

Thinking about Social Phenomena

Constructing Puzzles



Lecture dt. Apr 16, 2020

Objective of the course

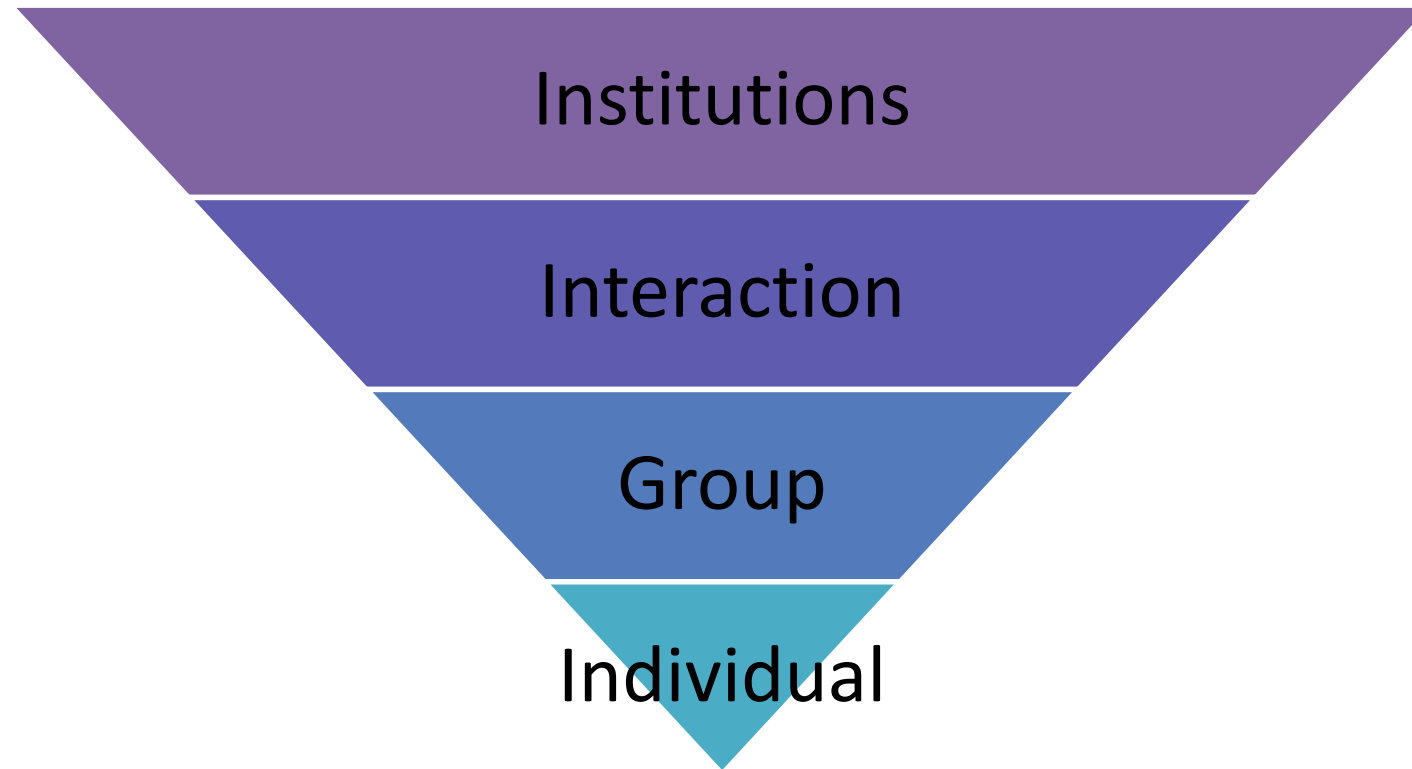
Critical thinking: the complexity of human choices and behaviour



- **Puzzles** or the counterintuitive
- To introduce scepticism
- Question common lines of reasoning

