



Hierarchy in humans & Opinion dynamics

Bioinspired System

2024 Nov 13

Dominance hierarchy in humans

- manifests itself as a **competition for status** and resources within a group, driven by social influence, strategic alliances or physical strength (depending on the value system of the group).
- From a physiological point of view: the mechanisms determining the rank are very similar between mammals (incl. primates and humans)
- Example:
 - **Testosterone**: (the principal male sex hormone)
 - level in the blood indicates the rank
 - The level of the testosterone hormone and the inclination towards behaving dominantly form a positive feedback loop
 - **Experiments**:
 - tennis players,
 - medical students

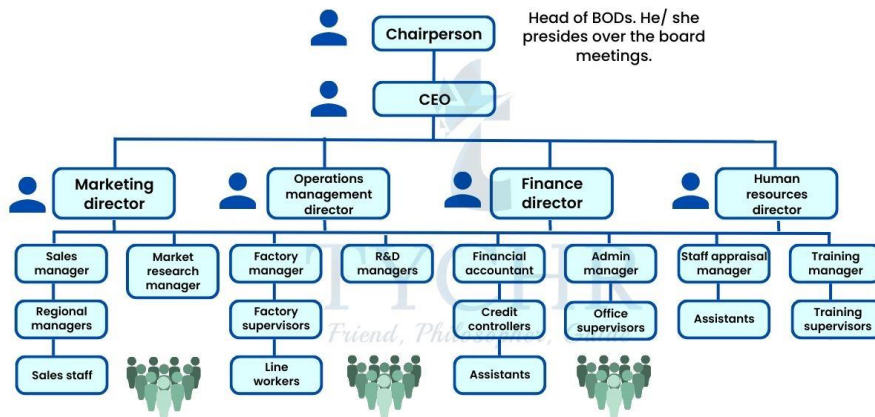
Formal (social/cultural) hierarchy in humans

- ~120,000 – 50,000 years ago: “cognitive revolution”
 - new way of social self-organization:
 - **Formal/social roles** (chieftain, king, pharaoh, colonel, etc.)
 - Requires abstract thinking
 - Independent of the actual individuals occupying them
 - Overlay and **extend** the basic dominance hierarchy by structuring power in a way that is more stable and scalable
 - Codification of power
 - Positions can be organized into any kind of hierarchical system (including egalitarianism, depending on the culture)

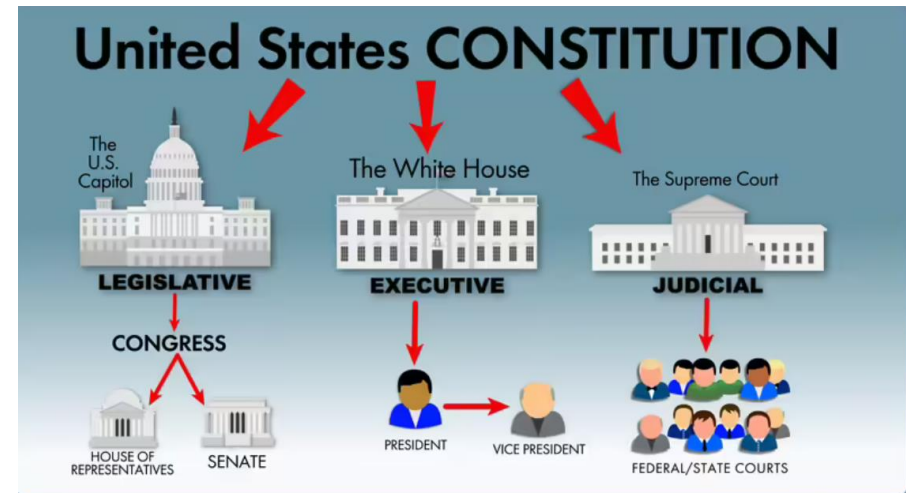
Dominance hierarchy	Cultural hierarchy
• Genetically coded → Restricted variability: the basic features are the same within one species. • Controlled mainly by hormones (testosterone, stress hormones, etc.) → Mostly instinctive • Its main purpose is to minimise the inner-group aggression by determining access to common resources	• Culturally coded → Can take <i>any</i> form, from strict dictatorship to complete egalitarianism • Controlled mainly by the Neocortex → Mostly conscious • Its main purpose is to harmonize the behaviour of the group members via political power

Formal (social/cultural) hierarchy in humans

- **Delegation and Division:** Formal roles enable the **division of responsibilities and duties** and **delegation of power** in ways that dominance alone cannot achieve.



An example of organizational structure



Formal (social/cultural) hierarchy in humans

- **Stabilization of Hierarchies:** Formal roles contribute to social stability by institutionalizing leadership and authority, making them less susceptible to individual power struggles.
- **Flexibility and Cultural Evolution:** Formal roles can be adapted or redefined as societies evolve, allowing human hierarchies to respond to changing social, economic, or environmental conditions.
- **Creation of Complex Societies:** The emergence of formal roles is what enabled humans to build **large, complex societies** with intricate social structures that go beyond the size and complexity seen in animal groups.
- **Legitimization of Power:** Formal roles often come **with rituals, myths, or religious beliefs** that help legitimize them. This provides a stronger, more accepted form of control compared to the sheer force seen in animal hierarchies.

Hierarchy in humans



Part 2 - Opinion dynamics



Opinion dynamics

- The scientific field aiming to understand the way opinions, beliefs and behaviour spread in human communities.
 - The community is usually described by means of **networks**
 - Nodes are individuals
 - Links are the ties (connections)
 - Direction
 - Strength
 - „opinion” (or „state” of the node) is usually described by a scalar (binary or continuous)
- Close relation to fields studying other spreading phenomena
 - Infection spreading

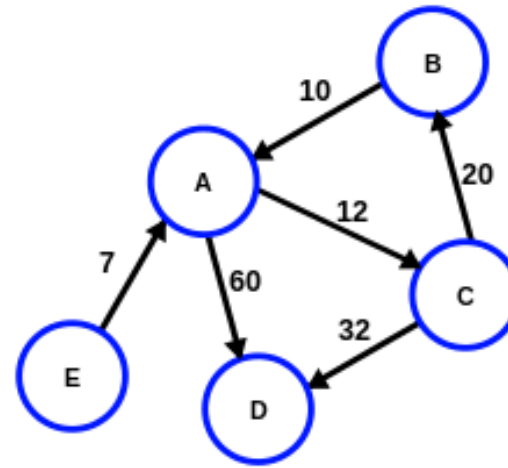
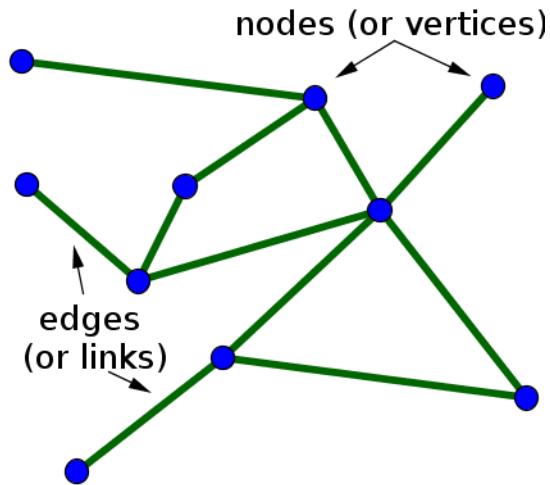


- Relevant **general questions** include:
 - What are the fundamental interaction mechanisms („local rules”) that allow for the emergence of
 - Consensus / polarization / fragmentation
 - a shared culture
 - a common language, etc. ...
 - What favors the homogenization process? What hinders it?
- Simplification arises from the fact that opinion formation is a **complex process** affected by the interplay of a vast amount of different elements, including the
 - Individual predisposition / family background („identity”)
 - Background knowledge
 - External information (e.g. public media)
 - Etc.

