

Choice 4

How do individuals define their self-interest? How are people's desires socially constructed? Do conventional definitions of a separate 'self' reflect a masculine view of the world? Some feminists of post-modern persuasion have argued that rational choice is simply an interpretive fiction. Others insist that we need a theory of individual choice that retains at least some emphasis on rationality broadly construed as reasonable, purposeful behaviour.

(Folbre, 1994: 17–18)

The term 'choice' conjures up strong ideas of human agency. The individual is free to select whatever action she or he desires or may discriminate between different available options and pick the most suitable. These ideas extend from purchasing food to selecting a life-style. As Plummer (2000: 432) comments: 'the idea that we are autonomous human beings who can choose the kind of personal life we wish to live has become a deeply entrenched one'. Indicating that how choice is conceptualized and experienced as a lived reality is historically specific, Giddens (1991) suggests that these aspects to choice are bound up with the conditions of late-modernity. For Giddens (*ibid.*: 2) choice forms part of the 'new mechanism of self-identity'.

Giddens identifies four influences that give rise to a diversity of choices. First, the signposts of how to act that are commonly found in traditional societies are no longer present. Late modernity is characterized not only by a plurality of choices but also by no guidance as to which choices should be made. Second, late-modern societies contain diverse, segmented lifeworlds. Individuals are surrounded by, and have knowledge of, alternative ways of living. This is, third, reinforced through a global media that brings to the individual an even greater array of milieux. Fourth, in marked contrast to the reasoned certainty of the Enlightenment, the reflexive nature of late modernity is marked by doubt.

Choice is, of course, also entwined with the individualism, rights and freedoms of liberalism. This can be seen in the language of choice that

has come to prominence in recent years in political discourses and policies. For example, the ‘individual’s right to choose’ has been an important aspect of British educational policy. This is evidenced in the development of educational markets and the rhetoric of parental choice (see, for example, Gewirtz et al., 1995). Feminism is no exception in taking up the liberalist discourses of choice. Eisenstein (1993: xiii, emphasis in text) makes this point in relation to feminist theorizing when she comments: ‘Although differences still exist . . . the more interesting point is that significant similarities exist as well. And at the core of *all* the differences remains “the” liberal feminist recognition of woman as an individual with ‘rights’ to freedom of choice.’

This emphasis on the freedoms and agency of choice has been heavily criticized for not taking enough account of issues of social structure. Walsh (1998: 33) defines structure as a ‘recurring pattern of behaviour [that] has a constraining effect’. Structural issues therefore impact on the autonomy of choice. For example, while a purely agentic account of career choice would suggest that individuals are able to select any form of employment they desire, a structuralist account would highlight how career choices are constrained, for example, by the gendering of women’s and men’s work. The extent to which anyone is absolutely free to choose is therefore called into account. Anderson (1998) provides an example of this from research into the psychology of career choice. She comments:

In couching the issue of occupational behaviour within a choice framework, there is an inherent assumption that all people have to do is choose a particular job or career from a whole array of different options. To operate from this assumption simplifies the issue and implies some kind of deficiency on the part of those who appear to restrict their selection to specific fields . . . educational and occupational choice is a complex process that is significantly influenced by environmental variables. Consequently, the current terminology and framework of choice . . . is inappropriate. (1998: 145)

Anderson offers the term ‘occupational fate’ as a way of conveying the structuring of choice and to imply that in many cases ‘choice’ is absent.

Nevertheless, structural accounts present the opposite problem to those of autonomy and agency. They are critiqued for being overly deterministic as they give primacy to the power of structural forces that reduce an individual’s freedom of manoeuvre. This, then, leaves us with a problem. This is how we might avoid an analysis that rests within the dichotomy of agency–structure. McNay (2000: 10) comments that feminist attempts to create a balanced account have highlighted how

women's 'experiences attest to the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities'. However, she also comments that feminist theorization has replicated the agency–structure dualism of mainstream social theory. This is because theorization has either mainly focused on micro-sociological accounts of agency or, alternatively, deterministic accounts of structure. Jones (1997: 262) describes social theorists' attempts to avoid either an overly optimistic account of human agency or an overly deterministic account of social structure as an 'endless ping-pong'.

The concept of choice is clearly a useful area in which to explore these broader issues of agency–structure. For this reason I shall detail two quite distinct conceptualizations. The first is that of rational choice theory. Rational choice is the central theorization of economics. It privileges the autonomous agent who pursues her or his self-interest. Rational choice accords with many everyday perceptions of choice. Within assumptions of rational choice one has a list of options and carefully selects the most appropriate within the ordinary constraints that exist of, say, time, money or insufficient information. Feminist critiques of rational choice theory offer an excellent example of the problems of agentic accounts of choice. Yet many of these critiques do not appear to go beyond the 'ping-pong' identified by Jones.

In contrast, the second conceptualization of choice that is explored is that of the poststructuralist 'choosing subject'. One of the perceived strengths of poststructuralism is that it offers a way out of the 'ping-pong' impasse. In particular, poststructuralism is seen to provide an explanation for resistance and contradiction. An exploration of the 'choosing subject' enables us to consider how this is achieved.

Rational Choice: Choice as an Act of Technical Rationality

Central to rational choice theory is a particular conception of the individual. Specifically, the individual is perceived to be 'utility maximizing' and, as the terminology implies, to act rationally in their choices. Scott (2000: 126) defines rational choice theory as 'the idea that all action is fundamentally "rational" in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do'. Within rational choice theory, therefore, the individual is conceptualized as primarily motivated by the rewards and costs of their actions and the likely profit they can make.