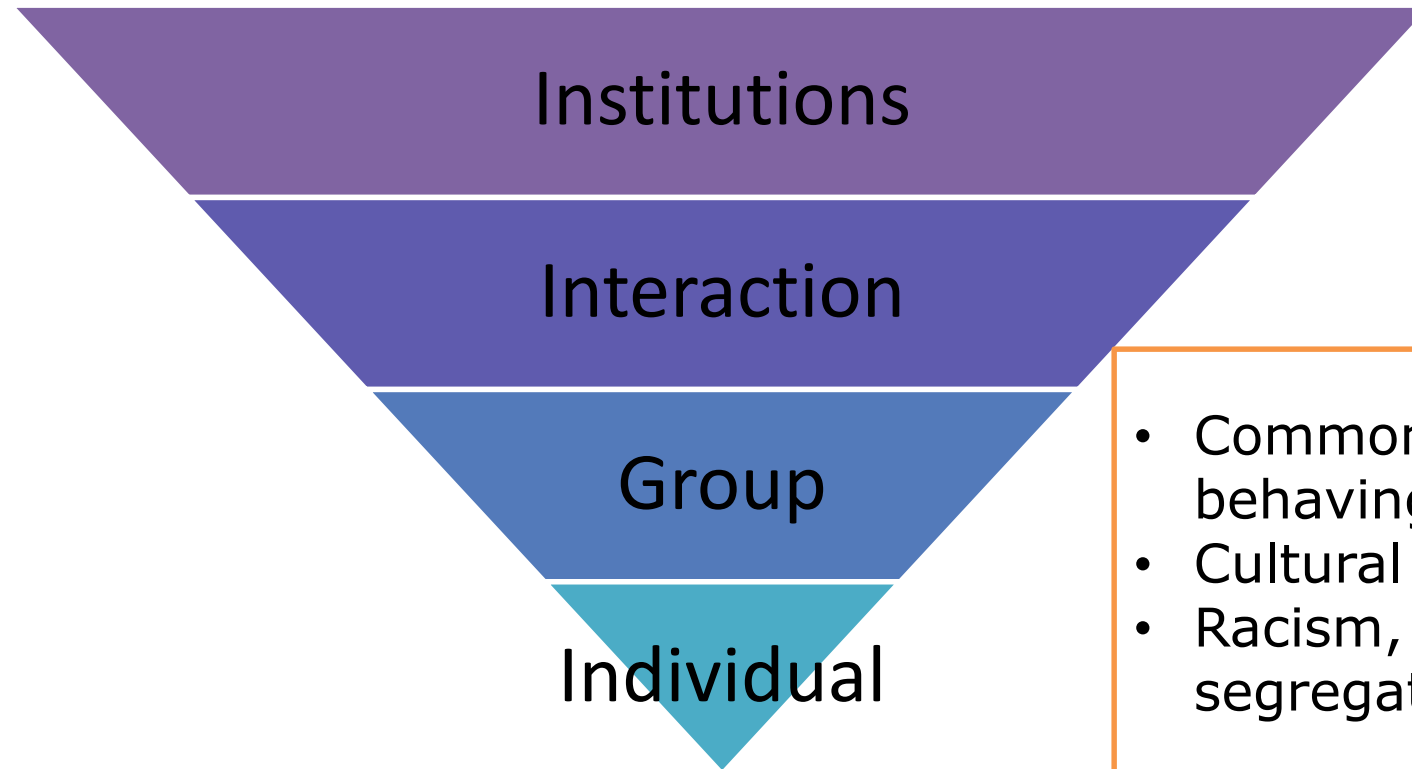
The process of explanation

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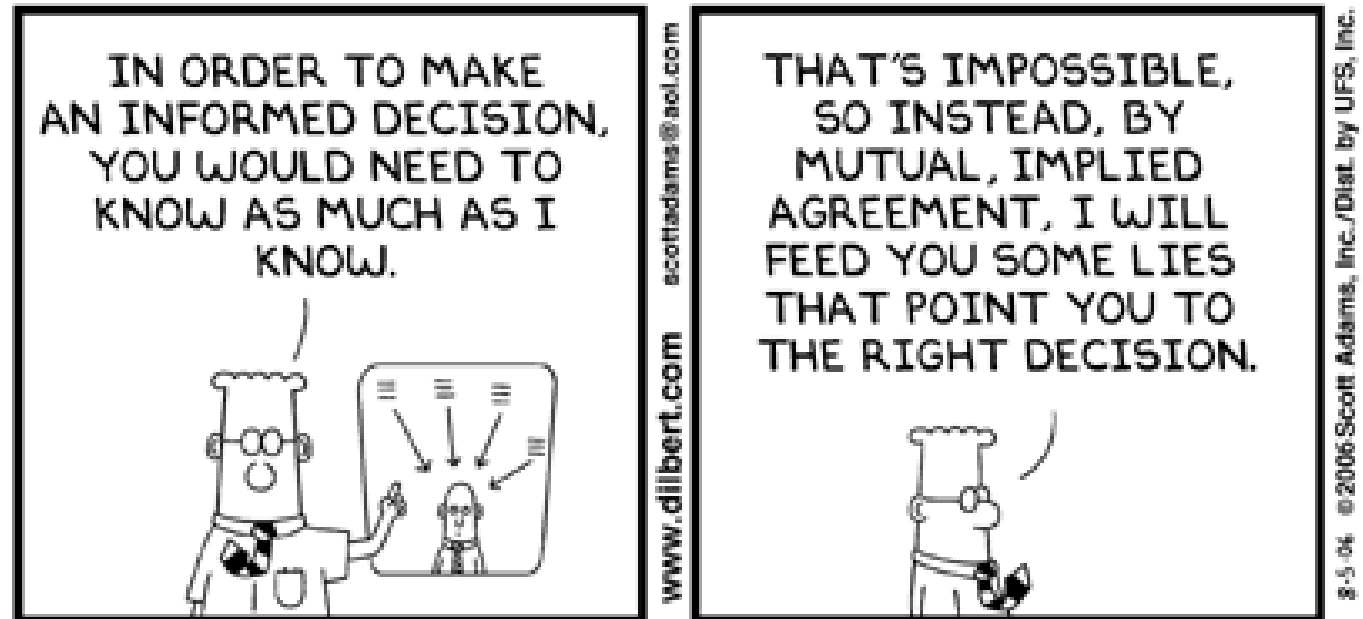
- Common ways of behaving
- Cultural taste
- Racism, discrimination, segregation

The process of explanation



- The 'billiard ball' model of causation: David Hume
- Elster (1997): 'To explain an event is to give an account of why it happened. Usually...this takes the form of citing an earlier event as the cause of the event we want to explain...[But] to cite the cause is not enough: the causal mechanism must also be provided, or at least suggested.'
- Non-functional; probabilistic

The process of explanation: the individual mind



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- The mind uses heuristics to reach decisions on what action to take

Individual biases

- Biases abound in judgements and decisions: cognitive, behavioural, motivational
- Cognitive: accuracy vs. subjectivity
- Motivational: judgements influenced by own desires



- Confirmation bias (desire)
- Omission bias/non-event (cognitive)
- Rationalization (behaviour)
- Wishful thinking (desire)
- Self-fulfilling prophecy (behaviour)
- Cognitive dissonance (mental stress)

Emotions, motivations



- Evaluative emotions:
action-oriented and
character-oriented
- Motivational conflict:
strength/urgency
- Reducing dissonance

From individual to group: Norms



- Moral and social
- Informal policing system
- Norms vs. rules: uncertain consequences
- Can be dangerous: honour; revenge



Emotions

Norm violation: Shame in violator; contempt in observer

From individual to group: collective action



If the compliance of certain norms benefit all, why is cooperation difficult to achieve?

