

# The AGORA

Newsletter of the Rationality and Society Section of the American Sociological Association and the Research Committee 45 on Rational Choice of the International Sociological Association

**Winter 2017/Spring 2018**

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## **From the Chair's Desk**

Jane Sell



Happy 2018! Welcome to both the old and new members of our section.

I would like to begin by thanking Vincent for his leadership last year. Our Montreal meetings were full of thought provoking presentations and discussions. And, I must say, that our section demonstrated its enthusiasm through attendance. Our business meeting was the last session of the last day—and we had spirited discussions and quite a few attendees.

This September began with an offer to the Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity session. We had seven of our members join the Altruism session and then asked that their members match us by joining Rationality and Society. Our trust was rewarded by trustworthy behavior: The Altruism section matched our seven people with section memberships. We also had increases in our student memberships. So, I think we have a good core of dedicated scholars.

We were scheduled as last on the ASA program last year and so, given the rotation, we will be early in the program this coming year. This is both good and bad. When your programs are on the last day, you are awarded an extra session; when you are first, there is no extra session. So, we have only one regular submission section (organized by Katie Corcoran) and one, hour-long, invited session, organized by me. As is our tradition, the hour session will be followed by our required business meeting. In our invited session, past and present award winners from our section will discuss theoretical development in the area. Questions we hope to address include the notions of

rationality as distinct from non/rationality, and how dependence of particular paradigms (such as social dilemmas or dictator games) might affect theoretical development.

Within this newsletter you will find calls for awards from our section. Please consider nominating someone else or yourself for the awards. This year, as every year, we have a graduate student award: the committee is chaired by Vincent Buskens. This year, we also have the Rationality and Society James Coleman Award for Outstanding Book (for books published in 2016 or 2017). Damon Centola is chairing this committee.

Speaking of our newsletter, I want to express my gratitude to Masayuki Kanai who has agreed to help edit the newsletter, Agora. I edited one edition of the newsletter for many years. I shared this editorship with our colleague Jun Kobayashi. Our newsletter is a sign of our vitality. We share our newsletter with the International Sociological Association, the ISA, which has Research Committee 45, Rational Choice. Please support both the ASA and ISA.

We will be having elections very soon. This year, we will be electing an incoming chair, a secretary/treasurer to replace Neha Gondal and a council member to replace Katrin Auspurg. I have already mentioned the good work of Vincent Buskens (our past chair), but let me mention that service of Katrin and Neha. Katrin has always been an active member of the council and a wonderful volunteer for multiple duties. (In fact, just a few weeks ago, she emailed to let us all know that she would be happy to serve on our Award for the Outstanding Book Committee.) Special thanks also to Neha as she steps down. Neha has been extraordinarily helpful with our finances and the everyday business of the section. We appreciated her careful and cheerful approach toward monitoring the section.

As we all know, voluntary organizations are sometimes plagued by the public good problem of free-riding. This is not the case for our section.

I thank the section for its generosity, and promise that 2018 will see us grow with enthusiasm.

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## Award Announcement from the Rationality and Society Section



### Rationality and Society James Coleman Award for Outstanding book

Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Eligible books must have been published in 2016-2017.

Nominations should be submitted to Damon Centola by email ([dcentola@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:dcentola@asc.upenn.edu)) by March 1, 2018. Please include author's name(s), institutional affiliation and institutional address, and full contact information including preferred email address, telephone number(s) and mailing address.

### Rationality and Society section award for Best Paper by a Graduate Student

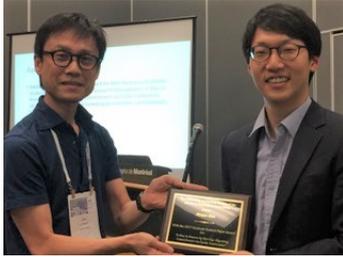
Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Eligible authors are students currently enrolled in a graduate program who will not have received the PhD at the time of the ASA meeting, August 11-14, 2018. Multi-authored papers are eligible if none of the authors has a PhD.