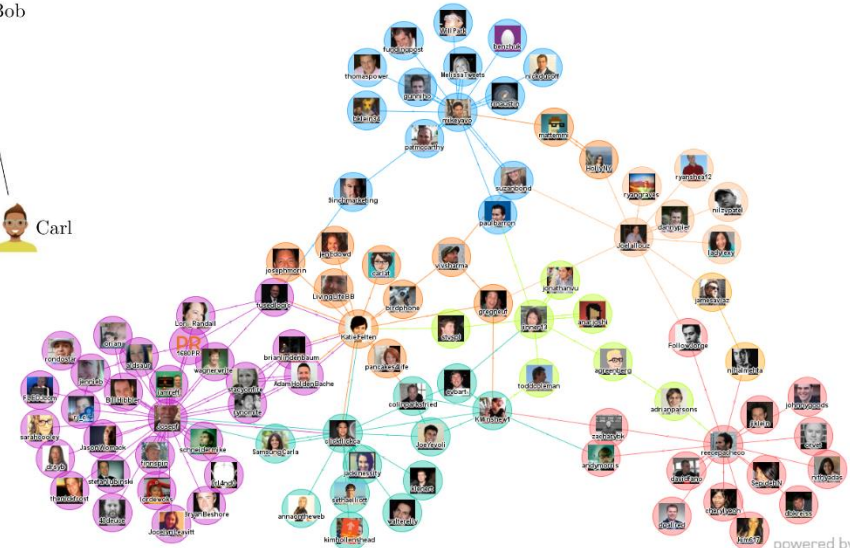
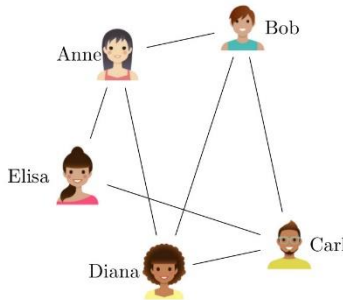
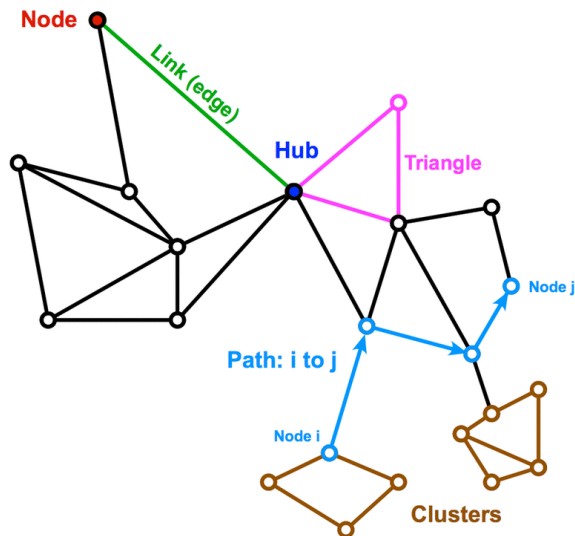
Typical („classical”) models

- Consider a finite number of connected agents
- each possessing opinions, described by variables,
- Assume certain *local rules* by which opinions change
 - Change of opinions result from **interactions**, either with peers or other sources.
- Opinions:
 - Variables:
 - one dimensional/multidimensional vector
 - discrete (the components can assume a finite number of states)
 - or continuous (values in the domain of real numbers)
- Connections:
 - Topology of the interaction NW (what is realistic?)
 - “Heritage” from physics: lattices or all-to-all (MF);
(hardly realistic in social context)
- Difficulties:
 - many simplifications;
 - Hard to say when are the results „good” (polarization)

Basic concepts of networks



With some network analysis



Binary opinions

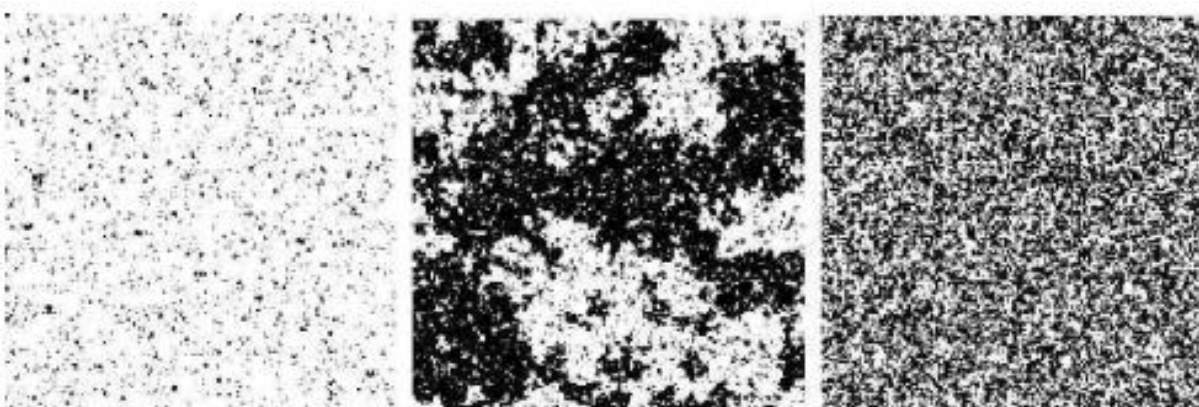
- Discrete, one dimensional
- 0/1; yes/no; etc
- Interpretation in op. dyn: political questions
infection models: infected / not
market behavior: selling/buying



Very first opinion dynamic model by physicist:
1971, Weidlich

Ising model metaphor

- Consider a collection of N spins (agents): s_i
- They can assume two values: ± 1
- Each spin is energetically pushed to be aligned with its nearest neighbors.
- The total energy is:
(the sum runs on the pairs of nearest-neighbors)
$$H = -\frac{1}{2} \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} s_i s_j$$
- Elementary move:
- a single spin flip is accepted with probability $\exp(-\Delta E/k_B T)$
 - ΔE : change in the energy
 - T : temperature (In ferromagnetic systems thermal noise injects fluctuations – tends to destroy order)
 - Critical temperature T_c : above: the system is macroscopically disordered
under: long-range order is established



Snapshots of equilibrium configurations of the Ising model (from left to right) below, at and above T_c .

