

## **Introduction**

Rationality is an individual phenomenon that changes with two variables: time and environment. This paper will explore this statement as it specifically relates to the Afrikan-American community. Choosing this slice of the American population allows me to draw on personal experience. Having lived with primarily Afrikan-Americans for the first seventeen years of my life in the Bronx, NY and then spending the past seven years gaining a greater knowledge of other groups, I have seen my rationale change.

Some may argue that I have changed as a result of maturity, but I would argue that my peers who remained in the Bronx still act the same at 22 (my current age) as they did at 17 (when I left). This paper attempts to explain the reason for this disparity. Moreover, I will juxtapose my findings with literary classics the twenties, forties, and sixties, as well as contemporary works to reflect the historical significance of this phenomenon.

## **SCIENTIFIC VIEW ON RATIONALITY**

Before delving into the crux of the paper which deals with the research and personal observation I've come across. It is only fair to introduce the scientific definition of rationality. Rationality, as defined in *Noah Webster's Random House Dictionary*, is "a based on, agreeable to, or exercising reason" (Webster 594). Furthermore, rationale (or an individual's view on rationality) is described as, "a statement of reasons or principles" (Webster 594). There is a fundamental difference in these two terms. A society or a group of people decides rationality. For example, it is rational for a person living in America to stop at a red light 3 o'clock in the morning. Whereas in South Africa it would be irrational as over thirty car-jackings a day occur in that country. You would be risking your car and possibly your life by doing so.

Conversely, rationale is a more individualistic phenomenon which can then be compared to the larger groups' view of rationality. It is at this point where people begin to call others irrational. The larger groups' view of rationality acts as the litmus test to determine if the individual is acting rationally.

### ***Nick Rescher and Rationality***

Nicholas Rescher's view of rationality is centered around the individual. He identifies the basic element involved with rationality as 'doing what is best for you'. He remarks: ". . . rationality concerns "optimization," or the act of doing the best we can under the circumstances" (Rescher 8).

Rescher continues his discussion, moving onto the concept of rationality being normative. He adds, "Normative expressions tells us how something "ought" to be done". This thought mirrors my view of rationality being determined by a larger population which then judges the rationale of the person. In Rescher's characterization of a rational person, he notes that a distinction must be made between ideal and practical rationality. The main reason for this is that no one can be right all of the time. In the real world, a person can only be asked to make an optimal decision based on the information available. To ask for perfection would be impractical. However, a person who rushes to an optimal decision without mulling over the available information is at much greater fault than one who arrives at that same decision while attempting to use all of the information available to them.

### ***Frank Yates and Rationality***

On the topic of environment, the article which stands out was written by Frank Yates et al. and involved a comparative study of decision analysis in China, Japan, and the United States. In their conclusion, they note that there is a remarkable difference on the thought process in each country. They found major discrepancies between the cultures and urged further study on this area. America, being the melting pot that it is, offers a unique opportunity to do so without having to travel far. The remainder of the paper will focus on rationality from that perspective. I will concentrate on Afrikan-American's in particular and compare their views on rationality to the larger culture.

## **CONTEMPORARY CASES INVOLVING RATIONALITY**

Thus far we have focused on the science communities' view of rationality. As stated earlier, there has not been any significant work done on to how rationality is

dealt with in an urban setting. Two cases immediately spring to mind: Larry Davis and Colin Ferguson.

### ***The Case of Colin Ferguson***

Colin Ferguson was born to a rich Jamaican family which migrated to the United States. He could not find a job once moving to New York and became increasingly frustrated. He began to blame the United States government for blackballing him. He later claimed that he actually was part of an experiment where he let a government agent put a chip in the back of his neck. Having grown tired of being controlled by the government he asked for the chip to be taken out, but they refused. Ferguson's next move was to punish the agents. He boarded a Long Island Railroad train and shot every passenger in sight, except the Blacks. During his trial, Colin Ferguson defended himself, referring to himself in the third person (later popularized by Bob Dole) stating Colin Ferguson (Sic.) was controlled by the government. He was convicted to several consecutive life sentences but while doing my research to date, he has not yet been examined and studied. He had never shown any previous violent behavior and has been a model citizen in jail. To this day, Colin Ferguson believes he did the right thing, as he (claims) the government no longer controls him.

