

Elementary School Students' Intimate Relationships: A Rational Choice Theory Perspective

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Abstract: Guided by Coleman's Rational Choice Theory, this study investigates the motives and decision-making mechanisms underlying elementary school students' formation of intimate peer relationships. Rational Choice Theory posits that individuals decide among alternative actions by evaluating expected costs and benefits. Within this framework, children's choices about close relationships reflect not only the pursuit of emotional gratification but also considerations of interactional costs, anticipated social returns, and prevailing social norms. As elementary students are in a pivotal stage of psychological and social development, intimate ties function both as sources of emotional support and as platforms for social recognition and the cultivation of future interpersonal competencies. Understanding how children make friendship choices through rational deliberation is therefore crucial for promoting their socialization.

Keywords: Rational Choice Theory, Intimate Relationships, Elementary School Students, Social Interaction, Emotional Needs.

1. Introduction

Elementary school friendships and close peer relationships play a crucial role in child development. Research shows that having friends during the elementary years is linked to better academic performance and positive socio-emotional outcomes. For example, high-quality friendships provide children with a sense of belonging and higher self-worth, while lack of peer acceptance can harm self-esteem and mental health. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how children form and maintain intimate peer relationships. However, most studies of children's friendships have been descriptive or focused on developmental and social factors, with relatively little attention to the decision-making processes behind forming these relationships.

This paper explores elementary students' intimate friendships from a Rational Choice Theory (RCT) perspective. RCT, originating in economics and criminology, provides a framework for analyzing how individuals make decisions by weighing perceived costs and benefits. Applying RCT to children's social behavior can offer new insights into why certain friendships form (or fail to form) in school settings. The following sections outline the RCT framework and discuss how children's friendship choices may be influenced by rational evaluation of outcomes, within the bounds of their cognitive and social development.

2. Rational Choice Theory and Children's Decision-Making

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) posits that individuals make decisions by rationally weighing the expected benefits and costs of possible actions, then choosing the option that maximizes their personal utility. In its classic form, RCT assumes a self-interested actor who evaluates choices based solely on personal gain. This model has attained prominence in fields like criminology, where it is used to explain decisions such as committing an offense based on a calculation of risks versus rewards. For instance, Paternoster et al. (2017) demonstrate that the decision to offend can be

seen as rational and sensitive to incentives, although they also note that standard RCT often narrowly emphasizes self-interest^[1].

Modern extensions of RCT recognize that decision-makers may also have other-regarding preferences (concern for others). Indeed, individuals are not purely selfish utility-maximizers; they can value the welfare of others and social norms. Paternoster et al. found that people with strong concern for others (measured by altruism in economic games) were less likely to make self-serving harmful choices, even under threat of sanction. This suggests that the rational calculation can include social and moral benefits or costs, not just material self-gain. In the context of children, this means factors like fairness, empathy, or desire to help a friend might factor into their "rational" decisions, alongside self-interested motives.

RCT has been widely applied in adult contexts and policy. For example, in education policy, rational incentive structures can shape behavior at an institutional level. Ooghe and Schokkaert (2015) illustrate that school accountability systems which reward high student performance may inadvertently encourage schools to selectively admit or favor certain students. In a rational response to performance-based rewards, schools have an incentive to attract pupils with backgrounds that predict higher achievement^[2]. This outcome – schools "choosing" students – is a byproduct of rational actions in response to the incentive structure, albeit one that raises ethical concerns about equity. The example underscores how rational choice processes are not limited to economics or crime; they operate in educational settings, influencing decisions from the institutional level down to everyday social interactions.

Notably, most empirical tests of RCT have involved older samples (adolescents or adults) and often use hypothetical scenarios to gauge decision-making. For instance, Bouffard and Exum (2013) compared university students and incarcerated offenders on a drunk-driving scenario and found remarkably similar decision logic between the two groups^[3]. Both students and offenders identified comparable potential rewards and consequences of the act and factored them into

their intentions in similar ways. Such findings support the idea that the rational choice “decision calculus” has generalizable elements across populations. However, little research has addressed whether young children also engage in a form of rational calculation when choosing friends or playmates. Children’s decision-making differs in important ways from that of adults – cognitively, emotionally, and in terms of life experience – which must be considered when applying RCT to their social choices.