This conceptualization of the rational behaviour of the ‘utility-maximizing’ individual assumes that choice is predicated on the following three stages:

- 1 Possibilities are identified and separated out as ‘different’ and distinctive from one another.
- 2 Information is acquired about each different option, so that they can be evaluated one against another, and against previously held criteria.
- 3 This rational appraisal leads to the selection of one option as the ‘choice’.

(David et al., 1997: 399)

In addition, rational choice theory is based on an approach termed ‘methodological individualism’. Implicit within methodological individualism is a particular conceptualization of society. This rests on the centrality in neo-classical economic thought that is given to markets as regulators of human behaviour. Thus, choices arise from free trade, competitiveness and individualism. These elements can be seen in Becker’s (1991: ix) comments that rational choice ‘assumes that individuals maximize their utility from basic preferences that do not change rapidly over time, and that the behaviour of different individuals is coordinated by explicit and implicit markets’. As Scott notes, central to rational choice theory is the idea that complex social phenomena can be explained as the result of the actions, and interactions, of individuals. In rational choice theory the individual is taken as the elementary unit of social life and ‘social explanations [are] based entirely on trade between rational individuals’ (Gardiner, 1997: 150). Figure 4.1 summarizes these elements of neo-classical economics. While such an approach *may* hold good for understanding why people choose one particular consumer product over another, such a theory has posed a number of problems for economists in analysing choices where more complex information is required or where there are uncertainties or misinformation. In response to these issues Fine and Green (2001) note how new theoretical developments in economics during the 1970s took account of the differential effects that imperfect information had on markets. In consequence, the development of these new theoretical and econometric directions enabled the discipline of economics to extend its analyses beyond its traditional spheres of financially based market relations. One such area is that termed New Home Economics.

Gardiner (1997) notes that the development of New Home Economics arose from what neo-classical economists saw as a paradox. That

- 1 Economics is about the alternative uses of scarce resources.
- 2 Economics is about the exchange of goods and services, normally for money.
- 3 Economics is about the market mechanism: the role of price in bringing about a balance between supply (sellers) and demand (buyers).
- 4 The market is a democratic institution in which buyers and sellers have equal status.
- 5 The primary economic agent is the individual; households and firms act as if they were individual agents.
- 6 Economics has universal applicability and can be applied to different societies and historical periods.
- 7 The main purpose of economics is to make valid predictions on how individuals and economies will behave.
- 8 Economic theory suggests that the economic role of the state should be minimal and that markets should be given the greatest possible freedom to allocate resources.

Source: Gardiner, 1997: 12

Figure 4.1 Neo-classical economics

is that there were increasing numbers of women in employment in the context of rising real incomes. Why, it was asked, should women choose to work when their husbands' incomes were more than sufficient? The sphere of New Home Economics introduced 'the notion of the household as a maximizing unit' (ibid.: 37). This means that the household was assumed to function in a unified, rational and ahistorical way.

Two illustrations from Becker (1991) will illustrate how neo-classical economists have confronted, first, the problem of imperfect information and, second, have assumed the household can be analysed as a unity. Becker is a key proponent of rational choice theory and has applied this to an analysis of family life. Through mathematical models, Becker's treatise on the family explores a number of issues including the division of household labour, marriage, divorce, fertility and employment. The following extract indicates a rational choice theory perspective of utility maximization as it is applied to choice of marriage partner. According to Becker, longer searches may increase the likelihood of finding the perfect partner but they are more expensive. The 'rational person' will find the optimum point between initial costs and eventual returns.

Increased search and better information raise the utility expected from marriage by improving the quality of marital choices. However, time, effort, and other costly resources must be spent on search, and the longer the search, the longer gains from marriage are delayed. A rational person would continue to search on both the 'extensive margins' of additional

prospects and the 'intensive margin' of additional information about serious prospects until the marginal cost and marginal benefit on each margin are equal. In particular, rational persons marry even when certain of eventually finding better prospects with additional search, for the cost of additional search exceeds the expected benefits from better prospects. (Becker, 1991: 325)

Becker argues that the common indicators of a good 'choice' such as family background, educational level, religion, income, and so forth are only proxies for the traits desired of a good marriage partner. Because they are proxies they constitute imperfect information. The real business of getting to know your partner occurs in the first few years of marriage or cohabitation. The problem of 'imperfect information' is, in consequence, the reason for high divorce rates in the early years of marriage. Thus:

I suggest that marriages fail early primarily because of imperfect information in marriage markets and the accumulation of better information during marriage. . . . Women who divorced early in their marriage report that 'difficult' spouses and value conflicts were major sources of their discontent, presumably because these traits are much better assessed after a few years of marriage. (ibid.: 328)

The view that the household is a unified decision-making unit is illustrated in Becker's analysis of altruism. As Gardiner (1997) notes in the public world of employment, production and consumerism neo-classical economists argue that the market acts as a coordinating mechanism that will regulate excessive behaviour. This coordinating mechanism is absent in the household. Becker resolved this through his discussion of altruism and selfishness. In Becker's treatise altruism can be located in the head of the household to whom Becker gave the male pronoun. The female pronoun was given to the one who acts selfishly. This altruist will be a 'benevolent dictator' and act in the best interests of the household. He (*sic*) will control the resources and make decisions. In this way, therefore, the economic analysis of the household can proceed as if it were an individual.