Relation to opinion dynamics models

- Each agent has one opinion represented as a spin:
a choice between two options
- Spin couplings: peer interactions (social conformity)
- Magnetic field: external information / propaganda
- Simple, but attractive model

Potts model (1951)

- a generalization of the Ising model
- Each spin can assume one out of q values
- equal nearest neighbor values are energetically favored.
- The Ising model corresponds to the special case $q=2$ ¹⁴

Voter model

- Originally introduced to analyze competition among species, early 1970s
- Rather crude description of any real process
- Popular: it is one of the very few non-equilibrium stochastic processes that can be solved exactly in any dimension
- its name stems from its application to electoral competitions

- **The model:**

- each agent in a population of N holds one of two discrete opinions:

$$s = +/- 1$$

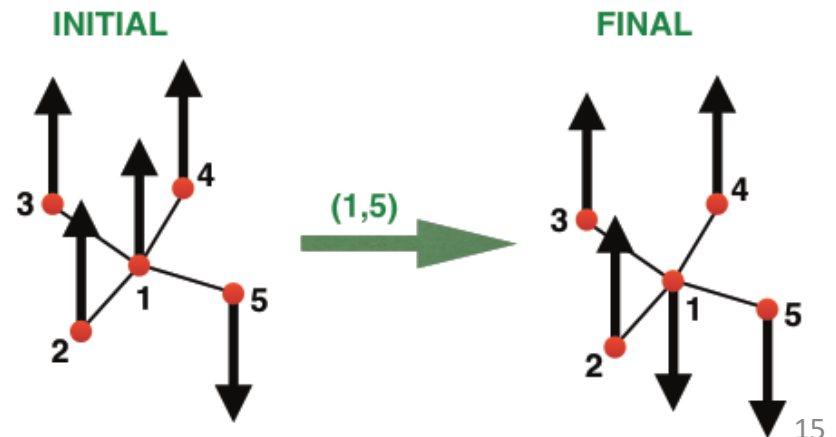
- agents are connected by an underlying **graph** (topology)

- **At each time step:**

a random agent i is selected

(1) along with one of its neighbors j (5) and the agent takes the opinion of the neighbor: $s_i = s_j$

(alignment *not* to the majority, but to a random neighbor)

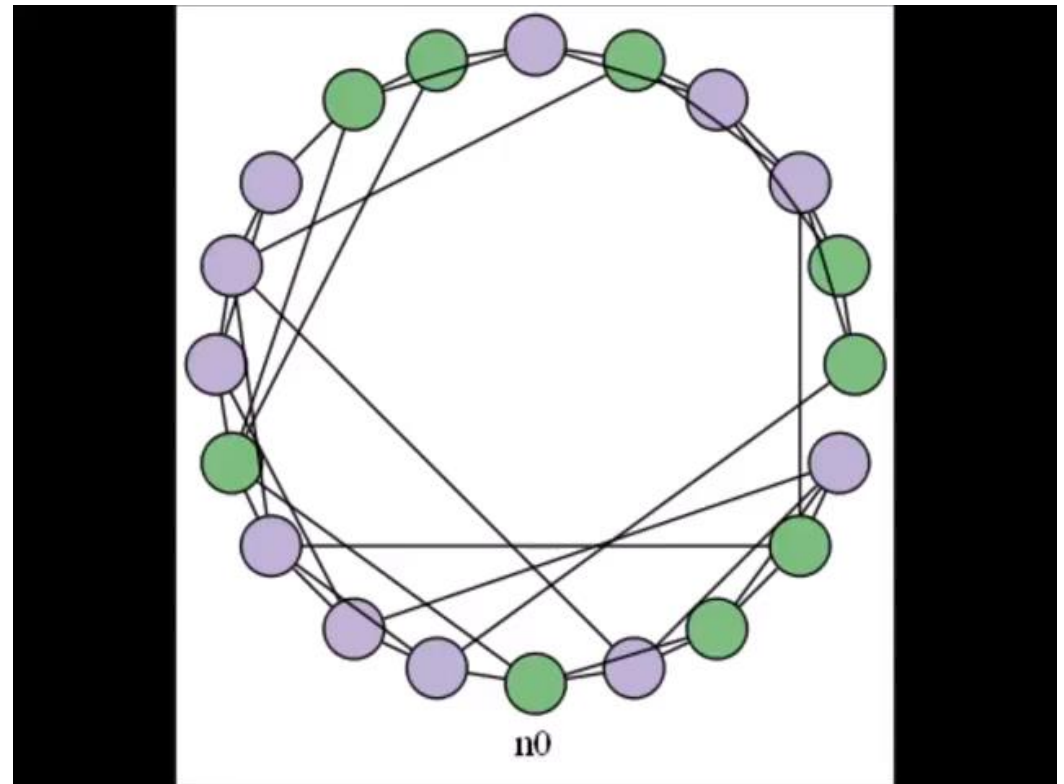


Behavior of the Voter model

- Has been extensively studied
- If people are modeled as vertices in a d -dimensional hyper-cubic lattice.
 - For finite system: for any dimension d of the lattice, the voter dynamics **always leads to** one of the two possible **consensus** states: each agent with the same opinion $s = 1$ or $s = -1$.
 - The probability of reaching one or the other state depends on the initial state of the population.
 - Time needed for reaching the consensus state:
 - $d = 1: T_N \sim N^2$
 - $d = 2: T_N \sim N \ln N$
 - $d > 2: T_N \sim N$
 - For infinite systems: consensus is reached only if $d \leq 2$

Extensions of the voter model

- Introduction of “zealots”: individuals who do not change their opinion
- Constrained voter model:
 - agents can be leftist, rightist, centralist;
 - Extremists do not talk to each other (discrete analogue of the bounded confidence model)
- Communication is based on various NW



Voter model on a small world network
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmhSTdrsimk>

Social impact theory

- Bibb Latané (psychologist), 1981:
- **social impact**: any influence on individual feelings, thoughts or behavior that is created from the real, implied or imagined presence or actions of others.
(„Collective” behavior)
- The impact of a social group on a subject depends on:
 - The number of individuals within the group
 - Their convicting power
 - Their distance from the subject (in an abstract space of personal relationships)
- Originally a cellular automata was introduced by Latané (1981) and later refined by Nowak et al (1990).

Social impact theory – the model

- A population of N individuals
- Each individual i is characterized by
 - an opinion $\sigma_i = \pm 1$
 - Persuasiveness p_i : the capability to convince someone **to change** opinion (a real value)
 - Supportiveness: s_i : the capability to convince someone **to keep** its opinion (a real value)
(these are assumed to be random)
- The distance between agents i and j d_{ij} ,
- $\alpha > 2$ parameter defining the how fast the impact decreases with the distance

$$I_i = \underbrace{\left[\sum_{j=1}^N \frac{p_j}{d_{ij}^\alpha} (1 - \sigma_i \sigma_j) \right]}_{\text{Persuasive impact (to change)}} - \underbrace{\left[\sum_{j=1}^N \frac{s_j}{d_{ij}^\alpha} (1 + \sigma_i \sigma_j) \right]}_{\text{supportive impact (to keep opinion)}}$$

Persuasive impact (to change)

supportive impact (to keep opinion)

Opinion dynamics:
$$\sigma_i(t+1) = -\text{sgn}[\sigma_i(t)I_i(t) + h_i]$$

h_i : personal preference, originating from other sources (e.g. mass media)

a spin flips if the pressure in favor of the opinion change overcomes the pressure to keep the current opinion ($I_i > 0$ for vanishing h_i)

General behavior of the social impact model

- In the absence of individual fields (personal preferences):
 - the dynamics leads to the dominance of one opinion over the other, but not to complete consensus.
- In the presence of individual fields:
 - these minority domains become metastable: they remain stationary for a very long time, then they suddenly shrink to smaller clusters, which again persist for a very long time, before shrinking again, and so on (“staircase dynamics”).

