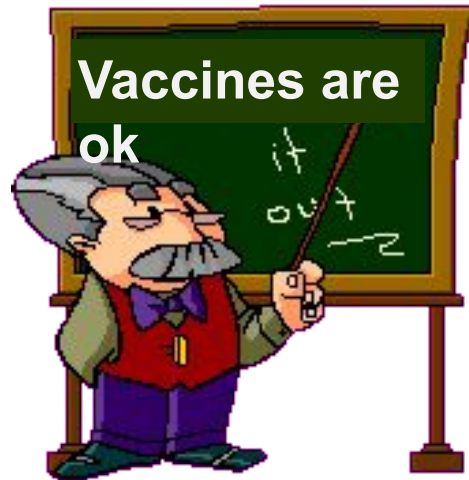
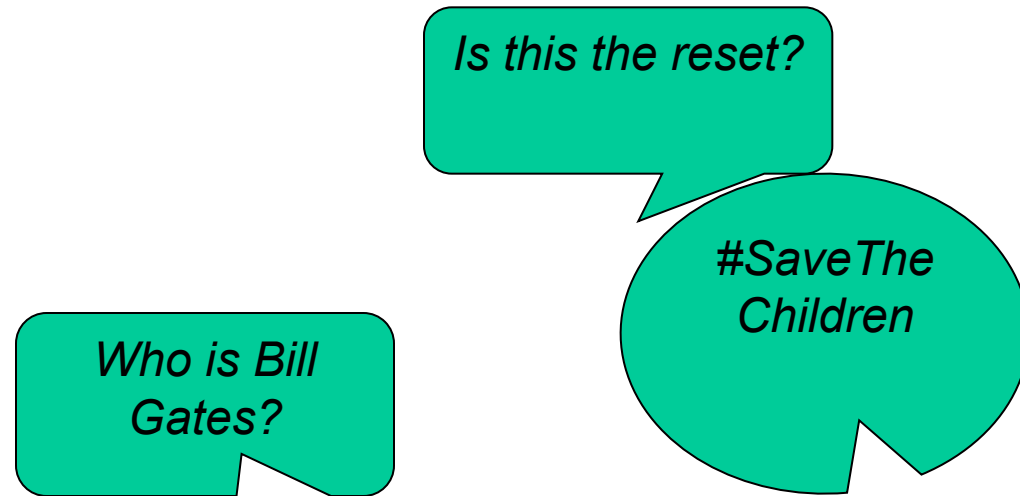


Responding to conspiracy theories and alternative narratives in the classroom



Jeremy.hayward@ucl.ac.uk



A photograph of a large crowd of people at a protest or demonstration. In the foreground, the back of a person's head and shoulders is visible, wearing a dark jacket with a patch that says "DRUG FREE" and "CHOOSE YOURSELF" with a syringe icon. The crowd in the background is dense, with many people holding up phones to take pictures. Some people are holding signs, and a megaphone is visible in the upper left. The entire image has a semi-transparent red overlay.

Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom

Guidance for teachers

Jeremy Hayward & Gemma Gronland

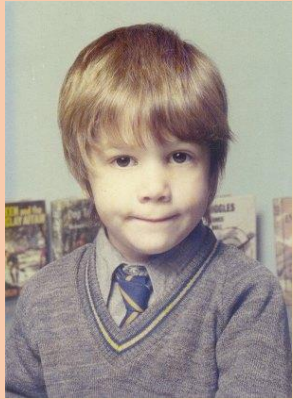
Available from www.since911.com

UKRI
Infodemic project

UKRI
Everything is Connected
<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/eic/>

Me

Today



3 Channels

Books

Newspapers

Debates about content

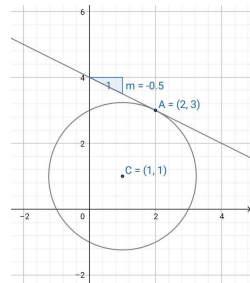
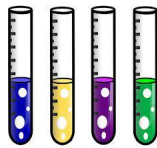


Unlimited content

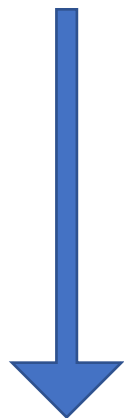
No real editorship

Run by advertising companies

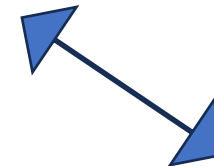
Algorithms/AI



Official vs unofficial knowledge



Official, 'legitimate' knowledge



Folk, popular, 'illegitimate knowledge'/ideas

'the velocity and scale of knowledge exchange... is unique' with "illegitimate knowledge" now enjoy[ing] mass participation' (Birchall 2006: 5).

Zagzebski, L (1996) *Virtues of the Mind : An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* Cambridge: CUP



Intellectual virtues

- open-mindedness in collecting and appraising evidence
- fairness in evaluating the arguments of others
- intellectual humility
- intellectual perseverance, diligence, care and thoroughness
- adaptability of intellect
- being able to recognize reliable authority
- insight into persons, problems, theories

Intellectual skills

- verbal skills: skills of speaking and writing
- fact-finding skills
- logical skills: skills of performing deductive and inductive reasoning. Ability to think up counterexamples
- explanatory skills, e.g. ability to think up insightful analogies
- mathematical skills and skills of quantitative reasoning
- spatial reasoning skills, e.g., skills at working puzzles p.114



Conspiracy theories



Conspiracy theories - terminology

- **Fake news** - an umbrella term for different kinds of false or heavily edited information.
- **Disinformation** - False information that is deliberately created - usually to harm an individual, social group, organisation or nation.
- **Misinformation** - False information that is accidentally shared or created. There is no intention of harm, but may cause harm.
- **Malinformation** – True information, but it has been deliberately shared to cause harm.
- **Conspiracy theory** – Exact definition of a conspiracy theory is contested.



Conspiracy theory

A theory that

Significant events are not as they seem and are planned by secretive powerful groups

Counter to official/publicly accepted versions

Definition is disputed e.g., Coady (2006), Keeley (1999), Cassam (2019)



Conspiracy theories – emerging findings

Birchall, C. & Knight, P. (2023)

<http://infodemic.eu/>

Characteristics of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories



- **Mobilising:** Increasingly taken to the streets, displaying conspiracy theories on. (Capitol riots, UK:159 Phone masts attacked, protests outside schools)
- **Convergence:** The combination of previously distinct conspiracy theories, e.g. anti-vaxx + Qanon, great reset.
- **Enmeshed:** Now difficult to isolate conspiracy theories from other modes of information
- **Grievances:** Some conspiracy belief may be formed from grievances (some legitimate)

Motives/correlates

Epistemic: Understand, agency, conjunction fallacy etc

Existential: Powerless, loss of control, times of crisis

Social: In-group image, agency, vs sheeple, associated with losing, socio-economic

(Sutton and Douglas 2022)





Wider problems of social media

Spreading A) dangerous ideas B) my side bias, but also C) what is the internalised model of disagreement?

- False news 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than true ones.



- False news stories cascade is between 10-20 times faster than real news stories/facts (Vosoughi et al. 2018).



Threats to democracy as a result of belief - correlations

Loss of trust in government (possible causation)

Distrust in Science – climate change, covid

Loss of engagement with mainstream political process

Engagement with extreme actions. Protest, violence, vandalism

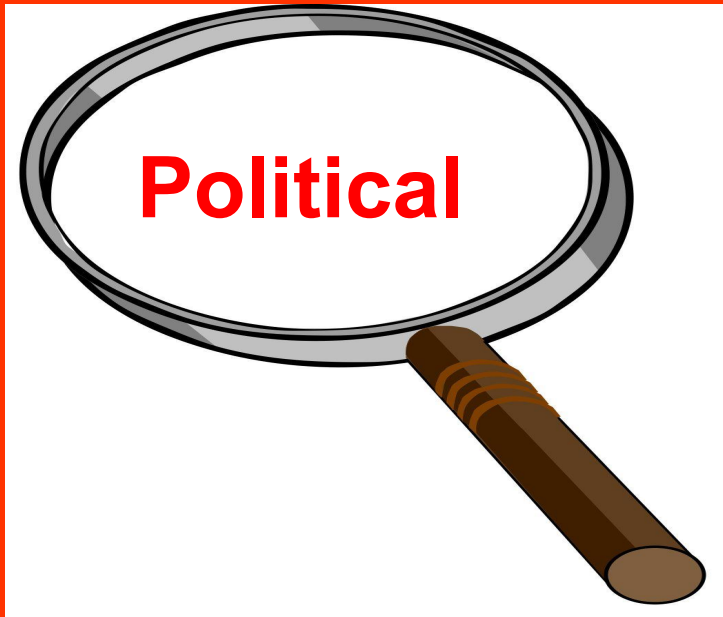
Outgroup hatred

(Summary from Sutton and Douglas 2023)

Opportunity cost

Displacement: Ignoring key issues, misdirected energy





Hate speech

Are conspiracies a form of hate speech?

“...basically a form of political propaganda and that the response to them also needs to be political” (Cassam 2019:VII)

Not amateur sleuths speculating, but politically motivated actors seeking to further agendas.

Nazi Propaganda

Russia

Climate denial

Giving credence is doing their work

CTs vs ct





**Are conspiracies
true?**

Rationality and conspiracy

Narrative plausibility.

Hard to prove wrong (defeating scepticism). Perhaps not even falsifiable (as the lack of evidence, or evidence against, counts as evidence).

