

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AS A MODEL TO APPLY TO CULTURAL BEHAVIORS*

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Abstract

The main task of this study is to challenge certain traditional ideas regarding identity and culture and to bring these themes within the scope of the rational choice theory. To this aim, the study is divided into two sections: first, the rational choice theory is presented as a model by explaining its basic assumptions such as utility maximization and methodological individualism; and second, this model is applied to cultural behaviors to obtain required rational explanations. The application will begin with the common traditional definitions of the concepts of culture and identity, and next, it will demonstrate that culture and identity are subject to cost-benefit calculation just like the issues that we have seen in the rational choice preferences. This research intends to view cultural behaviors as instances of rational choice and analyze these behaviors at the level of the individual. By modelling cultural behaviors as a product of individuals' rational choice, thus, this paper will offer a new perception concerning the nature of rationality and the freedom of choosing individual identity and culture.

Key Words: Rational Choice Theory, culture, rationality, utility maximization, individuality.

KÜLTÜREL DAVRANIŞLARA UYGULANABİLİR BİR MODEL OLARAK RASYONEL TERCİH TEORİSİ

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, kültür ve kimliğe dair geleneksel düşünceleri sorgulamak ve rasyonel tercih teorisi çerçevesinde bu konuları yeniden ele almaktır. Bu amaçla çalışma iki alt bölüme ayrılmıştır: ilk olarak rasyonel tercih teorisi bir model olarak sunulacaktır ve daha sonra bu model gerekli rasyonel açıklamaları elde etmek üzere kültürel davranışlanara uygulanacaktır. Uygulama öncelikle kültür ve kimlik

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kavramlarının geleneksel tanımlarıyla başlayacak ve daha sonra kültür ve kimliğin tıpkı rasyonel tercihlerde gördüğümüz gibi kar-zarar hesaplanmasına açık olabileceğini gösterecek. Bu çalışma kültürel davranışları rasyonel tercihin bir örneği olarak görme imkanını ortaya koymayı hedeflemekte ve bu davranışları birey düzeyinde analiz etmektedir. Böylece bu çalışma, kültürel davranışları bireylerin rasyonel tercihinin ürünü olarak örneklendirerek hem rasyonalitenin doğasına ve hem de bireylerin kimlik ve kültürlerini seçme özgürlüklerine dair yeni bir anlayış ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rasyonel Tercih Teorisi, kültür, rasyonalite, fayda maksimizasyonu, bireysellik.

Problem

In daily life, we face many situations that require us to make decisions among alternatives. But it is not always easy to find which choice is “the best one” for us in advance. Moreover, the relationship between the principles of rationality that we presumably apply and the principles of action we follow is of a complex character (Tsebelis, 1990). How do we evaluate the alternatives and how do we make the best choice available for us in these circumstances? Rational choice theory (from now on RCT) is believed to provide an answer through determining the process of decision making within a framework of the instrumental rationality (Resnik, 1987: 3-19).

According to the RCT, individuals have the capacity to behave rationally when they are fully informed about the alternatives. They can make comparisons among the alternatives and decide rationally the best choice possible. This is their distinctive nature as human beings. Even though RTC is based on very narrow economic assumptions, it claims to explain a wide range of behaviors in psychology, sociology, and politics. (Morris and Oppenheimer, 2004: 9). For example, John Rawls who based mostly on the RCT develops a new approach to justice in his book *A Theory of Justice*. Even though he follows John Locke closely in many aspects, Rawls aims to eliminate unfair conditions from Locke’s theory, since his theory deprives people of their rights particularly with regard to their gender and qualifications. The three main concepts characterize Rawls’ theory: principles of justice, the veil of ignorance, collective rationality.

First, the principles of justice are the principles with which individuals make preferences according to the precepts of rational choice. They make their choice through hypothetical situation of *veil of ignorance*. Since the individuals do not know what will happen in the

future, they will choose rules and norms that would be suitable for a general framework of justice rather than merely to promote their desires and greed. Before the state, individuals are more likely to agree on certain impartial norms and rules. Thus the principles of justice are developed by a fair agreement of rational individuals. During the situation of veil of ignorance, a process of bargaining is carried out which not only determines what principles and form of government would be established by rational choices but also provides a way of solving problems which emerge from the conflicts among people (Rawls, 1951: 177). He imagines the agreement situation as an impartial contract that all sides are free, equal, and fairly disposed. Further, since people do not have information about each other and they do not carry prejudices against each other, they would practice the principles of justice when they make decisions.

