



RATIONALITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: EVOLUTION IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of rationality in the social sciences through the lens of its historical and theoretical evolution, with particular attention to decision-making processes within social institutions. The study analyzes how classical models of instrumental rationality have gradually expanded to include bounded rationality, institutional rationality, and context-dependent approaches shaped by cultural, normative, and structural factors. Special emphasis is placed on the role of social institutions as mediators that both constrain and enable individual and collective decision-making. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, economics, political science, and philosophy, the article demonstrates that rationality is not a fixed or universal principle, but a dynamic and evolving construct influenced by institutional change and social complexity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how rational decision-making adapts to modern societal challenges and provide a conceptual framework for further empirical research in social theory.

Keywords: Rationality, social sciences, decision-making, social institutions, bounded rationality, institutional change, social evolution.

Introduction

In contemporary social sciences, the concept of rationality occupies a central position in explaining human behavior, social processes, and mechanisms of decision-making. Within classical theoretical frameworks, rationality was predominantly interpreted as an individual's capacity to make choices aimed at maximizing utility based on complete information and consistent preferences.



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However, as social reality has become increasingly complex, such simplified models have proven insufficient to capture the multifaceted nature of decision-making in real social contexts. This has led to the emergence of broader and more nuanced interpretations of rationality in social theory.

Social institutions such as the family, education, the state, the market, and civil society play a decisive role in shaping rational behavior and guiding decision-making processes. These institutions establish normative frameworks, rules, and constraints that influence both individual and collective choices. Consequently, rationality cannot be understood solely as a property of individual cognition; rather, it is embedded within institutional structures, historical experiences, and cultural contexts that define what is considered reasonable or legitimate action in a given society.

The aim of this article is to analyze the evolution of the concept of rationality in the social sciences and to examine its role in decision-making processes within social institutions. The study explores classical models of rational choice alongside theories of bounded rationality and institutional rationality, highlighting their theoretical foundations and limitations. By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on sociology, economics, political science, and philosophy, the article seeks to demonstrate that rationality is a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by institutional change and social transformation. This analysis provides a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary decision-making practices and offers directions for further research in social theory.

Literature Review

The concept of rationality has been extensively discussed in social science literature, particularly within economics, sociology, political science, and philosophy. Early theoretical foundations were largely shaped by classical economic thought, where rationality was conceptualized through the model of homo economicus. Scholars such as Adam Smith and later neoclassical economists viewed individuals as rational actors who consistently pursue utility maximization based on stable preferences and full information. This instrumental



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understanding of rationality became a dominant analytical framework for explaining decision-making behavior, especially in market-oriented contexts.

In the mid-twentieth century, critiques of classical rationality models emerged, emphasizing their limited explanatory power in real-world social settings. Herbert A. Simon's theory of bounded rationality marked a significant turning point in the literature. Simon argued that individuals operate under cognitive limitations, incomplete information, and time constraints, leading them to seek satisfactory rather than optimal solutions. This approach shifted the focus from abstract rational ideals to empirically grounded decision-making processes, influencing subsequent research in organizational studies, public administration, and behavioral economics.

Sociological perspectives further expanded the understanding of rationality by embedding it within social and institutional contexts. Max Weber's typology of rationality instrumental (zweckrational), value-oriented (wertrational), traditional, and affective action provided a foundational framework for analyzing how social norms, values, and beliefs shape human behavior. Weber's work highlighted that rationality is not monolithic but pluralistic, varying across social domains and historical periods. Later sociologists built on this insight by examining how institutional norms and legitimacy influence what is perceived as rational action within organizations and societies.

Institutional theories have played a crucial role in redefining rationality in relation to social structures. Scholars associated with new institutionalism, such as Douglass North, James March, and Johan Olsen, emphasized that decision-making is guided not only by cost-benefit calculations but also by institutional rules, routines, and shared meanings. The "logic of appropriateness" proposed by March and Olsen suggests that actors often make decisions based on what is considered socially acceptable within a given institutional setting, rather than purely instrumental reasoning. This perspective underscores the role of institutions as frameworks that both constrain and enable rational behavior.

More recent literature integrates insights from behavioral economics, cognitive psychology, and evolutionary theory. Researchers such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky demonstrated that heuristics, biases, and emotional factors systematically influence decision-making, challenging assumptions of consistent



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rational behavior. Evolutionary and adaptive approaches further argue that rationality evolves in response to changing social environments, allowing individuals and institutions to adjust decision-making strategies over time. These interdisciplinary contributions reinforce the view that rationality is a dynamic, context-dependent construct shaped by social evolution.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical research methodology aimed at analyzing the evolution of the concept of rationality in the social sciences and its implications for decision-making within social institutions. Given the conceptual and interdisciplinary nature of the research problem, the study is based primarily on systematic analysis and interpretation of existing scholarly literature rather than on empirical data collection.