Are they true? Single event vs Global

Try not to get drawn into first order discussions on facts. Use logic-based approaches (general arguments)

A) Loose lips

B) Nature of how real conspiracies are uncovered

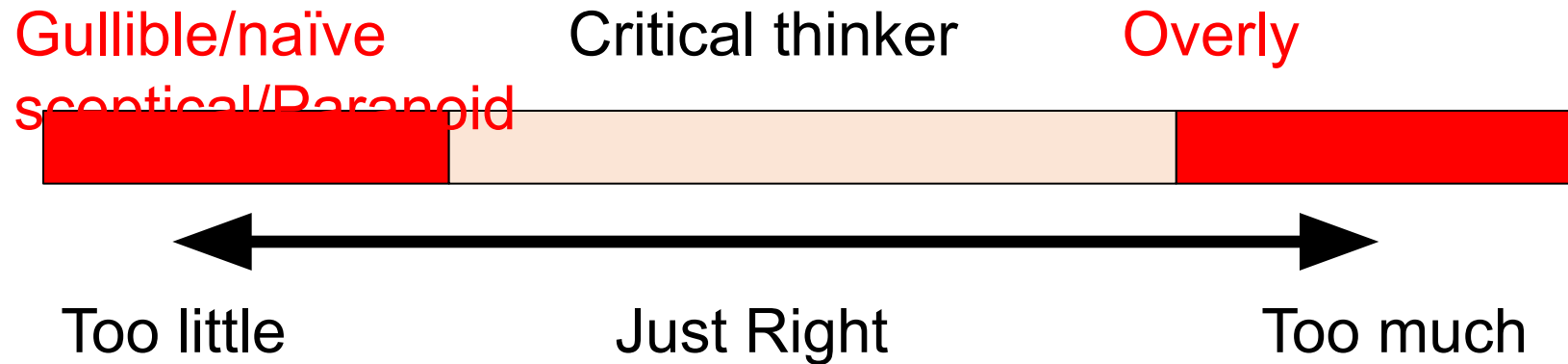


Get student to see themselves as a critical thinker, not a conspiracy thinker

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean



SCEPTICISM





Hot cognition

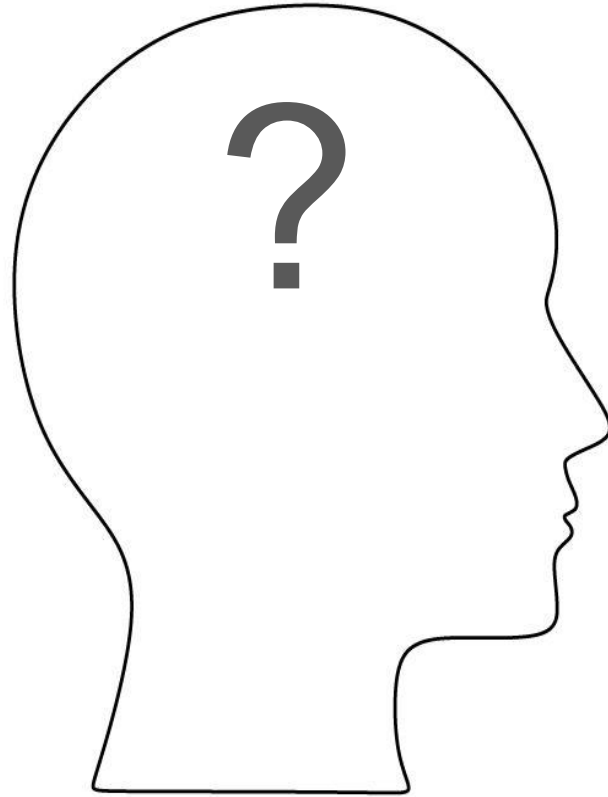
Motivated reasoning

System 1

Intuition. Gut feel
Emotions. Prior
Attitude. Memory.

Cognitive Psychology

Humans are not as
rational as we think.
Motivated reasoning.
'Hot' Cognition model.
Ego-centric.
System 2 is employed
to justify System 1.
(Lawyer)



System 2

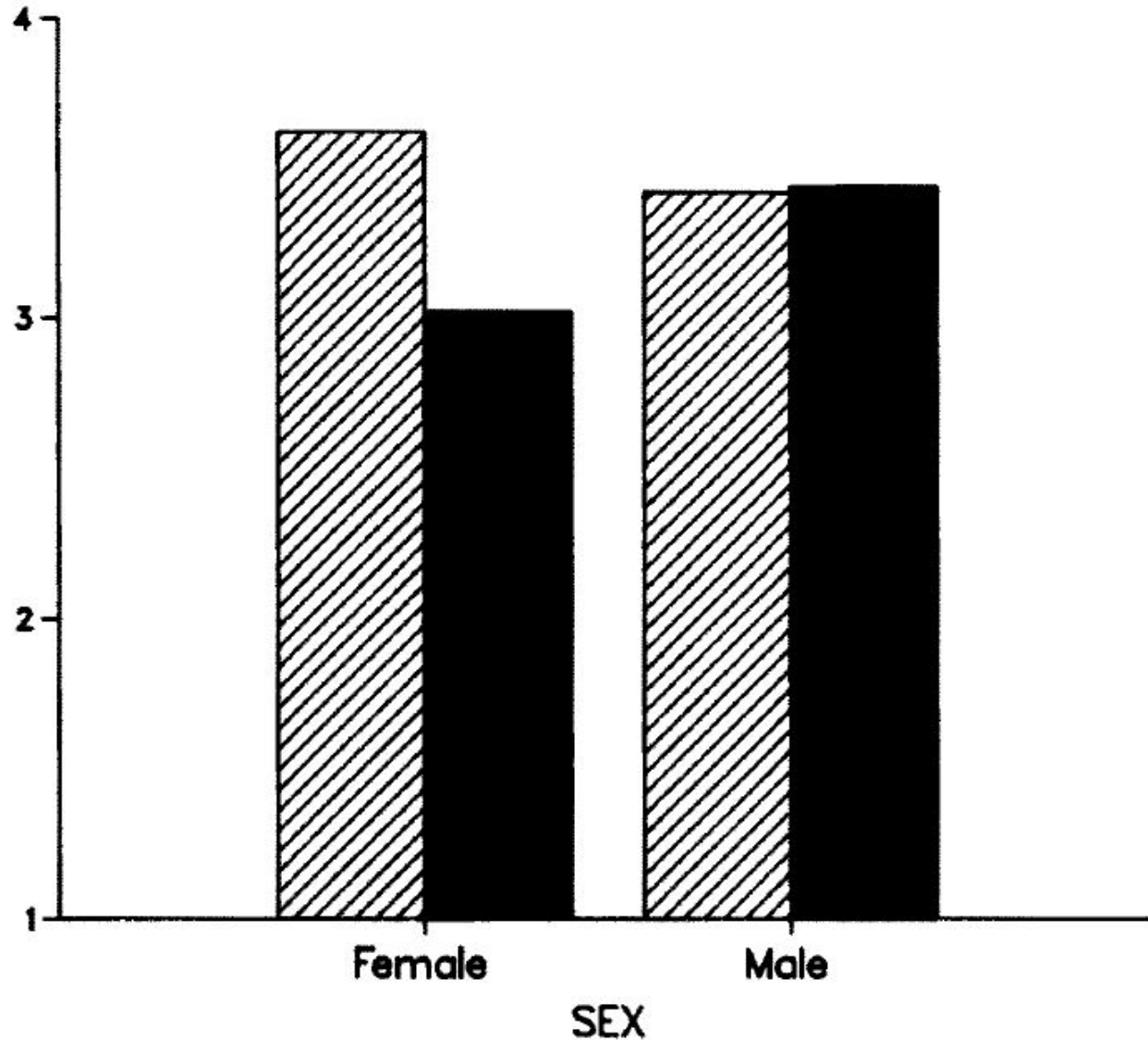
Reason. Evidence.
Critical thinking.

Enlightenment model (Cartesian model)

Thought is conscious,
humans are rational,
decisions are based on
reason. Reasoning is
neutral/unemotional
cold. System 2 keeps
System 1 in check
(Scientist)

MOTIVATED INFERENCE

Caffeine and Fibrocystic Disease



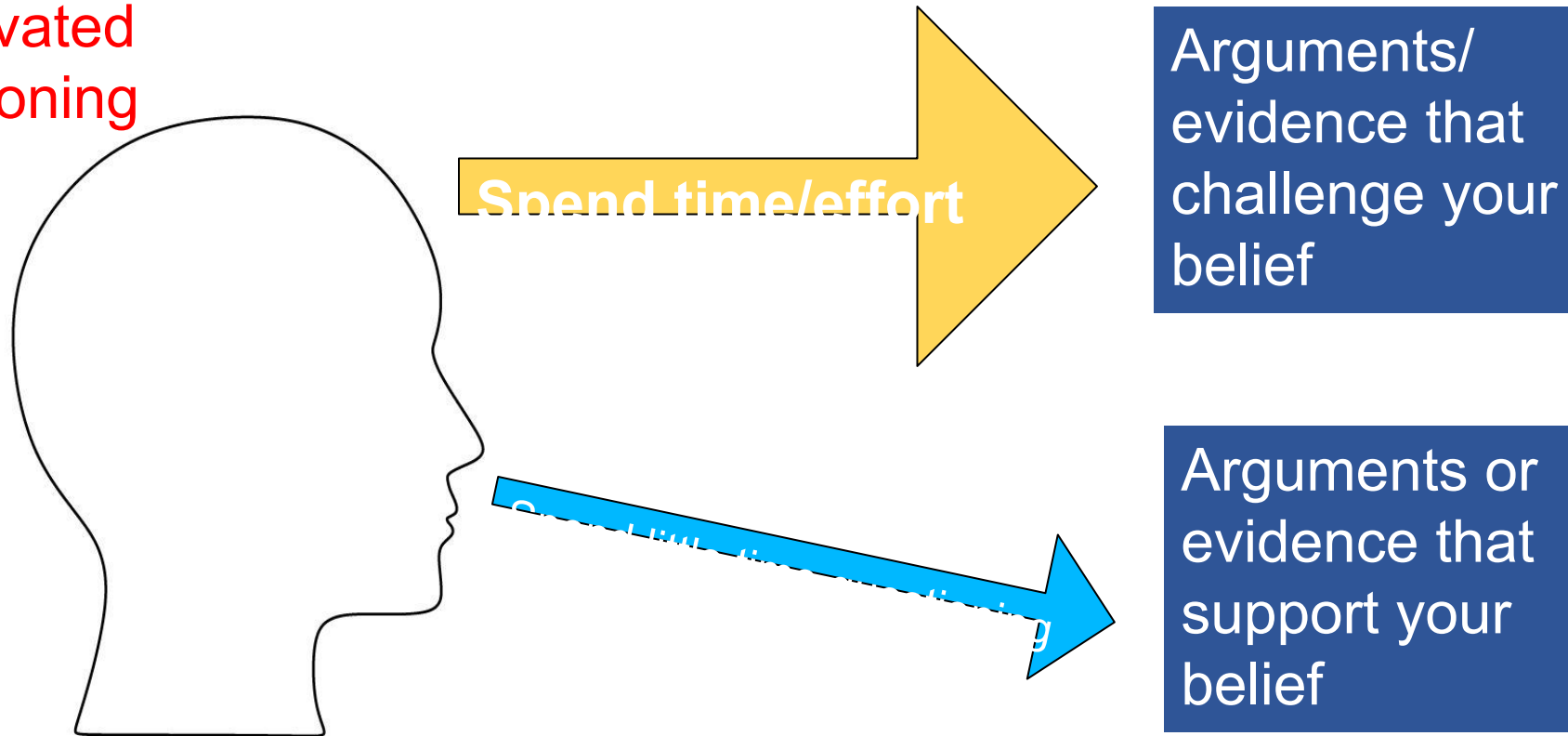
Kunda, Z. (1987).
Motivated Inference.
Journal of Personality
and Social
Psychology, 53(4),
636-647.