Second, Rawls introduces the concept of veil of ignorance as a ground for impartial agreement. This concept helps us to understand why Rawls prefers to employ the model of individual choice under uncertainty to his theory. The initial situation as veil of ignorance is a situation under uncertainty since it brings impartiality and it helps us to imagine that we pursue the principles of justice as free, rational and equal individuals (Freeman, 2014). However, Rawls admits that individuals are rational in a limited way. He adds that even though the persons are rational in the narrow sense, their choice becomes acceptable and relevant because this is a choice in the original position before government. That is, justice as a choice is based on a fair consent among rational individuals.

Third, Rawls sees society as a cooperative arrangement for mutual benefit and as an important background for the principles of justice that come about through an agreement between rational persons. As noted by Rawls, “a well-ordered society satisfies the principles of justice which are collectively rational from the perspective of the original position.”(Rawls, 1971: 505). This sentence shows that Rawls links his idea of contract with collective rationality. In fact, he aims to provide a framework in which rationality as utility maximization is linked to the principles of justice as constraints for mutual advantage so that the market failures arising from individual rationality are solved through this framework. All these simply mean that Rawls considers the theory of justice as a part of the RCT (Rawls, 1971: 408). To be more precise, Rawls takes the RCT as a normative theory that provides the best actions to reach our ends.

Unlike Rawls, despite the ambitious goals of the RCT, there are scholars in various domains who argue that human beings are motivated by their passions and emotions in their actions and they act irrationally defying the rules of rationality in many cases. The domain of culture is one such case where individuals follow the rules that are dictated by the collectivities such as cultural groups, communities, and nations. Individuals, according to this view, are situated as passive receivers in their social and cultural environment, and culture provides all available preferences for individuals. They do not have to consider alternatives and make the best possible choice. Cultural group affiliation also explains why members of the same group are similar and behave similarly, and of the different groups differ and behave differently from each other. Group sets the stage, defines the roles, dictates the rules, imposes the choices, and provides an overall identity for its members. This creates certain advantages for the individuals from facilitating cooperation to establishing homogeneity. However, do these advantages dismiss the need for rational decision making at the individual level with regard to matters of identity and culture? I believe not, and in this article, I argue that it is possible to think cultural behaviors as instances of rational choice by hoping to provide a model to explain cultural behaviors as products of individual rational choice. Still, I have to admit that it has not been an easy task to fit culture and identity in a RCT model. It is not easy because the RCT models are not primarily originated from the issues of identity and culture which cannot be calculated easily through rational lenses. It is application to other domains, however, proved to be fruitful and resulted in the research areas such as incomplete information, unstable preferences, cost-risk calculation, bounded rationality, social context, and emotional states so forth.

1. Model: Rational Choice Theory

To explain main features of the RCT, I will begin with the less controversial principles of the theory that are generally accepted by its supporters: purposiveness, utility maximization and methodological individualism. These axioms will mainly respond to the following questions: Who are the rational players? What choices do they have? What are the possible outcomes that may result from their interaction?

Purposiveness is the most basic assumption of RCT and it maintains that there exist human beings who are capable of acting purposefully in the world (Lovett, 2006: 237). In other words, human behavior is intentional, purposeful, and goal-seeking (Vanberg, 2002:7). It is true that individuals now and then do act irrationally, impulsively or habitually. This does not make them habitual, impulsive irrationals. Given the cognitive capacities they have and the full knowledge of the alternatives, they *can* make rational preferences. They are capable of evaluating among alternatives, and making a choice among them in order to satisfy their intentions (Lovett, 2006: 240). For example, when renting an apartment, we consider location, condition, safety; when buying a car, we look for safety, reliability, and price; when deciding which candidate to vote for, we examine candidates or evaluate their political programs. When we make our decisions among the political candidates, certain psychological drives, childhood socialization, organizational norms, or other influences may play a role. Such things, however, can be overcome and the RCT posits that individuals pursue their goals rationally according to the beliefs, intentions and information that they have (Fiorina, 2001: 12761).