- Many modification / extensions:
 - Learning
 - Presence of a strong leader
 - Etc.

Schweitzer and Holyst included: (2000)

- Memory: reflecting past experience
- A finite velocity for the exchange of information between agents
- A physical space, where agents move.

Continuous opinions

- In many cases more realistic
- Requires **different framework**
 - Concepts like “majority” or “opinion equality” don’t work
 - Has a different ‘history’
- **First studies** (end of 1970’s and 80’s):
 - Aimed to study the conditions under which a panel of experts would reach a common decision (“consensus”)
 - By applied mathematicians
- **Typically:**
 - **Initial state:** population of N agents with randomly assigned opinions, represented by real values within some interval.
discrete op. dyn. $\leftrightarrow$ all agents start with different opinions
 - **Possible scenarios:** more complex
 - Opinion clusters emerging in the final stationary state:
 - one cluster: consensus,
 - two clusters: polarization
 - more clusters: fragmentation

Bounded confidence (BC) models

- **In principle:** each agent can interact with every other
- **In practice:** (often) there is a real discussion only if the opinions are sufficiently close:

bounded confidence

- **In the literature:** introducing a real number ε :
“*uncertainty*” or “*tolerance*”, such that:
- An agent with opinion x , only interacts with those whose opinion lies in the interval $]x-\varepsilon, x+\varepsilon[$
- („Homophily”)

Deffuant model

- population of N agents
- nodes of a graph: agents may discuss with each other if they are connected.
- Initially: each agent i is given an opinion x_i randomly chosen from the interval $[0, 1]$.
- **Dynamics:**
 - random binary encounters, i.e., at each time step, a randomly selected agent discusses with one of its neighbors, also chosen at random.
 - Let i and j be the pair of interacting agents at time t , with opinions $x_i(t)$ and $x_j(t)$
 - if the difference of the opinions $x_i(t)$ and $x_j(t)$ exceeds the threshold ε , nothing happens
 - If $|x_i(t) - x_j(t)| < \varepsilon$, then
 - μ : convergence param.
(μ in $[0, 1/2]$)

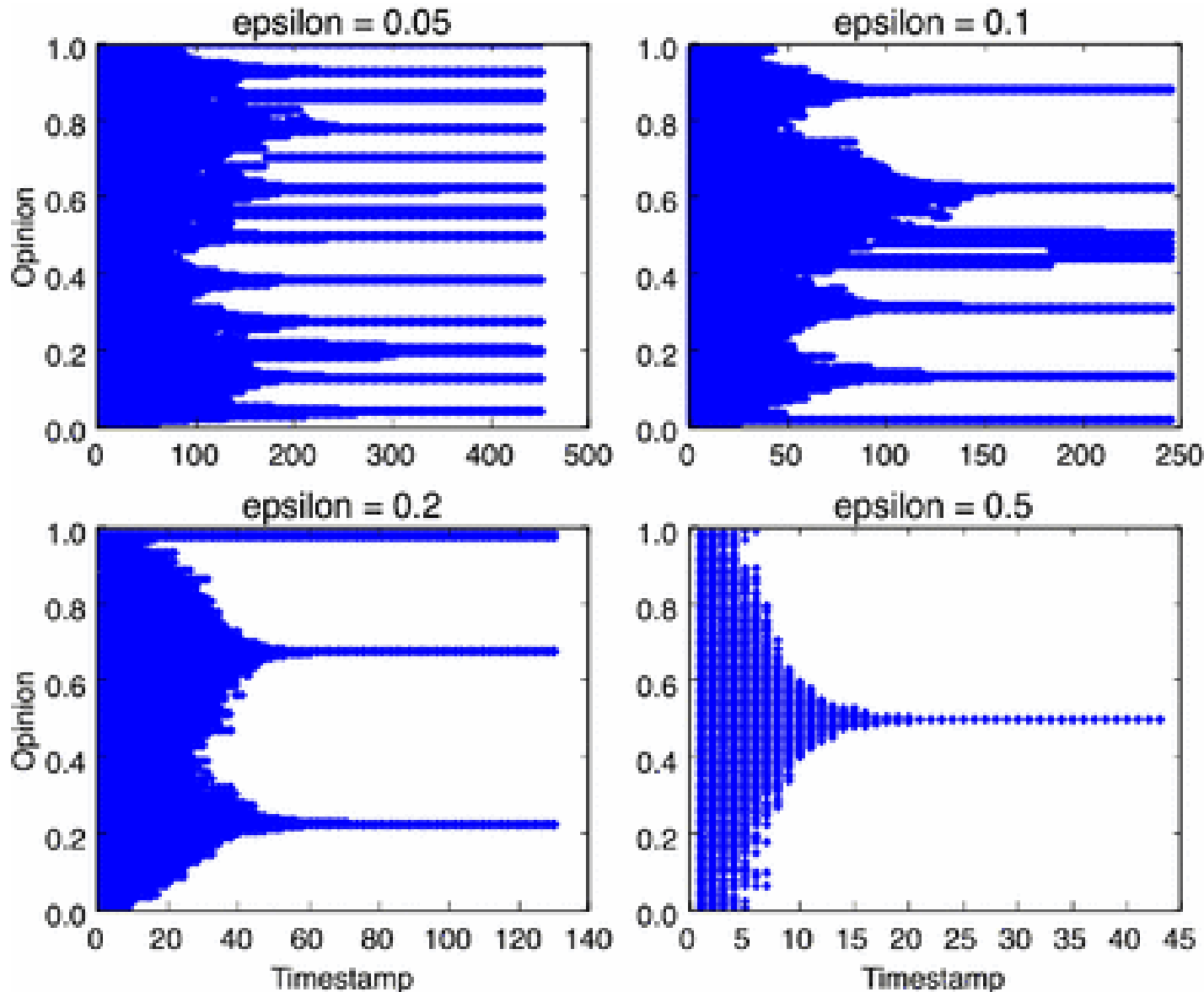
$$x_i(t+1) = x_i(t) + \mu[x_j(t) - x_i(t)]$$

$$x_j(t+1) = x_j(t) + \mu[x_i(t) - x_j(t)]$$

Behavior of the Deffuant model

- For any value of ε and μ , the average opinion of the agents' pair is the same before and after the interaction $\rightarrow$ the global average opinion ($1/2$) of the population is invariant
- Patches appear with increasing density of agents
- Once each cluster is sufficiently far from the others (the difference of opinions in distinct clusters exceeds the threshold):
 - only agents *inside* the same cluster interact
 - the dynamics leads to the convergence of the opinions of all agents in the cluster
- In general:
 - the *number and size of the clusters* depend on the threshold ε (if ε is small, more clusters emerge)
 - the parameter μ affects the convergence time
 - (when μ is small, the final cluster configuration also depends on μ)

Behavior of the Deffuant model



Cultural dynamics

Multidimensional vector model

- Mostly: opinion: scalar variable
„culture”: a **vector** of variables

The typical questions are similar:

- what are the microscopic mechanisms that drive the formation of cultural domains?
- What is the ultimate fate of diversity?
- Is it bound to persist or all differences eventually disappear in the long run?
- What is the role of the social network structure?

