A Note on Simple Models

Herein I propose a moratorium on the use of the word "simple" immediately preceding the word "model" in any communication, written or verbal, between and among political scientists.

I am going to assume that we have all seen this particular locution enough that I do not have to trot out a string of examples to demonstrate that it is endemic. Simple models are everywhere. By account of political scientists who describe what they do as modeling—formal or statistical or otherwise—models that are not simple are hard to find. "Simple" has become an automatic modifier of "model" in a way much like how broadcast news reporters attached "Panamanian strongman" to Manuel Antonio Noriega in the early 1990s, or "Yugoslav rump republics" to Serbia and Montenegro later in that decade. The use of "simple" before "model" is, I suspect, practically unconscious by now among many political scientists.

Let us dispense with a couple of caveats at the outset. First, all models are simple, in the sense that they are stripped-down representations of a more complex world. Whatever parameters the modeler leaves in the model are those she or he holds to be the most essential for explaining the phenomenon at hand. Any undergraduate in an introductory course in any science (political or other) should recognize this. If, by putting the word "simple" before "model," then, one is attempting to remind the audience that models are simplifications, the phrase is overly redundant (joke!), and should be avoided.

Second, some models *are* simpler than others. Some models that can be written down in mathematical notation can be translated to English in a straightforward and concise fashion. Other such models require substantially more words, and sometimes a good deal of hand-waving and hopping around, to describe without mathematical notation. That's OK, and the effort might well be worthwhile, but it is a sign the model is less (or more) than simple.

The thing is that use of the phrase "simple model" has been completely divorced from whether models are, in fact, simple by this yardstick. I was struck by this most recently when reviewing a paper that uses the phrase twice in the space of three sentences to describe a model that is actually a hierarchical extension of a Bayesian generalized linear model to estimate three separate parameters—the subtle differences among two of which, according to the authors, have eluded some of our best methodologists for a decade—describing the effects of electoral reforms on party competition in sub-national governments. Neither the baseline model nor the extension in question is anywhere near simple. They are good models of an important phenomenon and well worth modeling in my estimation, but not simple.

So, if "simple" is redundant as a generic qualifier of models, and is not, in practice, being used to distinguish models that can be translated in straightforward fashion into English from those that cannot, what is going on? Cutting straight to the chase, I suspect "simple model" often translates something like this:

> This model may present some conceptual challenges for you, dear reader. However, I wish to assure you that the phenomena I am capable of modeling far exceed in complexity the matter currently at hand. Given that I value elegance and would never opt for a more complex representation of the world when a less demanding one will do, I will refrain from demonstrating here the full extent of my technical virtuosity. This model will suffice. That said, I want to be sure that two things are clear. First, my talents are such that I am capable of much more. Second, should you find this daunting, well, draw your own conclusions as to how your own intellectual horsepower compares with mine.

If I am correct, then users of the phrase might be congratulated for communicating so much so economically, but a patronizing attitude—even communicated with some subtlety—is still obnoxious. So cut it out.

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A Further Look at Child Support Guidelines

Jo Michelle Beld's article on child support guidelines defends the efforts of the Minnesota Child Support Enforcement Division to maintain the state's formula for determining child support award amounts (2003). She responds to long-standing criticism, in this instance conveyed by Stephen Baskerville, that the child support enforcement community, which has a financial interest in child support amounts, exercises unchecked authority through the forced use of guidelines, and that as a result, child support awards are arbitrarily high (2002).

The evidence in support of the criticism is actually much more concrete than presented by Baskerville. That the enforcement system's guidelines were designed to increase child support award amounts is documented in their own work. Legal precedent on the use of their guidelines has established that support amounts are now arbitrarily manipulated by the states. I also believe that the political effect of child support reform has been more alarming than what he reports.

