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Rationality and Society 1990 2: 156
DOI: 10.1177/1043463190002002005

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What is This?
The article applies the radical-cultural feminist critique of the separative model of self to rational choice theories. Four assumptions of neoclassical economics—the "ideal type" of rational choice theories—are identified: selfishness; that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible; that tastes are exogenous and unchanging; and that individuals are rational. For the most part, sociological versions of rational choice theories rely on these same assumptions. The article shows that a separative rather than a connected model of the self underlies each of these assumptions.

Feminist Critiques of the Separative Model of Self

IMPLICATIONS FOR RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

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In recent years, feminists in virtually every field have uncovered ways in which disciplinary traditions assume and glorify traits traditionally associated with men, while ignoring and deprecating traits traditionally associated with women. These biases skew work on many topics, not only inquiries whose topic is gender. This article considers how the feminist critique of the separative model of self applies to rational choice theory. We take neoclassical economics to be the "ideal type" of rational choice theory and identify the four critical assumptions of neoclassical economics: selfishness; that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible; that tastes are exogenous and unchanging; and that individuals are rational. We also examine the extent to which sociological practitioners of rational choice theory accept each of these assumptions. The argument is made that the four assumptions of
rational choice theories harmonize more readily with a separative rather than with a connected model of self, and that this imbalance distorts the theories.

**FEMINIST DISCUSSIONS OF SEPARATIVE AND CONNECTIVE MODELS OF SELF**

There is no one unified feminist theory. One way to summarize feminist positions is to distinguish between liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and radical-cultural feminism (Donovan 1985; Jaggar 1983; England forthcoming, chap. 6). In a nutshell, the distinctions are as follows. Liberal feminists accept much of nineteenth-century liberalism, including the assertion of individual rights over the state or other collectivities, and the notion that individuals’ rights derive from their rationality. Liberal feminists believe that these same rights, originally construed by their male authors only to apply to men, should be extended to women as well, because women, too, are rational beings. Socialist feminists generally come out of a Marxist tradition, but take issue with the orthodox Marxist view that sexism is an epiphenomenon of capitalism and gender inequality derivative of class relations. Socialist feminists see male dominance and the dominance of capitalists over workers as distinct, although related, forms of oppression. Radical/cultural feminist theory argues that traditionally female qualities are of great value, but have been systematically deprecated because of male power and biases. Here, we focus on one strand of radical-cultural feminist theory which we believe makes the most interesting and important criticisms of assumptions of rational choice theory: the distinction between a separative self and an emotionally connected self.

Much of Western thought assumes and glorifies a separative self. The separative self also has been seen as masculine rather than as feminine. Radical/cultural feminism objects to the separative bias as much as to its link to gender, whereas liberal feminism only objects to the latter.

Theologian Catherine Keller (1986) provided a sketch of the way in which Western thought has glorified the separative self that begins with Greek philosophers and the early Christians. Aristotle and the early Christians associated women with water, animal nature, and composite monsters. Men were seen as more like God, a unified substance separated from the primal womb. In short, men’s superiority over women was seen to involve being in separate, homogeneous form, while women’s inferiority was related to their connection to the heterogeneous, primal slime. Here, already, we see separation revered and connection deprecated.
Benhabib (1987) traced the ideal of separative autonomy through classical liberalism in political philosophy. The contractarian tradition (whether the version of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, or Kant) discusses moving from a "state of nature" to the contractual cooperative state. Both before and after the contract, men are presumed to be separative and autonomous; what changes with the contract is the degree of civility or justice wrought out of their separative selves. These theorists presumed nurturance and connection to be available to men through women. Yet morality was not seen to hinge on nurturing emotional connections. Women’s nurturing did not count as moral since it was seen as "natural." The possibility of men’s nurturing was largely ignored. Thus the separative self was valued, with the nurturant connection either ignored or depreciated.