Legend
▨ low caffeine
■ heavy caffeine

System 1

Signs of
motivated
reasoning

Disconfirmation bias

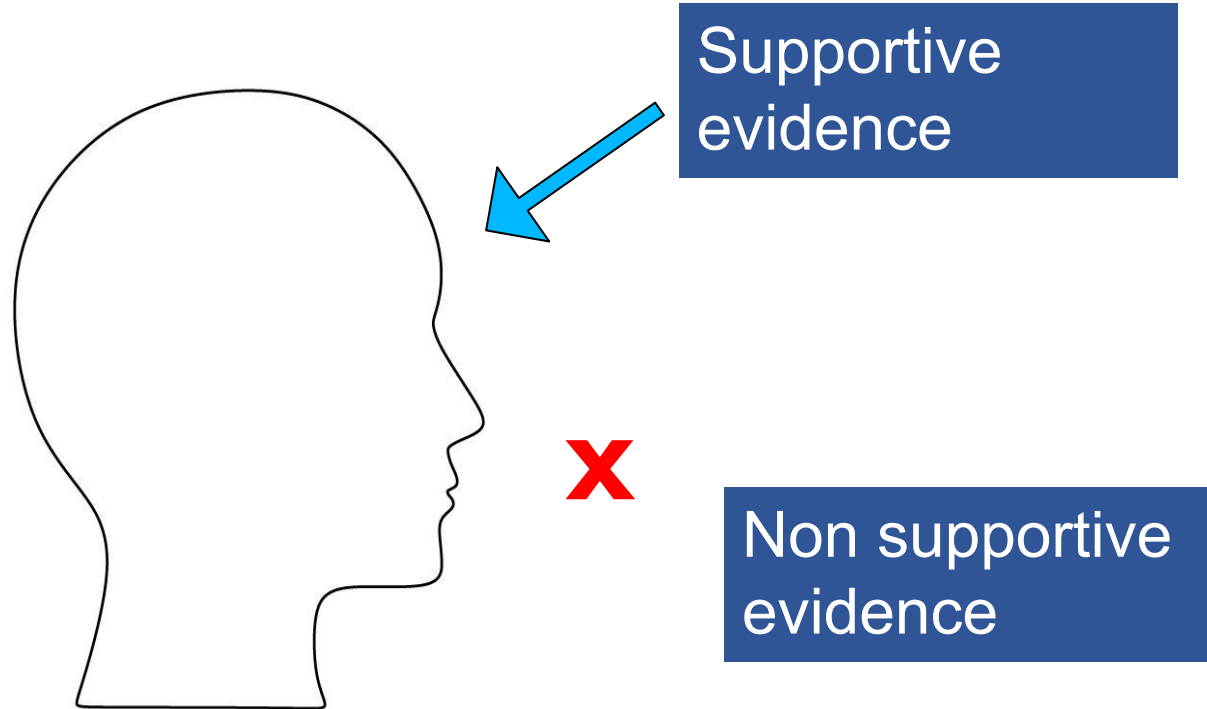


Tendency to spend much longer discounting and criticising arguments/evidence that does not support your prior beliefs e.g. Medical test. Evaluating arguments

System 1

Signs of
motivated
reasoning

Confirmation bias



Tendency to highlight information that supports your view and ignore evidence that challenges this.

Hastorf, A. H., & Cantril, H. (1954) 'They saw a game: A case study.' in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49, 129-134.

Lenker, M. (2016) 'Motivated Reasoning, Political Information, and Information Literacy Education' in *Libraries and the Academy*, Volume 16 (3) 511-528

American public is edging towards ideological extremes, driven, in part by the public's habit of consuming political information...

"By selecting sources of political news that tend to confirm their existing positions, consumers of media reinforce both their initial convictions on political matters and their distrust of those who view the issues differently" (p.511)

(selective exposure)



University of
Kent

SAFER SCROLLING

How algorithms popularise and gamify
online hate and misogyny for young people

After five days, all archetypes saw a four-fold increase in the level of misogynistic content being presented on their “For You” page (increasing from 13% misogynistic content to 56%)

<https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Help%20and%20advice/Inclusion/Safer-scrolling.pdf>

Incel 1.0

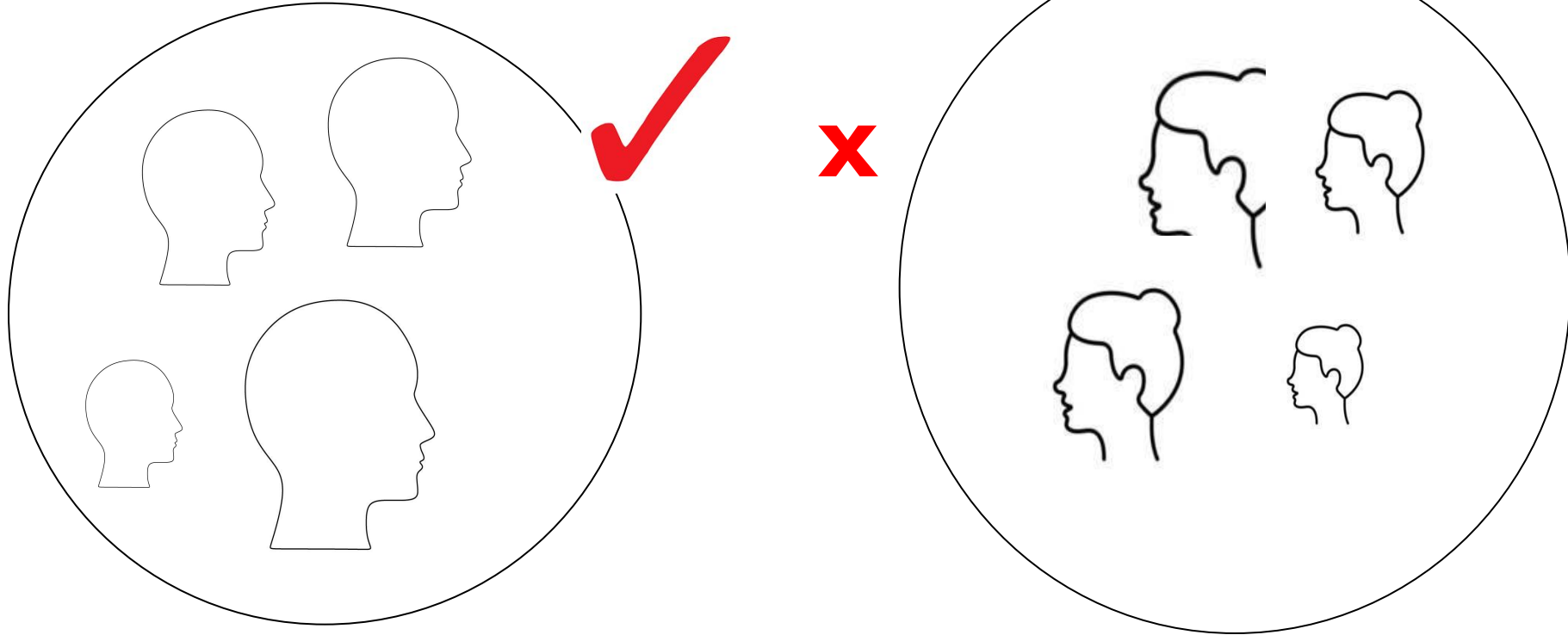
Incel 2.0

System 1

types of
motivated
reasoning

In group/outgroup bias

Sport
Age
Gender
Ethnicity
Religion
etc

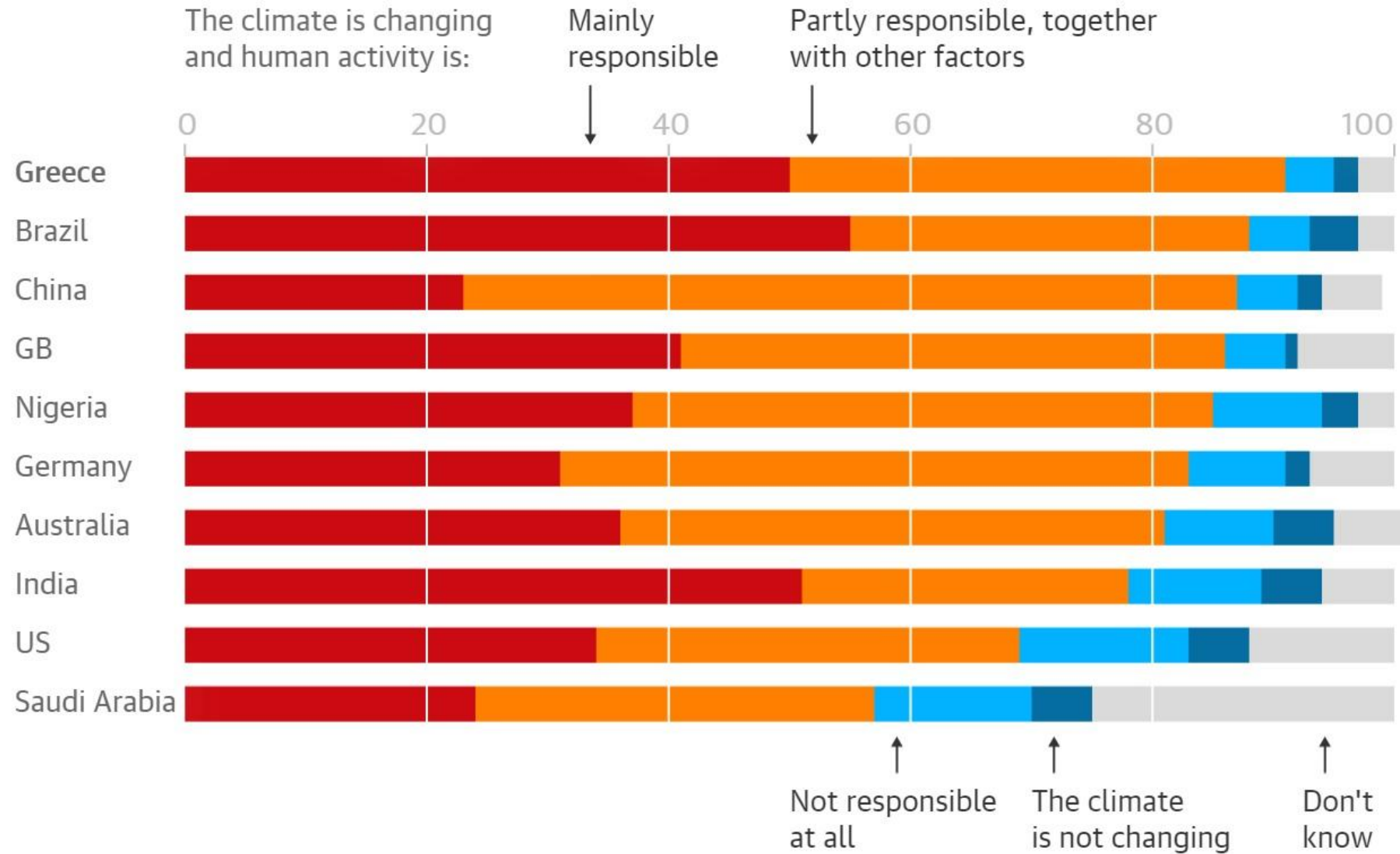


Tendency to look favourably on in group and less favourably on out group

Tajfel, H. (1970) Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American*, 223, 96-102