### ***The Case of Larry Davis***

The second story is of Larry Davis, who, in the late 1980s, decided that drug dealers were ruining his community in the Bronx. Davis was a working man who had never been involved with drugs. He had become increasingly annoyed with the appearance of drug dealers in his neighborhood and began his vendetta to kill them one by one. After reaching six dead, he was finally apprehended by police and sentenced to a lengthy jail term. In his mind, and many others, there was nothing wrong with what he was doing. To most, Larry Davis was simply ridding the earth of unneeded nuisances.

I introduce those two cases<sup>1</sup> only to show the lack of interest in rationality and the Black community. The only topic which has some documented research is "Black Rage", but in my investigation, the reports almost always point to the subject being crazy, rather than dealing with the matter scientifically. A serious investigation on such matters is severely needed.

## **Literary Examination**

### ***I. Manchild in the Promise Land***

*Manchild in the Promise Land*, by Claude Brown is a classic autobiography set in the time just after World War II and ending in the late 50's. The story mostly takes place in New York City, mainly Harlem and Greenwich Village. As he describes in his foreword:

I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis and America itself. (Brown X)

*Manchild in the Promise Land*, chronicles Claude Brown's life from his troubled childhood in Harlem, to his migration to Greenwich Village, where he meets success, and then back to Harlem where he tries to save his younger brother from falling prey to the harms which caused Claude to initially leave Harlem. This book is so powerful that it is deserving of its own paper, instead I will focus on a few of the moments in the book where rationality and decision making are illustrated.

One such instance involves Claude trying to burn an absence card from school. Normally, young Claude would beat the mailman to his home and intercept the letter thus keeping it away from his father. However this time the card had already been delivered. He decided to burn the card while it lay inside of the mailbox. After

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<sup>1</sup> The above two stories are not by any means unique when taken at face value. There have been stories of postal workers going off in a post office or citizens taking the law into their own hands. The complex comes in when these people have not been studied and a diagnosis has not been given. The well-chronicled postal situation has received widespread attention and most public vigilantes have taken pace in sub-urban areas, never in the inner-city and the victims usually are innocent bystanders. Very few people would call drug-dealers innocent. Hopefully, one day cases like the aforementioned will be given a more thorough examination.

using all of the matches, the card was not completely burned so he decided to runaway. In his mind, this alternative was better than staying home, as now he would not only get in trouble for missing school, but for burning the card and several other mailboxes. His survival was in jeopardy. Claude recalls, "In a little while, Dad would be coming home; and when he looked in the mailbox, anywhere would be safer than home for me" (19). This example illustrates his rationale, where he would have received a beating for missing school, which is why he decided to burn the card. Since he could not burn the entire card he would still get a beating (for missing school) but with the extra sin of burning the card, he no longer wanted to stay. Having been beaten in the past, Claude knew what he was in for, and at his own admission, it was not that bad. But now there was a beating for burning the card which he was not familiar with, so he decides to run away, the correct decision as his rationale dictates. As that chapter ends, Claude's parents are so worried about his whereabouts, they welcome him back and the card incident is forgotten.

Claude later reveals his rationale, when it comes to going to school and stealing. He argues: ". . . I played hookey to avoid getting into trouble in school. It seemed whenever I went to school, I got into a fight with the teacher. So to avoid that trouble I just didn't go to school. When I stole things, it was only to save that family money and avoid arguments or scoldings whenever I asked for money" (22). He continues: "Everybody was stealing from somebody else, we accepted this as the ways of life" (22). As Claude grows older but remains in Harlem, he began selling drugs and pimping women. One of his girls was 13 and big for her age and women would pass by her and say that it was a shame that she was prostituting herself. In response, Claude rebuts: "But it wasn't. The shame of it was that she had to do it or starve. When she got hip and went out there on the street and started turning tricks, she started eating and she stopped starving. And I thought, Shit, it ain't no shame to stop starvin'. Hell No" (169).