Axelrod model

- Axelrod, 1997
- Attracted lot of interest both from social scientists and physicists
 - Reason (soc. sci): inclusion of two fundamental mechanisms:
 - **Social influence**: the tendency of individuals to become more similar when they interact
 - **Homophily**: the tendency of alikes to attract each other, so that they interact more frequently
 - These two ingredients were generally expected to generate a self-reinforcing dynamics leading to a global convergence to a single culture.
 - But it turns out that the model predicts in some cases the persistence of diversity. (The importance of minimal models!)
 - From the viewpoint of stat. phys:
 - is a “vectorial” generalization of opinion dynamics models
 - gives rise to a very rich and nontrivial phenomenology, with some genuinely novel behavior

Axelrod's model

- **Individuals :**
 - are nodes on a network (or on the sites of a regular lattice – original version)
 - They are endowed with F integer variables $(\sigma_1, \dots, \sigma_F)$ (describing their “culture”)
The variables are the “*cultural features*”
- **Each σ_i (feature) can assume q values: $\sigma_f = 0, 1, \dots, q-1$**
 - q : number of possible traits (modeling the different “beliefs, attitudes and behavior” of individuals)
- **An elementary step:**
 - an individual i and one of its neighbors j are selected
 - The overlap between them is computed:

$$\omega_{i,j} = \frac{1}{F} \sum_{f=1}^F \delta_{\sigma_f(i), \sigma_f(j)}$$

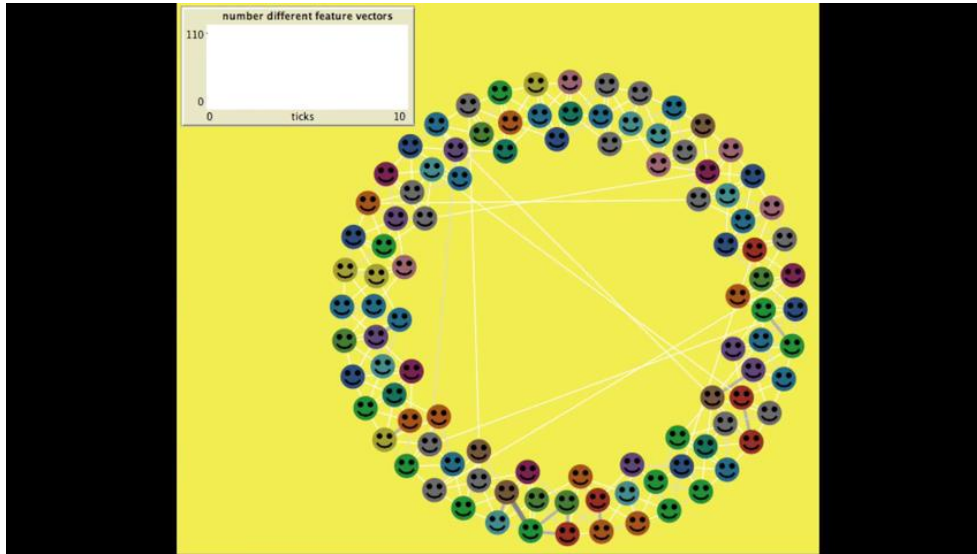
Where $\delta_{i,j}$ is the Kronecker delta

- $\omega_{i,j}$: probability of interaction between i and j
 - If they interact: one of the features for which traits are different ($\sigma_f(i) \neq \sigma_f(j)$) is selected and the trait of the neighbor is set equal to $\sigma_f(i)$
 - If they do not interact: nothing happens

Features of the Axelrod model

- the dynamics tends to make interacting individuals more similar
- Interaction:
 - more likely for neighbors already sharing many traits (homophily)
 - becomes impossible when no trait is the same
- For each pair of neighbors: two stable configurations:
 1. when they are exactly equal, so that they belong to the same cultural region or
 2. when they are completely different, i.e., they sit at the border between cultural regions
- Starting from a disordered initial condition:
 - The evolution on any finite system leads to one of the many **absorbing states**, which belong to **two classes**:
 1. the **ordered states**, in which **all** individuals have the same set of variables, or
 2. **Frozen states** with different coexisting cultural regions (more numerous)
- Which one is reached: depends on q (number of possible traits):
 - Small q : quickly full consensus is achieved
 - Large q : very few individuals share traits → few interactions occur → formation of small cultural domains that are not able to grow (disordered frozen state)

Axelrod's model of cultural dissemination in a small world network (47 sec)

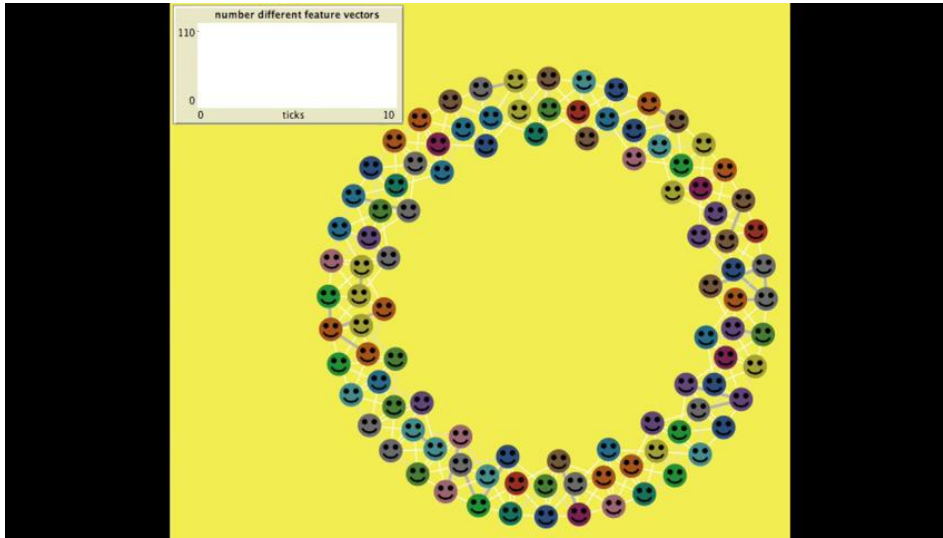


- a small-world interaction structure
- 100 agents, each
 - with 6 network contacts
 - 5 features
- Each feature can adopt 15 values
- Init: random set of traits
- Color of agents: *one* of the features
- Color and thickness of the lines: the overall similarity between the respective nodes
- emergence of internally homogenous but mutually maximally different clusters.
- Dynamics settled after 140,427 iterations with 7 cultural clusters.