Beld admits that child support collection entrepreneur Robert Williams has had a significant influence on the development of guidelines (715–716). His original 1987 study explicitly states that his recommendations were intended to increase the average child support order by 250%. His justification for the increase was an alleged "adequacy gap" in the amounts that had been awarded under traditional law. But the argument is circular. Study of the original source of the claim (Haskins et al. 1985) reveals that the so-called adequacy gap is just the estimated difference between what had been awarded under traditional law and what would be ordered if child support awards were strictly determined by formulae of the type Robert Williams was suggesting. Far from proving that child support awards were less than they should have been, the source study made the radical political suggestion to raise award levels to improve the standard of living of single mothers; an idea that had always been considered illegal because spousal support and alimony can be awarded separately when appropriate and should never be awarded covertly.

Beld admits a fundamental problem in estimating the cost of raising

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children. About 90% of household expenditure is "expended on behalf of the whole family, rather than on behalf of individual family members" (716). This creates a wide range of choice in allocating family expenditure to children. Analysts can as easily manufacture a child cost estimate at 10% of custodial parent spending as 30% of the combined income of both parents. What is not mentioned in Beld's defense is that Robert Williams chose to use *intact* family spending estimates, which is itself a radical departure from the established child support law that relied on the actual economic circumstances of each family in post-divorce separated households. I also disagree with Beld's conclusion that the estimating method chosen, even in the context of intact families, did not "yield high estimates of parental spending on children" (716).

What must be classed as error rather than a difference of opinion is that the enforcement system's choices did not conform to established child support decision theory. Beld explains: "The empirical question at the heart of state child support guidelines is, 'What do parents spend on their children?'" (716). But their technical approach lacks a theoretical foundation that would put the empirical question in context. The choice of focus on indeterminate child cost calculations to the exclusion of sound theoretical development is itself strong evidence of a will to maintain arbitrary control. The new child support laws present a circular dilemma and a *fait accompli* for those who wish to present a logical challenge to presumed award levels. What is legally regarded as child support, the specific obligation of the paying parent, and the factors used to determine amounts are whatever the guidelines say. Parents are at the mercy of arbitrary economic choices made by bureaucrats and collection entrepreneurs who have a direct personal financial interest in generating higher levels of debt.

The effect of judicial acceptance of the enforcement system's choices has been dramatic. *P.O.P.S. v Gardner* (1993) was a federal class action suit against the State of Washington alleging that the arbitrary nature of their guidelines, which are also based on Robert Williams' recommendations, violate the Constitution. The group bringing the suit was composed of noncustodial parents whose families had never received public assistance and were unlikely to in the future. In support of the State, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals accepted the classification of child support decisions as "social policy." This classification invites political control that is unconstitutional when applied to private issues. Had it not been for this transition, the application of constitutional principles would have forced correction of the guidelines (*Georgia DHR v. Sweat* 2002).

The legal reclassification of a private family issue sets a dangerous precedent that opens the door to further government tactics to manipulate families. In regard to child support decisions, the system of checks and balances, the constitutional protections against arbitrary government intrusion, have been destroyed. Baskerville has suggested that political scientists should focus attention on "the large governmental machinery that has arisen . . . to address family issues" (2002, 695). I certainly agree, and would put special emphasis on the dramatic shift in power between branches of government along with the need to restore basic family and other individual rights. Child support reform has led to a fundamental shift in the relationship between government and the primary social unit.

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"Small Spaces" Correction

When compiling data for the article "Small Spaces for Different Faces: Political Science Scholarship on Asian Pacific Americans" (July 2004 *PS*), I inadvertently omitted the numbers for one issue of *Social Science Quarterly*. The omission does not change any of the rankings, but it does alter some figures slightly. The correct numbers for the affected totals are as follows:

[Figure 1] Articles on APAs, 1990–2003, Interdisciplinary journals: 1.31% [rather than 1.15%]

[Table 1] *Social Science Quarterly* APA articles: 2.89% [rather than 2.77%]

[Table 1] *Social Science Quarterly* articles on race: 25.43% [rather than 23.82%]

[Figure 2] Articles on race, by discipline—Interdisciplinary journals: 13.85% [rather than 13.40%]

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