

CMY3701 summary/essay of rational choice theory for 15 marks

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C. Deyzel

Rational choice theory (15 Marks)

This is a summary of the classical school, including my own examples; I used these as my own exam preparation and managed to obtain a distinction.

Please do not submit this essay as an assignment, there are direct quotes from the study guide. Use these for exam revision ONLY.

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1. Introduction

Rational choice theory is based on the utilitarian, classical school philosophers of Cesare Beccaria. Cornish and Clarke have attempted to construct a more sophisticated approach to the decision to offend, which they have termed “rational choice” theory. This perspective assumes that people are not just “empty vessels” when they approach a situation in which crime might be committed. They bring with them background factors that create criminal motivations.

2. Definition of a key concept

2.1 Rational choice

Rational choice emphasises the importance of rationality in human action, even if this is limited. It emphasises the decision-making process involved in the choices made by offenders.

3. Propositions

Cornish and Clarke summarise the basis of their rational choice perspective in the following six basic propositions:

- i. Firstly, crimes are deliberate acts, committed with the intention of benefitting the offender. *For example, benefits may include the money the offender has stolen or the excitement gained from committing the act.* It is therefore reasonable to assume that crimes are premeditated acts that involve substantial amounts of rational consideration.
- ii. Secondly, offenders try to make the best decision they can, given the risks and uncertainty involved. *For example, a security guard may unexpectedly appear on the scene.* No matter how much planning and effort the offender has put into committing the crime, there might still be various other factors that the offender might not have thought of that could influence the risks of committing the crime.
- iii. Thirdly, offender decision-making varies considerably according to the nature of the crime. *For example, the methods/decision-making involved in committing a bank robbery differs from the methods involved in committing arson.*

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- iv. Fourthly, decisions on becoming involved in particular kinds of crime (“involvement decisions”) are quite different from those relating to the commission of a specific criminal act (“event decisions”)
- v. Fifthly, involvement decisions comprise of three stages: **initiation**: whether a person is ready to begin committing crime to obtain what he/she wants. *For example, criminal activities may be used to easily achieve success by committing fraud.* **Habituation**: whether, having started offending, he/she should continue to do so. *For example, by committing fraud once, the offender should make the decision if it was a “once off thing” or if he/she will do it again.* **Desistance**: whether, at some stage, he/she ought to stop. *For example, the offender might decide to discontinue his/her criminal career (fraud).* These stages must be studied separately, because they are influenced by quite different sets of variables.
- vi. Lastly, event decisions involve a sequence of choices made at each stage of the criminal act. For example preparation, target selection, commission of the act, escape and aftermath.

4. Bounded rationality

For Cornish and Clarke behaviour is rational, but bounded. Offenders are generally doing the best they can within the limits of time, resources and information available to them. In other words, all offenders think before they act, even if this is only momentary and is based on some immediate assumptions and hoped-for benefits, rather than any long-term strategic thinking.

5. The choice process

Cornish and Clarke argue that the choice process occurs in two major stages:

- Firstly offenders must decide whether they are willing to become involved in crime to satisfy their needs. Whether or not they decide to become involved in crime is influenced mainly by their previous learning experiences with crime, contact with law enforcement, moral attitudes and the degree to which they plan ahead. These learning factors are shaped by various background factors. *For example, if their parents were offenders and got caught by law enforcement (imprisonment) they would most likely decide against committing the act.*

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- Secondly, once individuals decide to become involved in a crime, they need to adopt a crime-specific focus. They need to decide what offence they will probably commit. This decision is heavily influenced by the individuals' current situation. *For example a single, unemployed mother could shoplift food out of desperation for the survival of herself and her children.*

6. Evaluation of theory

6.1 Pro's

Rational choice theory seems to hold a promising approach to reducing crime: situational crime prevention. By studying how offenders make decisions, steps can be taken to reduce opportunities that make these offences possible.

6.2 Con's

The danger of rational choice theory, however, is that offenders will be treated as though they were rational decision makers. When this occurs the context that influences their decisions to break the law is ignored and commentators begin to recommend harsh criminal justice policies.

7. Conclusion

Please provide own conclusion. Remember to indicate that this is your opinion, for example "this student is of the opinion that..." This is what you think about the theory. This is not a summary of your essay.