Inset: number of different feature vectors

(Michael Maes, 2015)

Playing with Axelrod's model: the effect of globalization (53 sec)



- **Globalization**: more individuals are in contact with others who are geographically very distant
- Circle NW interaction structure (at the beginning!)
- 100 agents, each
 - with 6 network contacts
 - 5 features
- Each feature can adopt 15 values
- Init: random set of traits
- Color of agents: *one* of the features
- Color and thickness of the lines: the overall similarity between the respective nodes
- The dynamics reaches a rest point (after 51,065 iterations)
- Rewire 20 links and cont. (modeling that individuals have more contact to distant others)
(Michael Maes, 2015)

Illustrates two **implications** of the model:

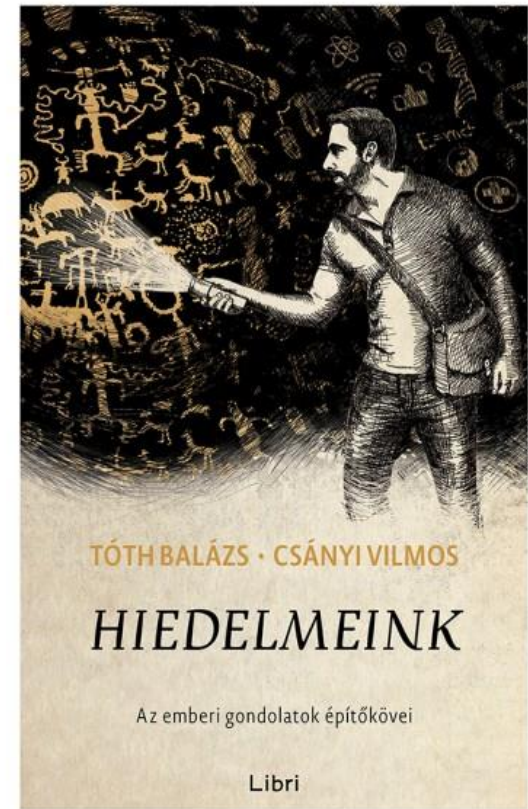
1. due to the rewiring the number of clusters in equilibrium decreased from 22 to 16
2. after the simulation continued (after rewiring) the number of unique combinations of cultural traits (diversity) first increased and then decreased
 - (i) globalization decreases cultural diversity
 - (ii) the short-term effects differ from the long-term effects

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvXjk8P4TX0>

The human belief system

A lot of knowledge has accumulated

- Neurobiology, various human sciences, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, etc...
- **Beliefs are interconnected** rather than isolated; they form complex, interconnected systems. For example, a person's beliefs about health, politics, and social issues are often linked—one belief can reinforce or contradict others. Traditional scalar models can't capture these interdependencies.
- **Influence Through Social and Belief Networks:** individuals influence each other not just in terms of isolated opinions but in ways that impact entire belief systems. This can reveal why people sometimes resist change on a belief because it conflicts with their established network of beliefs.



Fundamental Features of Human Belief Systems - What we *do* know

„**Belief**” (or „element of a BS”): all sorts of human thoughts – simple or complex – that can be transmitted with the use of language.

Beliefs...

- Form an ***interconnected*** system (no belief can exist in isolation)
- Not equally important
- Two belief/concept can be
 - ***Consistent***, if they support each (Pathogens causes diseases” vs. „Contagion is due to the spread of pathogens”)
 - ***Contradictory*** „Pathogens causes diseases” vs. „Evil spirits cause diseases”
- ***Seeks to be consistent***: people try to maintain a belief system in which the elements mutually support each other, or are independent
 - ***If not: cognitive dissonance (CD)*** one of the most influential and well-researched theories in social psychology.
 - Strategies to keep them mutually supportive: „***biases***”
 - Accepting those which support the already existing ones
 - Keeping touch with people from whom we expect similar opinions
 - Accepting beliefs that re-interpret the ones creating CD in a way that the CD dissolves (fake news)
 - Re-evaluating beliefs
- (Compartmentalized)

Most **models** assuming interrelated beliefs are coming from the political science.

Graph representation:

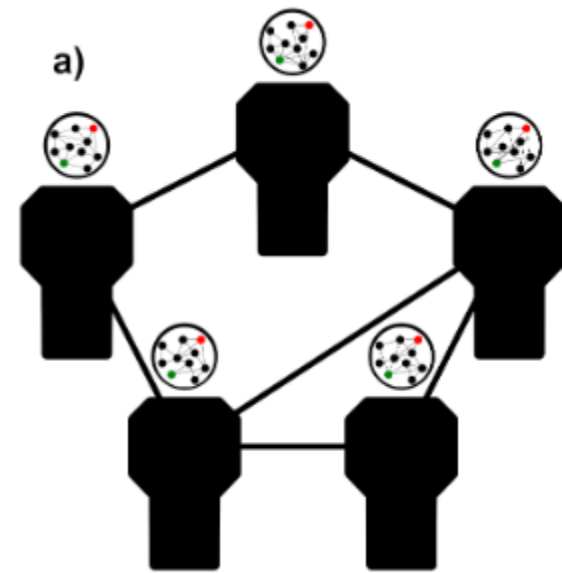
- A modular („compartmentalized”) hierarchical network
- Nodes: beliefs (attitudes, concepts, etc.)
- If they are related: edge between them
- Main principle: coherence/consistency maximization

Not a new idea. : Philip E. Converse: The nature of belief systems in mass publics (1964)

Further articles:

- DellaPosta, D. Pluralistic Collapse: The “Oil Spill” Model of Mass Opinion Polarization. Am. Sociol. Rev. 2020, 85, 507–536
- Turner-Zwinkels, F.M.; Johnson, B.B.; Sibley, C.G.; Brandt, M.J. Conservatives’ Moral Foundations Are More Densely Connected Than Liberals’ Moral Foundations. Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull. 2020, 47, 167–184
- Brandt, M.J.; Sleegers, W.W.A. Evaluating Belief System Networks as a Theory of Political Belief System Dynamics. Personal. Soc. Psychol. Rev. **2021**, 25, 159–185
- Baldassarri, D.; Goldberg, A. Neither Ideologues nor Agnostics: Alternative Voters’ Belief System in an Age of Partisan Politics. Am. J. Sociol. 2014, 120, 45–95. [Google Scholar] [CrossRef]
- Brandt, M.J.; Sibley, C.G.; Osborne, D. What Is Central to Political Belief System Networks? Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull. 2019, 45, 1352–1364.

- **Social Network Layer:** The overarching social network connects individual agents and represents the pathways through which influence spreads. Agents in this layer interact with each other, sharing or reinforcing beliefs. This network is often structured based on proximity, friendship, or similar characteristics, and can vary in density and connectivity.
- **Belief Networks (Intra-Agent Networks):** Each agent has its own internal belief network, where nodes represent individual beliefs or opinions, and edges represent the relationships between these beliefs. For example:
 - **Positive Connections:** If two beliefs reinforce each other (e.g., belief in environmental protection and belief in renewable energy), they may be positively linked.
 - **Negative Connections:** If two beliefs are contradictory (e.g., belief in climate action but skepticism toward government regulation), they may be negatively linked.
- **Network of Networks:** Combining these layers, the model forms a network of networks, where each agent's belief network is influenced by its social connections. Changes in the social network layer can lead to cascades or adjustments in individual belief networks, and vice versa.



