

# HOW SOCIAL SCIENCE CAN HELP US MAKE BETTER CHOICES

Optimal Rationality in Action

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Optimal Rationality in Action

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Dedicated to the memory of Helen Brown and her 103  
wonderful years and to Vincenza Holland a true  
stalwart in my life.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Chris Brown** is Professor of Education at the School of Education and Childhood Studies, University of Portsmouth. Chris has a long-standing interest on how evidence can and should but often doesn't aid education policy and practice. To that end he has authored four books (including *Achieving Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice in Education: Evidenced* (2017) for Emerald), several papers and has presented and keynoted on the subject at a number of international conferences in Europe, Asia and North and South America. Chris's other principal research interest is centered on the use of semiotic theory and analysis to find better ways to understand the complex problems we often face. This is his second book focusing on this area (following on from *Scenes, Semiotics and the New Real: Exploring the Value of Originality and Difference* (2015) for Palgrave Macmillan).

In 2015, Chris was awarded the American Educational Research Association 'Emerging Scholar' award (Education Change SIG). The award is presented to an individual who, within the first eight years of their career as an educational scholar, has demonstrated a strong record of original and significant scholarship related to educational change. Chris was also awarded the 2016 AERA Excellence in Research to Practice award and the 2016 UCEA Jeffrey V. Bennett Outstanding International Research award.

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# INTRODUCTION

In a world beset with problems, how can we encourage people to act differently? It seems almost daily that new studies emerge telling us how human action is causing planetary degradation, how changes to our diets and how more exercise could lead us to live longer healthier lives, or that financially we are in danger of returning to the debt-related crises of the previous decade. At the same time how many of us adjust our behaviour in response to such information? *How Social Science Can Help Us Make Better Choices* seeks to provide a new way to think about why people make the choices they do and, vitally, the role social science can play in response.

I use the book to explore people's reactions to optimal rational positions (or ORPs for short). ORPs are propositions that set out requirements for change. For example, the need to reduce carbon emissions to minimise the impacts of climate change is an ORP, as is the need for us to eat five items of fruit and veg a day. Other examples of ORPs include the suggestion that we should limit our alcohol consumption to 14 units per week<sup>1</sup> and that we should exercise for 30 minutes at least three times a week. Underpinning the book are two key arguments in relation to ORPs. The first is that, because they comprise a pragmatic coalescence of hard facts

with a general desire to improve people's lives, ORPs present us with a substantive requirement to do something different. Second, we should want to pursue ORPs because they espouse the types of behaviours that will enable us to live healthier, happier or more productive lives; that can improve the lives and outcomes of others; or that can help us ensure social and environmental sustainability.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time what is or is not an ORP needs to be rigorously defined. I suggest we can think of ORPs typically emerging as a result of: (1) a robust and credible evidence base in relation to current or potential new behaviours; (2) a well-reasoned argument (or theory of change), which provides this evidence with meaning; (3) a social, moral or value-based imperative setting out the need for change based on this meaning (or conversely, the consequences of not changing) and (4) buy-in to this imperative from a range of credible stakeholders. These four steps can be illustrated using the example of human-led climate change. For instance, according to the Consensus Project<sup>3</sup> 97% of published papers with a position on global warming agree that global warming is happening (step 1). The authors of these papers also agree that climate change is caused by human action: specifically, the burning of fossil fuels, which adds additional greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, serving to trap more of the sun's heat and so warm the air, land and water (step 2). Global warming is shifting weather patterns and causing droughts and extreme weather events. It will also lead to a rise in the level of the oceans. Climate change has the potential to cause enormous damage to the global economy, the environment and our way of life for centuries to come. To minimise its impacts we should keep the global average temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and ideally limit it to 1.5°C (Evans, 2017) (step 3); the 2015 Paris accord represents a global acknowledgement of the issue and

a commitment by governments to reduce carbon emissions so as to limit warming to these levels (step 4).<sup>4</sup> These four steps together clearly provide a compelling argument for us to engage positively with the need to reduce carbon emissions. Similar analyses can also be provided for each of the ORPs mentioned above.

Because they represent a combination of facts and values, ORPs are often Kantian in nature – they involve ‘should’ type statements relating to a desired outcome: for instance, we *should* reduce carbon emissions, we *should* eat ‘five a day’, we *should* recycle more, we *should* drink less alcohol and so on. At the same time this ‘should’ will only hold for a given period – this is because each and every ORP is capable of shifting over time as new evidence emerges, new arguments are formulated to explain the evidence or new imperatives arise. ORPs are thus contextual and situational rather than universal: eventually counter positions are likely to be established (Vico, 2002). However, for any given point of time the current set of ORPs are likely to represent the best route we have for improving people’s lives and achieving the type of society we want to live in.

At the same time, as we have seen in what is being described as the ‘post truth’ era, there is a danger that potential counter positions are conceived using untrustworthy evidence, and nourished with spin and scant disregard of the facts by those with vested interests. One example of this is the denial by some of the need to tackle human-led climate change (Evans, 2017); a view held by 6% of the public (Leiserowitz et al., 2017). As such, for any given accepted ORP it should be the role of scientists and researchers to work towards understanding how it can be implemented and maintained, to challenge false positions and where appropriate to only support genuinely new ORPs to emerge and take hold.