From the RCT point of view, making a good decision requires, first of all, figuring out the goals and evaluating the priority of each goal and then making an assessment of how likely each option is to meet our specific goals (Schwartz, 2004: 47). A rational individual seeks to find out which alternative is the best one in a given decision making problem and makes the choice accordingly, i.e., according to the principles of decision making studied by the philosophers, psychologists, economists, and other fields. It is possible to define rational individual as a person who is free, self-sufficient, knowledgeable what is good or preferable for herself or himself, fully informed over relevant alternatives or matters, and has the capacity to make a choice that would match her means with her ends. Therefore, for the RCT, the main principle is to prepare the conditions in which free and competent individuals form their beliefs and make their decisions according to the preferences as they see it proper. Needless to say, there are certain rules when this decision is made. However, these rules unanimously agreed and they vary among the scholars of the RCT. For example, Mary Zey lists five axiomatic requirements for preference such as consistency, transitivity, independence, continuity and monotonicity (1998), while Parsons mentions four axioms such as reflexivity, completeness, transitivity, and continuity (2005: 20). There are others who come up with a different set of axioms.

Among these axioms three are prominent: preference order, transitivity and consistency. Despite all these differences, there are commonalities that can be mentioned.

First, the alternatives in the set must have a rational preference ordering or rational utility order. In other words, each rational individual must have an explanation for why he or she orders these alternatives in that specific way (why certain alternatives are or are not to be preferred to others). In addition, a set of feasible actions is required. These are the actions that one knows that one can perform. Even if an action is available, if the person does not know about it, then it cannot be included in the set of feasible actions (Bicchieri, 2004: 183). Thus, individuals who are knowledgeable about the set of alternatives and the set of feasible actions and who can make preferences in accordance with their utility order are rational. What underlies this approach is that individuals have the capacity and skills to calculate the cost of each alternative, the subjective utility that they will gain from it, and they know how to maximize this utility in that order.

The second principle with the choice set is *transitivity*. According to this principle, the order of alternatives must be consistent or alternatively there should not be an inconsistency in the order. The third and perhaps most discussed principle is *consistency*. As Elster suggests, “consistency in fact, is what rationality in the thin sense is all about: consistency within the belief system; consistency within the system of desires; and consistency between beliefs and desires on the one hand and the action for which they are reasons on the other hand” (1983: 1).

Another point we should mention is that the RCT assumes the preferences as given, that is, the theory tells us how to make rational decisions, but not what decisions to make. The preferences are not subject to any judgment or questioning about their source (Parsons, 2005: 9). Rather the focus of the RCT is on whether individuals maximize expected utility. Nozick seems to support this idea by saying “rational behavior is aimed at achieving the goals, desires, and ends that people have. On this instrumental conception, rationality consists in the effective and efficient achievements of goals, ends, and desires. About the goals themselves, an instrumental conception has little to say.” (1993: 64). The axioms of the RCT do not define or determine the preference but only imply some crucial features or criteria for how to think about them. For example, the individuals are supposed to follow the formula: “An alternative is (*uniquely*) best if and only if it is better than all

other alternatives. If there is a uniquely best alternative, choose it” (Hansson, 2014). This formula also establishes a ground for another axiom of RCT; that is, utility maximization.

The RTC accepts individuals as “utility maximizers.” Utility analysis is the investigation of how consumers reach decisions to achieve utility maximization. This term is used in a restricted, technical sense in contemporary debates (Parsons, 2005: 10). The theory assumes that after considering all possibilities and carefully weighing the pros and cons of each of alternative, a rational actor makes a “cool and clearheaded ends-means calculation” (Verba, 1961: 95). Obviously, such a calculation requires that an actor have a complete perception of the implications of all her choices and a well-defined set of preferences concerning them. It also requires that she assess the preferences of other relevant actors and their possible strategies and responses to her choices. Individuals calculate and recalculate the changing conditions and then act rationally. To say that an individual is a utility-maximizer means that individuals choose the action whose consequence is the most preferred. In other words, the definition of a utility maximizer is: if a person is a rational agent and her choices always are the most likely ones to maximize her personal profit, then she is a utility maximizer. Thus rational choice calculation focuses on decisions involving the choices of an individual over a set of alternatives such whether she prefers to go cinema or library; whether she majors in philosophy, politics, or engineering, etc. The effect of other individuals for her decisions is not included in calculation. That is why, I have just focused on purposeful choices of individuals and have not mentioned anything about collective choices so far. The rational choice theorists in general believe that the groups or institutions cannot be rational and they cannot make choices like individuals with information and necessary skills to make rational decisions. Moreover, groups, societies, nations, institutions, or collectivities as they are called, cannot be the point of departure for analysis of decisions and can only be interpreted in terms of the cooperation of the individuals (Malesevic, 2002: 194). Or more sharply, as Elster said, collective desires or collective beliefs do not exist (1985: 3). This is the theory of methodological individualism developed as a method of explanation in social sciences and economics at the turn of the twentieth century.

