

Choosing an Identity: A General Model of Preference and Belief Formation. By Sun-Ki Chai. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. Pp. viii+344. \$52.50.

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Choosing an Identity is an incredibly ambitious book. Chai not only proposes a new, formal model of preference and belief formation, he also

examines three large literatures and offers new theoretical tests within them. He attempts to show that integrating his "coherence model" with a simple optimizing model allows analysis that other rational or nonrational choice models cannot.

The book begins with a broad examination of rational choice models used throughout different social sciences and philosophy. This broad examination is impressive because it draws on research across many different disciplines: psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, and so on. Partly because it is so broad, however, it simplifies many of the arguments and concepts. By doing so, Chai sacrifices some sophistication that reflects upon the model development and eventually, upon claims of the model's effectiveness.

Chai's coherence model starts with a type of rational choice model as its base, specifically, those very simple aspects that maintain self-interest and "rational" optimizing. Chai's model then layers complexity to the decision maker or actor. This actor is constantly updating information and wrestling with "doubt"—the subjective probability associated with a choice when the utility of the optimal strategy is less than the maximum feasible utility. Formally, as the author notes, doubt is equivalent to Savage's concept of expected regret. Chai, however, uses this concept more vigorously than it is typically used in economics or game theory. Substantively, doubt takes a central role in his model and acts similarly to cognitive dissonance (or more properly, dissonance reduction). Chai's model is based upon the psychological notion that actors attempt to maintain consistency in their behavior and beliefs. Exceptionally important for the model and his predictions, this consistency can take place retrospectively or prospectively. Coherence describes a condition in which doubt over a chosen strategy is zero, and it is this type of coherence that drives actors.

How does identity, in particular *choosing* identity as featured in the book's title, fit? The model begins with rule bases that include causal statements that are self-defining and self-referential, leading to self-consciousness "which requires that all of an individual's decision-making and deliberational algorithms exist in the form of beliefs about his or her own past and future actions, preferences and beliefs" (p. 84). Somewhat surprisingly, Chai also incorporates assumptions about needs and relations between sense data and language. Finally, "rules" or information are added based upon experience. "I call the initial rules an individual's foundation and those that are added later as her identity" (p. 89). Foundational beliefs describe observations, whereas identity beliefs involve deliberation and concern the nonobservable.

Building a model, of course, involves making choices about the most important characteristics necessary for eventual prediction. But, by approaching identity as "unified and purposive," and by placing consciousness in a central role, Chai abandons the general sociological concept of identity that involves actors with multiple identities who are not neces-

sarily making choices consciously, but who are willing, able, and sometimes anxious to allow inconsistency.

As a social psychologist, I was most interested in chapter 3 in which the general model is developed and several intriguing puzzles such as the endowment effect and reinforcement schedule strength are analyzed. (Behaviorists will really find something to rile them up here.) I would like to have seen this chapter expanded because important ideas directly related to some of the more unique aspects of the coherence model are offered but not fully developed. However, Chai quickly moves from the model development to three broad chapters analyzing ideology formation and policy choice in ex-colonies, the origins of ethnic identity and collective action, structural change, cultural change, and civic violence.

In these three chapters, Chai lays out some leading theoretical contenders then demonstrates how the coherence model does a better job of predicting outcomes. The evidence gathered here is impressive and the logic elegant. However, the strength of the coherence model is not as convincing. For the most part this has to do with the problem of identifying a priori the particular forms that preferences and identities take. Many (but, not all) of the arguments could be derived from simpler models. Here, Chai's lack of depth in discussion of the broad category of rational choice becomes more problematic—because use of some simple but elegant models within the rational choice tradition, such as Cournot solutions or the Folk Theorem, seems equally likely to yield some of the predictions without as many assumptions about actors.

While I have many reservations about the coherence model, it is clear that Chai's book is an exciting and sophisticated view of decisions. Those interested in rational choice (regardless of their discipline identification) and the substantive areas addressed should carefully consider the challenges issued and the solutions offered.