

Choosing an Identity

A General Model of Preference and Belief Formation

Sun-Ki Chai

Ann Arbor

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For my family

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Preface

This book provides a general model of preference and belief formation, integrating it with a model of rationality to generate a unified model of preferences, beliefs, and actions. The basic concept behind the model is one that appears under a variety of guises, depending on the social science literature from which it is taken: regret, dissonance, and coherence to name but a few. I argue that there is an essential theoretical unity to these concepts and that, properly defined and constrained, they can form the basis of a general positive model with implications not only for rational choice theories, but also for issues of personal identity and culture. I also argue that identity and culture are not antithetical to rationality but instead are essential to its having any meaning. The central premise of the model is that individuals act to optimize their preferences and beliefs within a set of phenomenological constraints, analogously to the way that they act to optimize actions within a perceived set of structural constraints. Indeed, optimization is seen to occur jointly across preferences, beliefs, and actions, as individuals seek to construct an optimal life plan that constitutes their identities.

By providing this model, I hope to address some the major problems that have plagued attempts to extend the boundaries of the rational choice approach: (1) the ability to make determinate predictions and (2) the ability to make the transition from micro to macrolevel explanation. The model is examined in an extended fashion through three empirical studies that address major unresolved issues in the comparative study of long-term development.

While writing this book, I have incurred debts to a wide range of teachers and colleagues. This book was originally my dissertation at the Stanford political science department, and I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: my adviser Robert Packenham, Gabriel A. Almond, and John Ferejohn. I would also like to thank the people from whom I received regular comments and advice during various stages of writing: David Abernethy, Michael Hechter, James G. March, and the late Aaron Wildavsky.

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to research assistants Jason Miller and Kristi Clark for help with copyediting the document.

I would like express appreciation to everyone at the University of Michigan Press, including the successive politics editors: Malcolm Litchfield, Charles T. Myers, Jeremy Shine as well as their staff, for their admirable patience, as well as to two anonymous reviewers and one anonymous member of the executive committee for their detailed comments. Along with the usual thanks, I would also like to offer some apologies. First of all, to the people at Michigan, who were promised a completed manuscript by August 1995. This clearly did not happen! Sorry for the long wait, and I hope that the resulting improvements in the text at least partly compensate for it.

I should also acknowledge my ebtedness to the text-processing language Plain T_EX, which was used to typeset this document, and the programming languages Snobol4 and Icon, which were used to write scripts for converting the citations, generating the index, and dealing with other last-minute changes of mind on formatting.

Moreover, as an aside to those scholars whose theories are discussed and compared in this book: the nature of my topic has meant that I have had to skate over an extremely wide range of literature in a relatively short space. Hence, the dangers of superficiality or misrepresentation are omnipresent. Despite my best efforts, I am sure I have not always managed to avoid such dangers. I should also emphasize that each theory is evaluated in light of its applicability to the particular issue being discussed in the relevant chapter, not with regard to its overall usefulness, and I hope my comments will be taken in that light. Nonetheless, to those whose theories I have wronged in some fashion, I offer apologies in advance.

Finally, I would like to apologize to my wife, Hye-ryeon Lee, and my son, Alex, for seeming to walk around in a fog at times while I was writing the book.