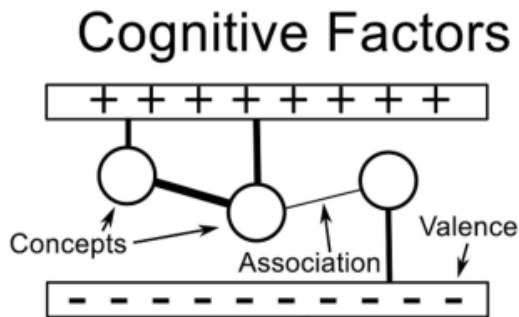
Some applications:

- Polarization
- Misinformation and Belief Resilience
- Cultural and Ideological Spread

Two crucial aspects of belief dynamics

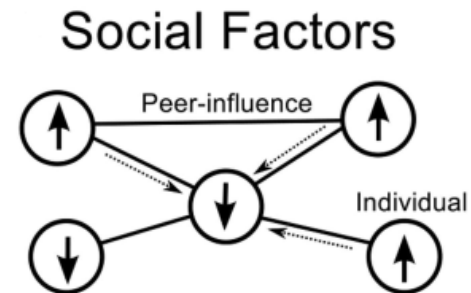
Cognitive bias (or belief bias):

- **Def:** A person's tendency to accept arguments that supports a conclusion that aligns with his/her values, beliefs and prior knowledge, while rejecting counter arguments to the conclusion
- Leads to individual belief rigidity
- Cognitive dissonance (well-studied area)



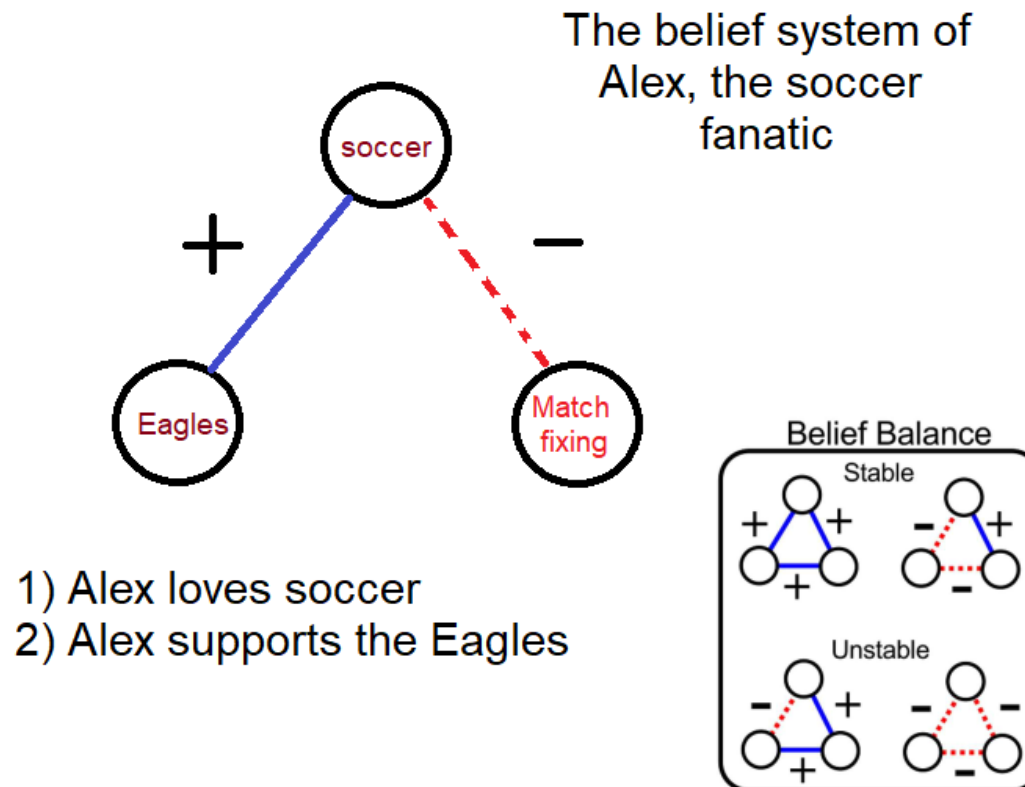
Social influence:

- The tendency of individuals to become more similar when they interact (we have seen it at the Axelrod model)
- Leads to social conformity



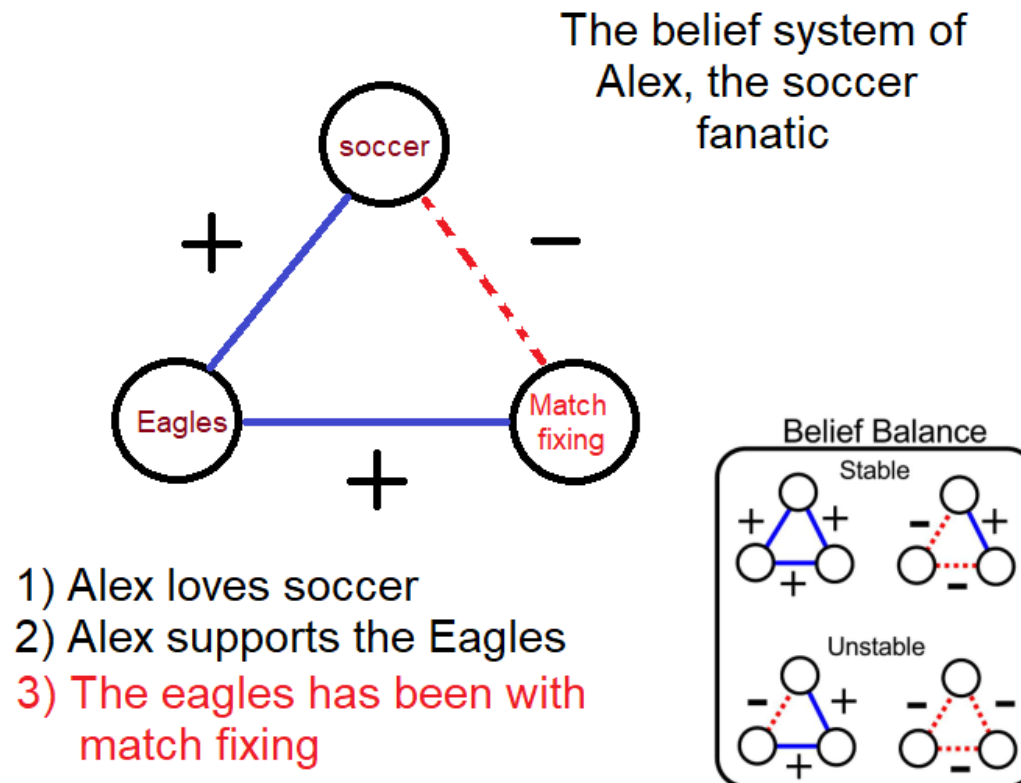
A cognitive-social model

- Individuals are embedded into a social NW, and social influence takes place via the social ties
- Each individual possesses a *network* of concepts and beliefs
- The internal (in)coherence of each individual's belief network is evaluated