The theory of individualism, in fact, has a long history and has been debated among the different schools of philosophy. Several authors pointed out that the idea goes back to Hobbes who believed that understanding of the whole required first the understanding of

its components, the understanding of its constitutive causes. The main idea of methodological individualism is that society consists of individuals. This is a fact that no one can deny but it is also a truism bordering tautology. Similarly, methodological individualism is interpreted by some as that facts about the society can only be explained through the facts about the individuals, an interpretation which was supported by Hayek who says: “there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior.” (1980: 6). He was particularly concerned with the centralized rationalistic planning in economics and politics. He believed that even in economics macro explanations must be answerable to micro events. Individual actions and preferences, according to him, do not necessarily determine the outcome at which they intend. In many cases, their individual preferences lead to consequences that they did not intend. Thus the economist must see economic relations through the eyes of the individual actions and preferences. Methodological individualism helps us to see the shortcomings our limited perspective and the dangers in centralized rational planning.

Another important aspect of methodological individualism that concerns us here has its origin in Weber, in his theory of ideal types. Weber believed that historical explanation may refer to the individual intentions but sociological explanation cannot just rely on the subjective interpretations. It has to make some generalizations and develop a model about human actions and this model is the model of rational human action. Weber considered all irrational human actions “as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action” (Heath, 2015). According to Heath, Weber’s methodological individualism “puts rational action theory at the core of social-scientific inquiry” and it is this idea that led social scientists of the later period to come up with a general unified theory of action. The project lapsed but later revitalized by Jürgen Habermas in his work *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Therefore, having secured a place for methodological individualism, we may now look at debates which interpretation is preferable for our purposes:

[i] Social phenomena should be explained entirely in terms of individuals alone: or social explanations must be derivable from facts about individuals (Little, 2010: 881);

[ii] Social phenomena should be explained in terms of relations between individuals; or scientific statements about society must be reducible to statements about individuals and their properties and relations;

[iii] Social phenomena are some kind of ordered whole and unitary collective (Udehn, 2001: 1).

I believe that first and second interpretations, taken together, capture main gist of methodological individualism. Even if the first and second interpretations catch the main idea of methodological individualism, definitional ambiguities still remain. Nevertheless, those scholars who defend the methodological individualism generally insist on the importance of individuals and their purposeful behavior to explain all facts about society and social phenomena (Hodgson, 2007: 211). In this view, an understanding of individual action is sufficient to explain social processes, even though relationships among individuals represent a valid component of such explanations.

In conclusion, the RCT begins from the viewpoint of the individual, rather than from the view point of collectives. The emphasis on the individual and on his or her interests is always a starting point for any theory of rational choice. Different theories of rational choice may make somewhat different assumptions about the individual, and may chart a different map from individual to society, but each begins with the individual as the basic assumption of the theory. For example, Rawls regards rational decisions as an interactive choice (Rawls, 1971: 505) He considers contractarianism as a cooperative arrangement for mutual benefit of the rational participants. This also provides a background for which (moral or legal) principles should be preferred through an agreement between rational persons. It links maximizing rationality to the principles as a constraint for mutual advantage. Thus, the system must depend upon an agreement between instrumentally rational agents with the expectation of advantage in which the governing principles are chosen accordingly through a rational bargaining. Similarly, Hobbes considers that people have a chance to get rid of fear of death and violence by evoking the same rational behavior in all individuals; namely by means of consent on the social contract (Hobbes, 1996: 89). Therefore all theories of rational choice are committed to the basic assumption of methodological individualism – the individual as actor with an initial concern only about him or herself and his or her welfare. From this basis, the RCT sets on showing how cooperation or norms emerge, but the emphasis is always on the individual social

actor. So, we can sum the main implications of the RCT at the end of section: there is a purposeful and goal oriented individual; this individual has various sets of hierarchically well-ordered preferences, and these preferences serve as a guide to action; the individuals act for to satisfy their preferences; namely, they calculate and recalculate the changing conditions and act rationally to maximize their utility; individuals are the starting point for all the explanations, even social events and structures, collective decisions; collective behavior are ultimately the result of rational choices made by the individuals.