This emphasis on separation can be seen in modern developmental psychology as well. A long line of psychologists, including Freud, Jung, Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg, have seen individuation as synonymous with maturing. Gilligan (1982) dissented from this tradition, offering a feminist critique of Kohlberg’s (1976) stage-theory of moral development. Gilligan’s research suggested that women’s moral reasoning is often based on an ethic of responsibility and caring which flows from an emotional connection between self and other. By contrast, men’s moral reasoning is more often based on an ethic of principled noncoercion, which presumes and seeks to honor the other’s separateness. When women are measured on Kohlberg’s scale, they tend to score lower, particularly if they have been in nurturing roles. (For debate on whether Gilligan’s or Kohlberg’s empirical contentions about gender differences have been replicated, see Walker 1986; Baumrind 1986; Lifton 1985.) Gilligan argued that women’s lower scores on Kohlberg’s scales reveal a separative bias in the conception of morality rather than a defect of women. She believed that women’s connective conception of morality is as valuable as that of men, and hinted that some combination of the two views might be best for both men and women to learn. One part of Gilligan’s analysis is the empirical assertion of a gender difference in morality, while a second part of it is the normative claim that we should value connective ethics of care as much as separative ethics of noncoercion. The normative argument has recently been explored more fully by philosophers (Kittay and Meyers 1987).

Glorification of a separative self appears in science and in the philosophy of science as well. Evelyn Fox Keller (1983, 1985) argued that objectivity has been defined in terms of the separation between the subject (the scientist) and the object (of study), and that this choice of how to define science tells us more about male psychology than about how we might best come to know
the world. Keller argued that it is bad science to eschew emotional connection with one’s subject matter when this can aid understanding, as she claimed it did for Nobel prizewinner, biologist Barbara McClintock. Keller thus argued against the glorification of separateness that has been present in both science and the philosophy of science.

Like Gilligan, sociologist Nancy Chodorow (1978) was struck by the twin facts that men are more “separative” than women and that psychological theories have seen separation as synonymous with development, thus glorifying the male pattern. But what is the source of this divergence between the male and the female emphasis on connection and separation? Chodorow devised a feminist revision of the object-relations tradition in psychoanalytic theory to account for gender differences in separateness, arguing that a key aspect of childhood socialization flows unintentionally from the fact that the primary caretakers of children are usually women. As a result, females have their primary bond with a same-sex person, whereas males are bonded to a person of a different sex. Thus males become more individuated than females because defining themselves as male requires separation from, rather than identity with, their caretaker. In contrast, among females, such separation is not required, allowing females to retain more permeable psychological boundaries that encourage emotional closeness, empathy, and altruism.

While Chodorow saw being reared by a female as sufficient to produce connective women and separative men, others suggest that it is the experience of gestating and caring for children that creates a consciousness more oriented to connection (O’Brien 1981; Ruddick 1989). Of course, a more straightforward, cultural explanation hinging on the differential socialization of males and females could be offered as well. Finally, more structural forces may also be at work affecting sex differences in orientation to separation/connection. For example, when women are assigned to structural roles (jobs) emphasizing nurturance, development of a nurturant focus is hardly surprising. Our goal here is not to resolve questions regarding the source and size of the relationship between gender and the dimension of separation/connection, but to point out the relevance of this gender-related dimension to assumptions in many of our theories.

The prevalence of this theme of separation/connection in both normative and positive feminist writing is striking. Taken as a whole, this feminist body of writing challenges both the positive claim that individuals are emotionally unconnected and the normative glorification of the separative rather than connected self. Although this feminist position calls attention to current gender differences, most of its proponents see no necessity or virtue in men being separative while women emphasize connection. Indeed, they see the
asymmetry to contribute to women’s subordination. But while liberal femi-
nists would correct this asymmetry by assuming and glorifying the separative
self for both men and women, radical-cultural feminism sees an equal and
prominent valuation of connection for both men and women as a goal
(England forthcoming, chap. 6).