The application of rational choice theory can also be found in debates about human and social capital. Human capital, again strongly associated with Becker, is commonly related to the extent to which education and training constitute investments in individuals that give rise to increased productivity or an increased economic yield. This relationship gives rise to studies which measure, for example, the national economic returns to education in terms of Gross Domestic Product or the impact

of training on company profits. It is also used to explain differential incomes on the basis that investment in initial education and training will produce higher incomes (see Tight, 1996, for a useful summary and critique).

Gardiner (1997: 37) comments: 'Whilst individual maximizing behaviour has normally been used to explain male economic behaviour, such as the supply of labour to the market, the notion of the household as a maximizing unit has usually been introduced where there is a need to explain female economic behaviour.' Thus, in response to explanations for women's lower earnings economists turn to the household. For example, human capital theorists argue that women's lower earnings can be explained by their lack of investment in human capital. Such explanations have suggested that because young women know that as adults they will be primary carers of their families, they make rational choices not to invest in initial education and training. More recently, women's increasing participation in paid labour and their higher investments in education have since produced alternative 'choice' explanations. In relation to the high proportion of women in part-time paid employment, for example, such explanations argue that women choose employment that requires less energy and time because this compensates for the greater time they will have to spend on domestic work. Overall, as Gardiner (1997: 49) comments: 'Gender differences in employment patterns are explained as the result of the cumulative effects of men and women individually and in household units responding rationally to the way the market signals their comparative advantage in the different spheres of production.'

The general criticisms of rational choice theory focus primarily on the absence of a recognition of the many problematical aspects of the social world. Fine and Green (2001: 78) note that neoclassical economics is both ahistorical and excessively formalistic and 'Because it is constructed on the foundation of methodological individualism, its concepts are timeless, universal and not infused with real history'. Scott (2000) cites three main areas where rational choice theory is problematic:

- in respect of explanations for collective action as rational choice theory cannot explain why individuals join different kinds of groups and associations;
- in terms of the origins of social norms such as trust, altruism and reciprocity;
- in respect of the impact of social structures. Within rational choice theory primary emphasis is placed on the actions or agency of individuals.

Conceptualizations of social capital have been heralded as adding an important social dimension to economic theories and in this way contributing to what is seen as a major weakness of economic theories of rational choice. This has been particularly through the work of Coleman (1987; 1988a; 1988b). Coleman is associated with forms of methodological individualism developed by scholars in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago (Fine, 1999). He is, as Fine points out, the intellectual partner to Becker. Working within theories of functionalism and individualism, Coleman saw his work in terms of a convergence between economics and sociology that was underpinned by a rational choice model of human action. In this he sought to develop human capital theory by recognizing the role of social relationships.

In economic terms social capital is

the network of social and community relations which underpin people's ability to engage in education, training and work and to sustain a healthy civic community. Key conditions for the nurturance of social capital include reciprocity and trust, the imposition of sanctions when these fail, the existence of horizontal, not vertical, mechanisms for the exchange of information and support and the willingness of the community to take on responsibility for the provision of as many social services as possible. (Riddell et al., 1999: 55)

This perspective can be seen in the work of Coleman whose main concerns were to demonstrate how an individual's attainment of human capital, say, in the levels of their examination and scholarly successes, were influenced by family and inter-family relations.

Coleman suggested that social capital is generated in two ways. These are within the household and between households. For example, an important source of social capital is the amount of time that parents spend with their children and one another. In this way, Coleman offered an explanation of why parents rich in human capital themselves might not pass this advantage to their children. Their engagement in paid work, for example, meant that they had limited contact with their children and with each other. The result is a lack of necessary investment of time and energy in their children's potential human capital. In another example, Coleman (1988a) recounts a situation in Asian immigrant households in the USA where mothers purchase copies of school textbooks in order to help their children. Here Coleman argues that the social capital available for the child's education is extremely high while their human capital is low. This social capital, according to Coleman, is converted into human capital in the form of educational qualifications.

By recognizing the significance of family and household the explanatory framework that Coleman develops does take more account of the influences of social structures than is found in the explicit individualism of Becker's earlier work on human capital. Nevertheless, it is a muted development of an individualistic discourse that still relies on exchange relations between rational individuals for its primary explanatory framework. Using the language of trust, reciprocity, mutuality, support and community, the literature on social capital conveys a rosy glow of social relations as it posits exchange relations as beneficent and democratic (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000).

There are several critiques of these conceptualizations of rational choice that I wish to draw attention to and shall expand upon below. Overall it is hard to avoid the implication of this theorizing that neo-classical economists believe that if we were all to act as maximizing, atomistic, exchange-focused individuals the problems of social life would cease. However, how adequate is this framework both in terms of a representation of the realities of social relations and in terms of an appropriate moral and ethical framework? And, what does this mean in terms of the development of policy frameworks that encourage a greater extension of rational choice market-based economics? Certainly, feminism has had some responses to these questions.

Case Study 7: Girls in the Education Market

Since the late 1980s British educational policy has embraced the market through its concern with parental choice and encouraging competition between educational institutions. Rational choice theory provides the centre-piece of this as it is assumed that parents will select the school that is most appropriate to their child's needs through a rational appraisal of how these are matched through the school's ethos and results. Ball and Gewirtz (1997) offer an analysis of how single sex schools for girls are responding to their market position and how parents and their daughters choose between single-sex and mixed schools. Their research is based on interviews with parents and case studies of the schools in question. Their analytic framework seeks to explore both the demand and supply side of the market in girls' education.