2. Application: Culture and Identity

Whether identity and culture can be the subject of the free choice of rational individuals will be the main topic of this section. It will be mainly concerned with the following questions: Is the RCT applicable to all human behavior apart from the economic incentives and political considerations? Can individuals make any choice with regard to their culture or identity? Or are matters relating to culture and identity beyond the individual preference? Furthermore, it will focus on two main problems in the context of culture: underestimation of individuals' capacities by the essentialist cultural theories and the inadequacy of these theories for cultural change and identity formation. This application does not intend to exhaust all present problems concerning culture and identity by looking at them from the RCT perspective; however, it can provide an insight into the intimate relation between rationality, individuality and culture.

So far, the studies on rational choice tended to overlook the issues of cultural identity by claiming that these issues cannot be explained by rational reasons; they are emotional commitments inculcated in us by our parents, relatives, and other members in the society and they remain relatively stable throughout our lifespan. In a similar way, the studies on cultural issues do not show any interest in the relationship between the rationality of individuals and cultural issues. The classical theories related to culture, especially the essentialist ones, seem to underestimate the role of individual in overall formation of the identity (Heywood, 2003: 37). One such theory claims that identity is *given* naturally to the individuals in a certain culture which remains on its fixed way in spite of the changes and interactions among individuals, groups and communities (L'Abate, 2012). This view is called as essentialism or primordialism. Essentialism, as a philosophical idea, advocates

that for any specific entity, there is a set of certain attributes all of which are necessary to its identity and function. Things have essences and they have certain necessary properties and without these properties, things could not be what they are. Samuel Huntington's major works can be seen as striking examples of the essentialist theory of culture (2005: 38). Huntington claims that America was created by settlers who were mostly white, British, and Protestant, and whose values, institutions, and culture provided the foundation for the Americans as a nation and defines culture and identity as social phenomena which represent the essential characteristics of a particular nation. This idea leads to him to ignore the complex structure of societies and intermix between different cultures. In a similar way, theories of primordialism and culturalism suggest that since ethnicity unchangeable and fixed, it just belongs to the realm of emotions and it is not subject to rational considerations (Hearn, 2006: 20). Another contemporary scholar Walker Connor, for example, claims that "the national bond is subconscious and emotional rather than conscious and rational in its inspiration" (1994: 204). This reductionist approach assumes that the identical and similar cultural conditions at the community level create a situation in which all individuals perceive or react in the same way. These classical views of culture ethnicity and identity seem to ignore grossly the role of rational individuals over questions that matter to them most and focus just on how "culture precedes and determines the individuals belonging to it" (Eriksen and Stjernfelt, 2010: 360).

Rejecting the essentialist theories of culture, some scholars argue that internal and interactive dynamics and pluralistic nature of each civilization, continuing relations between cultures must be taken into consideration to have a meaningful theory about culture, ethnicity, identity, migration, globalization, and so on (Said, 2001: 12). Recent studies also challenge this concept of culture and national identity and deny that the nations are the only source for identity formation (Faas, 2010: 1). In the light of some empirical research, it is no longer tenable that cultures are unique and integrated unites, and they remain invariant without contradictions. Especially, two approaches have been influential in weakening the classical views of culture and identity: nominalist philosophy and postmodernism. From the nominalist point of view, identities are just descriptions determined by social convention in language (Barker, 2012: 20). There is no hierarchy of the properties, distinctions and qualifications that can be taken to determine an aspect of a culture or identity. Postmodernism, on the other hand, emphasizes diversity, pluralism

and authenticity with regard to culture and identity by giving attention to the individual identities rather than holistic, unified and centered wholes. Accordingly, identities which are formed through interaction and influence might be altered, modified and abandoned at any time. They can be subject to change because as a recent scholar Moya argues, “essentialist approaches to identity suppress the heterogeneity within identity-groups while they posit arbitrary rules.” (2000). Those rules, for postmodernists, develop master and meta-narratives of identity by underestimating subject who “is constituted by the relationality of the social and, at the same time, constitutes itself against social constructions” (Wang, 2004: 125). In the age of globalization, with the rapid development of communication media, and the facile dissemination of information, culture and identity are no longer viewed as the ultimate, stable and unchanging reference points for the individuals.