Cognitive capacity and effort are key constraints on children’s decision-making. Fully evaluating costs and benefits can be mentally demanding, and young children’s cognitive resources (attention, working memory, etc.) are still developing. Studies in cognitive psychology show that engaging in goal-directed decision tasks requires effort, which can be measured physiologically. For example, increases in task difficulty lead to increased pupil dilation, reflecting greater mental effort being exerted. Van der Wel and van Steenbergen (2018) review evidence that across various cognitive control tasks, greater task demands reliably elicit larger pupil dilation responses – an index of effort mobilization. Similarly, neurobiological research indicates that the brain’s orienting and attention systems cause transient pupil dilation in response to salient stimuli, linking cognitive processing to measurable changes in pupil size. In other words, even simple decisions or attention shifts have an underlying “effort cost” detectable in physiology^[4].

Applied to elementary students, these findings suggest that a child deciding whether to approach a peer or initiate a friendship is engaging cognitive processes (e.g. assessing the situation, recalling prior interactions, predicting outcomes) that require effort. Younger children, with more limited capacity, may simplify decisions or satisfice (choose a “good enough” option) rather than exhaustively weighing every pro and con. Their rationality is thus bounded by developmental limitations in cognition. A rational choice perspective on children’s friendships must account for these limitations: what appears “irrational” (such as a child not befriending a classmate who could be a good study partner) might stem from constraints in the child’s ability to perceive or evaluate the potential benefits.

Despite these constraints, children do exhibit selective and goal-oriented behavior in their peer relations. Even at early ages, kids can behave in ways consistent with pursuing perceived benefits (social or material) and avoiding costs. Importantly, children’s preferences are not purely self-centered – they often value fairness and reciprocity. A rational choice approach that incorporates social preferences can still apply. For example, a child might choose to share and make friends with a classmate not only to gain a play partner (benefit to self) but also because they empathize with that peer’s feelings (incorporating the peer’s utility into their own decision). In summary, elementary students are emerging rational actors: they have agency and can weigh options, but their decision-making occurs within the confines of their developmental stage and social environment.

3. Factors Influencing Children’s Friendship Choices

Several factors influence how elementary school students form intimate friendships, and these factors can be interpreted through a rational choice lens as affecting the perceived costs, benefits, or available options in children’s decisions.

3.1. Perceived Benefits of Friendship.

From a child’s perspective, forming a friendship can yield many rewards. Friends can provide help with schoolwork, fun and companionship, protection from bullying, and emotional support. Empirical evidence confirms that children likely derive tangible benefits from having friends. Wentzel et al. (2018) found that children with at least one friend tend to perform better academically than those with no friends^[5]. A reliable friend might help with homework or motivate each other in class, which improves academic outcomes. Likewise, friendships fulfill socio-emotional needs: being part of a friend group boosts a child’s feelings of acceptance and belonging, which contributes to higher self-esteem. Conversely, peer rejection or isolation is associated with negative self-appraisal and even long-term mental health risks. Thus, the “utility” a child gains from friendship is multi-dimensional – better grades, enjoyment in activities, and emotional well-being are all potential benefits. Rationally, a child has incentive to seek friends because the expected benefits are substantial.

3.2. Social and Personal Costs.

On the other side, children may also perceive potential costs or risks in peer relationships. For instance, attempting to befriend someone risks rejection or embarrassment (a social/emotional cost). Maintaining a friendship requires sharing and cooperation, which means giving up some resources or time. There may also be status considerations – befriending an unpopular classmate might carry a stigma by association, which could be viewed as a cost in status-conscious peer environments. Children, especially as they get older, become sensitive to such peer group dynamics. By upper elementary grades, friendship choices grow more selective and are influenced by evolving social norms (e.g. gender norms discouraging cross-sex friendships). In rational terms, older children might avoid certain friendships if they calculate that the social costs (like loss of status or ridicule by others) outweigh the benefits.

Notably, children’s own characteristics and values will shape their perceptions of costs and benefits. A particularly empathetic child might place high value on helping a lonely peer (the emotional reward of kindness outweighs any social cost), whereas another child might prioritize popularity and see little benefit in befriending someone outside their clique. These individual differences highlight again that utility in RCT can be defined broadly – not just material gain, but also feelings of doing good or being loyal can enter a child’s utility function.