This body of feminist theorizing suggests several things: (a) Models
assuming a separative self more accurately describe men than women; (b)
men, too, are embedded in emotional bonds of connection that separative-self
theories have denied; and (c) to the extent that gender differences in orien-
tation to separation/connection are socially constructed, social theories that
assume a separative self are inaccurate models of some possible and actual
social arrangements, although they claim to be completely generic.

EVALUATING THE ASSUMPTIONS
OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Neoclassical economics, the “ideal type” of rational choice theory, has
four major assumptions: (a) that individuals are selfish, (b) that interpersonal
utility comparisons are impossible, (c) that tastes are exogenous to the theory
and unchanging, and (d) that individuals are rational. We now explain these
assumptions, consider whether they are adopted by sociological practitioners
of rational choice theory as well, and examine how the feminist critique of
the separative model of self pertains to each of these assumptions.

THE ASSUMPTION THAT INDIVIDUALS ARE SELFISH

Neoclassical economic theory assumes self-interested actors. However,
the theory says nothing explicit about what gives people utility, and most
economists presume that this varies from person to person according to tastes.
Thus it is not inconsistent with neoclassical assumptions for some individuals
to have a taste for either social approval or altruism. Despite the consistency
of status consciousness or altruism with economists’ formal assumptions, in
practice, most economists assume selfishness without explicitly stating the
assumption, as Frank (forthcoming) pointed out. One reason why the as-
sumption of selfishness is generally made is that, without such an assumption,
determinant predictions of the type which economists derive mathematically
are often impossible. This is particularly true if individuals vary in their
altruism, and if altruism is encouraged by some situations and not by others.
Sociological practitioners of rational choice theory also generally assume selfish actors, as Friedman and Hechter (1988, 209) pointed out in their article reviewing the perspective. The prominence of discussions on how the "free rider problem" makes collective action difficult is evidence of this assumption. In this view, unions, social movements, or other collectivities have trouble getting people to contribute to the cause when the individuals will be able to enjoy the results of any collective success whether they have contributed or not. (For discussions of this "free rider" problem, see Hechter 1987; Freidman and Hechter 1988, 206; Coleman forthcoming; Friedman forthcoming. For conflicting experimental evidence, see Marwell and Ames 1980; Kim and Walker 1984.)

Theorizing about the family poses special problems for the selfishness assumption, since altruism surely exists in the family. Yet selfishness seems operative as well. For example, Brinton (1988; forthcoming) attributed the tendency of Japanese parents to invest in college for their sons rather than for their daughters at least in part to self-interest. Many Japanese need to rely on a child for financial support after retirement. Given pervasive discrimination in the labor market, a son is a better investment than a daughter. The explanation makes some sense. But one might point out that if parents were completely selfish they could surely find more profitable ways to make money for their retirement than investing in a son's education. In the extreme, if all parents were entirely selfish, many children would never be born or would die at a young age! Economist Gary Becker (1981) swung to the other extreme, painting fathers as complete altruists. He posited an altruistic family head who takes the utility functions of family members as arguments of his own utility function. (Becker referred to the altruistic head as male and to the beneficiaries as women and children, although he claimed that this gender distinction was not necessary to his argument.) This allowed Becker the mathematical simplicity of a single family utility function, while allowing him to avoid examining problems of family power and conflict (England and Farkas 1986, chap. 3). Restrictive assumptions of either complete selfishness or complete altruism allow mathematically driven deductive conclusions.