Nominations should be submitted by email to Vincent Buskens ([v.buskens@uu.nl](mailto:v.buskens@uu.nl)) by March 1, 2018. Nominations should include two electronic files: (1) A cover page with the paper title, paper abstract, author's name(s), institutional affiliation and institutional address, the name of the author's faculty advisor, and full contact information including preferred email address, telephone number(s) and mailing address. (2) The nominated paper, double-spaced, beginning with title and abstract but with author's name and other identifying information removed.

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## 2017 Rationality and Society section award for Best Paper by a Graduate Student

Jun Kobayashi, committee chair



The committee consists of Masayuki Kanai and David Calnitsky who is the last year's recipient of this award, and Jun Kobayashi as a committee chair.

We had five nominations, self-nominated or by others. Then, papers are blinded. Committee members read and reviewed the papers. Each member separately selected one to four papers (out of the five papers), that they think worth the award. We reviewed papers based on originality, clarity, robustness, and future possibilities in terms of rational choice sociology. It turned out that all papers were enough qualified, so this was a tough but pleasant work.

I aggregated evaluations of the three members. Very fortunately, we needed no coordination processes. We reached a unanimous consensus in the first round to decide which paper to be awarded.

The paper was "A Man is Known by His Cup: Signaling Commitment via Costly Conformity." The author was Minjae Kim, a fourth-year Ph.D student in Economic Sociology at MIT, working with Ezra Zuckerman.

What did the paper attain? The paper challenges to reveal underlying mechanisms of social norms. For this purpose, the paper raises a research question of why people follow unpopular norms, such as staying late at the workplace and overdrinking after work with coworker, even though they do not like it and they know others do not like it. In rational choice words, the paper tries to discover rationality of Pareto-inefficient norms. "Lack of information" in the literature cannot explain this.

The paper theoretically derives a prediction that costly conformity to such norms serve as signals of commitment to relationships or groups. We can call this a "latent function" of social norms. Then, the paper tests this prediction, focusing on an overdrinking norm in South Korea. (As I am a Japanese, overdrinking is also problematic in Japan). It uses two methods. The

first method is interviewing on 42 informants. The second is an internet survey to conduct vignette experiments on 499 respondents. The prediction was supported in the both methods.

What can we learn from the paper? It carefully connects theoretical investigation with empirical testing. That is, this is a theory-driven, at the same time evidence-based paper. In addition, it uses both qualitative and quantitative data and nicely integrates them. This means it adopts a mixed methods approach to provide robust findings. So, it showcases the power of rational choice theory with diverse types of empirical support. In this sense, the paper can be called a crossroad of theory and application as well as qualitative and quantitative analyses.

As a result, it sheds new light on rationality of social norms. It also enriches our understanding of Asian business cultures. As I am a Japanese, its explanation was quite convincing. Then, I wanted to know how this mechanism can be applied to other cultures than Asia and other social norms than overdrinking. Anyway, the most important lesson for us should be "Do not drink too much!"



## Research Committee on Rational Choice RC45

The general objective of Research Committee 45 on Rational Choice is to advance the development of Rational Choice Theory. This includes its application to various explanatory problems across social science disciplines, its empirical test, its theoretical development and comparison with alternative approaches. The RC tries to achieve this general objective by promoting the international exchange of scientific information across disciplinary borders.

### From the President`s Desk

Antonio M. Chiesi



Dear RC45 members,  
Rational choice approaches (RC) are gaining momentum in different social science disciplines. The models of actor are more and more complex and realistic, and methods are increasingly accurate and powerful, especially in experimental practices.

This growing interest for more realistic models of actor has affected mainly Economics, as well as Political Science. Discursive and reflexive Sociologies have long been skeptical about these developments and still are, but I do not see innovative breaks through in their internal debates. On the contrary, those who refer to the methodological individualism and its elaborations of the past century have enjoyed substantial advances, new followers and fruitful interchange of ideas and methods with the other social sciences. I see clear convergences within the social and behavioral sciences around an increasingly shared RC approach.