3.3. Classroom Context and Opportunity Structure.

The school environment determines the pool of potential friends and the opportunities children have to interact, which in turn influences their friendship choices. Hallinan’s classic study (1979) demonstrated that structural factors such as class size, seating arrangements, and grade level significantly affect friendship patterns in schools. In larger classes, children can find more peers who are similar to themselves, which generally increases the likelihood of friendship formation (as similarity makes interactions easier and more rewarding)^[6]. Hallinan found that children in large classes tend to have more friends, while the number of isolated students (those with no friends) is lower in larger classes,

presumably because it is easier to find at least one compatible peer in a big group. This suggests a rational component: when more options are available, children can more successfully match with peers who meet their “preferences” (shared interests, etc.), thus maximizing their satisfaction.

Classroom organization also matters. In traditional classrooms where teachers strictly control seating and interactions, children have fewer chances to mingle freely, which leads to fewer new friendships and often reinforces existing social hierarchies. Open classroom settings, in contrast, allow children to choose partners and groups, resulting in more peer interaction and, consequently, a greater number of friendships across the class. From an RCT viewpoint, a restrictive classroom raises the “transaction costs” of forming new friendships (fewer opportunities to interact means higher effort to find and engage a friend), whereas an open classroom lowers those costs. Children in open settings can more easily pursue the benefit of new friends since the environment facilitates interaction.

One striking pattern related to opportunity is the prevalence of same-gender friendships in elementary school. Because of both social norms and ease of interaction, most young children choose friends of the same sex. Hallinan (1979) noted that at the elementary level, cross-sex friendships are very rare. This can be interpreted as a rational outcome under normative constraints: the “cost” (in terms of social disapproval or personal discomfort) of interacting with the opposite sex is high in many elementary peer cultures, whereas the benefit might be limited if interests are divided along gender lines. Thus, even if a boy and a girl might get along, they may refrain from becoming close friends because the perceived social cost is too high. In larger classes, the number of same-sex peers is greater, making it even less necessary to form cross-sex friendships. Over the elementary years, gender norms often strengthen, and by higher grades children become even more averse to cross-gender friendships, reflecting an increasing “cost” imposed by peer expectations as they approach adolescence.

3.4. Child Attributes and Social Value.

Children do not all have equal ease in forming friendships – personal attributes can influence a child’s popularity and attractiveness as a friend^[7]. Studies show that certain traits make a child more likely to be chosen as a friend, suggesting peers implicitly assess each other’s “value” as relational partners. In the sociometric literature, friendliness (outgoing, cooperative behavior) and popularity have been found positively correlated with attributes like intelligence, physical attractiveness, and social adeptness. In rational terms, children may gravitate toward peers who have desirable qualities. A clever classmate might be seen as a helpful partner on school projects; an attractive or socially skilled classmate could confer status or simply be more fun to interact with, thereby offering greater benefit to friends. The result is that high-achieving or otherwise advantaged children often end up with more friendship nominations, while less skilled or more atypical children may be left out. Hallinan observed that in most classes only a small number of “social isolates” have no friends, and those are often children who, for various reasons, were not preferred by others. This pattern aligns with a rational choice interpretation: given the choice, children will select friends who maximize their own outcomes (fun, help, companionship), which can unintentionally lead to the exclusion of peers who are seen as less rewarding to

befriend.

An analogy can be drawn to the earlier example of schools selecting students. Just as schools acting rationally might prefer higher-performing students, children acting (perhaps semi-consciously) rationally can end up preferring higher-status or more skilled peers. This dynamic can create a peer stratification where socially “rich get richer” – popular kids accumulate more friends, whereas those who could benefit most from friendship (e.g. very shy or troubled children) struggle to find friends because others perceive fewer benefits (or greater effort) in those relationships. While young children are certainly capable of kindness and often seek to include others, as they mature, their friend choices become more discriminating. By late elementary, children start to form tighter cliques and often exclude less popular classmates, which can be seen as each clique member choosing to invest their limited social time in a set of peers that optimizes their sense of belonging and status.