The assumption that individuals are selfish is related to the separative model of self. Emotional connection can breed empathy, altruism, and a subjective sense of social solidarity (although when it is asymmetric it may also breed domination). Thus separative selves are more likely to be selfish than are connected selves. Thus, if separation/connection is variable, selfishness is as well, both in the family and elsewhere. Selfishness should not be assumed a constant in theories.
THE ASSUMPTION THAT INTERPERSONAL
UTILITY COMPARISONS ARE IMPOSSIBLE

Neoclassical economists explicitly assume that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible. That is, we cannot know which of two persons gained more from a given exchange or who is more advantaged overall. This is because the relevant “currency” in which we measure gain or advantage is utility, but utility is conceived as being radically subjective. It is thus seen as able to be measured ordinally within persons through their revealed preferences, but not on an interval-ratio (or “cardinal”) scale that would provide a common metric with which to compare between individuals (Hirshleifer 1984, 476).

In neoclassical theory, any voluntary exchange is said to lead to a Pareto-superior distribution of utility, and a sequence of as many voluntary exchanges as are desired leads to a Pareto-optimal result. But Pareto-optimality does not imply equal utility before or after the exchanges; equality or inequality of utility between parties is not believed to be knowable.

The closest concept in neoclassical theory to what we think of in commonsense terms as “someone getting a bad deal” is the notion of trading with a monopolist or monopsonist. Monopoly refers to a situation in which there is only one seller for a particular good or service; monopsony refers to only one buyer. In either situation, there is an absence of competition. In this case, economists recognize that the monopolist or monopsonist derives more from the exchange than he or she would derive under competition. But this is not the same as arguing that the monopolist or monopsonist gets more from the exchange than does the other party to the exchange. Thus, even in this case, interpersonal utility comparisons are avoided.

When we apply this principle that interpersonal utility exchanges are impossible to the comparison of structural positions or groups, we see why economists never conclude that the group in one structural position is more advantaged than another. Such a conclusion requires averaging across various rewards. Economists assume that it is impossible to do such averaging precisely because individuals may weight rewards differently in their utility functions. This explains why positive neoclassical theories harmonize well with conservative normative positions on distributional issues. A paradigm which denies the possibility of stating that those at the bottom of hierarchies average less “utility” overall than others, but is sure that virtually all collectivist redistribution is non-Pareto-optimal, will incline its practitioners to be conservative on distributional issues.
Most sociologists outside the rational choice camp implicitly assume that interpersonal utility comparisons are possible when they use terms like subordination, disadvantage, or power. The microsociological version of rational choice theory, exchange theory, has emphasized power, and has measured it in a way that presumes a cardinal measure of utility (Emerson et al. 1983; Emerson 1987; Friedman 1987). To talk about a comparison between one person’s ratio of input to reward and another person’s ratio presumes a common, cardinal metric for reward and thus interpersonal utility comparisons.

Authors devising macrosociological versions of rational choice theory often use language that suggests the possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons. For example, Heimer (1985) discussed how principles of rationality in the presence of risk which she used to analyze the insurance business might also apply to decisions about having sex before marriage. After comparing the expected costs and benefits to a man and a woman of engaging in premarital sex, Heimer commented that, should a pregnancy ensue, the woman will probably incur higher costs than the man. We are not talking here only of monetary costs (although each individual might assign a dollar value to them); the statement presumes a cardinal metric which we can use to average across different costs to compare the man’s and the woman’s, and thus an interpersonal utility comparison. To take another example, Coleman (forthcoming) discusses the emergence of norms through collective sanctioning, and commented that those actors with greater power are less constrained by norms than are those with less power. If person A having more power than person B is taken to mean that A gets more of what A wants than B gets of what B wants, then comparing power means making an interpersonal utility comparison.

Despite the fact that those sociologists following rational choice theory are more likely than economists to use language that implies overall disadvantage, and hence interpersonal utility comparisons, their research nonetheless de-emphasizes consequences of power and inequality, just as the research of economists does. For example, Hechter (forthcoming) argued that a theory explaining how institutions emerge in the presence of large power differentials is theoretically uninteresting since it is obvious how institutions could be imposed under such conditions. Thus he took as his task to explain how institutions emerge out of collective action among equal individuals. This cuts two ways. On one hand, the discussion of unequal power admits of the possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons. On the other hand,
Hechter eschewed discussing how institutions are formed under conditions of unequal power, even though these may be the very conditions under which most institutions are formed.