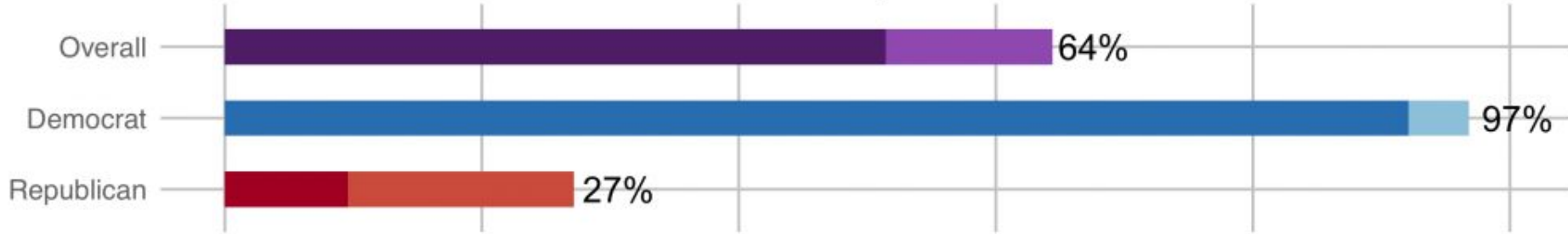
Robbers
cave

91% of people in Greece believe human activity is mainly or partly responsible for climate change

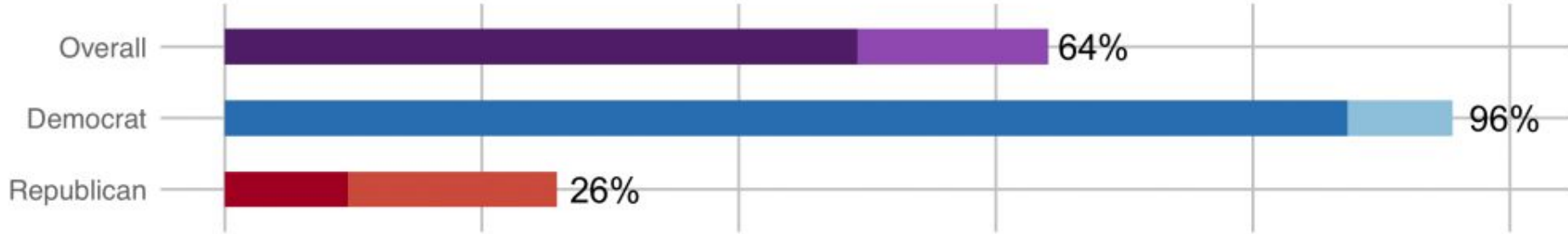


Biden rightful winner

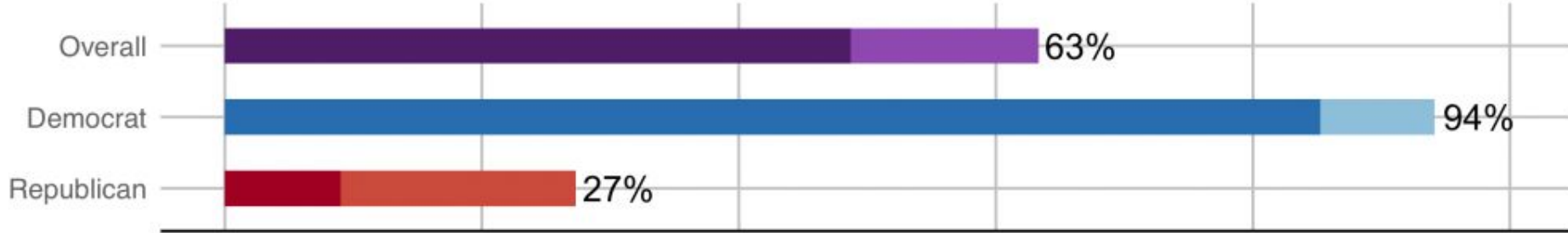
February 2021



June 2021



November 2021



Darker shades are "Very confident" and lighter shades are "Somewhat confident."
Source: @BrightLineWatch - November 2021

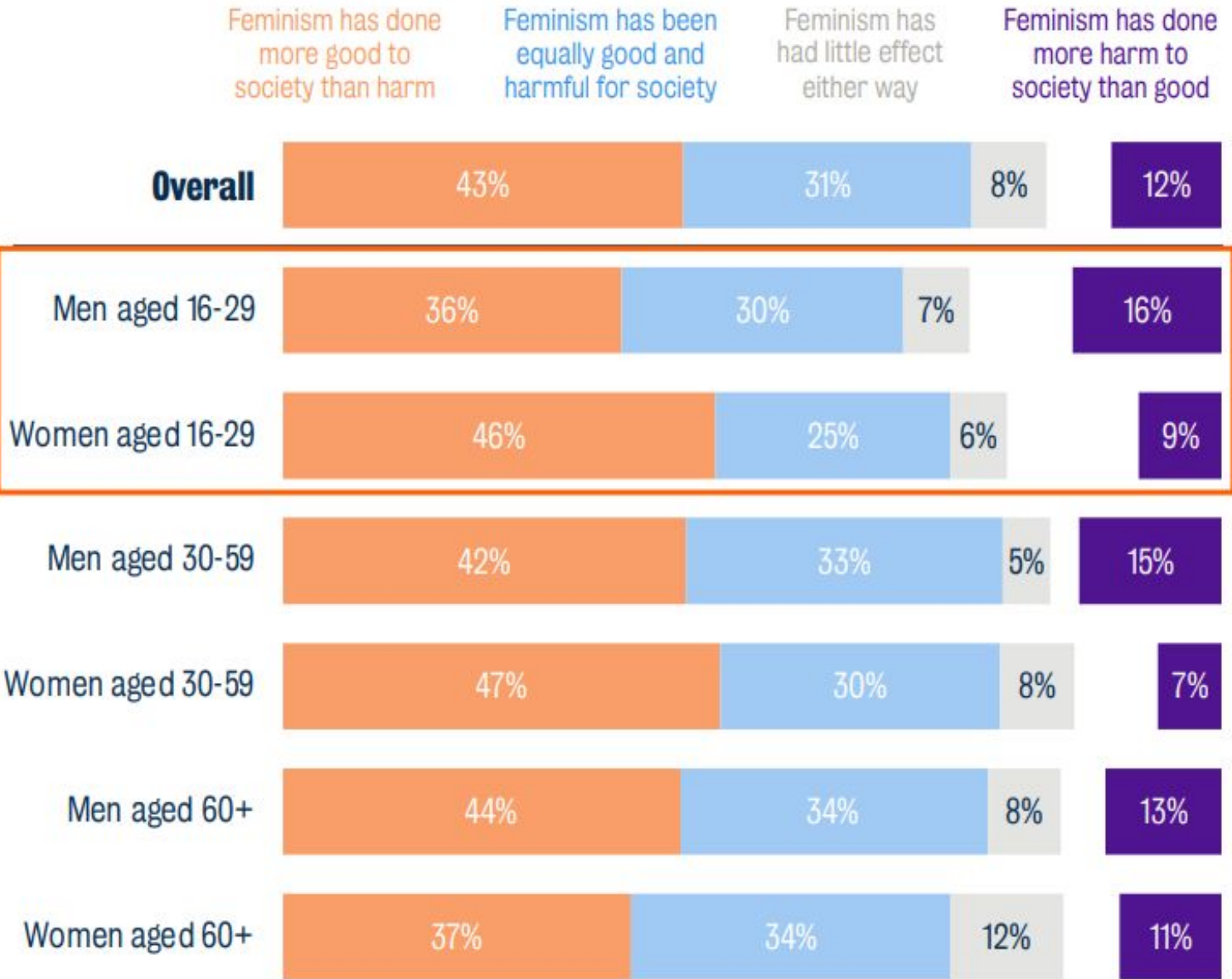
Young men are notably less positive than young women about the impact of feminism

46% of women aged 16 to 29 think feminism has done more good to society than harm – 10 percentage points higher than the share of men of the same age who feel this way. And among this age group, one in six (16%) men say feminism has done more harm than good, compared with one in 11 (9%) women.

Ipsos KING'S GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP THE POLICY INSTITUTE KING'S College LONDON

Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality

Which of the following comes closest to your view about the overall impact of feminism on British society?