The methodological approach includes a comprehensive literature analysis of classical and contemporary works in sociology, economics, political science, and social philosophy. Key theoretical models of rationality such as instrumental rationality, bounded rationality, value-oriented rationality, and institutional rationality are examined through comparative analysis to identify their core assumptions, strengths, and limitations. This allows for a structured understanding of how interpretations of rationality have evolved over time in response to social and institutional changes.

In addition, the research employs a conceptual analytical method to examine the role of social institutions in shaping decision-making processes. Institutions are analyzed as normative and structural frameworks that influence individual and collective choices. Through this approach, the study explores how institutional rules, norms, and cultural contexts mediate rational behavior and redefine decision-making criteria in different social settings.

Elements of historical and evolutionary analysis are also incorporated to trace the transformation of rationality concepts across different stages of social development. This method makes it possible to identify patterns of continuity and change in theoretical approaches to rationality and to assess their relevance to contemporary social realities.



Finally, the study applies a synthesis method to integrate insights from various theoretical traditions into a coherent analytical framework. This methodological combination ensures theoretical consistency and contributes to a deeper understanding of rationality as a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon within social sciences.

Analysis and Results

The analysis reveals that the concept of rationality in the social sciences has undergone a significant transformation from a narrowly defined, individual-centered model toward a more complex and institutionally embedded understanding. Classical models of instrumental rationality, which emphasize utility maximization and consistent preferences, remain analytically useful in explaining certain types of decision-making, particularly in stable and highly structured environments. However, the literature analysis demonstrates that such models are insufficient for capturing the realities of decision-making in complex social and institutional contexts.

One of the key findings of the study is the central role of bounded rationality in bridging the gap between abstract rational choice models and real-world decision-making practices. Cognitive limitations, informational constraints, and environmental uncertainty significantly affect how individuals and organizations make decisions. As a result, actors tend to rely on simplified decision rules, routines, and heuristics that are shaped by institutional settings. This confirms that rationality is not merely an internal cognitive process but is closely linked to external social and organizational structures.

The analysis also highlights the decisive influence of social institutions on rational decision-making. Institutions provide normative guidelines, formal rules, and shared expectations that define acceptable and legitimate courses of action. The findings indicate that institutional rationality often operates through the “logic of appropriateness,” where decisions are guided by socially embedded norms rather than by strict cost benefit calculations. This is particularly evident in public administration, education, and political institutions, where legitimacy and conformity frequently outweigh efficiency considerations.



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Furthermore, the results demonstrate that rationality evolves in response to social change and institutional transformation. As societies become more differentiated and dynamic, decision-making processes increasingly reflect adaptive and evolutionary forms of rationality. Behavioral and evolutionary perspectives show that learning, experience, and feedback mechanisms enable individuals and institutions to adjust their strategies over time. This adaptive dimension underscores the fluid and context-dependent nature of rationality in modern social systems.

Conclusions

This study has examined the evolution of the concept of rationality in the social sciences with a particular focus on its role in decision-making within social institutions. The analysis demonstrates that rationality cannot be adequately explained through classical, individual-centered models alone. While instrumental rationality remains relevant in certain analytical contexts, it is increasingly clear that real-world decision-making is shaped by cognitive limitations, institutional frameworks, and socio-cultural conditions.

The findings confirm that social institutions play a crucial role in defining and structuring rational behavior. Through formal rules, normative expectations, and shared meanings, institutions influence how individuals and organizations perceive problems, evaluate alternatives, and justify their decisions. As a result, rationality emerges not as a universal or fixed principle, but as a context-dependent construct embedded in specific institutional and historical settings.

Moreover, the study highlights the evolutionary nature of rationality. Changes in social complexity, governance structures, and knowledge systems lead to the emergence of adaptive forms of rationality that rely on learning, routines, and incremental adjustments rather than on strict optimization. This evolutionary perspective helps explain how decision-making practices evolve over time in response to new challenges and uncertainties.

In conclusion, the article contributes to social theory by synthesizing classical, institutional, and behavioral approaches to rationality into a coherent analytical framework. This integrated perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of decision-making processes in contemporary societies and



provides a theoretical basis for future empirical research on rationality and institutional dynamics in the social sciences.

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