In fact, anti-essentialist theories have reshaped our understanding of individual, culture, identity and society through demonstrating again and again that individuals have multiple dynamic options for their identities. They reveal that we are living in a world filled with multiple identities to choose from, but this is not helpful in giving satisfactory reasons regarding changes of cultural behaviors. However, the RCT focuses on explaining and predicting individual behaviors giving priority to individual actors rather than to pre-existent groups. As known, seeking explanations for changes from the essentialist point of view does not produce a cogent theory of change in society, attitudes and behaviors. As Russell Hardin notes, the issues like nationalism, ethnic loyalty or identity are commonly viewed “as irrational or extra-rational” (1995: 14-41) Despite this view, however, he also claims that “individual identification with such groups is not primordial or extra-rational but is interest based and rational. Individuals identify with such groups because it is in their interest to do so” (1995: 14) Following Hardin, I suggest that although the RCT does not present a broad explanation for all cultural behaviors because of its self-restriction on matters of content, still it can provide a framework to explain cultural issues such as hyphenated identities, social and culture change through means of interaction, media, immigration, mobilization, etc. Besides, the RCT can also be applied to irrational or habitual behavior by subjecting them to the certain rationality criteria (Banton, 1983: 108). In other words, cultural behaviors can be analyzed in terms of cost-benefit calculations, rational or irrational decisions of individuals by applying the RCT.

The application of the RCT, however, to the cultural phenomena may seem at first sight very controversial, but as we have seen, a close analysis shows deeper affinities than surface level similarities. So far, the studies in this area, especially from the perspective of anthropology, have been busy with describing and reporting the connection between thinking and acting according to social norms (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010: 6). But the application of the RCT provides us with the opportunity to predict as well as to explain the reasons for human action even if individuals come from different social and cultural backgrounds (Chai, 1999: 176). This approach has a potential to make three essential contributions to the domain of cultural studies. First, as rational consumers, individuals act in the area of culture by choosing and deciding. The dominant view that there is nothing rational about culture needs to be revised. While anti-essentialists ignore the real life complexities because they put so much emphasis on the given aspects of identity, the RCT can provide a more reliable explanation of the ongoing life by introducing identities as *chosen* not given or constructed (Hechter, 1986: 269). In other words, when the RCT assume that the cultural identities are multiple and changing, individuals whose act rationally on the basis of their beliefs and desires can actively participate in the formation of their own identities within a set of alternatives. For instance, many women can choose either to be a housewife or a business woman; choosing where to live can affect and change the way of life; the status immigrants status change more than once in a different country; people have a chance to adopt a new religion, join a new sect, or not to believe at all (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000: 726). It would not be surprising, with the help of scientific and technological developments, to influence the genetic structure of the next generations, making slight but significant changes in their genes, gender, body size, IQ, or even all of its physiognomy which would have an tremendous effect on their identities (Shelling, 1978: 203). As these examples show that individuals increasingly face a bigger and wider range of alternatives to choose from in the way they participate in the formation of their identities actively.

Second, the RCT holds that individuals are rational consumers and if what I have been arguing is right they have an identity “market” “to shop” from. The rational consumers operate cost-benefit analysis to evaluate all the possible risks and gains that may be achieved when new components are acquired in their identity. Nevertheless, cost-benefit analysis does not necessarily mean that individuals pursue only material benefits, and “there are other types of rewards such as honor, prestige, authority, power, and position”

(Barot, 2006: 793). For example, getting a university degree may be considered a turn point in one's identity since it brings changes from new opportunities to pursue. Or, marrying a person from another culture brings a lot of changes in life-style, beliefs, values, etc. Of course, when individuals try to get maximum advantage, they interact with others. That is, the "market" also includes groups, communities, nations, namely, "sellers" who produce new and attractive identity "products" for rational individuals (Iannaccone, 2012: 110-115).

As Bauman claims, people with different backgrounds can produce new forms of expressions and cultural products instead of using the traditionally available ones in order to take the advantage of global opportunities in the world. An identity which is formed, formulated and gradually transformed according to the principles of free and rational exchange in the "identity market" can survive as long as there is demand and supply. So the strategy is to see culture or national identity as an option. In other words, cultural or social relations can be considered as the allocation of scarce sources: individuals act to obtain maximum utility by competing with each other. But, this does not mean that pursuing utility maximization necessarily leads to "zero-sum games in which the gains of the some rest on the losses of others. Quite the contrary, individuals associate with one another because they all profit from their association. But they do not necessarily profit equally, neither do they share the cost of providing the benefits equally. Even when there are no direct costs to participants, there will still be indirect costs borne by those who are excluded from the association" (Blau, 2006: 15). This view, mentioned by the sociologist Peter Blau, famous as founder of social exchange theory, is an application of the RCT to sociology. This theory assumes that "men live in a world of scarcity and therefore must select between alternative courses of action" (Heath, 1976: 3).