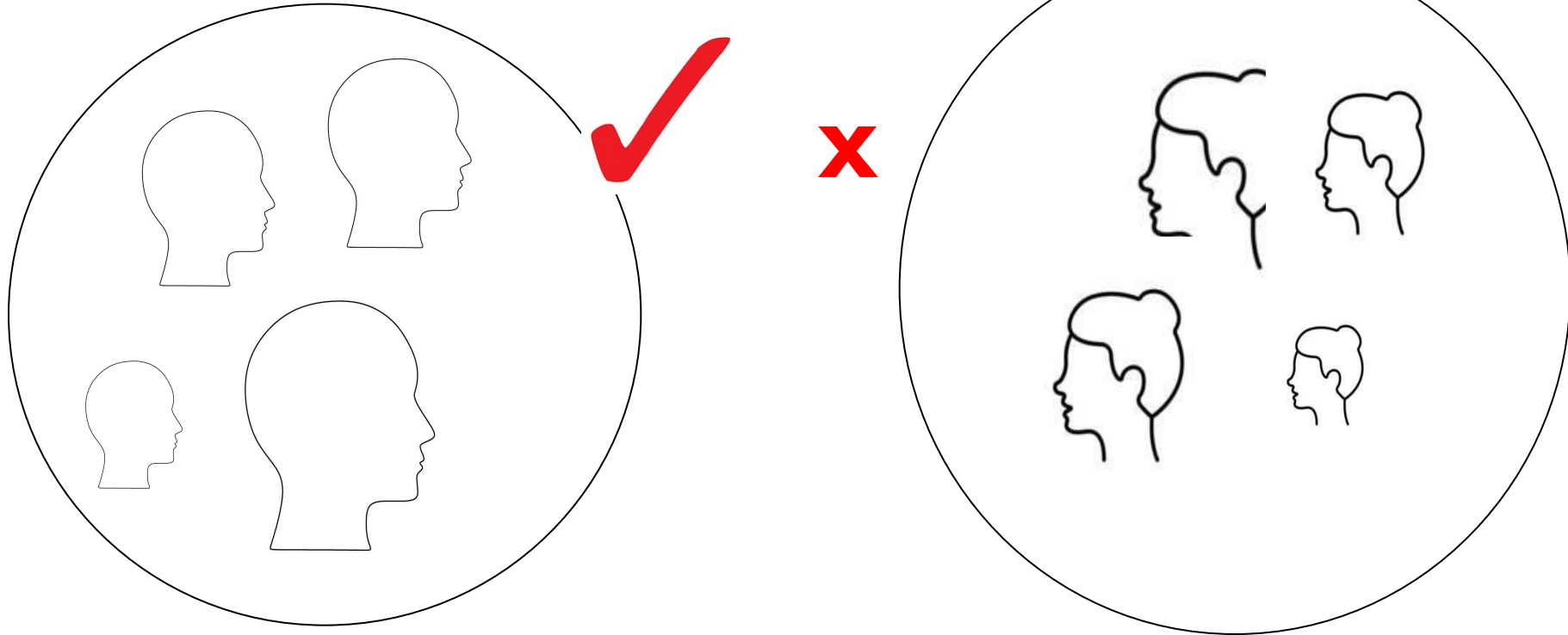


System 1

types of
motivated
reasoning

In group/outgroup bias

Sport
Age
Gender
Ethnicity
Religion
etc

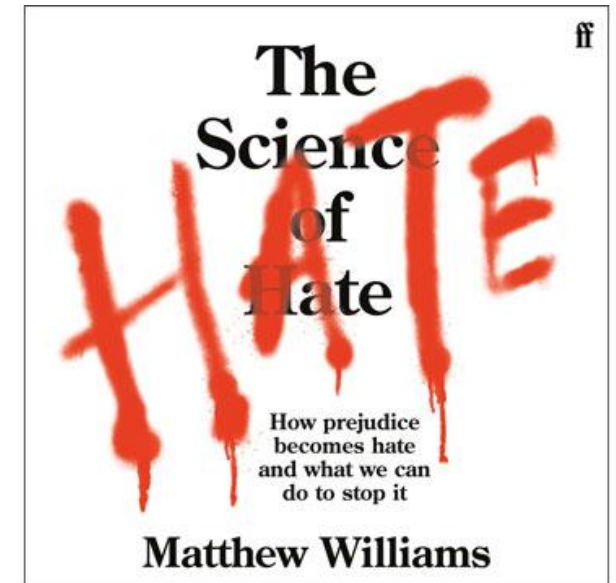
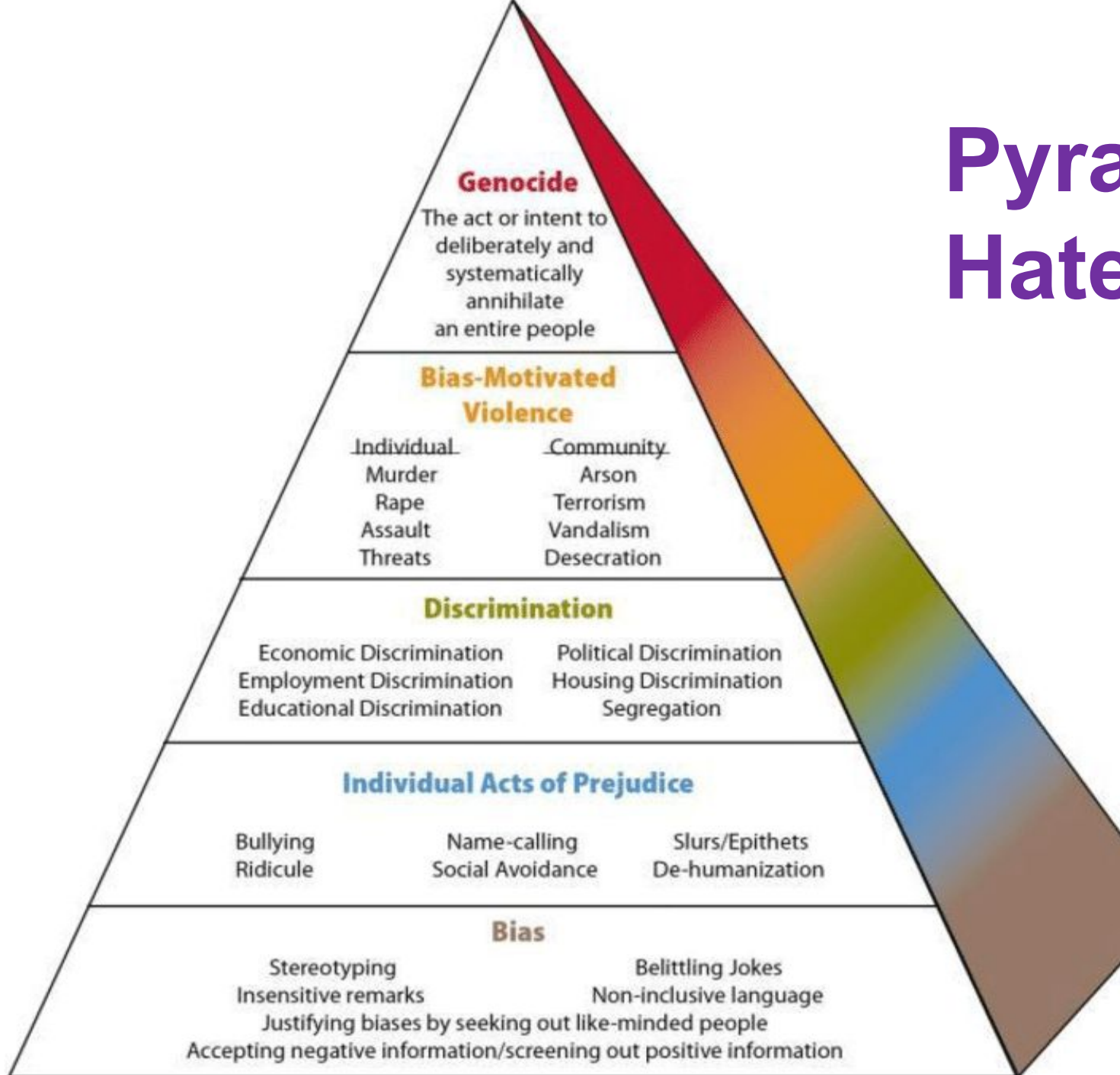


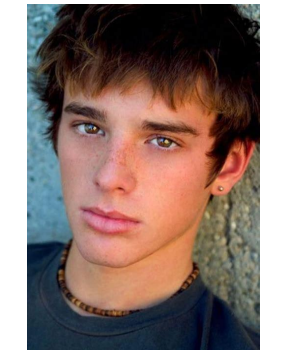
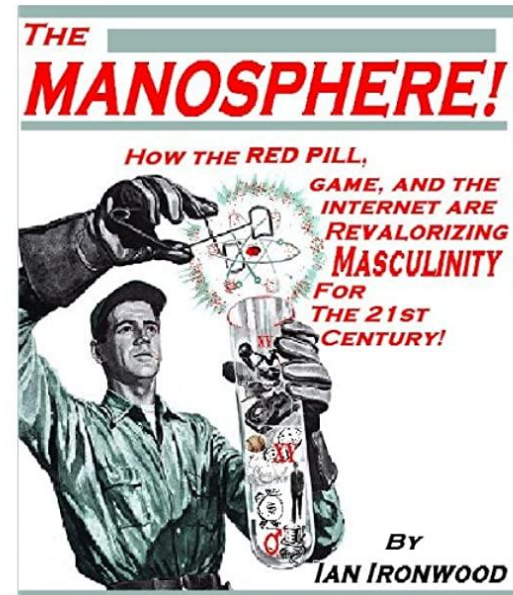
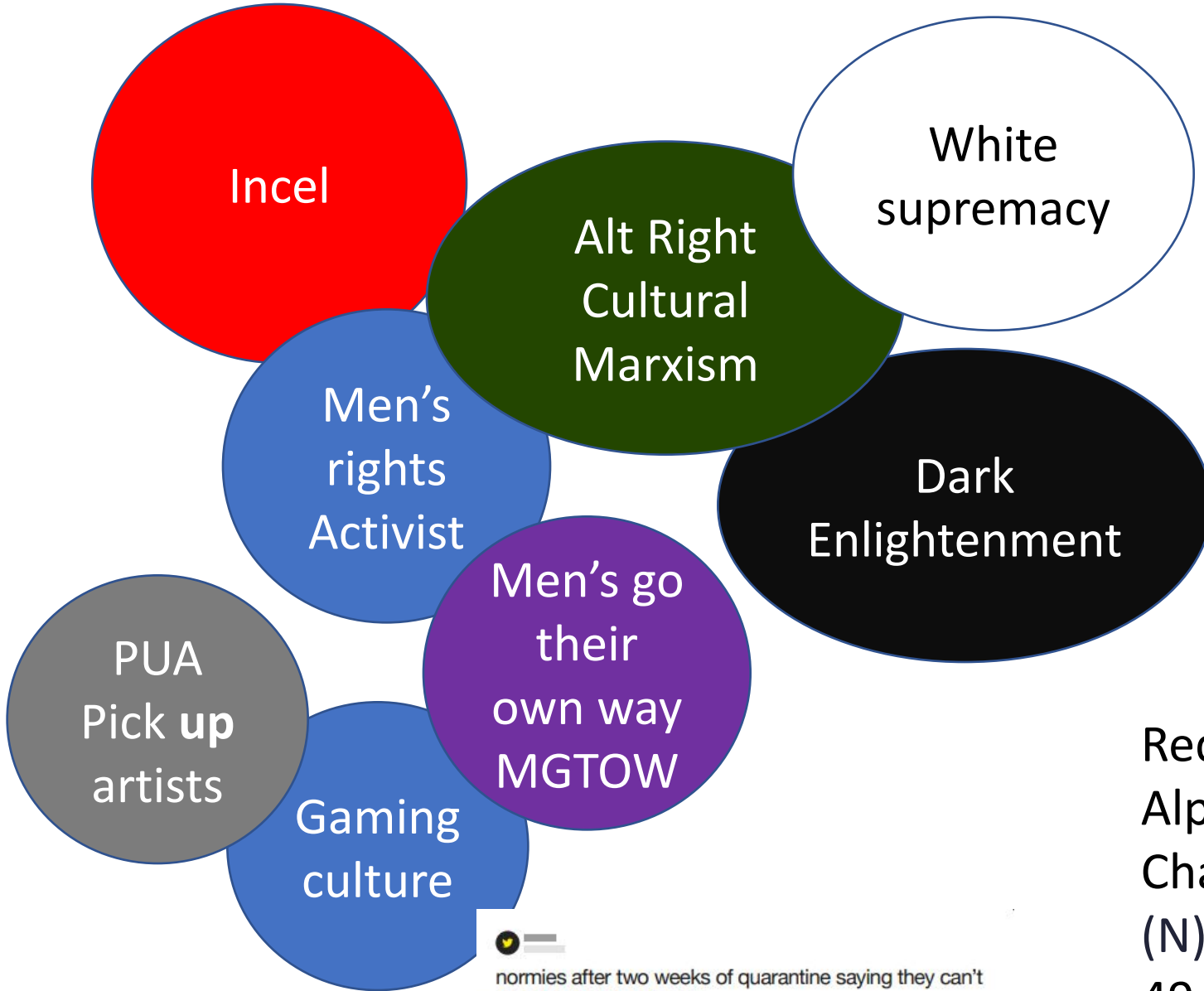
Tendency to look favourably on in group and less favourably on out group

