



SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

**FOR
AFRICAN STUDENTS**

First Edition

Edited by
Olutayo, A. O.
Akanle, Olayinka

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Contents

	Page
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
 Chapters	
1 Social Thought and Social Theory: The Need to Recognise the 'Former in the Latter' <i>Olutayo, A.O. and Afolayan, Shina</i>	1
2 Sociological Theory: An Introduction <i>Olusegun, F. Liadi</i>	15
3 The Macro-Sociological Theories <i>Olayinka Akanle and Olutayo, A.O.</i>	25
4 Social Exchange Theory <i>Yohanna Kagoro Gandu and Kamurudeen Adegboyega</i>	71
5 Social Action and Sociological Explanation <i>M.D. Enaikele</i>	91
6 Ethnomethodology <i>Odok, Godwin Etta</i>	105
7 Phenomenology <i>Odok, Godwin Etta</i>	135
8 Symbolic Interactionism Perspective in Sociological Explanations <i>Olusegun F. Liadi</i>	149

9	Structuration Theory: Giddens Explored <i>Busari, D.A.</i>	161
10	Rationality in Sociological Perspective <i>Kudus Adebayo</i>	177
11	Actor-Network Theory <i>Adeniran, Adebussyi Isaac, Ugbem, Comfort Erima, Adegoke, Peter Damilola, Ayokunle, Olumuyiwa Omobowale</i>	197
12	Feminism: An Africanist Perspective <i>Yusuff, Olabisi Sherifat</i>	209
	<i>Index</i>	231

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Rationality in Sociological Perspective

Kudus Adebayo

Introduction

In our day to day interaction with friends, family members, acquaintances and people with whom we are unrelated, there is tendency for us to concoct explanation for most of their actions. In cases where such explanations do not clearly present themselves, we often find ourselves probing indirectly but at other times, we directly ask them to justify why they act, speak and behave as they do. Sometimes we accept their explanation – as sensible, justified, reasonable or rational – but at other times, we do not – calling it senseless, unjustified, unreasonable or irrational. In some other situations however, we tend to move away from trying to understand and interpret individual (or dyadic or triadic) action or behaviour to that of larger groups, as well as institutions, ideas and belief systems. Here, one may be interested in finding out why the Boko Haram is tormenting the Nigerian state from the North with the aim of discerning the ‘real’ reason for their action and why this particular period in time.¹ Similarly, the basis or reason for preferring decentralisation to centralised governance, capitalism to socialism, monotheism to polytheism or Islam to Christianity may also be of concern to us. This process of ‘finding out’ or seeking explanation for action, thought or belief (and what we accept as a reasonable explanation) is intimately related to our assumption that human beings possess rationality. Aristotle’s philosophy was underscored by this assumption, that ‘man is a rational animal,’ and it is a position that is shared by innumerable natural scientists, philosophers and social scientists. In other words, rationality is part

¹ The same question may be asked of the militants in the Niger Delta. The probable response to this inquiry will be determined by whether the analyst refers to them as ‘freedom fighters,’ ‘oil thieves,’ or ‘terrorists.’ Ultimately, any of these tags decides what response becomes reasonable and which is not.

and parcel of human intersubjective engagement, it is characteristic of the society, and, as Robert Nozick (1993, p. xi) observes, 'the capacity to be rational demarcates humans from other animals and thus defines them'. Nozick further stresses that 'rationality provides us with the (potential) power to investigate and discover anything and everything; it enables us to control and direct our behaviour through reasons and the utilisation of principles.' It is a word that describes the correct way of finding out what is going on by using unlimited criticism (Gattei, 2009, p. 82).

The sphere of influence of rationality is as diverse as its reach and application. Therefore, any attempt to define the term, or describe it at best, must be sensitive to this diversity. In squaring up to this requirement however, this chapter is not pretentious about the fact that a full account of the complexity of rationality cannot be exhausted in the short space. The paper begins with the analysis of the nature of rationality by discussing how the concept is connected to, and differs from, rationalism, irrationality, non-rationality and truth. While acknowledging the positivistic origin of rationality, the next section looks at the role of the concept in sociological enterprise as a whole. The rest of the paper deals with the four types of rationality, the rationalisation process and some objections that have been raised against rationality as a reliable concept in the analysis of social groups and group interactions. Overall, the aim is to look at the significance of rationality to explanation in general, and to social explanation in particular – and how it operates to aid our understanding of the society that we live in.