So far, economical assumption seems applicable to culture and identity, since individuals face by a scarcity of advantages of in terms of their capabilities and identities. The competition on the "market" forces individuals to change and make choices regarding opportunities. Whoever has distinctive qualifications such as multiple languages, skills, expertise and experience, s/he will raise the cultural capital that facilitates adjustment to different identities and cultures. That is, individuals prefer one identity over another or hide their identities because of the benefits or disadvantages they bring (Yang, 2000: 47). Further, individuals can act together by means of cooperation to achieve their ends and

this collective action cause new social and cultural groups. Individuals remain as a member of these groups as long as their utilities are maximized or at least are unharmed. If not, an individual, given the opportunity, can leave his or her group where his or her activities are not approved in previous environment. This strategy is motivated by the expected utility which appears as a maximum reward in individuals' relations. For example, if two individuals produce their maximum rewards for both sides at a minimum cost, their relationship will produce maximum utility not only for each, but also for the cooperation since they may have extra advantage when they keep company (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959: 31). Some people mark, cut or tattoo their body to show their commitment to a certain group. In terms of utility, these kinds of actions provide rewards or sympathy from those who have similar marks. Avoiding conflict and losses in utility would be a strong motivation for "people may want to match with those who share the same identity or for whom actions have the same meaning" (Akerlof and Kranton, 2000: 732).

By applying of the RCT's individual rationality and utility maximization assumptions to culture and identity, we have seen that contrary to the essentialist views, cultures can be defined as heterogeneous and changeable. Emphasizing the sense of belonging concerning culture and cultural identity, the essentialist views put uniformity and invariance against diversity and change, and this eventually leads to discrimination. Human beings have a long history of discrimination based on the distinctive features of gender, faiths and ethnic distinctions. The idea of fixed essence of every social group leads to see everyone in the group as "we," whereas people who are outside of the group as "other." The RCT's application allows us to see cultural identity not as a reflection of a fixed, natural, state of being but as a process of rationalization of individuals. There is no essence in culture and identity to be discovered; rather, individuals, communities, and nations are continually producing cultural identity (Barker, 2012: 233). However, this idea seems to undermine the traditional importance of notions such as race and ethnicity, and instead, proposes competition, choosing and changing as the basis of analysis. It is true that the RCT has taken a very different way to explain cultural behaviors as consequences of rational choice. And this way provides us with a powerful tool which makes it easier to explain and predict decisions and behaviors of individuals.

One of the strongest objections to the identity change idea comes from Paul Stern who notes, for example, that "people resist changing their national identities, even when they

can expect to benefit” (Stern, 2000: 105). To support his claim, he gives examples from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He argues that “despite benefits made available to those who identified with dominant national groups, people passed on their ancestral identities as Ruthenians, Ossetians, Azeris, and the like for generations with little hope of collective gain” (Stern, 2000: 106). While the RCT supposes that there is a possibility to change identities or acquire hyphenated identities because of the benefits, Stern thereby opposes this idea by claiming that emotional attachment plays a bigger role than cost-benefit calculation. He claims that “such communities of hyphenated-Americans seem to be acting not for tangible benefit, but out of identification –as if their old national identities have intrinsic value” (Stern, 2000: 106-107). We should not assume, however, that the RCT is not primarily interested in changes, since “the theory of rational action of purposive action is a theory of instrumental rationality, *given* a set of goals or ends or utilities” (Coleman, 1990: 516). Its first and foremost priority is in decisions. Change is a consequence of decisions and actions and the RCT explain and predict change through them. In addition, as Coleman indicates, the requirements for explaining changes are not easily met. What is needed, then, is to introduce a process of calculating benefits in order to explain the strategies, motivations and behaviors of the individual actors in relations to the changes that occur in their culture and identity.

Although Stern seems right to claim that emotions are huge part of someone’s loyalty to his/her nationality, but it is only a part of the whole story and does not provide a full explanation for adoption of new or hyphenated identities. Furthermore, emotions are not so stable as to sustain these identities due to their constantly changing nature. In addition, utility maximization can be regarded as a highly relevant motivation for individuals to acquire hyphenated identities through social interactions with other cultures. Thus, rational individuals can compromise their cultures and identities if their expectations greater than the costs (Ikpi, 1988: 6).

This does not mean that all human behavior is rationally motivated and people behave to realize their interests accordingly in all circumstances. Instead, the RCT allow us to identify the structure of change and exchange at a background of motivations through rational evaluation to reach desired goals. There is no reason why identity and culture should be deprived of the benefits of scientific research, i.e., the explanatory and predictive power of the RTC.

