

Thinking about Social Phenomena

Constructing Puzzles



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Social phenomena



Inequality

Education, gender,
workplace, identity

Social phenomena

Family



Marriage, divorce,
kinship

Social phenomena



Conflict

Protests, violence,
identity, crime

Institutions and the individual

Institutions (macro/context) □ *complex*

Individual (micro/action)

Institutions and the individual

Institutions (macro/context) □ *complex*

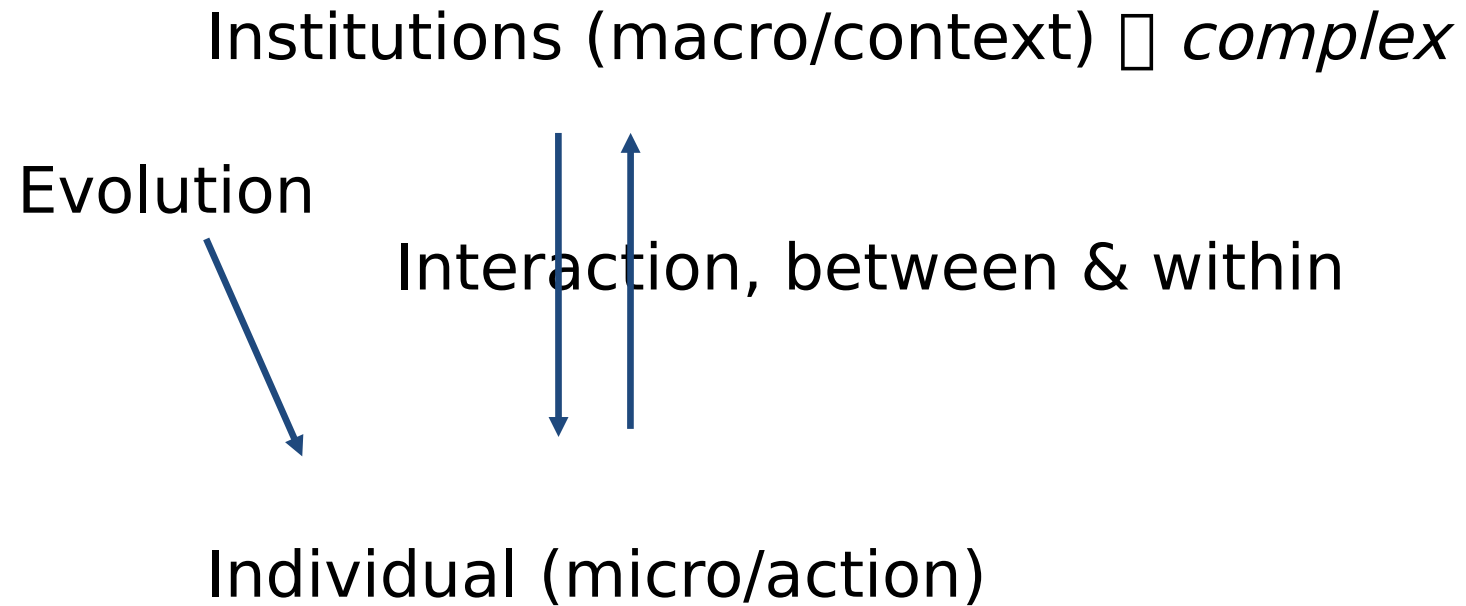


Interaction, between & within

The diagram consists of two vertical blue arrows. The left arrow points downwards from the 'Institutions' level to the 'Individual' level. The right arrow points upwards from the 'Individual' level to the 'Institutions' level. These arrows are positioned on either side of the central text 'Interaction, between & within'.

Individual (micro/action)

Institutions and the individual



What is a puzzle?



When we have a well-established fact or event to which we do not have a well-established explanation □ ‘puzzle’

- Counterintuitive fact, e.g. littering
- An unexplained correlation, e.g. alcoholism and parenting

What is a sociological question?



FACT: 65% Indians support capital punishment

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How did these people come to support capital punishment?

Attitudes

What is a sociological question?



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How did these people come to support capital punishment?

Attitudes

- *Changes over time*
- *Differences across populations*

Question for you

Puzzle

Why may harsh punishments increase the behaviour they target?

Functional explanations

- Explaining a phenomenon from consequences
- Phenomenon persists because of consequence:
Evidence?
 - Why do we have chairs? To sit.
 - Why do we sit? So that we can have chairs.

Tautology

Functional explanations

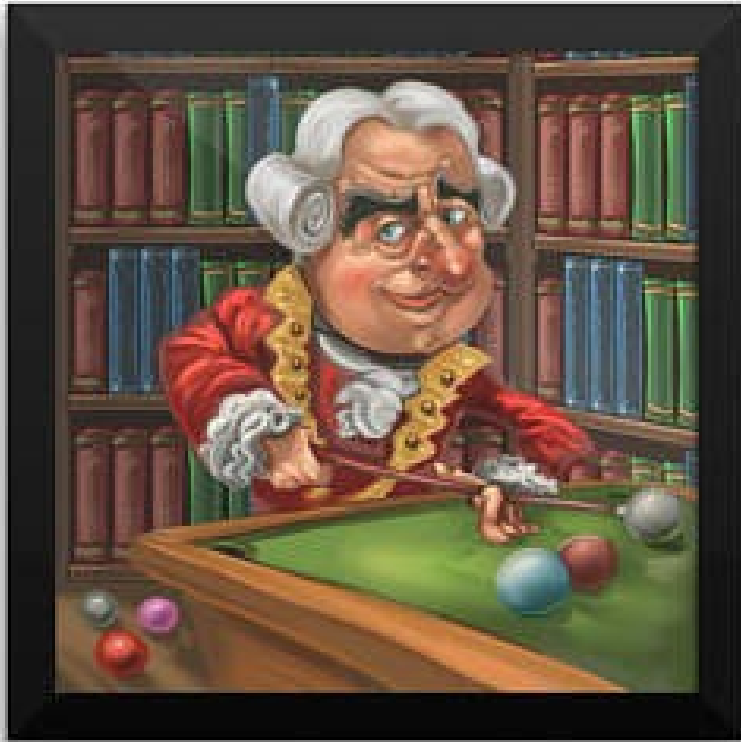
- Punishment → reduced crime
- Crime → social cohesion (punishment a means): e.g. Emile Durkheim
- Explain from **prior** events and facts

Poverty?

Discrimination?

Mental health?

The 'billiard ball' model of causation: David Hume



One billiard ball striking another:
sequence over repeated
experiences

□ But what causes the 'cause'?

Readings for Thursday

Elster, Jon. 2007. *Explaining Social Behaviour: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
(Chapter 1 'Explanation').

Watts, Duncan. 2014. 'Common sense and sociological explanations'
American Journal of Sociology, 120 (2): 313-351.