Nature of Rationality

Rationality is a complex, widely applied and often confused concept (Hardy-Vallée 2008, p. 16; Audi 2004, p. 17). It has deep philosophical root and has been a core aspect of philosophy since the beginning of systematic enquiry in the discipline. In effect, Hilary Putnam (1981, pp. 104-105, as cited in Hardy-Vallée 2008) once proclaimed that *all of philosophy is almost coextensive with the theory of rationality*. From Plato and Aristotle to the church fathers of the Middle Ages, philosophers endeavour to present

rationality as one of the indispensable elements at the centre of the society. However, it was the writings of the rationalists of the Modern period that ushered in a discourse of rationality that would later find its way into the natural sciences, politics, economics, religion, sociology and many other disciplines that are too numerous to mention. The rationalists – also called continental rationalists² – defended rationalism, the epistemological standpoint which states that reason, not experience, is the source of knowledge. This philosophical doctrine is the campaigning arm of rationality (Bruce & Yearley 2006, p. 254). Rationalism, as a theory of knowledge, emphasised the prominence of reason or rational thought as the most dependable source of true belief and that it remains the only true foundation of any knowledge claim. Because of this, actions that are grounded in rational explanation are often said to be self-explanatory or self-justifying, requiring no other evidence apart from itself.

Rationality is also seen to be important for the diagnosis of human social interactions. Depending on how broadly it is defined, rationality can be said to be the single most important attribute that defines humans in a very sharp and distinct way. It captures the human person in a way that no other concept does and gives a depth of meaning about people which cannot be found in other non-human social groups. Thus, rationality is an attribute of human agents who are believed to surpass other animals only due to their capacity to think and surmount difficult life challenges through systemic reasoning procedures. As many others have argued in the past, Nozick (1993, p. xi) thinks that it is this capacity for rationality that continues to give humanity some special status in the universal scheme of things. For example, while most non-human animals respond to external environmental stimuli in an automated or automatic way, humans generally shape their responses through some form of thought processes that oftentimes lead to choice or total abstention from choice. Although studies in the field of animal psychology have shown that some traces of rationality can be seen in some animals, evidence seems to lean

² René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz are the three prominent figures of this philosophical tradition.

more towards the thesis that rational behaviour is more of the human species than any other earthly social groups. However, within the human groups, we must point out the differences between the rational, irrational and the non-rational actions or behaviours.

Rational, Irrational and Non-rational

Rationality is exercised by rational agents, expressed as belief or action. A rational agent or person is expected to hold a set of rational beliefs and discard those that have been defined by the society as irrational. In the same vein, certain pattern of behaviour is expected among people of the same society, under different circumstance and any behaviour or belief that contradicts expected societal norms are often regarded as irrational. In this sense, rationality is both relative and normative³. The relativity of rationality lies in the fact that what constitutes rational action or belief differs significantly from society to society. In the United State for instance, legal and cultural prescriptions may categorise the President as irrational the moment he voices out his intention to take another wife. But in Nigeria and most African countries, what is irrational about a marriage situation is for a traditional high-titled chief or king to proclaim that he is fine with just one wife. On a more universal scale, structural and epistemological differences may constitute the major determinants of what qualifies as rational or irrational. For instance, a scientist's belief accommodates only those propositions that align with the tenets of science so that the attribution of miracle to a finding that cannot be explained (or yet to be explained) is interpreted as irrational. When science is then juxtaposed with religion, we will have a somewhat different system of rationality⁴. Accordingly, rationality is normative to the extent that distinct reasoned grounds are required for a belief to be rational, from one society to another and,

³ Stephen Kalberg (1980, p. 1146) referred to this dimension as 'sphere-of-life-specificity.' Also see Hardy-Vallée (2008).