Ball and Gewirtz illustrate how schools position themselves in the market place through, for example, careful consideration of the images they present. These include changes to uniforms to ensure they represent a 'respectable' status and producing brochures that extol the benefits of all-girl schools. In these ways senior managers in schools

juggle between professional and entrepreneurial interests and discourses. Parental approaches to choice certainly include a careful perusal of the documentation and other published information such as school league tables. They also visit schools on open days. However, Ball and Gewirtz comment that 'both making choices and choices made is far from the rational calculus conjured up by some market theorists. While material class interests and concerns about the life opportunities available to girls clearly inform and underlie choice-making these are realised through a "fuzzy" and sometimes misguided logic' (ibid.: 219). Thus 'personal prejudices derived from their own school experiences, vague and uncertain grasp of received wisdom and reputational gossip acquired from local social networks and media hype . . . [together with] . . . powerful affective responses, positive or negative, from parents and daughters' (ibid.) consequent upon visits to schools all impact on choice.

Feminist Critiques of Rational Choice Theory

Economics in the twentieth century became increasingly restricted to a theory of rational choice in the context of scarcity . . . Feminist economists have been key critics of the individualism and absence of an ethical dimension within mainstream economics.

(Gardiner, 1997: 38)

Becker and Coleman's work evidence something more than gender-blindness. They evidence a political reassertion that the worthy individual is based within a subjectivity of White, middle-class, masculine rationality. Generally, therefore, feminist critiques draw specific attention to the inherent assumptions of gender, class, 'race' and sexuality that are present in rational choice models. For example, Folbre (1994) draws attention to the masculinity within neo-classical economics through her euphemism 'Mr Rational Economic Man'. R. Williams (1993) notes the dualistic thinking in much theorizing by feminist economists that retain the stable and unified assumptions of the female/male binary. She calls for a deconstructive approach that racializes theories of gender. Overall, there are three areas where feminist economists focus specific critique. As I shall illustrate, these draw more generally on the feminist literature and are concerned with the gendering of self-interest, rationality and individualism.

As we have seen, an aspect of the subject at the heart of rational choice theory is that of the utility-maximizing individual. Gardiner (1997: 55) thus comments that neo-classical economics has been constructed around the idea of 'self-interested, self-supporting economic agents who are faced with an array of options from which to choose within the limits of the resources available to them'. This means that self-interest provides the major element, not only for motivating choices but also for the efficient maintenance of the market and indeed for the 'good' of all. However, feminist economists point out that within economics the issues of self-interest, individualism and competitiveness are primarily equated with the public economy and market. In terms of individuals in the private economy of the household, the assumption is that these relationships are more harmonious and cooperative (England, 1993; Gardiner, 1997).

In particular, feminists point to Becker's analysis of altruism as evidence for this. Becker's choice of the masculine pronoun for the altruist and the feminine pronoun for the beneficiary of this altruism is a stark illustration of the more gendered assumptions underpinning his work. Becker's depiction of the family 'calls up a picture of a benign group of generous individuals, banded together in happy union . . . however, [the family in Becker] is more accurately characterized as 'The Present-Giving Male Dictator and His Selfish Wife' (Bergmann, 1995: 146). Strassman (1993) points out that Becker's model contains two old economic fables. These are the story of the benevolent patriarch and the story of the woman of leisure. Thus, the patriarch is engaged in paid work and acts as the necessary regulatory force of the household. As economically inactive, the wife is assumed to be unproductive.

There are two key points that feminist economists draw attention to in this respect. The first is the dualistic framework of public/private that is called upon. The economic model of rational choice assumes that market and household behaviour are essentially different. In the public market people behave competitively. In the private sphere of the home people behave cooperatively. Nevertheless, this suggests a uniform and unique set of behaviours characterized across a clear public/private binary. In the everyday of social relations such a binary falls down. Gardiner (1997: 236) comments in this respect: 'Economic life, whether in private companies, public sector organizations or households is pervaded by combinations of self-interested behaviour and cooperative endeavour, by conflict and altruism.'

In response to this feminist economists have called for greater consideration to be given to what goes on in families (Cantillon and Nolan, 2001). The 'benevolent patriarch' of Becker's model suggests that

‘Although family members may have conflicting needs, the good provider dispassionately and rationally makes decisions that are in the best interests of the family’ (Strassmann, 1993: 58). Issues of power relations are therefore relegated to a model of ‘free choice’. In particular, feminists draw attention to the asymmetrical power relations of households. These asymmetric power relations not only impact on who does what in the household division of labour. They also affect the distribution of other resources, such as food, clothes, access to private health care, and so forth.

The second issue associated with the notion of the utility-maximizing individual is that no account is taken of the gendered construction of self-interest. For example, women who assert their self-interest risk transgressing norms of femininity. They may therefore find themselves in a contradictory position when faced with the need to pursue self-interest, for example, in relation to employment careers or in terms of their health. In respect of the division of resources within the family, ideologies of motherhood require women to put their children first. Not to do so can reap severe sanctions.

In addition, the linkage of self-interest and rationality is also called into question. Folbre (1994) comments that in economics the term selfishness is often used in such a way as to imply that it is more rational than, say, altruism. Utility-maximization is linked to the individualism and competitiveness of markets. Such an argument would say that given that this is how markets are, it is only rational to behave in ways that will protect and enhance one’s self-interest. In this way, selfishness asserts and confirms, rather than questions, the primacy of the market as a regulator of behaviour. So long as we can be sure that everyone is acting in terms of their utility-maximization, we can ensure the efficiency of the distributive mechanisms of the market.