Third, to find out background motivations for cultural behaviors are to determine preferences or to ask, “*Why* people want they want” rather than “*How* people try to get what they want” (Wildavsky, 1987). According to Becker, “all human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who maximize their utility from a stable set of preferences” (1976: 14). For example, deciding between tea or coffee for breakfast is an act of choosing and this represents a transformation of values into a decision. When different alternatives are available, an individual can weigh each preference in terms of cost-benefit calculations. In other words, “individuals will identify with high-status groups because this identification contributes to their self-esteem. Likewise, individuals will avoid identifying with low-status groups unless there are objective or psychic barriers to so doing” (Hechter, 2000: 99). When we apply assumption of cost-benefit calculation to the area of cultural, we realize that individuals tend to use different aspects of their identities in order to achieve utility maximization. Nevertheless, there is a problem here: according to the RCT, preferences, which individuals need for the analysis of cost-benefit, do not alter from one person to another. If our preferences are stable and fixed, how can we explain cultural preferences are subject to change? According to Wildavsky, cultural preferences “emerge from social interaction in defending or opposing different ways of life. People decide for or against existing authority. They construct their culture in the process of decision-making. Their continuing reinforcement, modification, and rejection of existing power relationships teach them what to prefer” (1987). Hence, according to this view, rational individuals are able to make their identity decisions by sorting their preferences.

Despite this clear-cut explanation, it can be argued that people are driven by altruistic preferences which are context dependent, and so their preferences vary. The RCT considers this objection and “links preferences and beliefs to behavior without specifying the content of those preferences and beliefs” (Chai, 1997: 49). Indeed, the RCT assumes that “preferences are exogenous to the model and endogenous to the individual” (Dowding, 1991: 31). In other words, the RCT recognizes that individuals have preferences and are interested in their outcomes. That preferences can vary among individuals does not create a real problem for the RCT. If preferences have changeable characteristics, then from this perspective, it can be acknowledged that culture or identity “is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental

mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return.” (Hall, 2002: 53). If individuals think they will get beneficial consequence from choosing certain aspects of another culture or various components of a certain identity, then they will do so. If individuals suggest that there is an opportunity to get utility from cooperation, then they will do so even if it leads to changes in their identity and cultural affiliation and commitments.

Therefore, the application of the RCT model implies that the individuals search for a suitable alternative for reducing costs and increasing utility in their new environment. As long as they get what they expect, their identification and willingness to participate, and to adapt to a new culture will increase. This explains the increase in mobilization in our times, since when the opportunity decreases or a life-threatening situation exists, the RCT predicts that immigration to another culture will be increased. This will also allow us to see that cultural behaviors are not fully norm-oriented; it is also possible to see them as utility oriented.

Conclusion

In sum, essentialism and culturalism explain identity and culture through group membership or community based and the anti-essentialism by denying stability risks incoherence, this study has claims that the RCT provides an explanation to the cultural phenomena taking individuals’ capacity of choosing and rationality as the foundation of analysis and also considering identity preferences as the most important decision people make. In this study, first, I have examined the basic assumptions underlying the theory of rational choice that individuals are rational and they maximize their utility and second, I have applied these assumptions to the domain of culture and identity. So by applying RCT model to cultural domain this article concludes as follows: (i) Culture can be described as not just a given or predetermined phenomenon but a *chosen* domain in which individuals behave according to the principles of rational choice. Having a social identity does not necessarily preclude an individual from choosing among various alternatives as components of his or her identity. (ii) Utility maximization as an explanation for behaviors can be a useful model in the context of cultural behaviors of individuals.

Certainly, this application may be subject to some criticisms. Because of space limitations, here, I will briefly mention one of them that is evolutionary theory. This approach helps in understanding dynamic process of cultural interactions between individuals. This is also important for understanding the nature of culture and identity, since culture is transmitted across generations and it is subject to selection and evolution. However, the RCT is not interested in changes of choices over time; rather it assumes there is a fix set of alternatives and human beings behave as socially alienated atoms. This criticism can be used to advance both the idea of bounded rationality and the interactions between cultural actors, and to understand how people change their cultural behavior and norms to maximize their utility. This analysis bounds individual rationality with cultural behavior dynamically, so that changes both in individual strategies and in cultural norms can be answered more realistically. So, the evolutionary approach provides us an opportunity to see the dynamic interactions between norms and rational individuals. I think that this criticism is helpful and should be considered by the RCT to revise its thin model of rationality.

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