'Survival' is a term which is missing from most discussions of rationality. When one thinks of mainstream American culture, those who live in the inner-city ghettos or lower income families are usually not the slice of America that is focused on. Consequently, factors such as survival are not explored when defining rationality.

The only instance where it has been given some weight is when a person's life is in danger. There are several documented cases where people have acted irrationally under extreme situations (i.e. being attacked) but these acts are temporary or short-lived. Conversely, the people I talk of live this type of life day in and day out.

This same circumstance happens to Claude in his life fifty years prior when he moves from Harlem to Greenwich Village. Here Brown recounts the period where he began to move away from the Harlem scene:

I was pulling further away from the Harlem scene. I knew if I kept hanging around Harlem I was going to get busted for something jive like smoking reefers. I decided to move out of Harlem. I knew what street life was like, but school and the books and the Village - all this was new. I wanted to get into it good, I couldn't do it in Harlem. Being down there [Greenwich Village] I could. (178)

With his change of environment, Claude begins to see things differently. He describes a visit to Harlem where he recognizes a girl he knows is selling her body. He laments, "You almost want to cry, and you snatch her and say, "Cmon girl, git off this corner. What the hell is wrong with you? Come on over here and let me buy you some coffee and send you home" (194). Remember this is the same person who felt it was justifiable for a woman to sell her body when he lived in Harlem just one year earlier. He gives further evidence of his newfound philosophy as he recalls his passage away from Harlem, "I gave my gun away when I moved out of Harlem. I feel free. I was able to see things differently [in Greenwich Village]. I had become convinced that two things weren't for me: I wasn't going to jail, and I wasn't going to kill anybody. But I knew I could not sever all ties with Harlem. My family was there, and just about all my life was there" (210).

For the remainder of the book, Claude attempts to save his brother from the perils of drugs. These happenings bring Claude to reminisce about his early days and the downfall of those who he grew up with who never changed their ways. By the end of the book, all but one of his Harlem friends have died as a result of murder or overdose due to drugs. In his final comments, Claude turns to a minister for an answer to why he is still around and everyone else is not. Reverend James

emphatically states: "All youngsters in Harlem are confused in their thinking. Their thinking is influenced by their environment, by external values -- not their own, but the values of the community, the people around them. They form their attitudes on the basis of these things. If one boy doesn't want to use drugs, but everybody else is using drugs, he's going to feel as if he's somewhat left out" (230). Claude responds: "I never thought about it this way. It's an attitude in the community. It's the thing to do. But look I came up in the same community and through the same thing" (231). Reverend James concedes that he cannot figure out why Claude came through unscathed.

I will attempt to fill in for Reverend James and say that it was a change of time and environment. With the passing of time and a change of environment, Claude shifted his thinking. He began to act like those around him and distanced himself (via time) from the memories of the past. With the passing of time, if these fictitious people were to trade places, according to my theory, each would begin to act increasingly like the other in their new environment.

## ***II. Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City***

*Black Metropolis* is about a Black community, called Bronzeville, which is located in Chicago during the 1930's and 1940s. Black Metropolis offers many examples of the rationality of the people of that time. One such instance is the commentary on race relations. A Negro physician tells the following story to an interviewer:

Any Negro who is honest will admit that he is dominated by the standards of the society he is brought up in. It is a sociological rule that people are pulled into the standardized ways of thinking. The average Negro may say that he's proud to be black. This is more or less a defense mechanism. People in America don't black their faces and make their hair kinky. They would be laughed at; it would be too different from the American standard. The whole situation is easy enough to understand. White people will even sometimes compliment a Negro by inconspicuously saying, "Good -- you did that like a white man." Scant wonder that Negroes have picked up the idea that "black is evil. (Drake 496)

Although not as moving or colorful as Claude Brown's narrative, this physician gives us an insight into what Afrikan-American's of this time are thinking. He clearly states that others shape Blacks' thinking. Namely the mainstream, majority thinking of whites. In another anecdote by a Negro shop keeper, they associate this same type of thinking as it relates to Negro spending habits, "When we opened up, we had just as good stock as any of them whites. But then, the colored did not come in and buy so we went backward. Some of our people will always trade with the Jew. They have not been educated to trade with the colored people" (447).