⁴ Difference in systems of rationality has also been widely debated by African philosophers who tried to show that traditional African societies have their own form of rationality that is consistent with their own traditional beliefs and practices. See Bello, A. G. A. (1993) for a peek into this debate.

ultimately, from one discipline to another⁵. Nevertheless, this relative and normative character of rationality does not change the fact that a rational agent must always demonstrate reasoned thought as well as logical coherence and consistency.

From the above, it can easily be deduced that irrationality is nothing more than the opposite of rationality. However, it must be borne in mind that 'irrational is not merely the non-rational, which lies outside the ambit of the rational; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason' (Davidson 2004, p. 169). Again let us elucidate this point with science. In any science, the canons of observation, experimentation, evidence, rigour, logic and systematic analysis must be respected by all scientists. No scientist is expected to accept or reject scientific findings without proof, and knowledge claims must at all times be based on deductively (or inductively) argued set of interconnected propositions. Hence, an irrational scientist will accept inconsistent statements, reject *obviously* true statement and she may also set up an experiment that is based on two or more incoherent beliefs. Put in another way, it will be irrational for Mr. S not to believe that *A implies B* if he believes 'A' and where 'A' is always a necessary and sufficient condition for B. As Davidson (2004) rightly observed:

Irrationality...is...the failure, within a single person, of coherence or consistency in the pattern of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, intentions, and actions. Examples are wishful thinking, acting contrary to one's own best judgment, self-deception, believing something that one holds to be discredited by the weight of the evidence (p. 170).

To be exact, irrationality is not the same as fallacy. Reasoning that produces internal coherence and consistency in belief does not translate to rationality and similarly external coherence and consistency of outcome do not guaranty rationality because both

⁵ Hilary Putnam, in 'The Impact of Science on Modern Conceptions of Rationality,' explored the notion of disciplinary rationality where the primacy of science as *the truly rational discipline* was challenged.

internal and external rationality must be synchronized. In addition, irrationality does not imply meaninglessness but only that an action has no rational basis.

Another cognate of rationality is non-rationality – what some call a-rationality. Non-rational beliefs and actions can sometimes be confused with irrationality but they are not the same. While irrational applies to actions, beliefs or mental processes that have gone wrong (Davidson 2004), non-rational actions and beliefs do not fall within the ambit of rationality at all. A non-rational action cannot be subjected to rational criticism. A new born baby or inanimate objects are good examples of categories to which non-rational can be applied. One might wonder where the insane falls in all of this. In this regard, the best that can be done is to group the action or belief of clinically insane persons as irrational because in certifying someone as ‘insane,’ the psychiatrist is almost always guided by some rationally designed principle.

Rationality and Truth

Rationality and truth must not also be confused with each other. This is due to the fact that the status of a belief as rational relies on some other realities other than on an agent’s reason for holding the belief. Same can be said of human actions in which an actor decides on a particular course of action based on thoughtful consideration of available alternatives, then goes on to choose ‘A’ instead of ‘B’. Truth is an entirely different idea. The truth about belief and choice of action in the foregoing is not dependent on the thought process involved but on other objective criteria that must ‘be so’ or ‘be the case’, and must at the same time, according to epistemologist, pass the test of coherence and of correspondence to reality⁶. Meanwhile, it must be pointed out that rationality and truth are usually required for scientific knowledge, although the presence of one is often erroneously assumed by the presence of the other. Social researchers must be wary of the difference between the two in their analysis of phenomena that have religious

⁶ Ritzer (2008) alluded to this difference with the case of the Nazi’s Concentration Camps which were rational places but were immoral and bad.

and moral undertones since they are the areas where a definite line is not usually drawn between rationality and truth⁷. As Bruce and Yearley (2006) emphasised:

To describe a belief or some act as rational is not to say that it is true or correct but that it is held (or done) on reasoned grounds, that it follows from some accountable logic, and that it has been arrived at in ways consistent with the person's other views. Rationality is more a matter of procedure than content: beliefs should be consistent and not contradictory; they should fit with experience and not be known to be false (p. 254).

