

Signalling theory and its application to human behaviour

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1. Principles and limits (27/11)

2. Ancestors, founders, and pitfalls (4/12)

In this lecture I talk about 'who is who' in signalling theory and the range of social phenomena to which the theory has been applied in biology, economics and anthropology since it emerged in the middle of the 1970s. I begin however by tracing the core idea of the theory back to Thorstein Veblen, and to the ambition to make sense of 'wasteful' human practices. Veblen gave rise to a 'genealogy', which includes Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu and recently Eric Posner, who use the core idea of the theory for grand explanatory purposes but in problematic ways.

3. Signals of toughness: violent conflicts among prisons inmates (11/12)

In this and next lecture I describe two ways in which I have applied signalling theory. Here I present a theory of interpersonal violence derived from signalling theory, which can predict under what conditions violent fights are likely to be observed. The theory makes some counter-intuitive predictions, for instance that under extreme conditions women fight as much or more than men. Some empirical tests on frequency of prisons violence among inmates will be presented.

4. Signals of trustworthiness: cooperation between taxi drivers and passengers in dangerous cities (18/12)

In this lecture I show how signalling theory can help us to clarify the thorny notion of trust and put it on firm analytical grounds open to empirical testing. I will then give a brief overview of the ethnographic study I carried out with Heather Hamill on taxi drivers' decisions on whether to pick up a passenger or not in Belfast and New York City. The ethnographic study was driven by clear predictions with regard to the type of signals drivers will use to make these decisions, and the findings, some of which we did not expect, speak to the general question of how we decide whether people are trustworthy.