I think that our Committee has taken advantage of this evolution. In the last four years we have increased our membership and the number of papers proposed for presentations in our workshops. This is an important evidence of the interest around our

initiatives, which have been proposed not only by our board, as its institutional activity, but also by new scholars who approached us and found interesting to contribute in different ways. This has been evident in Vienna, in 2016, where special attention had been given to the debate around the Analytical Sociology and to the role of experimental methods.

The year 2017 has been important for our Committee. We had two main initiatives. One has been the launch of the Best Students Paper Award, second edition, which will expire by the end of next February and whose winner will be awarded in Toronto during our business meeting at the World Congress of Sociology. The other initiative has been the Second International Workshop devoted to the analysis of social inequalities, which was held in Utrecht last September. This successful workshop was organized by Jun Kobayashi, Masayuki Kanai, Carola Hommerich and Vincent Buskens and has collected an international group of scholars from three continents.

I guess the increasing interest enjoyed by RC45 will also be clear in Toronto, next summer, where we have selected rich sessions with 74 presentation abstracts, discussions and posters on an array of different exciting topics.

In the meanwhile, our board has been busy in preparing the elections of the new board which will be responsible for the future activities of the next four years. On behalf of the expiring board I warmly invite you to participate to the elections and thanks very much Willie Jasso who has accepted to serve as Electoral Officer and will contact each of you soon.

All these perspectives will be a challenge for our Committee in the next years.

I am writing to you the day before Christmas. I imagine you are busy in preparing the last things, to celebrate tomorrow with your dears. You will receive this letter when the new year is well ahead. Then, let me send you my best wishes for a fruitful and serene 2018. I hope to meet you all in Toronto next July.

Now, as I still have to complete my gifts, I have to hurry up to find something cute to leave to my daughter under the Christmas tree.

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## Second International Workshop of ISA RC45 on Social Inequality

Jun Kobayashi, organizer

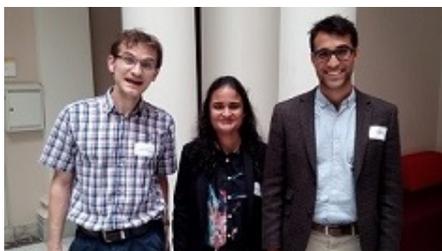
The second international workshop of ISA RC45 was successfully finished in Utrecht, the Netherlands, on September 1, 2017. It focuses on the problem of social inequality. It was cosponsored with the Stratification and Social Psychology Project (SSP Project).

The workshop had 22 participants and 16 presentations. Its program and pictures are available at the workshop's website:

[www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~thh0808/utrecht/](http://www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~thh0808/utrecht/)



Best paper awards were given to three young scholars: Xavier Hussain, Sehar Ezdi, and Sebastian Hülle (below from right to left).



RC45 president Antonio Chiesi and Gianluca Manzo served as a discussant. Guillermina Jasso and Toru Kikkawa gave keynote speeches (below). The organizing committee consists of Jun Kobayashi, Masayuki Kanai, Carola Hommerich, and Vincent Buskens.



I hope the workshop contributed to a future development of RC45.

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## Volker Stocké: An obituary

Hartmut Esser



On August 22, 2017 Volker Stocké died unexpectedly at the age of 51 years. It was a real shock to many, partly because no one could think of losing him, and partly Volker had brought a specific organization of scientific work and his own special way of life of cooperation, promotion and enthusiasm that blossomed not only for scientific work, on a professorship at the University of Kassel and before that at the University of Bamberg.