Let us illustrate this divergence further with the ongoing debate about the appropriateness or otherwise of the introduction of the Islamic Bank in Nigeria. While the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) opposed the idea because he believes that the introduction of Islamic Bank in Nigeria now is sectional, divisive and ethnically motivated, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) argued that his decision is purely an economic choice that is aimed at providing access to cheap or zero interest rates for small and medium scale businesses in order to accelerate the country's socio-economic growth. It will be noticed that the two positions of the CAN President and CBN Governor are rational in their own right for the reason that religion is a major cause of violent conflict in Nigeria and because the country is performing poorly and business owners, whose contribution to growth is being hampered by high interest rate, are in dire need of funds. However, the truth about the relevance of Islamic Bank to Nigeria's economy is not entirely dependent on the reasons being offered by CBN or CAN, but on other things, including the value of the idea in itself; whether it is inherently prejudiced toward those of particular ethnic or religious affiliation;

⁷ Church fathers of the Middle Ages are some of the thinkers that exemplify this current. Most of them appealed to rational arguments to affirm that in truth, God exists.

whether it upholds the central tenets of banking as a whole; if it helps farmers and manufacturers increase productivity and fast-tracks socio-economic growth and; whether indeed there are other multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies outside Nigeria where Islamic Banking is practised and the extent to which its design and application in Nigeria cohere with international best practices.

Rationality and Sociology

Rationality is very important to sociology. In fact, Bruce and Yearley (2006) suggested that 'at one level, rationality is a precondition for sociology'. This supposition is not far removed from how sociology was defined by its founding fathers, particularly those who upheld the scientific status of the discipline. In its classical form, sociology is fundamentally the scientific study of the society. Auguste Comte was of the opinion that sociology is better off by adopting the scientific method in the analysis of human society and for him, only positive science holds the key to unlocking the mysteries of human social relations. Bruce and Yearley (2006) observed that 'Comte championed sociology as a positive science for society...*in which*...precise observation, numerical measurement, the search for patterns of causal explanation should also be used in the social sciences'. The centrality of objectivity to scientific approach was not lost on Comte and other sociologists that embraced science – objectivity relies entirely on realism, the philosophical theory that there is an objectively existing world, not dependent on our minds, and which claims people are able to understand aspects of that world through perception (Encarta 2009). So, like the natural scientists who can figure out or discover the 'truth' about the physical world, sociologists set out to objectively discern patterns in human interactions. Since the ultimate end of sociology is the understanding, explanation and prediction of human social relations, it became necessary to establish a ground from which all social analysis must proceed. That ground, as pre-configured by scientific sociologist, was rationality.

On the presupposition of rationality, some sociologists argue that society, and sociology, are possible because people can assess the reasons for other people's beliefs and actions. Seen in this light, rationality now becomes a heuristic device in the hand of the

sociologist whose goal is to explain by attempting to understand why people hold certain beliefs and act in a particular way, and on that basis generalise and predict what others will believe and how they will act when the conditions are similar. The idea of rationality is the inspiration for many sociological theories – including rational choice, social exchange, and social action theories – even though it has been severely criticised. We shall return to highlight some of the criticism later in the paper but for now the point that is worth underlining is that sociology owes so much to rationality⁸.

Types of Rationality

Philosophers generally think of rationality as being of two variants: rationality of decision (or rationality of action or practical rationality) and rationality of belief (or theoretical rationality) (Hardy-Vallée 2008, p. 16; Audi, 2004, p. 17; Nozick 1993, p. xiv). These two dimensions, explains Robert Audi, ‘centres on the contrast between the rationality of cognitions, such as beliefs, in virtue of which we are theorizing beings seeking a true picture of our world and, on the other hand, the rationality of elements, such as actions, in virtue of which we are practical beings seeking to *do* things, in particular to satisfy our needs and desires.’ In this paper, our typology of rationality will draw on both but shall be expanded to accommodate that of Max Weber who, in addition to practical and theoretical rationality, developed rationality in sociology to include two others, namely substantive and formal rationality.