3.5. Inclusion of Students with Special Needs.

A particularly important consideration is how children treat classmates who have special educational needs or disabilities. Inclusive education has brought more such students into mainstream classrooms, but inclusion socially is not guaranteed. From a rational choice perspective, one might worry that if a classmate has difficulties (for example, communication challenges, atypical behaviors), other children might perceive the “cost” of friendship with that classmate as higher – it may require more patience, or the child may not reciprocate play in expected ways. Unfortunately, research indicates that students with special needs often do experience social isolation or fewer friendships in mainstream settings. A literature review by Koster et al. (2009) identified friendships/relationships and peer acceptance as core components of social inclusion for children with special needs. In other words, being accepted by classmates and having friends is integral to feeling included. When these are absent, inclusion is incomplete^[8].

The rational calculus for typical children might not naturally favor reaching out to a peer who is “different” if they worry the interaction won’t be as rewarding or might even invite teasing from others. This is a scenario where moral or empathetic motivations need to counterbalance strictly self-interested calculations. Interventions by teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) can help by structuring interactions that encourage friendships across ability differences. However, as Saddler (2014) points out, much of the focus in evaluating TAs’ impact has been on academic outcomes, neglecting the social outcomes of inclusion. Saddler argues that to truly support learning, TAs must also facilitate the social inclusion of students with special needs in the peer group^[9]. This implies creating situations where typical students perceive more benefit (and less cost) in interacting with and befriending those with special needs – for example, through cooperative learning activities where each child’s contribution is valued. When children see that a classmate with a disability can also be a good friend who, say, shares interesting hobbies or can offer help in certain tasks, it adjusts their perceived cost-benefit analysis in favor of that friendship.

In summary, children’s intimate relationship choices in elementary school emerge from a complex interplay of individual preferences, cognitive limitations, and contextual factors. Yet, many of these influences can be interpreted through the rational choice framework: children tend to

pursue friendships that offer academic or emotional benefits, avoid or terminate relationships that carry social costs, and are constrained by the opportunities and norms of their environment. They also develop strategies (sometimes implicit) to maximize positive outcomes – for example, forming tight-knit cliques for security and identity, or aligning with popular peers to boost their own status. Understanding these patterns as rational (within bounds) behaviors can help educators and parents in guiding children towards healthier social decisions.

4. Conclusion

Adopting a Rational Choice Theory perspective to examine elementary students' friendships provides valuable insights into the decision-making aspect of children's social lives. Children are not typically thought of as "rational actors" in the economic sense, yet we find that many of their behaviors in forming intimate relationships have a discernible logic: children seek out friendships that they expect will be rewarding – offering academic help, fun, acceptance, or other benefits – and they shy away from interactions that might be costly or unreciprocated. Of course, a young child's ability to calculate these outcomes is limited and often intuitive rather than explicit. Their rationality is bounded by developmental stage, and their preferences are shaped by age-appropriate priorities (for instance, the desire to play may trump long-term considerations). Nonetheless, patterns such as gravitating towards similar and likable peers, the avoidance of cross-sex friendships under strong gender norms, or the formation of stable cliques in large classes all conform to a rational interpretation of children optimizing their social experiences given the constraints they perceive.

Viewing children's intimate relationships through RCT also highlights points of intervention. If left solely to "rational" self-interest, certain students – such as those who are socially awkward or have special needs – may be excluded because other children do not immediately perceive a benefit in engaging with them. Understanding this dynamic is not to label children as unkind calculators, but to recognize the subtle cost-benefit considerations that may underlie their choices^[10]. It suggests that fostering empathy and providing structured opportunities for positive interaction can alter the payoff structure of peer relations. When inclusive activities are designed such that every child can contribute and benefit, friendships that might not form spontaneously can begin to take root, enriching the social environment for all. Indeed, rational choice models that include other-regarding preferences imply that children can learn to derive value from helping and including others, not just from what others can do for them.

In conclusion, elementary school students' intimate friendships can be fruitfully analyzed as outcomes of bounded rational choice processes. Children weigh, in age-appropriate

ways, the pros and cons of potential friendships, influenced by the rewards those relationships promise and the social context that defines the costs. While their decision-making is interwoven with developmental and emotional factors, the rational choice lens provides a structured way to understand why certain peer relationships flourish and others falter. Recognizing the quasi-rational calculations children make in their social lives can help educators craft better strategies to promote positive peer interactions, ensure inclusive friendships, and address issues like bullying or social isolation. By acknowledging both the agency of children in shaping their social world and the constraints under which they operate, we can better support them in making friendship choices that lead to happier and more supportive experiences throughout their school years.

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