Volker Stocké started his scientific career in Mannheim. He was an educational climber ("Bildungsaufsteiger") from a winegrower village in the Palatinate, being himself a text-book example for educational sociology, one of his later focal points. He was not supposed to pursue an academic path, but insisted on studying, and indeed - please note: - Sociology. In Mannheim. It was not a bad idea, certainly, but definitely a remarkable and, under the circumstances, a particularly courageous decision. Maybe that was more due to coincidence or proximity, but it worked on both sides. Unlike in many other places, Mannheim sociology was (and is) something that beginners in sociology consider to be: social inequality and education were and are still one of the most widespread motives for studying sociology, and they have long been one of the main focuses of the Sociology in Mannheim. But not as an accusatory moaning or merely conceptual sorting of the misery of the world, "Bourdieu" in other words, but with the aim of uncovering the exact causes and processes in order to be able to take effective action against it, if necessary: *Termini sine theoria nihil valent*. In addition: The philosophy of science of an enlightened realism in line with everyday experiences of constraints and of overcoming them. And little space therefore for too airy constructions of social reality, but a rather quiet amused distance to every bluffing attempt of juggling with all sorts of hollow rhinestones of an incorporated cultural capital, which one does rather not find in the less educated families, especially

not the Palatinate.

Between 1995 and 1998, Volker Stocké was Assistant Professor of Sociology and Science of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Mannheim and then until 2008 in various positions on a series of projects of the Department, the Mannheim Center for European Social Research and the Collaborative Research Center 504 on "Rationalitätskonzepte, Decision Behavior and Economic Modeling ". From the outset, the works had two intertwined relationships: the development of a general micro-foundation of the social sciences and the use of derived results for the further development of social science methods and theories in different content areas, from the very beginning including the explanation of educational decisions. The general theme was nothing less than the development of an "integrative", causally understood action theory, which can include not only the rational choice but also processes of "definition of the situation", symbolic interaction and possibly unconditional observance of norms and values which, for example, have not managed to grasp the economic approaches to this day and consider the interpretive approaches of sociology as completely inconceivable. Volker Stocké has done pioneering work in both fields, certainly not as a lone pioneer; this is hardly possible with a problem-solving approach and the necessary infrastructures. It was only possible with a hardly surpassable meticulousness first in the processing of the pending questions, then in the design of the necessary theoretical version and finally in the, z.T. extremely elaborate, systematic empirical test.

His doctoral thesis, which could have been an anticipated habilitation dissertation, is here the most visible example. It contains probably the most thorough work-up of the cognitive-psychological concept, on which the efforts for an integrative action theory have worked - until today - the framing of decisions, as it had become in the classical experiment with Tversky & Kahneman. A verbal label alone drastically changed subjects' decisions: A bitter blow for Rational Choice Theory. However, Volker Stocké had noticed, probably after long nights and too many cigarettes, that the specifications for the experiment systematically lacked certain information, which could lead to errors in opening up the missing information on the effects. Provided? Intention? And only an artifact? Maybe it's still "Rational Choice"? What to do? Sure:

We replace the missing information. Then there should not be the effect anymore. Thought. Done? No, it's not that easy in this kind of sociology: whole series of new experiments in an unknown terrain with a very uncertain outcome are needed. The result has paid off this time: No more framing effect, in fact! Enough? No! Now the real acid test: We let the information miss in a way that should yield the opposite result. And in fact: the effect turns! Indeed! A triumph for Volker's own considerations - and for Rational Choice Theory! And a disaster for all those framing rip-offs! Everyone else would have blown it out immediately. Volker Stocké: No, not yet. Because: All experiments were based on indifferent incentives, where according to the low-cost hypothesis of Rational Choice Theory, symbolic controlled effects should have been demonstrated even in rationality. So now let's vary incentive structures. And again, a whole series of experiments: One of the two options to decide between, gradually got a higher and higher value over the other, and then there would have to be an end to the framing after the Rational Choice Theory soon. And that's what came out: Some subjects actually react quite rationally and cease to react to framing as the incentives get stronger, but others are completely insensitive to the objectivity of the incentives and almost unconditionally follow the framing of language! Obviously, there is both: Rational choice and a symbolic definition of the situation.