Such a social system also assumes a notion of rationality as being conceptualized as dispassionate and objective. Here, there is no room for passion and subjective feelings but for a cool analysis of the ‘facts’. For feminists this conceptualization of rationality is equated with the masculine side of the binary where it is contrasted with the association that women are more emotional and subjective. Lloyd (1996) charts women’s changing relationship to conceptualizations of rationality from Aristotle to the present day. She notes how rationality was the mark of distinctiveness that separated humanity from animals. Women as fellow (*sic*) human beings could not, therefore, logically be excluded from having reason. Nonetheless, up until the seventeenth century, woman’s reason was regarded as inferior to that of men as she was perceived to be more emotional or more impulsive.

It was with the development of Cartesian conceptualizations of rationality in the seventeenth century that woman was fully cast out, so to speak. Descartes developed a conception of rationality that was based on a systematized and orderly method. In so doing, he separated mind from body and reason from emotion. This formulation of rationality as an act of the mind and distinctive from emotion reified the possibilities of polarization:

The search for the ‘clear and distinct,’ the separating out of the emotional, the sensuous, the imaginative, now makes possible polarizations of previously existing contrasts – intellect versus the emotions; reason versus imagination; mind versus matter. . . . the claim that women are somehow lacking in respect of rationality, that they are more impulsive, more emotional, than men is by no means a seventeenth century innovation. But these contrasts were previously contrasts *within* the rational. What ought to be dominated by reason had not previously been so sharply delineated from the intellectual. The conjunction of Cartesian down-grading of the sensuous with the use of the mind-matter distinction to establish the discrete character of Cartesian ideas introduces possibilities of polarization that were not there before. (Lloyd, 1996: 154, emphasis in original)

It is important to note that many feminist responses do not reject the notion of a rational consciousness that forms the essence of the humanist subject (Weedon, 1997). For example, Walkerdine (1990) and Lloyd (1994) illustrate how we can understand the development of feminist activism as a response to this polarization. Thus, given it was necessary to be trained in reason, liberal feminist responses are such that access to reason through education and training, should be opened up to women. Alternatively, some feminists argue that reason needs to be imbued with feminine values and our conceptualizations of reason should include feelings and intuition. Hekman (1994) summarizes feminist critiques of rationality as being unified with postmodernists in terms of a concern with language and discourse. As ‘Concepts formed from the male point of view create a male reality; both the real and the rational are defined in exclusively male terms’ (Hekman, 1994: 52). For Hekman this means that the root cause of women’s oppression ‘is rooted in male-dominated language and a male definition of reality’ (ibid.: 53).

These responses to the *Man of Reason* are present in feminist economists’ arguments. For example, England (1993: 49) refers to rationality as ‘the most “sacred” neoclassical assumption of all’. In addition, the assumption that competitive individualism and utility maximization are rational ways of being in the world has been questioned from a moral and ethical viewpoint. England argues for an extended meaning to be

given to rationality that includes issues of connection as well as separation. Nelson (1993) calls for economics to use the tools of 'imaginative rationality'. She suggests that this form of rationality would neither be masculine nor feminine but would be centred on how individuals, in interaction with others and their environment, provide for their survival and health.

Finally, feminists have highlighted how problematic the notion of methodological individualism is. Rational choice theory places considerable emphasis on the agency or autonomy of individuals with a consequent neglect of the structuring of choice. When it comes to issues of social structure, rational choice theorists presume that 'Those features of social life that are conventionally called "social structures" are . . . simply chains of interconnected individual actions' (Scott, 2000: 135). This means that explanations for social structures within rational choice theory are based on the cumulative results of individual processes at the micro level. At the group level, the family or firm for example, the group is taken as an agent, or individual, in its own right. Strassman (1993: 60) comments in this respect that the hidden assumptions of the 'free choice' model are: '(1) people are independent agents and unique selves, taking only their own needs and wishes into account; (2) people are able and responsible for taking care of their own needs.' Strassman notes that economists do not deny that these assumptions are problematic but they also view them as fairly benign. She remarks that these assumptions may fit the experiences of adult, White, male, middle-class American economists but they do not fit the economic realities of many others. Thus 'Economic theory's conception of selfhood and individual agency is located in Western cultural traditions as well as being distinctly androcentric. Economic man is the Western romantic hero, a transcendent individual able to make choices and attain goals' (ibid.: 61).

Folbre (1994: 51) uses the term 'structures of constraint' to critique the reductive nature of methodological individualism. These structures of constraint are related to issues of 'race', class, age, gender and ability and together they 'form a complex social edifice in which individuals and groups operate' (ibid.: 53). Folbre argues that the term 'rational choice' should be replaced with the term 'purposeful choice'. She argues that this change of language would mark a departure away from strict rationalist assumptions and would avoid the dichotomy of rational/non-rational. It would also encourage economists to focus on how people define and pursue their desires.

These agency–structure issues that are central to feminist critiques of rational choice theory are more fully explored in poststructuralist perspectives of the 'choosing' subject. It is to these that I now turn.

Case Study 8: WISE Choices?

Early feminist research and campaigning aimed to increase women's participation in scientific and technological areas of work. One campaign was called Women into Science and Engineering (WISE). This was based on equal opportunities discourses and assumed that the reasons why young women were not choosing scientific careers was because of a lack of relevant information and their masculine images. Action research initiatives in schools (see, for example, Kelly, 1987) were also set up to. These used interventions such as curriculum changes that would more readily illustrate the relevancy of science to women and girls' everyday lives and women scientists as role models to alter pupil's perceptions and to allow them to make more informed choices.