Practical Rationality

Practical rationality is conceived as that type of rationality which is exercised by social actors in their day to day interactions with their social environment. Max Weber described practical rationality as designating ‘every way of life that views and judges worldly

⁸ Kalberg (1980: 1148) for instance stressed how Max Weber, one of the most outstanding sociologists in history, utilized rationality in its various forms to analyse ‘patterns and regularities’ in social history in order ‘to master fragmented and disconnected realities.’

activity in relation to the individual's purely pragmatic and egoistic interests...' (Kalberg, p. 1151). An actor employs this type of rationality to deal with immediate and difficult situation that they encounter on a daily basis. In another way, one can simply call a practical rational actor as an actor who 'accepts given realities and calculates the most expedient means of dealing with the difficulties they present' (Kalberg, p. 1152).

An instance of practical rationality will be the case of a man who lives at Moniya and must report at work every day, say at the University of Ibadan. Let us say the man owns a motorcycle and a car, hence having at least four options to choose from if he wants to reach his destination: (1) Walk, (2) Engage public transport, (3) Take his personal car, or (4) Take his bike. To decide what the best option is, the man must consider some other variables such as distance, cost of fuel and cost of public transportation, convenience, time and weather condition, traffic record of his route, his own personal health amongst others. To understand how practical rationality operates, we must grasp the reasoning process that is involved in the man's means-end calculation of the most efficient way of reaching his destination every day. In the case under consideration, Option 1 may be the least attractive choice due to distance – except he decides to wake up early because he has no money to fuel his car or motorcycle and he also thinks that walking far distance helps the body. The best out of the three other options will be determined by, among other things, traffic and time. Hence, when the man decides to choose Option 4 on a typical fine day due to heavy traffic at Ojoo, and choose between Option 2 and Option 3 on other days, we may easily conclude that he has demonstrated practical rationality. It must be noted that the defining character of practical rationality is that 'it stands in opposition to anything that threatens to transcend everyday routine' (Ritzer 2008, p. 137).

Theoretical Rationality

In sharp contrast to practical rationality, theoretical rationality 'involves a conscious mastery of reality through the construction of increasingly precise abstract concepts rather than through action' (Kalberg 1980, p. 1152). Theoretical rationality involves an attempt to transcend that haphazard world by providing logical

explanations through the use of precise and abstract concepts (Zamaros 2007, p. 1). Here, the social actor seeks to order the social world through abstraction and mastery of life-organising concept – from which universal principles about the world are deduced. Theoretical rationality proceeds from mental or cognitive confrontation with one's own experience (Kalberg 1980, p. 1152). Of importance here is the role of logical formulation of explanation, causality and association and social symbolism.

Theoretical rationality has been found among sorcerers, priests, philosophers, judges, and scientists. For example, when a preacher explains poverty as the inescapable consequence of the first sin and promises the righteous poor eternal merriment in the world beyond, and when he submits that the inundation of gay activities and other extraordinary social groups are signs of the Apocalypse, theoretical rationality is on display. At the core of this type of rationality, therefore, is the quest to understand and explain the world in an orderly fashion. As Kalberg summarised it:

Religious thinkers continually sought to reorder and systematize the religious values implicit in the world view into increasingly internally consistent doctrines in the hope of deducing patterns of action that would insure a state of grace for believers. According to Weber, religious doctrines themselves – such as the Indian doctrine of Karma, the Calvinist belief in predestination, and the Lutheran justification through faith – could, under certain circumstances, significantly influence practical ways of life (p. 1154)

Unlike practical rationality however, theoretical rationality transcends daily pragmatic encounter with the social world and brings coherence, holism and meaning to the world (Ritzer 2008; Kalberg 1980). That is, theoretical rationality is spurred by the natural metaphysical need and irrepressible quest of thinkers and systematisers to transcend sheer given routine and to supply the random events of everyday life with a coherent meaning (Kalberg 1980: 1153).

Substantive Rationality

Substantive rationality shares the means-end calculation of choice with practical rationality but departs from it by prioritizing rational 'value postulates' above all other concerns. Value in this regard does not translate to a single value but, as Kalberg explains, involves 'entire clusters of values that vary in comprehensiveness, internal consistency, and content.' All social ideas and specific aspects of human interaction are hinged on diverse clusters of values and as Kalberg illustrates with the idea of friendship, values such as loyalty, compassion, and mutual assistance, constitute substantive rationality. More so, small groups, organisations, institutions, political entities, cultures, and civilisations are, in every era, ordered in terms of specifiable value postulates (Kalberg 1980, p. 1155).