Volker Stocké has never submitted this sensational result for publication. It is perhaps because Daniel Kahneman, to whom he wanted to report personally in a naive critical-rational pride during a visit to Mannheim, could not accept any of this. Kahneman has written later a book about fast and slow thinking, a core of what Volker Stocké had found, and that, unlike Kahneman and others in the field to this day, with a precise theoretical model. Later, there were several similar cases of non-publication in Volker Stocké: Super result, but still questions. "Public(ity) Sociology" and the unhesitating publication of even the loosest texts in non-referenced anthologies have never been his way of doing things. His impact is another. It is somehow objectified through citation indices, which are certainly not everything, but allow to distinguish between sociology that is reputedly controlled, sustainable and practically usable and other that is not.

In Mannheim, Volker Stocké then applied these

thoughts and findings primarily to the explanation of educational decisions. And because, as so often happens when new paths are taken, the necessary data was not available, he simply organized his own large study: the "Mannheim Educational Panel Study", called: MEPS. An again extremely complex, over several years applied panel survey. It was therefore only too logical that Volker Stocké became the initiator and sponsor of the National Educational Panel Study, NEPS, this very important flagship project of empirical educational research, and contributed greatly to its launching and maiden voyages. Since 2008 professor of "Sociology with a focus on longitudinal education research" and co-founder of the interdisciplinary graduate college BAGGS at the University of Bamberg.

With his appointment to a professorship for methods of empirical social research at the University of Kassel in 2012, he continued to deal with educational decisions and educational inequalities, but also turned to other topics, such as the social desirability in interviews, a topic that could hardly be more relevant and important today, as the fact that the voices of marginalized groups are, as always, very much obscured in opinion polls and election forecasts. In Kassel, as soon came to be known, he was able again to build up his own productive, inspiring working-life worlds. Obviously, they were indispensable for him, and, as in Mannheim and Bamberg, they spawned a large number of excellent sociologists. In between, many of them are in visible positions, being aware of what they had of Volker Stocké.

Mannheim, the environment that shaped Volker Stocké so significantly, both actively and passively, and where he has been a lot until the end, is said to be the northernmost city of Italy and the southernmost of the Ruhr area. That is true, and it applies to Volker Stocké too: sometimes the ascetic enthusiasm of the efforts of the analytic-empirical sociological work made him look quite gray. But he also liked the lighter life, and had a great kindness, helpfulness and not least that specific humor: loose and a bit distanced, but also with all definiteness always conciliatory, the type of humor educational climbers sometimes (but certainly not always) develop, when it is all too colorful, turbulent and big talk around them. Especially with a glass of Pinot Gris in the always quite mild evening sun of the Palatinate. After work.

This mildness has never changed his leniency in the matter. That was also one of the reasons why, just before his unexpected death, he was committed to founding the "Academy of Sociology" in Germany. Its purpose is what linked him to a not-so-small number of others: To regard sociology as a science to be taken seriously, no, even more, seek to obtain the most accurate and reliable understanding of social processes, based on clear and concise theories, enabling empirically reliable statements that are as far as possible controllable against value judgments and that should be able to serve for a well-considered change in societal institutions. For example: That even more talents from the less educated layers make it upwards. And not so much the rather moderate ones with their advantages in habitus, cultural capital and the unconditional aspirations of their parents on certificates and titles, all these things that are so much more seldom in the structurally harsher environments of less educated families, not only in the Palatinate.

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### Recent Publications of Interest

- Kley, Stefanie. 2017. "Facilitators and Constraints at Each Stage of the Migration Decision Process." *Population studies* 71(sup1):35-49.  
DOI: 10.1080/00324728.2017.1359328
- Kobayashi, Jun, Junya Tsutsui, and Masayuki Kanai. 2017. *Contemporary Japanese Sociology*. New Delhi: SAGE.

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### Editors' note

This is my first time I have edited AGORA. Many thanks to Jane and Jun for their support. This year, we have two major conferences in North America. Looking forward to seeing you there!  
(Masa)



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