A cognitive-social model

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A cognitive-social model

- The *internal coherence* of each individual's belief network is evaluated by the *internal energy function* (on the belief NW M):

(For simplicity, the belief NW is complete, meaning that all concepts have a positive or negative association with every other)

$$E_n^{(i)} = - \frac{1}{\binom{M}{3}} \sum_{j,k,l} a_{jk} a_{kl} a_{jl}$$

- The evolution of belief systems is also driven by social interactions: *social energy* term, capturing the *degree of alignment* between connected individuals.)

$$E_n^{(s)} = - \frac{1}{k_{max} \binom{M}{2}} \sum_{q \in \Gamma(n)} \vec{s}_n \cdot \vec{s}_q$$

k_{max} is a normalization factor, maximum degree of N.

S: belief state vector: each element corresponds to an *edge*

- **Total energy:**

where

I: peer-influence ,

J: coherentism

$$H = \sum_{n \in \mathcal{N}} [JE_n^{(i)} + IE_n^{(s)}]$$

- The status of the entire society is characterized by

(i) the average internal coherence of the individuals $\langle E^{(i)} \rangle$, and

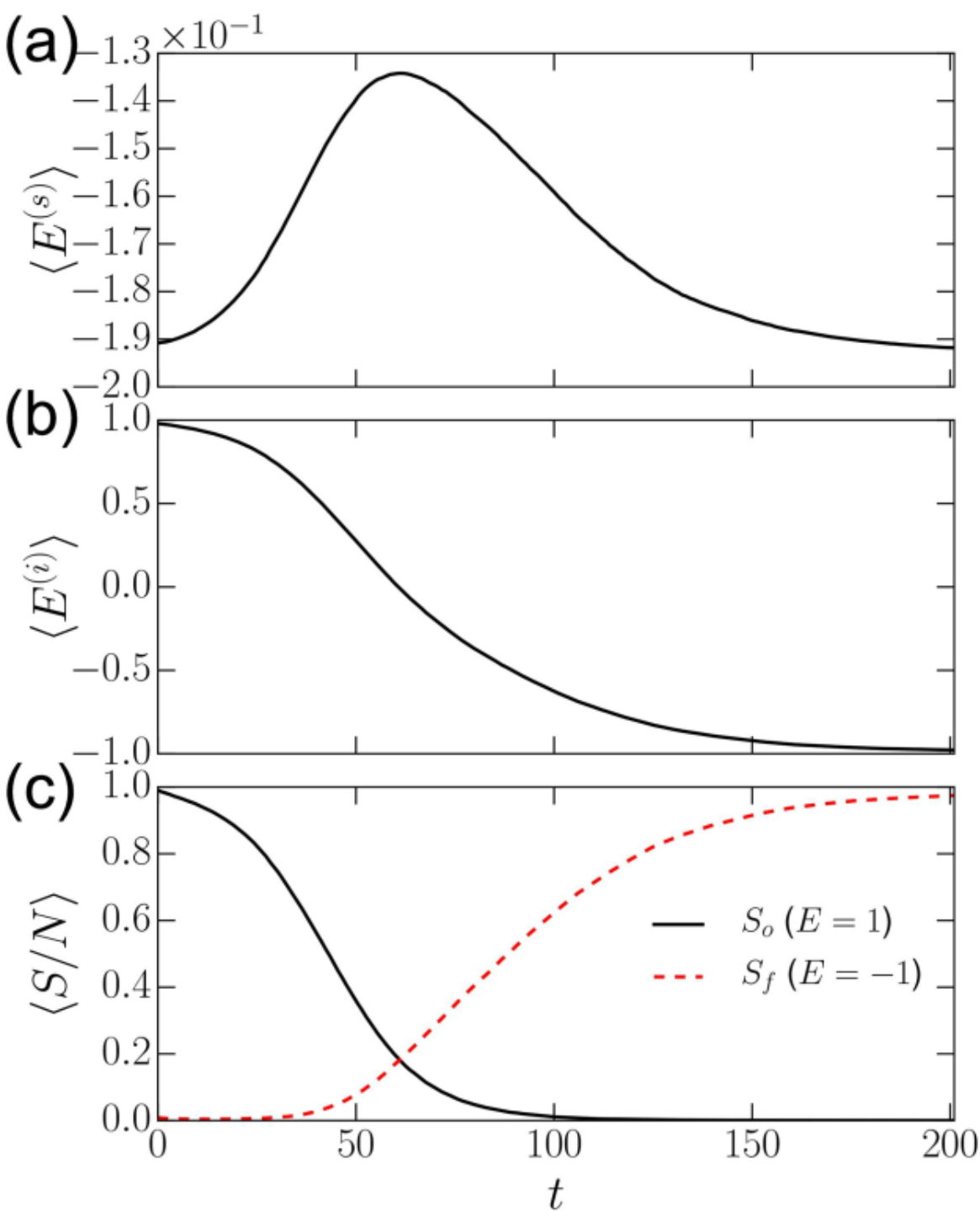
(ii) the homogeneity of the society $\langle E^{(s)} \rangle$

- The simulation:

- At each time step a random pair of individuals is chosen
- One of the individuals (sender) randomly chooses a belief (association) from its internal belief system and sends it to the other individual (receiver)
- Assumption: each individual has an identical set of concept nodes
- The receiver accepts it if it decreases its individual energy H_n
- If $\Delta H_n > 0$, the receiver accepts it with probability $e^{\frac{-\Delta H_n}{T}}$
- T is “susceptibility” / “open-mindedness”

Results

- Given a *homogeneous* population of people with *highly coherent* belief systems, society remains stable.
- Given a *homogeneous* population of *incoherent belief systems*, society will become unstable and following a small perturbation, breaks down
- In simulation:
 - The society is initialized at **consensus** with an **incoherent** belief system.
 - Then 1% of the population are given a random belief system
 - Individuals attempt to reduce the energy of their own belief systems and leave consensus



In the simulation, the society is initialized at consensus with an incoherent belief system. Then 1% of the population are given a random belief system.

Strong societal consensus does not guarantee a stable society in our model. If major paradigm shifts occur and make individual belief systems incoherent, then society may become unstable.

(a) The plot shows the evolution of social energy $E^{(s)}$ over time. The system starts at consensus but with incoherent beliefs. After introducing a small perturbation, individuals leave consensus, searching for more coherent sets of beliefs, until society reconverges at a stable configuration.

(b) Decreasing mean individual energies $\langle E^{(i)} \rangle$ over time illustrates individual stabilization during societal transition.

(c) $\langle S/N \rangle$ is the fractional group size. As society is upset, the original dominant but incoherent belief system S_o (solid black) is replaced by an emerging coherent alternative S_f (dashed red).