Substantive rationality is also distinguished by the fact that no one value system is substantively more rational than others. For Weber, it will be false to assume the existence of an absolute array of values that serve as *the* standard or yardstick for measuring the rationality of others. To Weber, such values simply do not exist. Instead, a radical perspectivism prevails in which the existence of a rationalisation process depends on an individual's implied or stated, unconscious or conscious, preference for certain ultimate values and the systematisation of his or her action to conform to these values (Kalberg 1980, p. 1156). As Weber evinced:

Something is not of itself "irrational", but rather becomes so when examined from a specific "rational" standpoint. Every religious person is "irrational" for every irreligious person, and every hedonist likewise views every ascetic way of life as "irrational", even if, measured in terms of its ultimate values, a "rationalization" has taken place [Weber 1930 (1958), p. 53, as cited in Kalberg 1980, p. 1156].

Other instances of substantive rationality is found in political and economic ideas like democracy, communism, capitalism and socialism, and their rational status can be affirmed only to the extent that they are internally consistent – not in relation to other ideas.

Formal Rationality

This type of rationality also involves means-end calculation but 'relates to spheres of life and a structure of domination that acquired specific and delineated boundaries only with industrialization: most significantly, the economic, legal, and scientific spheres, and the bureaucratic form of domination.' Contrary to the pragmatic orientation of practical rationality, formal rationality appeals to universal rules, laws and regulations. Here, rationality is drawn from universal principles and objectified, formalised and institutionalised into supra-individual forms. This implies that formal rationality is embodied in social structure that relates to individuals as something external to themselves (Brubaker 1984, p. 9, as cited in Ritzer 2008, p. 137).

To Weber, the most plausible example of formal rationality is found in bureaucratic structures. This is because bureaucracy simply calculates the most precise and efficient means for the resolution of problems by ordering them under universal and abstract regulation (Kalberg 1980, p. 1158). Formal rationality may be in opposition to substantive rationality in legal matters where only generally unambiguous details of a case determine outcome. Similarly, noted Kalberg, formal rationality in economic sphere 'increases to the extent that all technically possible calculations within the "laws of the market" are universally carried out, regardless of either their effect on individual persons or the degree to which they may violate ethical substantive rationalities.'

For example, until recently, most economists relied on statistical modelling and quantitative analysis for development planning. It was assumed that the social wellbeing of people would automatically improve if growth is achieved through what is commonly referred to as "trickle-down effect." As a result, they view economic growth, with its generalised submission to the "invisible hand of the market" as *the* prerequisite or pre-condition for human development, not the other way round. Adhering to the strict rules of formal rationality, this growth-drive development paradigm that emerged within industrial Europe was, therefore, universalised and imported into less developed continents. But in Africa and other places, substantive rationalities, including those that emphasised the values of community and social wellbeing, were instantly in contention with, and have been major

impediments to the successful application of, the principles of invisible market. In other words, formal rationality, with its penchant for universalisation, may become contested if imported into spaces where value-based substantive form of rationality was at play.

Rationality and Rationalisation

Bruce and Yearley (2006) elucidate that rationalisation in common usage refers to spurious reasons (a rationale) we give for our actions. To rationalise your action is to make it sound better than it really is. However, the sense that rationalisation is used here is credited to Weber, where sociologists employ it to mean 'of things becoming more rational.' Rationalisation is defined in terms of regularisation of patterns of action within civilisation, institutions, organisation, strata, classes and groups (Ritzer 2008, p. 136). Almost every aspect of the society is susceptible to the rationalisation process and it is a process that expands as societies become more industrialised and more modern. According to Bruce and Yearley:

Rationalisation is Weber's big idea in characterising modernity. We see it: in economic life with the bureaucratic organisation of factories and the use of systematic accounting procedures to calculate profit; in religion with the rise of monotheism, the decline of magic and the rise of personal spiritual responsibility; in law, ad hoc law-making is replaced by deductive reasoning from universal principles; in politics when traditional and charismatic leaderships give way to bureaucratic parties; and in society as a whole with the growth of bureaucratic administration and the spread of universalism (p. 255).