In sum, all rational choice theories de-emphasize systematic consequences of unequal power and resources. For neoclassical economists, it is an explicitly stated assumption, the assumption that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible, that gives rise to this de-emphasis. For sociological rational choice theorists, the same de-emphasis exists without a clear assumption as its base. To put it another way, sociologists who practice rational choice theory talk as if interpersonal utility comparisons are possible, but often choose their topics as if they are not possible.

How does the feminist discussion of separation/connection relate to assumptions about interpersonal utility comparisons? The belief that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible flows from a separative model of the self. Emotional connection facilitates empathy. Empathy, in turn, facilitates making interpersonal utility comparisons, since being able to imagine how another feels in a given situation implies the possibility of translating between one’s own and another’s metric for utility. If a model allows the possibility of interpersonal utility comparisons between the individuals under study, then the notion that the scholar can make such comparisons among individuals and groups under study is surely plausible. Thus the assumption of the utterly subjective nature of utility is one more example of basing models on a socially constructed specific of male psychology, while claiming that they rest on a constant of human nature.

THE ASSUMPTION THAT TASTES ARE EXOGENOUS AND UNCHANGING

Neoclassical economists take individuals who maximize utility as their analytic building blocks. Tastes are exogenous inputs into such a model, since an individual’s tastes determine the amount of utility provided by different combinations of goods, services, leisure, working conditions, fertility, and other factors. Economists do not attempt to explain the origin of these tastes. Stigler and Becker (1977) argued that there is little variation in tastes, and thus that most behavior can be explained by prices or endowments. Other economists assume that tastes vary across individuals and see a role for disciplines, such as sociology or psychology, in explaining variation in tastes (Hirshleifer 1984). But whether they see tastes to vary or not, economists see tastes as exogenous inputs to their models. Accordingly, an individual’s tastes are not seen to change as he or she interacts with economic forces. For
example, one’s preferences for job attributes is not seen to be affected by what jobs one has held.

Economists have recently moved onto the “turf” of other social sciences with models purporting to explain crime (Becker 1968; Witte 1980), behavior in the family (Becker 1981; Pollak 1985), and the authority structure within firms (Williamson 1985, 1988). As economists enlarge the topical scope of their theories, claiming that their paradigm can explain more than behavior in formal markets, but all of human behavior, then they have to argue that tastes are exogenous to all social interaction, even socialization in one’s family of origin. In such a view, tastes cannot be explained by other social sciences’ theories since the neoclassical model is seen to replace these theories. In such a view, tastes must be biologically determined, a highly questionable assumption. In sum, assuming fixed and exogenous rather than changing and endogenous preferences radically simplifies neoclassical models, although as economists’ topical scope enlarges, the implausibility of the assumption becomes ever clearer.

Sociological rational choice theorists also see tastes as exogenous to rational choice theories (Hechter 1987, 11, 184, n. 9; Freidman and Hechter 1988, 202-3). In addition, most sociologists using rational choice theory follow the neoclassical assumption that tastes are unchanging. An exception is Coleman’s (forthcoming) rational choice model of the emergence of norms which takes as variable the extent to which norms are internalized. When a norm is internalized, surely a preference has changed.