At its core, therefore, this work is grounded in the humanist tradition. Like Petrarch<sup>5</sup> I believe that our ethical approach should be shaped by an understanding of what can help us live a virtuous life: i.e. of knowledge of what can help us stay healthy, and that promotes sustainable actions. Correspondingly there is a role for social scientists and researchers to go beyond simply producing knowledge and towards actively seeking to achieve positive action in a world facing a multitude of problems. In Petrarch's time (1304–1374) Europe suffered from the Black Death, was entering the 100 years' war, while at the same time the church was grappling with the issue of *Avignonese papacy*. In modern times we face a wealth of issues, ranging from obesity to environmental degradation, around which there is a general consensus that urgent change is needed. Nonetheless, the approach presented here hopes to provide a smarter and more effective way to achieve action than through words alone. Whereas Petrarch sought to rely on 'eloquence' to achieve 'virtue' by 'moving the will of the hearer',<sup>6</sup> the approach set out in this book recognises that, in a world of echo chambers, it is increasingly difficult to get alternative arguments heard by those with entrenched views. As such I seek to show how ORPs can be attained by understanding what is needed to change people's perspectives and behaviours; and once this understanding has been reached a plan of action can then be put in place to help achieve this change. These two requirements, I argue, are totally within the reach and the purview of social scientists.

To describe the approach in the appropriate level of detail, the book is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 1, I outline the notion of optimal rationality, a model of rationality that seeks to explain why people can choose sub-optimal outcomes and yet still make rational choices. Representing a refashioning of Kantian and Aristotelian

rationality, optional rationality can be used to identify the existence of rationality ‘gaps’ in relation to ORPs: in other words used to identify why people may not behave in accordance with ORPs despite recognising the long-term benefits doing so would provide. While identifying rationality gaps is a good first step, in Chapter 2 I turn to the concept of semiotics to examine how such gaps can be filled. Semiotics is concerned with what things or concepts signify (intimate) to us. Semiotic approaches can also be used to explore the relationships we have with things or concepts. Correspondingly I argue that by understanding the meaning ORPs convey to people, the benefits they feel ORPs will provide and the difficulty people perceive they will face in acting in accordance with them, we can begin to understand whether ORPs are attractive enough for people to engage with rather than pursue other options. From this understanding we can then develop interventions designed to alter the perceptions people have in relation to ORPs.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I present the optimal rationality/semiotic (ORS) approach in action, using a case study from education. In particular I show how through employing the ORS model I was able to understand why teachers from three schools in Hampshire (United Kingdom) were not engaging with the notion of evidence-informed practice as a means to improve teaching and student outcomes. Using this analysis, I subsequently worked with the executive principal of these schools to develop a year-long intervention designed to foster evidence-informed school improvement. At the end of the intervention a second analysis was undertaken. Presented in Chapter 4, this second analysis illustrates that interventions can successfully be used to alter the significance of ORPs and as a result reduce rationality gaps. Building on from this work in Chapter 5, I argue that, while we typically have three ways of moving people to optimal rational behaviour (we can

attend to the costs people associate with a specific ORP; we can do more to highlight the benefits of the ORP; or we can attend to the meaning associated with the ORP and so attempt to improve the attractiveness of any given ORP's brand), typically 'attractiveness' tends to be neglected. In response I use the chapter to look at how the semiotic phenomenon of 'scenes' can be employed to change the desirability of a given ORP and so people's wish to be associated with it. Finally, in Chapter 6 I explore the lessons from this work for social science and the potential ways in which researchers can develop approaches to maximise the types of ORP-related behaviour that can improve all of our lives.

A final point. This book is steeped in the notion of consumption. This is because I believe that behaviour change – especially in relation to ORPs – is fundamentally linked to how people currently consume and how they might consume moving forward. In other words behaviour change is about getting people to rethink and reallocate resource in a way that moves from one pattern of consumption to another: whether this be changing the amount of time spent on specific activities such as going to the gym or the money spent on specific goods. We all have only finite resource (time, money, energy) at our disposal – how we allocate this to specific activities matters if we are to solve the world's problems. Furthermore, in keeping with this focus on consumerism, I also frequently use within the book the potentially contentious term 'personal brand'. But using this term isn't an attempt to equate people with consumer objects or corporations. For me the notion of a personal brand is something that encapsulates the qualities and attributes that we believe make us who we are; they also simultaneously represent the things we would like others to recognise in us.

For example, one way to consider the idea of personal brand is to ask ourselves 'what qualities or attributes would

my friends use to describe me'. We could repeat the question for our bosses or work colleagues, our family, our gym buddies, our neighbours and so on. If asking this for real the responses received, one would hope, would likely cover the qualities we believe matter and so attempt to enact and portray according to the relationship in question. In other words one would hope that people recognise and correctly interpret the meaning behind our deliberate actions. At the same time while not equating people with consumer objects we are all consumers and can generally recognise and take away from consumer brands the messaging they seek to convey to us. As such I argue that consumer brands can often also be used by people as a shorthand way to indicate specific qualities that form part of their personal brands. For example, where we purchase our groceries can indicate the extent to which food matters to us. Similarly our notion of personal style will be inherent in the clothes we buy. I return to this subject in Chapter 2 where I argue that the brand of an ORP and its relationship to our own personal brand will in part determine our engagement with it. In other words, determine whether we decide to consume in ways congruent with it.

## NOTES

1. See: <https://patient.info/health/recommended-safe-limits-of-alcohol>
2. Likewise ORPs can apply to governments and how they might foster and encourage behaviours and beliefs across society.
3. See: <http://theconsensusproject.com>

4. See: <https://www.c2es.org/docUploads/cop-21-paris-summary-02-2016-final.pdf>
5. See Petrarch (2008).
6. Also the work of other humanists such as Alberti who held similar perspectives in relation to art.