Henwood (1996) is critical of the narrow conceptualization of choice that she perceives in WISE initiatives. In particular she argues that it is not the masculine image that is problematic but the masculine culture of scientific work that impacts on decision-making. Henwood's research is based on interviews with two groups of students who were attending a college of technology in south-East England in the mid-1980s. One group of students were taking a 'traditional' women's course to become personal assistants. The second group of students were taking a 'non-traditional' course in Software Engineering. Henwood is concerned to analyse the reasons for these different occupational choices. Her framework for doing this is a discursive analysis of WISE initiatives.

Henwood's research illustrates that although they may not have detailed information, young women do have some important knowledge about different careers that impacts on choice. One of the primary reasons why young women chose the personal assistants course was because of their concern about the hostility they would face if they entered scientific or technological professions. These young women also knew that their chosen occupation had less status and financial reward. Henwood comments in this respect that this left them 'feeling most ambivalent about the work for which they had elected' (ibid.: 211). The expected hostility is confirmed in the accounts of those young women who were taking the Software Engineering course who encountered sexism and antagonism. Nevertheless, they also felt pride in entering a 'man's world' and were aware of its higher status and reward.

Central to Henwood's analysis is how predominant discourses that are found in initiatives such as WISE structure the perceptions and practices of both these groups of women and on what is sayable and unsayable. Thus for the personal assistants:

WISE's liberal ideology of equal opportunities works to prevent a clear articulation of the conflicts and contradictions they experience in making decisions about this future work. WISE says 'opportunities exist' and women have only to 'give themselves a chance'. Thus, if these women are in traditional women's work, it follows that they must have chosen freely to be there. (ibid.: 212)

In this therefore they only have themselves to blame for their lower status and income. For the software engineers equal opportunities discourses of 'same as men' silence women in a slightly different way. Here they cannot speak out about their difficulties because 'this only serves to highlight their difference and, in dominant discourse, their inferiority and lack of suitability for this work' (ibid.). Henwood also notes that what is completely absent from WISE initiatives and discourses is the threat to men's sense of superiority and status that the entry of women represents. Henwood argues that what is needed is greater attention being given to the construction of masculine cultures in the workplace and how these construct 'choice'.

The Poststructuralist 'Choosing' Subject

Post-structuralist conceptions of the subject have appealed to many because they seem to offer a way through an apparent tension in notions of 'social construction': how do we speak about people as constructions of the social order on the one hand, and as constructing agents or actors on the other, without erring on either side? Those 'social constructionist' accounts of schooling and socialization which accentuated the determining effects of the social structure and ideology had been unattractive not only due to their inherent pessimism, but also for the ways in which they seemed to obliterate the 'real' thinking person who can choose to resist, change, and 'make a difference'. On the other hand, accounts which emphasized 'agency' and change were too often voluntarist, in danger of assuming an individual able to act and think independently of the social structure and its ideologies.

(Jones, 1997: 262)

We have seen that a major critique of rational choice theory is that it privileges a voluntarist account of human agency. It suggests that individuals are relatively free to choose with no account taken of power

relations or the structuring of advantage and disadvantage. Feminist critiques of rational choice theory certainly highlight issues of structure as entirely salient to understanding how choices are made. Yet structural accounts can be critiqued because they privilege a certain determinism. In this way they can appear to suggest that one has ‘no choice’. In addition, the agency–structure dichotomy remains firmly in place as social theorists simply place themselves at varying points between its two polarizations.

Poststructuralist conceptions are offered as a way of going beyond such binary opposition. Jones comments on how poststructuralism has facilitated a questioning of simplistic accounts of socialization that would suggest that we are born into the world as ‘blank slates on which an appropriate and uniform gender is more or less successful inscribed’ (ibid.: 262). A poststructuralist explanation would encourage us to recognize that we do not all turn out to be the same. It would enable us to know that when we invoke the terms girl or woman we know this in terms of aspects of difference. It would also encourage us to understand that, as much as we might take up particular discursive positions, we can also resist them. This is because one of the main features of poststructuralism is that it stresses: ‘The doubled sense of “subject” (subject/ed *to* and subject *of* action) . . . [which] allows for an individual who is socially produced, *and* “multiply positioned” – neither determined nor free, but both simultaneously’ (Jones, 1997: 263). This analysis of being both subject/ed to and subject of action can be seen in Walkerdine’s (1990: 28) description of a school staffroom: ‘The staffroom is full of women eating cottage cheese or grapefruit. Each of them knows about diet and eating and sexuality. They are willing and happy to talk about these, caught inside what they are: the unique combination of worker and woman, dependent and independent, free and trapped’ (Walkerdine, 1990: 28).

In particular, poststructuralist accounts of agency draw on a critique of humanism. Davies (1991: 43) compares choice within a humanist framework and within a poststructuralist framework (see Figure 4.2). As Davies makes clear within humanist theorizing, strong connections are made between the ways that individuals make choices and our assumptions about them as people. Making choices in the prescribed rationality of weighing up the options and making an informed choice are seen to confirm that the individual is a coherent, orderly, rational and, indeed, sane person. Not to make choices in this way is to be regarded as faulty or lacking in this respect. Whereas within humanist theorizing choice is seen to be an act of consciousness and deliberateness in comparison conceptualizations of choice within poststructural

Humanistic

The choices that the individual makes are based on rational thought and are thus coherent choices that signal the coherence and rationality of the individual. People who do not make choices on this basis are regarded as faulty or lacking in some essential aspect of their humanness.

