

Questions for week 7, Politics of Attention and two articles on friction

Consider the following questions for discussion and for potential paper topics.

1. We argue that the same limits that affect an individual also affect institutions. Explain why this might not be true. After all, institutions can have a division of labor. They can simultaneously pay attention to many more things than a person can. A city government can both pick up the trash and build schools, even while also holding elections and operating a housing department and putting out fires. All this they do while the police department is arresting people, the museums are operating, the airport functions, the snow gets removed, and the mayor supports the baseball team. So perhaps the cognitive limitations we describe don't apply to large organizations with a division of labor.
2. Figure 4.14 summarizes the book and the entire approach. Discuss. Is it good evidence?
3. In chapter 4 we conclude by saying "there are a million stories" that can be told by looking at individual budget series, or individual cross-sections. Statistically, we can look "across a row" looking at a single spending category over time, or we can look "down a column" looking cross-sectionally at a single year. So, we can do a cross-sectional study of variance, a case study of dynamics over time, or combine both types of variance into a single stochastic model of the entire range of data. Review the argument in that chapter carefully and discuss. Why is our stochastic approach so rare? How does it differ from a more common time-series cross-sectional (or event history) approach?
4. We say that social inputs, since there are jillions of them, must be Normally distributed in terms of their changes over time. Challenge that. Try a simulation model where you make a spreadsheet or database, generate many many variables with different patterns. Then combine those into an index (with whatever index weighting you want to use, as long as no single variable constitutes a large proportion of the final index). Finally, show a histogram of the resulting index. Bingo if it looks relatively Gaussian. No bingo if it looks fat-tailed or skewed. But in the real world, what would such a combined index of input series look like?
5. Around pp. 164 and following we present a "friction" or "threshold" model, mathematically, and at this web site (<http://www.unc.edu/~fbaum/books/attention/Attention.htm>) present Jim Stimson's computer model of it. Try it out and discuss it.
6. In Chapter 7 we present a "progressive friction" hypothesis and follow up on that in the AJPS article led by Baumgartner (and with a thousand collaborators). What of this evidence?
7. In the 2009 AJPS article led by Jones (also with collaborators), we present a "general empirical model" suggesting that, for budgets, fat tailed distributions are everywhere. One of our reviewers suggested that this was unscientific. (Actually his exact words were that the entire approach was "corrosive of Science".) Is it of interest to know that we see this everywhere?