Tajfel, H. (1970) Experiments in intergroup discrimination. *Scientific American*, 223, 96-102

Robbers
cave

Pyramid of Hate



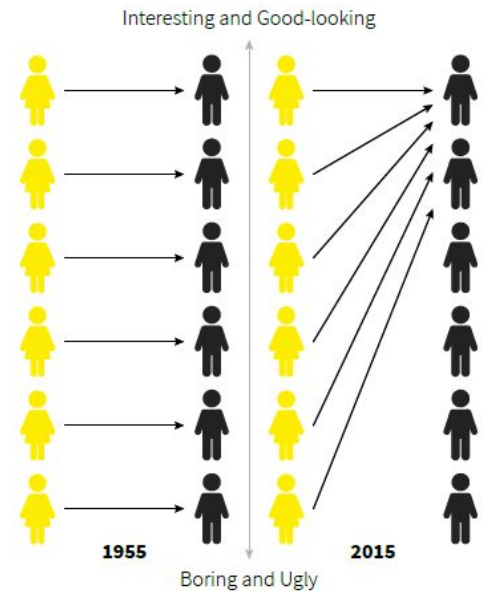


Red, Blue, Black Pill
 Alpha/Beta
 Chad/Stacy/Becky
 (N)Awalt
 49er
 Nice Guy
 Elliot Roger

normies after two weeks of quarantine saying they can't stand it, want to die etc

incels have to live for decades without any contact or intimacy with an opposite sex because all women hate ugly men, we just get ignored or laughed at when we try

4 Retweets 16 Likes

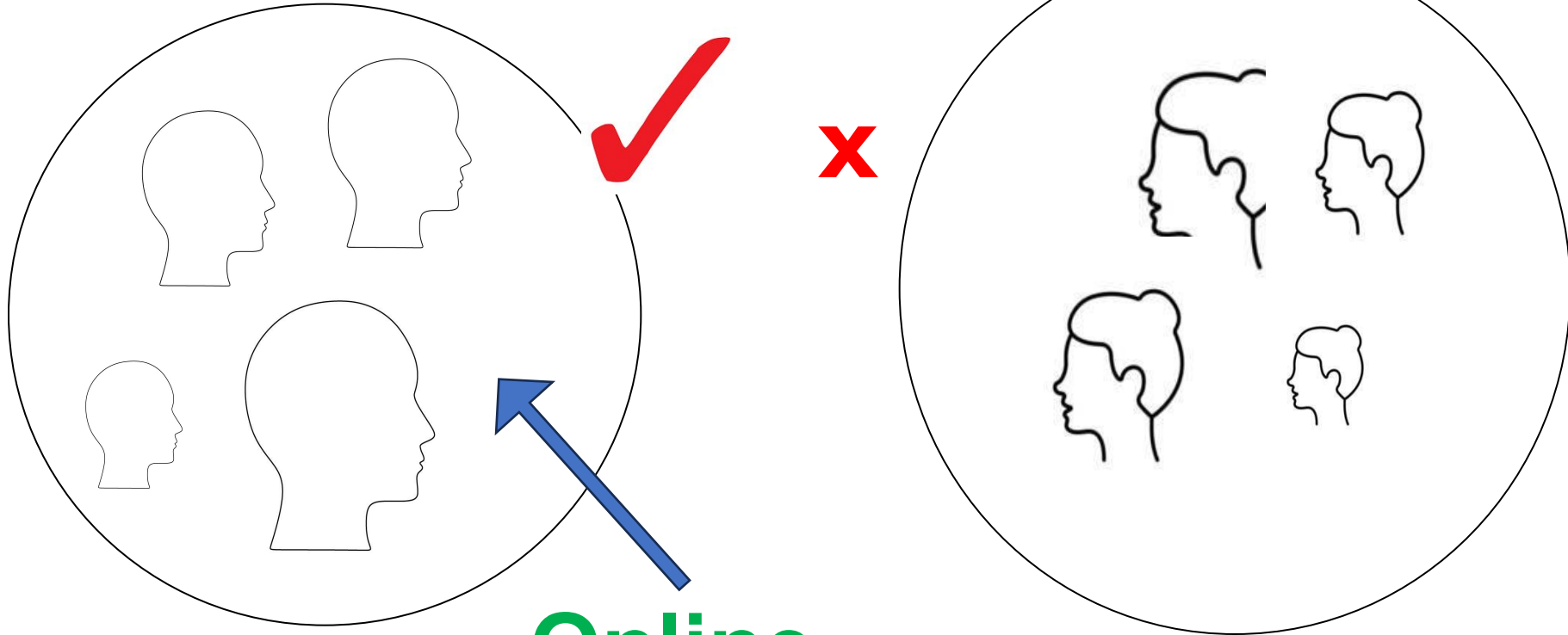


System 1

types of
motivated
reasoning

In group/outgroup bias

Sport
Age
Gender
Ethnicity
Religion
etc



Online
Narrative



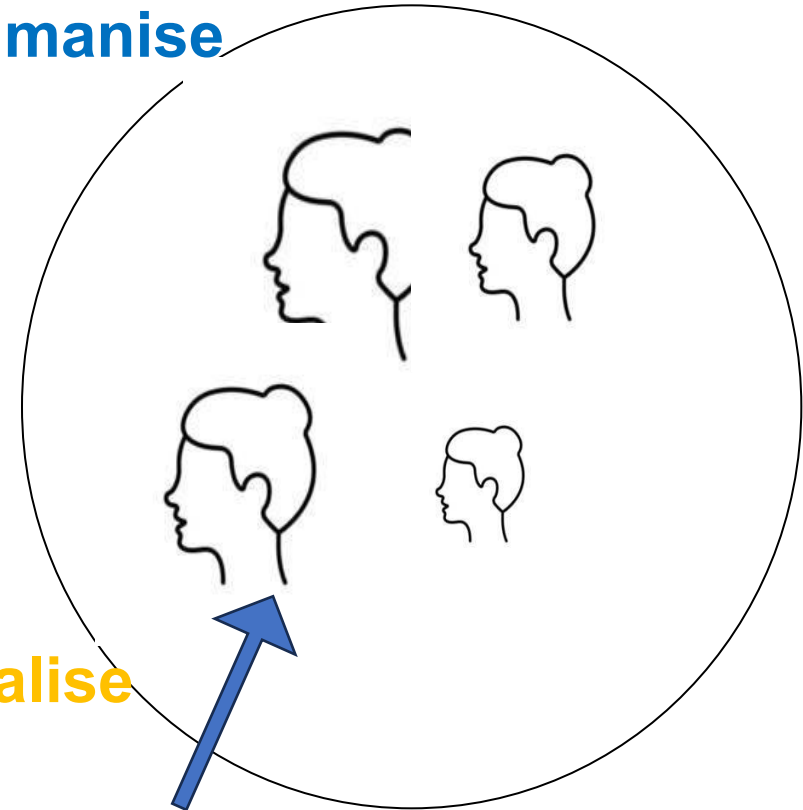
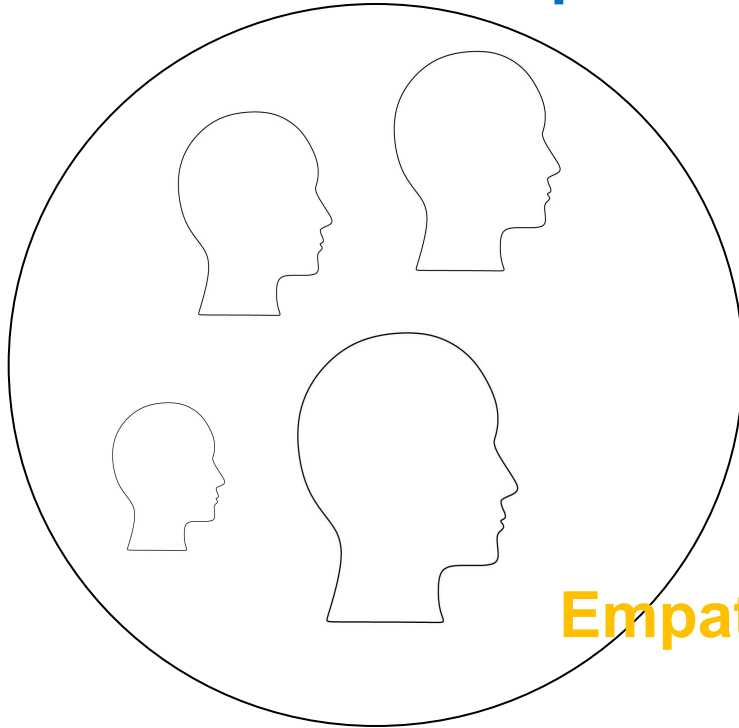
Robber
cave