Similar stories are lined in the chapter entitled Negro Business: Myth and Fact. Since *Black Metropolis* is a time period study, it is difficult to measure how the passage of time would effect this current situation in Chicago. It is apparent though that environment has definitely molded the rationale of the people, but we never get to see what would happen if a sect of these people were to change environments while the rest of the population were to stay put – an interesting scenario to say the least.

In a paper entitled *Rationality in Human Life*, the author expresses the following about rationality, "The simplest model of rationality occurs when one has a linear utility such that the utility of a sequence of events is the sum of their individual outcomes. As Bigger stood in that room, he weighed his options as his main concern was not getting caught. Once he made his first poor decision (kissing her), all other decisions, under this definition can be considered rational. John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* suggests, "A person should lead his life so that at its end, he will approve of what he has done". Does this not shout, that rationality lends itself to making decisions which are right for the person?

While not a groundbreaking discovery, it does highlight what can happen when a variable is not considered when making a decision. In this case I argue that survival and the will to survive plays a much larger role in forming one's rationality than it has been given credit for. When the factor of survival is mixed in, rationality can have many faces.

Robert Nozick in his book *The Nature of Rationality* gives his opinion on rationality:

Rationality has a cumulative force. A given rational decision may not be very much better than a less rational one, yet it leads to a new decision situation somewhat different than the other would have produced; and in this new decision situation a further rational action produces its results and leads to still another decision situation. Over extended time, small differences in rationality compound to produce very different results (Nozack X)

Richard Wright's *Bigger* Thomas exemplifies this theory. When Bigger decides to stay and kiss Mary, it created a second decision when Mary's grandmother entered to stop Mary from answering the call of her name. Now Mary is dead and Bigger is faced with a third decision on how to get rid of her body, and so on and so forth. I argue that all but the first decision was rational, because they dealt with survival. The decision to stay was based on lust and nothing else, but every decision made from that point on dealt with survival. Eventually Bigger is captured and as the book closes he is awaiting his turn on Death row.

The power of *Native Son* can be measured by the number of critical essays that have since been written about the book. Langston Hughes, a great author in his own right, dedicates an entire book titled *Notes on Native Son* to Wright's initial work. In an essay by Mike Gold in *Critical Essays of Richard Wright*, he shares my initial belief that Bigger Thomas was acting rationally and that the murders he did commit were not part of his normal character. Gold expounds, "Richard Wright demonstrates that this poor boy was never a murderer by nature. He was only what white capitalism had made him" (40). This critique directly backs up my thesis that a person's environment plays a direct role on how one's rationale is shaped.

Juxtapose this situation with Claude in *Manchild in the Promised Land* where the move to Greenwich Village opens Claude's eyes to what is in the world and what he could potentially have. Bigger Thomas never saw "the other side" and the predicament he ended up in on death row was a direct effect of this lack of vision.

### ***III. Makes Me Wanna Holla***

Nathan McCall, who in my opinion is the most refreshing Black voice to hit the literary scene since Richard Wright, writes the final book I plan to examine.

Nathan McCall gives the reader a raw, unedited perspective of his life and his rise from the drug life to his current position as a writer for the *Atlanta Constitution*. McCall speaks of his youth in the 1970s through to his adult life today (or better stated 1994 when the book was published). *Makes Me Wanna Holla*, provides gentle reading to anyone who has lived through many of the tales Nathan recounts. Nathan McCall was born in Portsmouth Virginia and as a youngster had several run-ins with the law. He was constantly fighting and caught up in the drug game. He eventually ends up in jail where he learns a trait and upon release becomes a successful journalist. I will pick up his story here as the similarities in early life between Nathan McCall and Claude Brown, are not nearly as interesting as those which take place once they are put in a new environment.