Dilemma of collective action

Individual defection (free-riding) is better than individual cooperation. But, group cooperation is better than group defection.

- Cooperation possible when individuals are monitored or observed
- Difficult in large groups, uncertain environment

From individual to group: interactions



- Stereotypes
- Intergroup threat (perceived): real or symbolic; operates at an aggregate level
- Intergroup contact: unlike threat, operates on an individual level, smaller spatial scale (see Biggs and Knauss 2013)

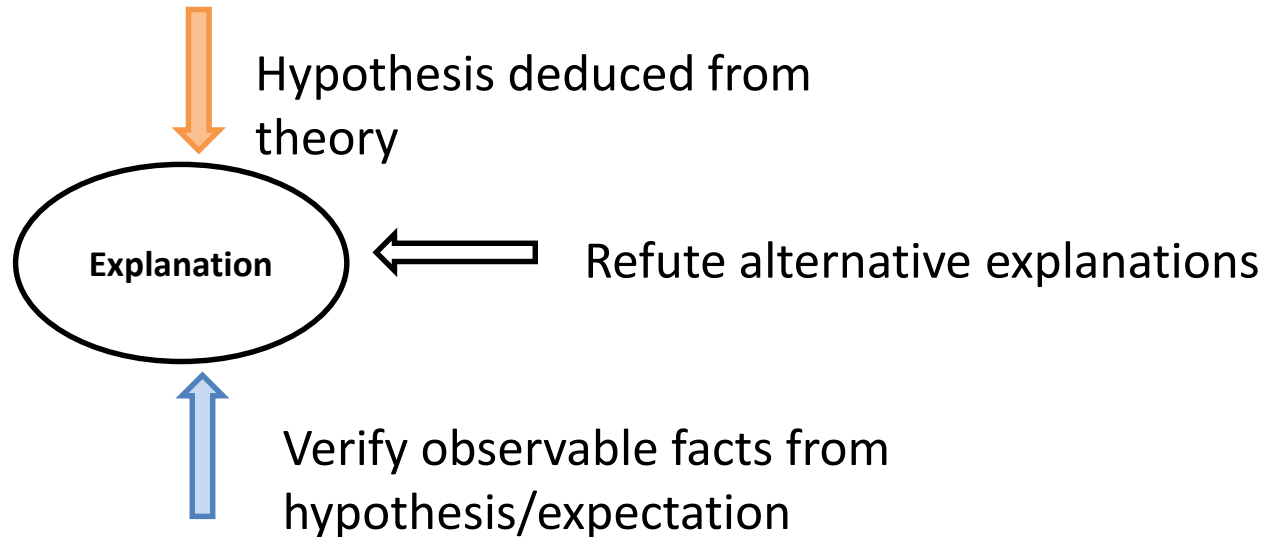
How do we investigate social phenomena?

- Choose falsifiable theories
- Challenge: how to operationalize abstract concepts, e.g. hierarchy, discrimination, social class
- Collecting quality data; ethics
- The need to report your methods; cite appropriately to avoid plagiarism accusations; cite from peer-reviewed (therefore, rigorous) scientific publications

