissertation addresses are: (1) What principles must govern the decision-making process in order for persons to be called instrumentally rational? (2) Are these principles satisfactory for human rationality in all domains? To answer these questions, I focus on rational choice theory (RCT) and public choice theory (PCT), which are extensively studied as examples of instrumental rationality in contemporary debates in philosophy and economics. To see their merits and to determine their limits, I have applied RCT and PCT to cultural behavior, given that it is mainly motivated and determined by the norms of a given culture, and that it can be contrasted with behavior that is initiated and chosen by the individual for reasons other than norms.

For example, eating is seen as an individual act, but table manners are accepted as the products of a specific culture. Furthermore, identity, class membership, group-belonging, cultural rituals and traditional practices are, among others, generally considered as imposed upon individuals by culture. This gives the impression that culture primarily shapes and determines behavior. Cultural behavior in this sense is not subject to rational assessment and is formed through habits, customs, and traditions that essentially remain within the domain of senses, attitudes, and emotions other than choice and rationality. Contrary to this approach, I apply choice theories to cultural behavior in three chapters to discuss whether the choice theories have the potential to explain different forms of human behavior in general.

The application of the models shows that cultural behavior can be subjected to the criteria of rationality as opposed to previous approaches. However, the application also shows that RCT and PCT have arguable success in explaining the complexity and subtlety of cultural behavior. Their success is limited because, for example, they make unrealistic assumptions about human cognitive capacities, they

disregard the content of preferences, and they dismiss the role of emotions in decision making, among other shortcomings.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, I introduce four criticisms—these are: (1) individuals are not atomic and unconnected entities; (2) individuals are not perfectly rational; (3) instrumental rationality cannot explain fully human behavior; and (4) institutions and structures cannot be reduced to individual choices. These criticisms have three goals.

The first goal is to reformulate the choice theories according to the general features of human behavior. Choice theories tend to ignore the relation of individuals to each other in their environments, treating social groups as secondary and reducing public decisions to the choices of individuals. Social life is not just a matter of choice, but a natural tendency. Individuals live and interact together, helping to fulfill each other's desires and goals that they cannot realize independently. Even basic needs are inevitably social. So, a theory of rationality must take account of 'relations' in the sense that individuals are more than atomic entities.

The second goal is to discuss one of the assumptions of RCT— the assumption that people are not only rational, but also that they are *perfectly* rational. If they follow the rules of rationality, as they should, they can make flawless calculations about the best means to achieve their specific ends. Psychological tests have provided evidence time and again that this assumption is no longer tenable and that the application of RCT to culture supports the same assumption. Considering individuals as less than perfectly rational gives a more realistic view of them.

The third goal is to emphasize a point made by Jon Elster in *Sour grapes* (1983). He gives the following example to criticize the kind of rationality that he calls 'thin': "If an agent has a compulsive desire to kill another person, and believes that the best way of killing that person is to stick a pin through a doll representing him, then he acts rationally if he sticks a pin through the doll" (3). Thus, Elster rightfully objects to the idea that rationality can be understood without reference to the contents of desires, intentions, emotions, and beliefs. Pure means-ends rationality justifies all kinds of immoral acts including killing an innocent person in the most efficient way. To avoid such absurd conclusions, a broader concept of rationality is needed to guide us in interpersonal relations towards a more humane world.

Regarding the last point of criticism, I mention Wittgensteinian rule-following as an objection against methodological individualism. It is not meaningful to talk about the correct or incorrect application of a rule, or the correct or incorrect use of a word, a sentence or a statement independently of their usage in social relations and interactions. The individuals' mental states, beliefs, intentions are inherently and inseparably linked to social practices. So, methodological individualism cannot be successful in explaining complex human behavior.

In the second part of the dissertation (chapter 3), I introduce four more criticisms, which are that (5) following norms is not incompatible with utility maximization; (6) the dynamic nature of norms and interactions among rational individuals can be fully accounted for through integrating an evolutionary approach to choice theories; (7) sympathy, trust, and commitment (among other values) must be an integral part of rational behavior so that complex behavior can be explained consistently in the PCT framework; and (8) PCT fails to produce empirically satisfactory findings for cultural behavior.

These criticisms aim to overcome the shortcomings of current choice theories by providing a complete picture of the determinants of norms, sentiments, and civic engagement. They indicate the evolutionary framework in which these determinants develop. Without taking these significant factors into consideration, we will not be able to comprehend fully the place of rationality in human affairs. A theory that equates rationality with utility maximization is not only wrong, but also harmful and runs into difficulties in the face of the complexity of human behavior. It also falls short of explaining some forms of civic participation such as volunteering, charitable giving, and other forms of altruism.

Second, the application shows that when cultural behavior is analyzed in detail, the model and its application fail to combine individual and social behavior appropriately. When people play the game of norms across generations, they will reach an optimal strategy and equilibrium regarding these norms. Therefore, an evolutionary approach enables us to see the dynamic interactions between norms and rational individuals. Our norms evolve along with our lives and relations, and this has to be taken into account to understand individual action through interaction with others over time.

Third, I discuss an aspect of Adam Smith's approach to human relations that is usually ignored by economists who concentrate only on

consistency, choices, and ends of economic action. In other words, they concentrate on the formal aspects of rational choice, ignoring the setting in which these concepts occur in relation to virtues such as sympathy, trust, and prudence. As argued by Adam Smith, the need for sympathy urges people to socialize and regulate their behavior to make it conform to moral values.

In the last part (chapter 4), I introduce two more criticisms: (9) making a constitution is not just about proposing fair rules and just laws to be included in a constitution, rather it is also about the relative merits of the constitution makers. Since there is always the possibility of constitutional high-jacking by self-interested and partisan rulers and law-makers, even the fairest rules may be unjustly interpreted and ruthlessly manipulated in the hands of people who are solely motivated by self-interest. Lastly, (10) only a neutral constitution can justify the necessary constraints for cultural behavior.

These ten criticisms are intended to suggest that we need a model that is inclusive of the individuals who belong to different 'forms of life' and will explain the reasons of their behavior properly. I believe that this dissertation achieves two things: first, RCT and PCT may have a potential to bring under their scope previously neglected fields such as identity and culture only if they transform their sense of rationality by considering complex behavior, actors, and their interactions. Second, the pervasive opinion that culture and identity are not relevant to rationality and rational choice must be reconsidered.

## REFERENCES

Elster, Jon. 1983. *Sour grapes: studies in the subversion of rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Yurdagul Kilinc Adanali** is Assistant Professor at the Philosophy Department of Selcuk University. She completed her master's degree with a thesis on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. She obtained a PhD in philosophy from Middle East Technical University under the supervision of S. Halil Turan. Adanali conducted research on rationality, rational choice, and public choice at Columbia University and George Mason University (2011-2012). As an officer at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Turkey, she works in various projects of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage and has become an expert with her study entitled *Culture and cultural rights in the context of public choice theory*

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