Nathan McCall elegantly brings us through a transformation he has in terms of his relationship with cops. Nathan had been to jail as a youngster and acknowledged that he did not like cops growing up until he met Detective Davies. McCall describes the situation: "He was an undercover cop who worked the streets. I hadn't known there were cops as cool as him. From the first time, I began to understand why a lot of cops have bad attitudes" (McCall 293) Here McCall is undergoing a paradigm shift with the police. While in Virginia, he could not find anything good about them but now in his new environment, he is able to have a more informed opinion.

Nathan often went back to his hometown of Portsmouth to see what was going on. He admits that he had changed, but tried hard not to show it, "Whenever I ran into dudes I knew from the old days on the block, I went out of my way to show them that I haven't changed. Of course I had changed a lot, but I talked more slang than usual to let them know I hadn't" (370). Nathan does not give a reason why he believes he has changed but undoubtedly in my mind, his new environment (similar to Claude in *Manchild in the Promised Land*) has a lot to do with it. Buddies he had went to jail with and came out before him, were still in the same predicament in Virginia, but Nathan was moving up in the world, which was a direct result of his new environment and the time away from the environment.

As he concludes his book, McCall tells a riveting story that epitomizes his transformation. He is driving down Martin Luther King Boulevard in Atlanta. There

is a brother in front of him driving really slow in the passing lane. After riding behind him for about a block, he switches lanes and tries to beat him through a yellow light but is unsuccessful. The driver initiates a conversation which ends up in him telling Nathan to pull over so they can settle this like men. Nathan then proceeds to give us a no-holds barred peek into his rationale:

So there I was, at a stoplight, preparing, for all I knew, to meet my Maker. I didn't know if he was armed, and he didn't know what I had. But we were both ready to take it to the hoop and see where it led. The senselessness of the situation dawned on me in the seconds before the light changed. In a fraction of a second I calculated the possibilities and weighed the potential for loss and gain. When the light changed, my man put on his blinkers and pulled over to the side of the road, like he had promised. I pulled up beside him, tooted my horn, then drove away. I would've felt sorry for that cat if he had bumped into my five years earlier. (McCall 378)

In the final chapter of his book "Choices," Nathan finally looks for answers to why he made it where other's didn't. He writes, "A psychologist friend once explained that our fates are linked partly to how we perceive our choices in life. Looking back, I see that the reality may well have been that possibilities for us were abundant. But in Cavalier Manor [where he grew up], we perceived our choices as being somewhat limited. He continues: "Sometimes I wonder how I endured when so many others were crushed. I was not special"(414). Once again, the passing of time and a new environment helped bring about his good fortune.

## **Conclusion**

It is my sincere hope that I have presented a thorough argument that a person's rationale changes with respect to time and environment. When the population is narrowed down to minorities, it is important to realize that the environment most minorities live in varies greatly from mainstream America. Dr. David Schum proposes: "A rational decision depends on the consistent or coherent application of certain decision rules or principles" (Schum 10). With this in mind, an act which may seem uncivil or irrational to the masses may be perceived as totally acceptable in the inner-city – assuming the rules or principles (survival usually plays

a role in this) in the two communities are different. However, once that (inner-city) person is introduced to an environment which mirrors mainstream America more than the ghetto, they will begin to adapt to their surroundings. The new environment combined with the passage of time, will facilitate this change.

In all of the books reviewed, this hypothesis holds true. The premise also passes the test of time as it is corroborated as early as the 1930s, all the way to the present. I am optimistic that there will be further study on this topic. The value to society of implementing a solution to the problem of inner-city crime and finding a way to change the lives of inner-city youth is immeasurable. Instead of throwing everyone in jail, possibly there is another way to habilitate (you cannot rehabilitate unless you first habilitate) these youths. It is truly my belief that a positive environment can change one's rationale. It worked for myself and others, but unfortunately we were the lucky ones. Too many are slipping through the cracks and it is to those men and women for whom I write this paper.

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