As Freidman and Hechter (1988) pointed out, any particular rational choice theory must make an assumption about the content of individuals’ (exogenous and unchanging) tastes or it cannot lead to predictions. In much of orthodox economics, this is dealt with by an auxiliary assumption that workers seek to maximize money income while firms seek to maximize profits. But orthodox economists know that such provisional assumptions are not assumptions that they want in the deep structure of their theories, for they know that workers also take the nonpecuniary working conditions of jobs into account, and will trade these off against income. Similarly, employers may be willing to lessen their profits to indulge a taste for discrimination. The consequences for a theory’s predictions of varying the assumed tastes are profound. To take a sociological example, if we assume that people have a taste for others’ approval, as Coleman (forthcoming) did, it is much easier to provide an explanation from rational choice theory of the emergence of norm-governed behavior through collective sanctioning strategies. The resources needed to sanction behavior are much less when approval and disapproval are salient in the tastes of actors.
The feminist critique of the separative model of self provides one way to think about the unreasonableness of the assumption that tastes are unchanging and exogenous to social or economic models. Only a self cleanly emotionally separated from others could move through social interaction, exchange, and structural roles with no effect on his or her tastes. Such a degree of emotional separation and atomism is highly unrealistic. If a model cannot help to elucidate how tastes change through social interaction, it may be putting too much of human experience outside its scope of explanation.

THE RATIONALITY ASSUMPTION

The rationality assumption in economics, as in all rational choice theories, refers to the cognitive assessments which individuals make about the relationships between means and ends. Ultimate ends are chosen by tastes. Intermediate goals (those that are ends with respect to some means and means with respect to more ultimate ends), as well as lower-level means, are chosen according to one’s cognitive assessment of whether and at what cost they will achieve one’s taste-defined ends. That individuals make such assessments accurately and use them to make decisions is the essence of the rationality assumption.

Most critiques of the rationality assumption focus on the fact that people often lack the necessary information to make correct calculations, or on the limitations of their cognitive ability to make them. Economists have responded to the first problem with the development of search theory, which posits that people will incur costs to obtain information only if the cost of obtaining the information is less than the expected gain from obtaining the information. Thus making a decision without full information is often rational. (For a nontechnical introduction to search theory, see England and Farkas 1986, 36-42, 123-126.) The second problem, lack of cognitive ability to make optimizing calculations has led to the concept of “bounded rationality” (Simon 1982; Hogarth and Reder 1987; Williamson 1985, 1988). In the case of either limited information or bounded rationality, if the limitations lead merely to random errors in individuals’ optimizing, the effect of this on rational choice models is to lower their explanatory power, not to make them wrong-headed. Neither of these critiques seem related in any clear way to the feminist critique of the separative-self model.

The question to be explored here is how the feminist critique of the separative self relates to the rationality assumption. To see this, we need to extend the critique beyond application to a separation between persons, and
apply it to the tendency to *separate human qualities into oppositionally defined dichotomies* (England forthcoming, chap. 6). The term dichotomy, as used here, does not imply a discrete rather than a continuous concept. Rather, it implies that the two poles of the scale, whether discrete or continuous, are radically separate opposites. Seeing men and women as opposites, as in the phrase “the opposite sex,” is an example of such thinking. To take another example, much of Western thought features a dichotomy between reason and emotion that sees reason as the opposite of and superior to emotion. While the liberal feminist protest against seeing this dichotomy as inherently linked to gender is well understood, less well-known is the radical-cultural feminist critique of the dichotomization itself. This rejection of separating human capacities into opposites bears considerable similarity to a rejection of glorifying the separation between individuals.

Since the radical-cultural feminist position argues against a false dichotomization of reason and emotion, it judges the rationality assumption by the extent to which such a dichotomization is entailed in the conceptualization of rationality. In this view, a conception of rationality is problematic if rationality is seen as radically separate from emotion. Let us examine whether this is the case for rational choice theory. Note first that desires, which we might think of as emotions, appear in rational choice theory only in the realm of exogenous tastes. The theory thus creates a radical separation between two spheres of events. In one sphere are the “tastes” (preferences, emotions, desires, internalized norms, and values) that determine one’s ends. In the other sphere are the cognitions, the calculations about what means will achieve the ends satisfying the demands of the first sphere. The rationality principle resides in this second sphere. Thus we see that rational choice theory does contain the reason/emotion dichotomy so common to Western thought. Rationality and emotion (tastes) have been separated from each other so that (a) rationality serves the interest of tastes but is not “distorted” by them, and (b) ultimate tastes are not changed by constraints or by rational calculations of what is possible and what things cost within these constraints. It is this radical separation that distorts the conceptualization of rationality. In reality, there is much more commingling of the realms of emotion and cognition. Indeed, the radical/cultural feminist position is that they are inconceivable and unfruitful without each other, so the conceptual separation is artificial. In this sense, the general feminist critique of false separations requires a revision of our concept of rationality. This would not preclude assuming rationality, but would alter our meaning of the term somewhat.
CONCLUSION