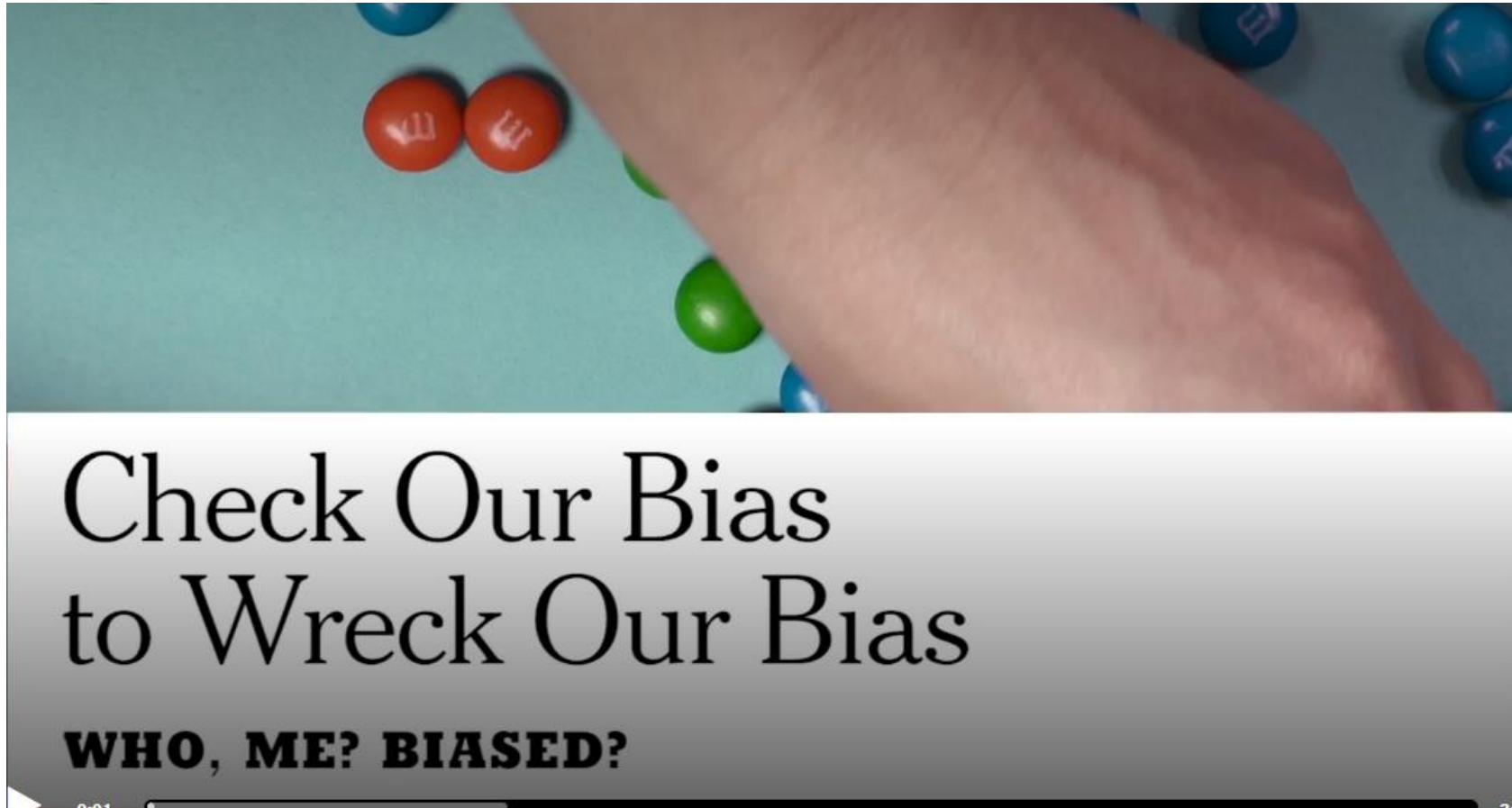
How to make a reasoned analysis

- Correlation vs. causation: Does X cause Y or is X one of the factors that mediates between Y and its actual Cause?

Theory → Hypothesis → Alternative Explanations → Can they be refuted?



Finally, be aware of your own biases...



New York Times: <https://nyti.ms/3agx0fs>

Readings (and movies)

Biggs, Michael and Steven Knauss. 2012. 'Explaining Membership in the British National Party: A Multilevel Analysis of Contact and Threat.' *European Sociological Review* 5: 633–646.

Groundhog Day
(self-fulfilling prophecy)



The Method
(on decisions,
behavior)