The transformation of social practices into more rational, consistent, more efficient and coherent system is at the core of the rationalisation process. Almost every aspect of the society may be restructured to become more rational, in line with the principles that are valued with particular social structures. For instance, Richard Harvey Brown (1993) proffered some explanations for the

possible path that rationalisation took in the transformation of science into a standardised discipline. In the article, titled *Modern Science: Institutionalization of Knowledge and Rationalization of Power*, Brown (1993, p.165) presented a picture of how the procedure of science was harmonised over a long period of time, involving the 'creation of standardized methods, procedures, and language, the codification of a field of knowledge and the certification of certain practitioners through communal rites as *bona fide* users of that disciplinary discourse'.

A more contemporary model of the rationalisation process is found in George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldisation. Ritzer (1983, p. 100) contextualized the phenomenon of rationalisation within the general pattern of changes that were occurring in the various areas of American lives – ranging from health to the media, tourism, industry and fast-food restaurants. Seen as an historical process whose end product is rationality, Ritzer focused on how the rationalisation of fast-food restaurants, especially McDonalds, has led to greater efficiency, predictability, calculability, substitution of nonhuman for human technology, and control over uncertainty. Unlike bureaucracy where rationalisation is represented in impersonal, reified codes, rules and regulation, Ritzer argued that McDonaldisation is an attempt to transform fast-food restaurants into simple and efficient systems with uniform outlook and procedure wherever they may be located in the world. However, he also agreed that though the fast-food is the current exemplar for future developments in rationalisation, it is not the ultimate expression of rationality⁹.

Some Critiques

Rationality shares the fate of most concepts in sociology because, like them, it is not immune to criticism. What follows is a sketch of some of the most popular objections that have been raised against rationality (and its rationalisation process) and the paper is not structured to single out the different types of rationality for criticism – although this is not impossible. What has been done in

⁹ See Ritzer (2008: 140 – 146) for more elaborate applications of rationalisation.

this section is to proceed in a holistic manner while highlighting the weaknesses of individual types as cases demand. First, rationality is theoretically limited in relation to the possibility of knowing what truly constitutes a rational action. This objection is framed in terms of 'internal vs. external rationality', where a researcher's interpretation of observed reality is limited by his or her inability to determine whether a perceived behaviour is both internally and externally rational. This synergy is critical for a sufficiently valid explanation of observed phenomena and when both internal and external aspects of a supposedly rational action are unclear, reliability is called to question. For example, in the Police, an archetypal formal rational organisation, taking a bullet in order to save ordinary citizen is not only seen as dutiful but also interpreted as heroic action. However, the "dutifulness" or "heroicness" of that action is also dependent on whether the officer involved did "take the bullet", and did not sustain the injury while trying to run away. The rational status of an action may therefore be incomplete/indeterminable if externally exhibited rationality is not in concert with internal reasoning that led to the action in the first place.

Connected to the first is a second objection which emanates from the difference in the ontology of the subject matter of natural science and that of sociology. As a product of culture – complex in nature, often unpredictable and usually not amenable to strict causal laws – humans are particularly difficult to study, compared to molecules or matter in the physical sciences. Rather than being a rational actor at all times, the decisions of people are sometimes influenced by tradition, image, culture and loyalty (Babbie 2007). In chronically impoverished high fertility countries for instance, the negative predisposition of people to birth control pills or family planning in general may not be fully comprehensible within the bounds of rational analysis alone. Since human behaviour is not always triggered by the presence of stimuli, as in other things in nature, understanding fertility behaviour in those countries must therefore leave room for culture-dependent explanations.