If one accepts the feminist critique of the separative-self model, how does this imply that rational choice theory should be changed? First, selfishness/altruism must be considered a variable. Selfishness should not be assumed a constant, despite the loss in formal deductive power of models. For example, sometimes, people show group solidarity that cannot be explained entirely by selfish responses to sanctions, but such group "altruism" cannot be assumed as unproblematic either. The interesting question is to investigate the circumstances under which solidarity based on altruism versus sanctions is most and least likely to occur. In contrast, rational choice theorists have theorized how behavioral solidarity could be produced in the absence of any subjective sense of group loyalty (Hechter 1987, forthcoming). This is a contribution, but it ignores one important source of solidarity.

On the issue of interpersonal utility comparisons, we suggest that finding a metric for cardinal comparisons be viewed as a practical, if difficult, measurement problem, not an impossibility. This allows theories to acknowledge power disparities and to study their roots and consequences.

We also need to develop models in which tastes are endogenous and changing. As an example, the "social structure and personality" school of sociology has demonstrated that many psychological characteristics which we might think of as tastes are affected by one's structural position (e.g., Kohn and Schooler 1983), using panel methods that vitiate suspicions of selection bias.

We have no quarrel with assuming rationality. Obviously, humans act with an eye toward the consequences of their actions. Of course, information, one's calculative skills, and the energy one has for engaging in constant calculation are all finite and vary across persons. This suggests that theorists should use common sense about how heroic the assumed calculations are. They should also attend to how one's structural position may affect the accuracy and amount of information available as well as opportunities to develop skills of calculation. The feminist quarrel with the rationality assumption arises only when rationality is construed as radically separate from and opposite to emotion, an assumption which we think is buried in the neoclassical model. But if not viewed as opposite emotion, rationality, the assumption from which rational choice theory takes its name, is the least problematic of the four assumptions of the theory.

However, if one accepts our critique of the other three neoclassical assumptions, even if one fully retains the rationality assumption, the changes in other assumptions blunt the power of the rationality assumption to lead to
deductively generated predictions. For example, a model in which people are rational in the service of utility functions that may or may not include empathy for another’s level of utility and altruism has less clear predictions than does a model in which one’s rationality is always in the service of one’s self, separatively construed. Similarly, a model in which individuals are rational in the service of their tastes loses some of its predictive power when placement in a social structural role or network can change those tastes. How much rationality tells us about the way people will behave diminishes when we do not know a priori if (a) they are selfish, (b) they feel and respond to another’s suffering (“lack of utility”), and (c) their tastes sometimes change.

In sum, even if we assume rationality, relaxing the other three assumptions of necessity produces less deductively determinate models. This is probably the single most important reason why rational choice theorists cling to simplifying assumptions: They create more determinate conclusions. This poses a dilemma. We would like parsimonious theories that make sense of the world. Yet the assumptions of rational choice theory are unrealistic, and distorted in a way that, in our heritage, is masculinist. To heed the feminist criticisms offered earlier, theorists should consider separative and connected selfhood a variable, and look for systematic patterns that indicate its determinants and consequences. This allows us to reject distorting assumptions while not giving up the search for systematic patterns. Some price in deductive determinacy has to be paid, but we think that the benefits are greater than the costs.

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