System 1

types of
motivated
reasoning

In group/outgroup bias

Depersonalise/dehumanise



Empathy/Personalise

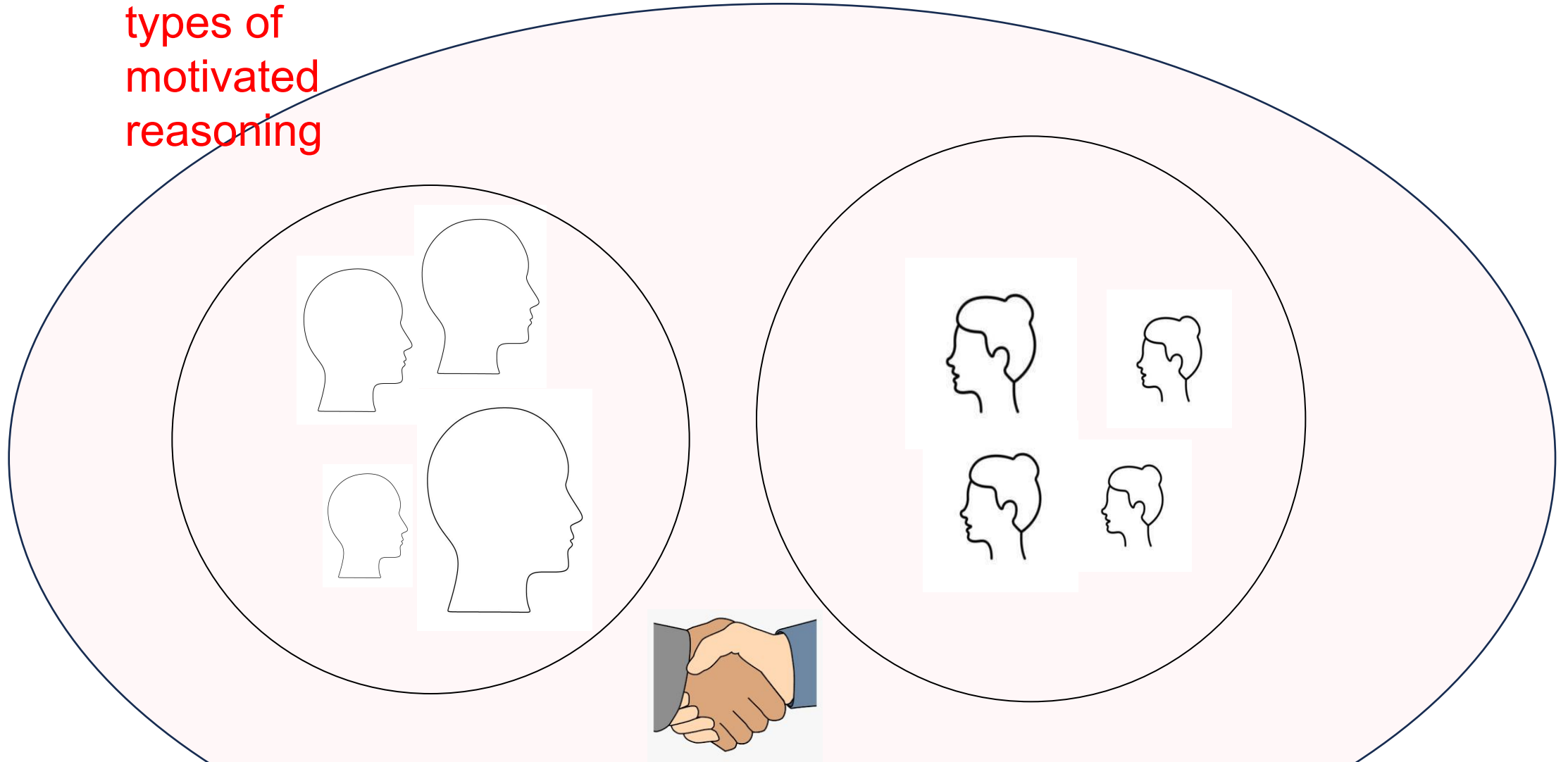


Narrative

System 1

types of
motivated
reasoning

In group/outgroup bias



▪ Williams, M (2021) *The Science of Hate* London: Faber & Faber



Conspiracy, disinformation and dangerous ideas. Young people & schools



Vulnerable to mis/disinformation



Study of 263 American university students

- Two thirds did not discover that first 'news' story was satirical
- 95% were not able to identify the lobbying group that produced the second
- Students' methods of evaluating were not reliable and relied on such things as the 'look' of a web page. (Wineburg et al. 2020)
- Students in Finland (with Critical thinking embedded) did much better (Horn & Veermans 2019).

Conspiracy theories and schools



- Pedagogy around conspiracy theory is new
- Understanding around teaching/discussion of conspiracy is limited
- Little known about young people and conspiracy theories.
Jolley et al. (2021).
 - *Starts around age of 14*
 - *Might be a part of an 'alternative' identity*
 - *Conspiracies can be playful*

Conspiracy theories – Teacher experiences in the classroom

Adapted from Table 3. *How frequently have you encountered extremist views in the classroom?* (Taylor et al. 2021:32)

	Fairly regularly	A few times	Once or twice	Never
Conspiracy theories	20.8	36.5	19.8	11.5
Racism	8.3	35.4	40.6	5.2
Homophobia	10.4	31.3	36.5	11.5
Islamophobia	5.2	24.0	32.3	27.1
Extremist views on women	4.2	24.0	34.4	26.0
Far right extremism	1	18.8	27.1	41.7
Anti-Semitism	2.1	6.3	36	53.1

Jerome et al (2024)
5,284 (Secondary Teachers)

62% had heard CTs in last 2 years.

41% variation of a global secretive elite

25% mentioning climate scepticism

66% opened up conversation
33% closed down



Responding to conspiracy theory



Two kinds of education responses

What counts as evidence?

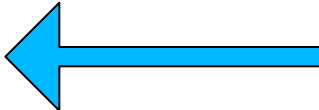
Proactive/planned



That's not true, we know who the terrorists were?

Reactive/unplanned

9/11 was an inside job



Proactive approaches – what works with adults?

(O'Mahony et al. 2023) – Systematic review (25 studies)

- Media literacy (*some effect on misinformation*)
- Critical thinking (*more effective*)
- Debunking (*not effective*)
- Prebunking/inoculation (*some effect*)
- Priming (*not effective*)
- Ridicule (*very small effect*)



Proactive approach

Peters, R. & Johannesen, H. (2020). What is actually true? Approaches to teaching conspiracy theories and alternative narratives in history lessons.

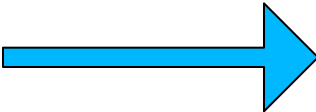
- **Two lower secondary schools in Denmark**
- **Took a metacognitive/critical thinking approach** (Structures of conspiracy, Sources, Popper/falsification, debunking)
- **One student** gave a highly sophisticated presentation on why theories that Hitler survived WW2 were wrong. However the student then stated that he believed Hitler survived.

“The teacher was increasingly worried about his students’ existential involvement in the theories, which prompted him to remark, “What if my students find the guy who dares to question the authorities really cool and start believing in conspiracy theories?” This ethical concern was justified... Even though this male student admitted the importance of critical source evaluation, he and a classmate later both stated that the 9/11 terror attack was a ‘false flag operation’ carried out by the US administration, and that it is necessary to be critical of any official explanations”. p.19

Two kinds of education responses

What counts as evidence?

Proactive/planned



That's not true, we know who the terrorists were?

Reactive/unplanned

9/11 was an inside job



A Parallel Universe: Conspiracy Theories and the Limits of Education Johannes Drerup <http://justiceinschools.org>

- Case study case is set in Germany at a comprehensive school for children aged 11-18.
- `Querdenker'-movement, whose political views relied heavily on different types of conspiracy theories. Rallies attended by far right.
- Peter repeatedly raises conspiracy theories. Teacher tries to engage in discussion. Some students start to support Peter. Others are stressed or roll their eyes.

Which Lens? (Adapted from Zemblyas 2021)



1. Epistemic lens (teacher default)

Conspiracy as mistaken belief or a 'crippled epistemology'. Class discussion may be effective by correcting errors or understanding of 'evidence'

2. Psychological lens

Conspiracy caused by and supporting cognitive biases. (Motivated reasoning, identity, paranoia). Plays role(s) in identity. Discussion not likely to be effective, may even re-enforce the belief.

3. Political lens

Conspiracy theory as politically motivated/propaganda. Designed/Causing spread mistrust and hate. Discussion is of little use and serves to legitimise and/or spread. Treat some forms as hate speech (Cassam 2019)

Responding to conspiracy

Counter if appropriate

Try not to get drawn into first order discussions on facts. Conspiracy theories are not falsifiable (as the lack of evidence, or evidence against, counts as evidence)

Use logic-based approaches (general arguments)

A) Loose lips

B) Nature of how real conspiracies are uncovered

Get student to see themselves as a critical thinker, not a conspiracy thinker

Quieten if repeated or unlikely to be productive. Have a chat later – determine level of involvement

Quietening

A) Inappropriate/Unacceptable

B) harmful/pointless

This not to say that teacher should stop all unacceptable comments.
Sometimes it is beneficial to run with them.

1) Knowing where the line is

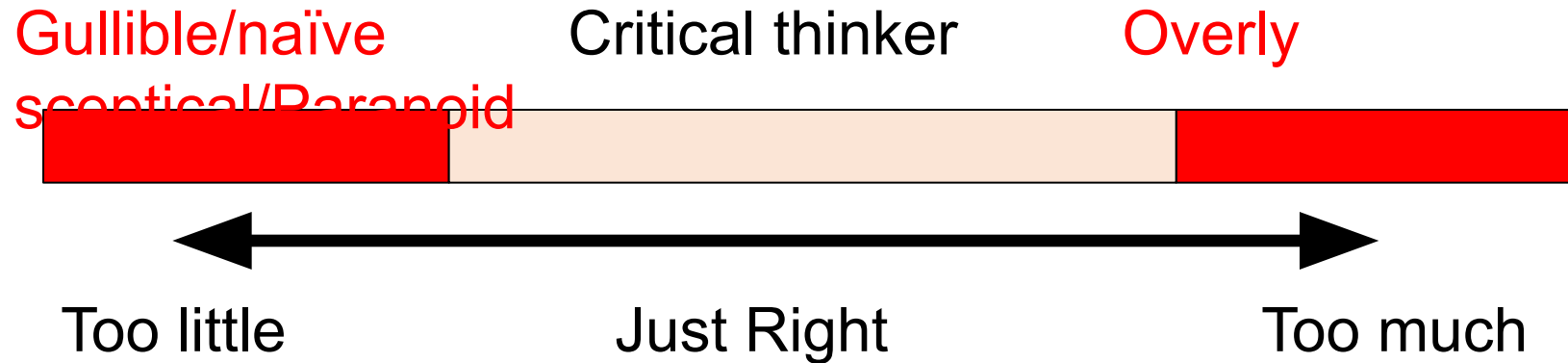
2) Drawing the line

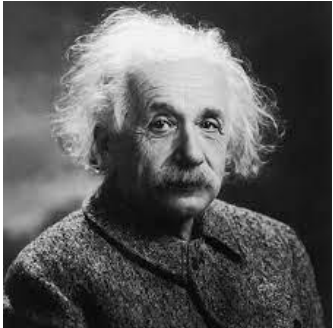
3) Enforcing the line



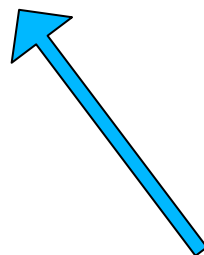
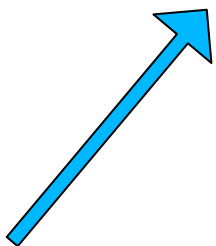
Aristotle's doctrine of the mean