Third, rationality is also assumed to be a universal principle, and it is rarely presented as an assumption about human social relations. This is flawed on the account of Bruce and Yearly (2006)

who called our attention to the difficulty involved in resolving the problem that relativism poses to rationality. In their view, since people always disagree even when they hold rational beliefs, we cannot be sure that rationality applies to all actions or beliefs and with this situation, intersubjective agreement may not always be achieved. More so, if rationality is relative and normative, it will surely be problematic to understand the real status of an assumed rational action. Take the case of primitive vs. civilised cultures that was popular among social anthropologists in the first half of the 20th century as an example. While the European anthropologists believed that the social institutions in the West were rational, developed and civilised, they categorised African societies as irrational and generally unintelligible. However, decades of social and philosophical research have shown that rationality is culture-bound, that Westerners have, for the most part, been wrong for assessing or judging the rationality of others using western criteria of rationality. If westerners were unable to decipher the rationality within other cultures, such difficulty may have been a result of the incommensurability of rationalities across cultures or because it is yet to be discovered since, according to Bruce and Yearly (2006, p. 255), “[i]t is difficult to see how any culture could be irrational for long. Even the most basic language requires that words refer consistently to the same objects and so on”.

Again, we cannot know previously what the real reason is for people's actions. During the era of the Republic for instance, a sociologist who is interested in understanding the real reason for Gladiatorial fight and cheap wine in Rome may discover that the Aristocrats pull these stunts because they wanted to distract the citizens from being concerned about state treasure, even though public officials professed that the displays were driven by the need to serve or improve the social lives of Romans. Similarly, the rationale or the real reason for the actions of Nigeria's political elites cannot be easily determined because their avarice for wealth actually undermines what they claim about trying to protect their people from ethnic marginalisation.

At a more practical level, rationality is found wanting because of its inherent contradictions. Ritzer (2008, p. 156) echoed this objection in his notion of 'irrationality of rationality.' According to

him, rationalisation of social structure is prone to counter-productivity. As the end product of rationalisation process, Ritzer argued that rationality leads to inefficiencies and unpredictabilities and produces irrationality in supposedly 'rational systems.' That is, rational systems are not always reasonable systems (Ritzer 1983). He elaborates thus:

Thus, although bureaucracies are constructed to bring about greater efficiency in organizational work, the fact is that there are notorious inefficiencies such as the "red tape" associated with the operation of most bureaucracies. Or, take the example of the arms race in which a focus on quantifiable aspects of nuclear weapons may well have made the occurrence of nuclear war more, rather than less, unpredictable (Ritzer 1983, p. 378).

Rationalisation brings with it great dehumanisation as people are reduced to acting like robots and leads to disenchantment, leaving much of human lives without surprises, spontaneity, mystery or excitement. It also robs humans of freedom and alters their creative capacity to reshape the world as they wish, and prevents them from defining how to live life. Overall, a fully rational society would be a very bleak and uninteresting place.

To cap it all up, Bruce and Yearly (2006, p. 254) maintain that the practical problem for the sociologist whose explanation is based on the assumption of human rationality is how to determine how rationally defensible an action has to be before it can be taken as not needing further explanation. All of these criticisms clearly pose serious problems to the social researcher.

Conclusion

Rationality is important in sociology and what has been done so far was to explain the main elements of the concept. Attempt was also made to examine how rationality relates to rationalism, truth, irrationality and non-rationality by showing their interconnections and differentiating attributes. This was necessary for a meaningful description of rationality as it is often confused with other concepts

with which it shares similar boundaries. And regardless of the objections that were raised, rationality remains a critical disciplinary assumption that aids the practice of sociology and it has been the focus of this paper to highlight its basic components and how it helps to make meaning of the actions and beliefs of social actors. Also from our explanation, it can be seen that rationality is multivalent. There are only a few aspects of the society to which it cannot be applied and almost any meaningful social behaviour can be subjected to rational scrutiny. For the sociologist, its value is immeasurable because rationality offers a broad-based theoretical approach to the analysis of human society. We know that it will be nearly impossible to comprehensively analyse conflict situations within any society without an adequate understanding of the rationale or the rational basis of people's actions. Similarly, our understanding of the political choice of Nigerian women in the 2011 elections will be limited without first comprehending why they formed an alliance to vote in a man as the president – even though they all agree that women have been marginalised for too long. The point that is being stressed, therefore, is that rationality is generally desirable and it is an important and useful approach to discovering the sources of order and change within the human society.

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