Poststructural

The choices that the individual makes may be based on rational analysis, but desire may subvert rationality. Desires are integral to the various discourses through which each person is constituted and are not necessarily amenable to change through rational analysis. Subject positions which individuals may take up are made available through a variety of discourses. One subject position, more often made available to white middle-class males than to others, is of the agentic person who can make rational choices and act upon them.

Source: Davies, 1991: 43

Figure 4.2 A comparison between humanistic and poststructural frameworks of conceptualizations of choice

perspectives view it as an aspect of subjectivity. The consciousness and deliberateness of ‘rationality’ might be subverted by both conscious and unconscious desire.

Desire is constituted through discourses through which one is subject of and subject to. Not all subject positions are equally available. Individuals have differential access to particular discursive positions. Discourses therefore have different gendered, ‘raced’ and class implications and we can only ‘pick up the tools that are lying there’. In this way choices are understood as contextualized within the specific regulatory discourses to which we have access. As Davies notes, the subject position of the humanist subject, that is as experiencing oneself as ‘continuous, unified, rational and coherent’ (1991: 43) is mainly available to White middle-class males. Therefore the subjectivity of the rational humanist subject is more likely and more achievable for such individuals. For example, Walkerdine (1990) notes how modern conceptions of child development configure children as inquiring and active. These qualities are, moreover, strongly associated with the masculine side of the female/masculine binary. Thus, ‘By definition, active childhood and passive femininity exist at the intersection of competing discourses. For girls, therefore their position as children must remain shaky and partial, continually played across by their position as feminine. Conversely, for boys masculinity and childhood work to prohibit passivity. And in both cases passion and irrationality are constantly displaced’ (Walkerdine, 1990: 34). This means, as Davies (1991) notes, that men have greater

access to discourses of autonomy. For women the achievement of autonomy is both tenuous and ambivalent. Walkerdine (1994) notes from her research into the achievement levels of children at school that no matter how poorly boys were doing, they were always judged as 'having potential'. This possibility was never claimed for girls.

One of the issues that poststructuralist theorizing has explored in relation to choice is its illusory nature. One may feel autonomous and free to choose. But the power of regulatory discourses means that such choice is both 'forced' and of false appearance. This is because 'the subject's positioning within particular discourses make the "chosen" line of action the only possible action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one's placement within that discourse to *want* that line of action' (Davies, 1991: 46, emphasis in original). Two examples illustrate the illusory nature of choice. Walkerdine (1990) discusses the illusion of choice in relation to psychological perspectives of 'good' child rearing. She reflects on how discourses of child rearing urge parents to avoid humiliating a 'naughty' child through overt threats and sanctions as this will damage the child's growing sense of being an autonomous being. Rather, parents are encouraged to offer a child a 'choice' of different behavioural options whilst conveying to the child that there are, of course, 'right' and 'wrong' choices that can be made.

Laws and Davies (2000) explore how schooling regulates the possible choices that children have about their behaviour. Children at school are similarly encouraged to make the 'right' choices. For example, to be recognized as a good or competent student the child has to know how to learn, when to speak and when to be silent, when to work and when to be creative. These forms of regulation of children's behaviour are understood as central to creating the appropriate conditions for teachers to teach. The child who refuses to make these 'right' choices or does not recognize their import risks being viewed as unintelligent or difficult and so forth. In this respect Laws and Davies draw attention to the connections between 'choice' and 'consequences' and the agency of the individual:

Both 'choice' and the closely related concept 'consequences' are central to the 'good school behaviour' discourse. They are used by teachers and students to 'manage' classroom order. But this management of order cannot be achieved by teachers' efforts alone. Students must take up as their own a desire for the sort of order the teacher wants. (ibid.: 209)

Within poststructuralist accounts agency is perceived to be the simultaneous act of free will and submitting to the regulatory order. In the act

of ‘choosing’ and experiencing this choice as an individual act of will we are submitting to the requirements of particular regulatory discourses. This can be contrasted with humanism where an opposition is set up between autonomy and submission. Within humanism, one is either autonomous or submissive. Thus, one is either acting freely or one is forced to do something one would choose not to do.

One of the ways that poststructuralism seeks to demonstrate the paradoxical point that issues of agency and structure inhabit the same act can be seen through the attention that has been given to the twinning of mastery and submission. Butler (1995: 45–6) notes in this regard:

The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself . . . the simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject itself.

These processes of regulation that one submits to become internalized in terms of self-regulation. For example, the desire to be good means that one must master (*sic*) the subject position of the ‘good’ child or student. This is achieved through repetition. The more we repeat a practice or an action, the greater our mastery of it. Mastery, itself experienced as the achievement of the humanist self, is the ultimate self-regulation of our actions and behaviours. Thus, we take up our pen and form our handwriting in uniform shapes. Or, as a child we might think ‘my mother needs me to be quiet’ and so we are quiet. We have in these moments accomplished key aspects of humanist discourses – individuality, choice, a recognition of the consequences of one’s actions, autonomy and responsibility (Davies et al., 2001). Davies et al. explore this in relation to their experiences as pupils who had been ‘successful in “getting the goodies” of formal schooling’ (ibid.: 180–1). They describe how learning to be successful was experienced ambivalently but included acquiring the signifiers that would evidence that they were competent and good. This included subordinating the body to the mind, to love what it is the teacher teaches and producing the clean script. Their collective biography illustrates how:

We have been able to show the hard work of becoming appropriate(d) – both its necessity and its risky fragility. There is no guarantee that even

the most conscientious schoolgirl will be able, repeatedly, to produce herself as that which she has come to desire for herself. Her knowledge of herself as acceptable depends on both a tight disciplining of the body, and a capacity to disattend the body and its needs. It depends on a capacity to read what the teacher wants and to produce it, but more than that, to want it for herself. At the same time, it depends on a capacity to distance herself from the Others, on whose approving gaze she is dependent, and to know herself *in contrast* to them. She must, paradoxically, find these points of contrast at the same time as she takes herself up as recognisable through the very same discourses through which she and they are constituted. (ibid.)