SCEPTICISM



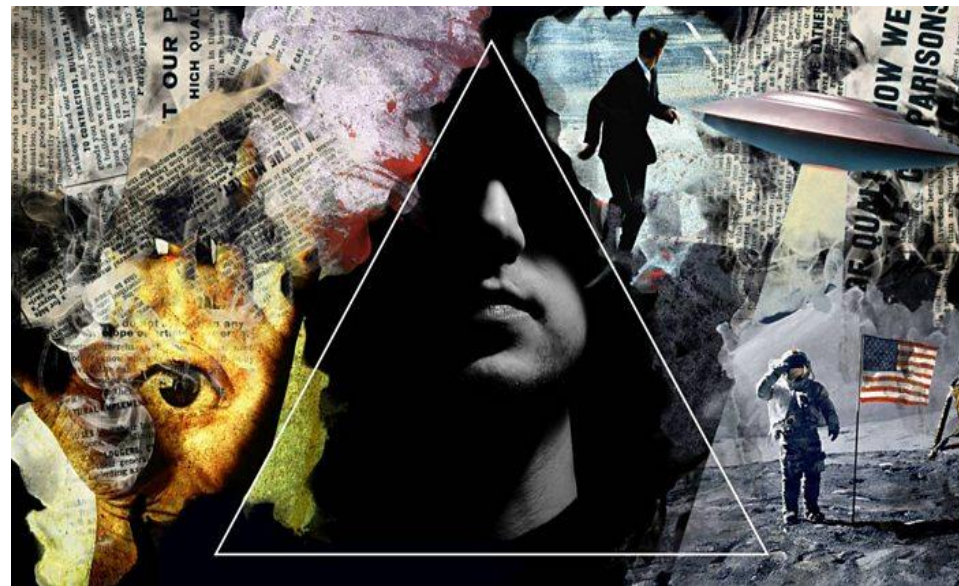


Critical thinker



Mainstream

Alternative/Conspiracy thinker

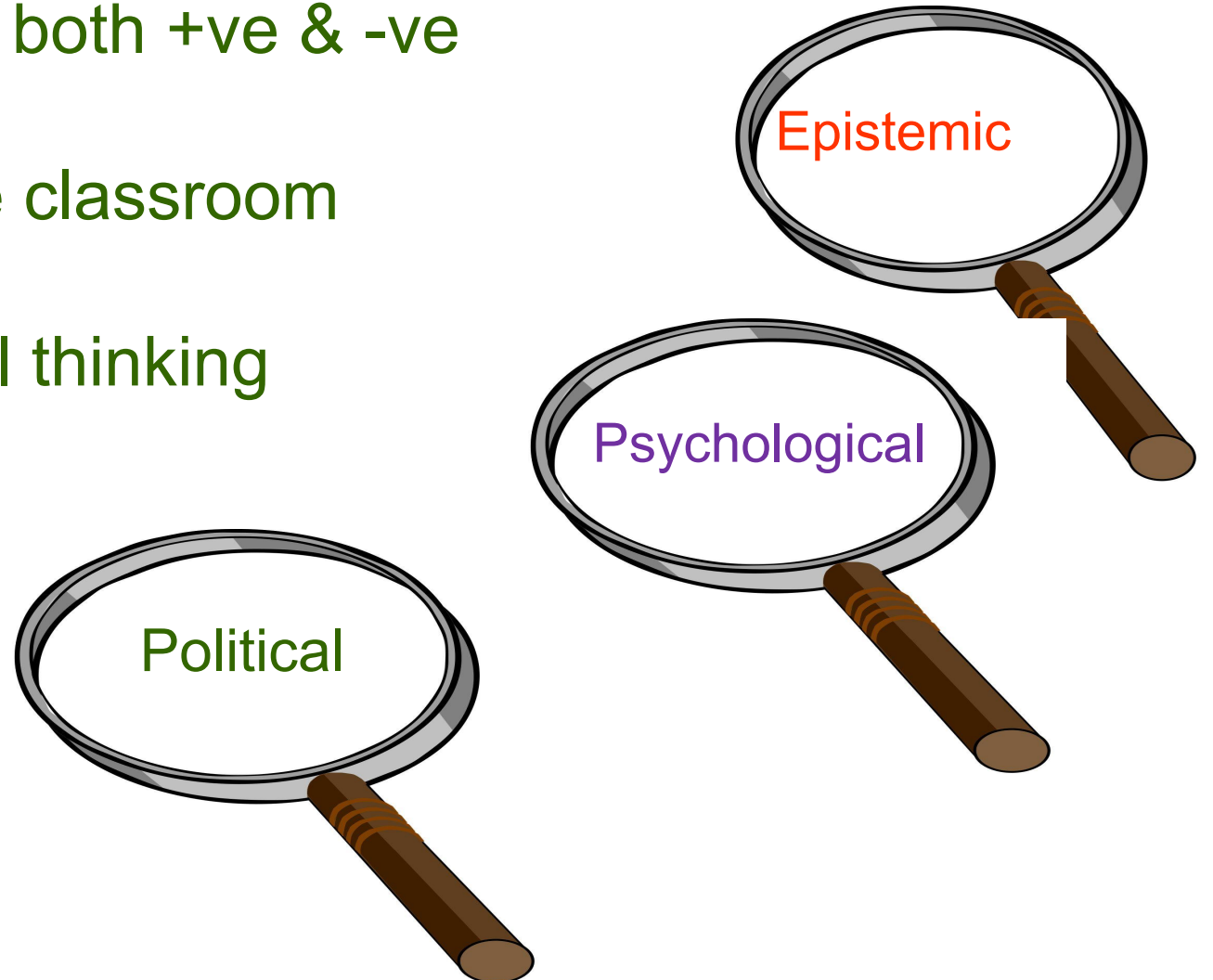


How to quieten?

May involve a loss of “face” both +ve & -ve

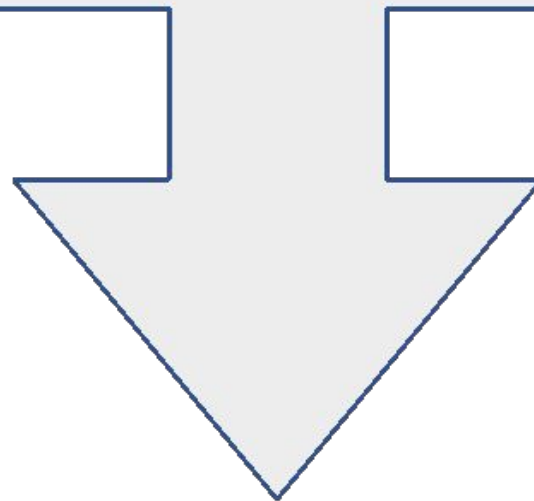
Taking discussion out of the classroom

Develop identity as a critical thinking



1 Finding out: Characterising the belief. Prompt questions

- How did you come across the idea?
- What do the posts/message online say? (It may be better not to directly ask them to articulate what they believe straight away, as this act of sharing the belief can help to consolidate the belief)
- What interests you about these ideas?
- Do you post much?
- Are there particular profiles or forums that you follow?
- Have you been messaging people directly?
- Have people been messaging you? What do they say?
- What do you think is going to happen next/in the future?



Level of belief	Characterisation	Strategies/approaches
Low	<p>The occasional mention of a conspiracy theory by student. Different theories might be mentioned. Does not seem to be serious. Could be part of a broader identity as an alternative thinker, or as a disruptive student.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Student raises a conspiracy theory to be funny/disruptive in class/for attention.</p>	<p>A) be supportive of <u>critical thinking</u>, of challenging ideas and beliefs, but encourage students to also apply this criticality to the conspiracy itself. What is the actual basis of this? What hard evidence is there? Might these ideas be spread for bad reasons?</p> <p>B) Although conspiracies may appear interesting at first, make students aware that many <u>conspiracy theories are racist</u>, either openly or less openly. Even though the student may not be racist, other believers may hold the conspiracy belief in a racist way.</p> <p>Note, this an argument by association, which are not always good (<i>"Hitler was a vegetarian, so vegetarians can't be trusted etc.."</i>). However, it is important for the student to be aware of the role that conspiracies and disinformation play in developing or supporting racist ways of thinking, and the student needs to be aware that some people may seem them as racist for holding the belief.</p>

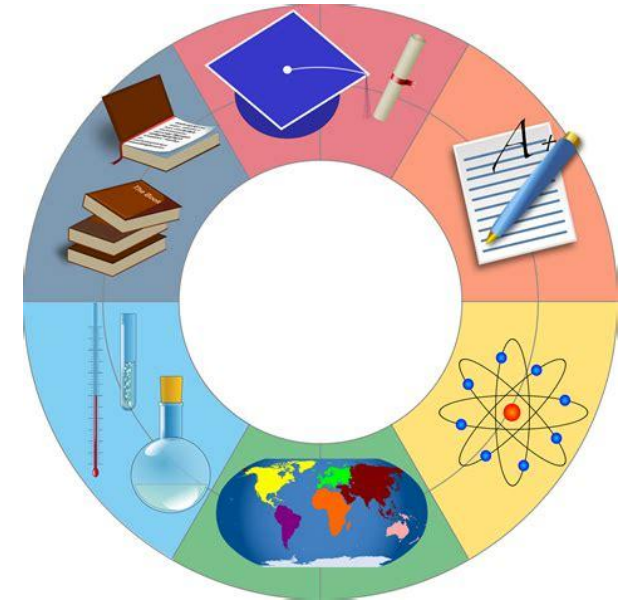
Level of belief	Characterisation	Strategies/approaches
<p>Low to Medium</p>	<p>Student has mentioned conspiracy once or twice.</p> <p>Has been doing research, but does not seem active e.g. posting or sharing ideas online.</p>	<p>In addition to A & B</p> <p>C. Student should be made aware that conspiracy thinking <u>can lead deeper</u> into more dangerous conspiracy theories.</p> <p>D. Acknowledge that conspiracies do occur. E.g. Volkswagen. Salisbury poisoning. But that the way these are discovered is through <u>traditional methods of investigation</u>, not by looking endlessly on forums.</p> <p>E. Warn the student not to <u>back themselves too far into a corner</u>. The more they repeat a conspiracy, the harder it is to back down and as a critical thinker it is important to keep an open mind.</p> <p>F. <u>Speak</u> with the form tutor or head of year. A conversation with parent(s)/guardian may also be appropriate.</p>

Level of belief	Characterisation	Strategies/approaches
<p>Low to Medium</p>	<p>A student persistently raises a conspiracy. It is not a 'dangerous' conspiracy.</p>	<p>In addition to F. and some of the above</p> <p>G. Warn the student that they can no longer raise this in class as they are spreading disinformation.</p> <p>H. From anecdotal evidence the most persistently raised is the Illuminati conspiracy in which case you can develop on B above. The Illuminati conspiracy theory has been linked to anti-Semitic and racist ideas. Warn the student(s) that there will be consequences if they raise this again in class.</p>

Level of belief	Characterisation	Strategies/approaches
High	<p>A student shows a detailed level of involvement, is active on forums. For example is posting, talks about followers. May have tried to recruit others.</p> <p>And/or</p> <p>the student shows interest in a conspiracy theory that is openly racist e.g. Protocols of the elders of Zion; Great Replacement</p>	<p>I) There may be child protection/Prevent concerns. Try to see how serious the beliefs, how active their involvement is and whether there are individuals who are encouraging/leading them.</p> <p>In addition to some of the above...</p> <p>J) If you have any concerns, particularly if the student is making contact with others online, or is starting to view the world in terms of 'us' and 'them', then make some notes of the conversation and speak to the school Prevent lead.</p>

Possible Solutions

- Epistemic turn (Epistemic virtue)
- Media literacy
- Meta cognition and biases
- Counter narratives



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