Finally, it should be noted that the point of a poststructuralist political project is not to set up a new binary of humanist subject and anti-humanist subject. To do so would simply reinforce the binary oppositions that poststructuralism seeks to move beyond. The point of poststructuralism is to ‘show how the humanist self is so convincingly achieved’ (Davies, 1997b: 272). As Davies et al. state:

The idea and the ideal of autonomy, which our theorizing recognizes as fictional, is nevertheless the conceptual and practical lynchpin of the appropriate(d) subject. The subject submits to the fictions of the self and gains mastery through them. And that mastery – of language, of the body – provides the conditions of possibility for investing something new, of seeing afresh, of creatively moving beyond the already known. (2001: 181)

Case Study 9: The Rush to Motherhood

Meyers (2001) comments that the choice of whether or not to have children has the most profound impact on women’s lives. Such choices impact centrally on women’s identity (see also McMahon, 1995) as either mothers or non-mothers. They condition people’s judgements about oneself. They involve legal and social ties. And ‘Through motherhood decisions . . . women assume an indelible moral identity and incur or disavow various caregiving obligations’ (2001: 735). Meyers illustrates how feminist concerns around motherhood and abortion have focused on women’s right to choice through rhetoric that portrays decisions as highly voluntaristic. Meyers’ analysis seeks to illustrate how ‘autonomous people have well-developed, well-coordinated repertoires of agentic skills and call on them routinely as they reflect on themselves and their lives and as they reach decisions about how best to go on’

(*ibid.*: 742). In addition, Meyers' starting point for such a subject is 'the socially situated, divided self . . . an evolving subject – a subject who is in charge of her life within the limits of imperfect introspective decipherability and welcome, though in some ways intrusive (or downright harmful), social relations' (*ibid.*: 744). Meyers' methodological approach is through an analysis of maternalist discourses and a review of previously published empirical research.

Meyers; principal concerns are to set out and argue for the development of the skills that she believes are central to an analysis and exercise of autonomy. Meyers argues that any assessment of an individual's autonomy requires an accurate analysis of their adeptness at using agentic skills. These are introspection, communication, memory/recall, imagination, analysis/reasoning, volition and interpersonal skills. A key concept that Meyers uses in her analysis is that of matrigynoidolatory. By this Meyers is referring to celebratory, pro-natalist discourses that promote imperatives of procreation as the key/only route to womanhood and femininity. Such discourses could be summed up in terms state that 'A woman is not a woman until she has had a child'. Here Meyers notes that, given that some women actually do reject motherhood, it would be 'misleading to claim that this discourse determines women's choices' (*ibid.*: 762). Rather, her point is that such a discourse stifles 'women's voices by insinuating pronatalist imperatives into their self-portraits and self-narratives' (*ibid.*: 763). For example, it is virtually impossible to extol the benefits of non-motherhood and those women who reject motherhood speak defensively or aggressively about their decisions because they are put in such a counter-discursive position (see, for example, Letherby, 2001).

Although her focus is on skill development, Meyers response to the overwhelming impact of matrigynoidolatory discourses on autonomous subjectivity bears some strong similarities to those who argue for the development of critical literacies (see for example, Davies, 1997a; Hughes, 2002; Searle, 1998; Young, 1997). Meyers argues that what is necessary is the concerted development of autonomy skills through pedagogic methods. Thus, Meyers comments:

To democratize women's autonomy, caregivers and educators must modify their practices and actively promote skills that enable women to discern the detrimental impact of matrigynist figurations on their lives, to envisage dissident figurations, and to entrust their lives to those figurations that augment their fulfilment and enhance their self-esteem. (*ibid.*: 767–8)

Summary

I have explored two conceptualizations of choice in this chapter. The first is rational choice theory that is both the most everyday understanding of choice and the one that underpins much economic theory. The second conceptualization draws on poststructural theorizing and is referred to as the choosing subject. I have framed these conceptualizations of choice within debates about agency and structure. Feminist economists have illustrated how rational choice theory puts too much weight on issues of agency and autonomy and too little weight on the structural issues associated with life chances and choices. Poststructuralist accounts seek to avoid the ‘choice’ of either agentic or structural accounts by holding both agency and structure in simultaneous relation.

FURTHER READING

Becker, G. (1991) *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

There is no better way to gain an understanding of rational choice theory and the implications of arguing for a framework of atomistic exchange behaviour as the most significant basis for understanding social relations. It might be salutary to remember the accord given to Becker’s work as Nobel Prize Winner of Economics in 1992. Who said we were in a post-feminist age?

Gardiner, J. (1997) *Gender, Care and Economics*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. An excellent review of neo-classical, political economy and feminist perspectives.

Hewitson, G. (1999) *Feminist Economics: Interrogating the Masculinity of Rational Economic Man*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. The Becker reading should be immediately followed by Gillian Hewitson’s text. Hewitson takes feminist economics fully into poststructural perspectives.