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37. Cognitive Models of Causation in Political Ideology

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George Lakoff in *Moral Politics* (1996) showed that political worldviews in the U.S. have coalesced into distinct cognitive models governing the understanding of society. Each model comprises a set of moral ideas about the proper social relations of citizens to each other and the state. The result is competing ideologies leading to distinct political choices. Now, 20 years later, little seems to have changed in the operation of these models of social morality in American political life. They form the underpinnings of the basic divide between social conservatives and social liberals that has dominated the American political landscape for a generation.

Lakoff's achievement was to show that these views derive from basic and divergent understandings of the family and its function in daily life. Each model represents a metaphorical understanding of the workings of the family. Once this is understood, the interrelation of the ideas in each model can be seen to form a coherent whole. The guiding theme of each ideology is clear from their names: the Strict Father model, and the Nurturing Parent model.

The Strict Father model operates on the foundational principles of authority, individual responsibility, and self-reliance. In the nuclear family idealized in this model, a primary role of the father as head of the family is to wield authority to teach children to know right from wrong, i.e. how to behave in conformance with the laws and traditions of the family, religion, and the larger society. Punishment for wrong actions is seen as essential to the child's learning of right from wrong and for developing responsibility for its

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actions. Applying this logic to the metaphorical counterpart of the family, the state, leads to the expectation that a primary role of the state is the exercise of authority in the form of law enforcement and punishment for criminal behavior. Because of the guiding principles of self-reliance and responsibility, the state is seen as having no legitimate role in setting policy for or supporting social welfare. The Nurturing Family model, on the other hand, is based on the principles of community and mutual support. In the properly functioning family at its heart, each family member is an important and valued individual whose views are taken into account in family decisions. The highest value is placed on the development of empathy, cooperation, and mutual support, which are seen as the moral foundations of correct social actions. If a child does something wrong, punishment may be in order, but the primary focus is on guiding the child to understand the effects of his or her actions on others and thus, through empathy, awakening the desire to act better in future. The analogous view of society based on this view of family emphasizes building a democratic state whose citizens work together and take care of each other. As a consequence, it is seen as a legitimate function of the state to supply a social safety net for health and welfare. Law enforcement and criminal justice are also important functions, but punishment is not the only correctional mechanism; rehabilitation is a primary goal wherever possible. Each model assumes that general moral and economic progress of the society will follow from the basic organizational principles inherent to it.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the models is the type of causation used to explain events and actions. Causation is not directly observable through perception, even in the simplest cases; it must be construed. When a situation is highly complex, such as the workings of a society, then

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differences in understanding of cause and effect can be profound, as seen from the stark disagreements in our society about causes of social problems.

The Strict Father model, Lakoff argues, tends to construe situations and events in terms of simple and direct causes, without additional intervening factors. People are seen to cause events by choosing to act on other people and objects in the world, yielding observable consequences. Because in the model every adult is assumed to be fully responsible for their actions, there is little or no role for any other factors that might contribute to the outcome. The only causal factors are the specific moral choices leading to the actions taken by the individual. For example, if a person commits a robbery, the cause was the person's choice to commit it. The person's social or family environment, or their access, or lack thereof, to education and employment opportunities are not part of an understanding of the crime, nor relevant to its punishment. Elements external to the situation are simply invisible in this model. The emphasis on individual responsibility means that the choices and action of the individual are primary in the understanding of cause and effect. Thus the principles of the model lead to the selection of the construal.

A direct causation construal with a volitional actor as causer is termed agentive causation by Talmy (1988). Agentive causation is probably the most natural way of construing causation involving a human actor, and languages seem to treat it as basic by providing common linguistic structures for its expression (cf. Kemmer & Verhagen 1997). But it is not the only possibility. The Nurturing Parent model, according to Lakoff, typically portrays social situations in terms of more complex and indirect causal relations. Crimes, for example, are seen as involving an interaction of causal factors going beyond the immediate situation of the criminal act.

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Contextual factors such as deprivation are understood as influencing individuals' actions, thus forming part of a complex set of causal factors, some relating to systematic patterns of social inequality. Causes arising in a complex system of interaction are called systemic causation, a more complex construal than direct causation. Although direct, specifically agentic causation, as the more basic construal, might appear in either model, systemic causation is apt given the focus on group relations inherent to the Nurturing Family model.

Consider next gun violence. In the Strict Father model, the shooting of a gun is an act of agentic causation, which traces a direct causal chain from agent to action. The slogan 'guns don't kill people; people kill people' derives from reasoning within the model. Agentivity is a critical factor in the workings of the Strict Father model, coming from the emphasis on responsibility for actions. Once agentic causation is selected as the schematic cognitive framework for understanding shootings, then the agent is the only possible locus of cause for the shooting. The logic of the model dictates that there is only one solution: punishment of the shooter, which will then deter others.

Those using the Nurturing Parent model, observing the large number of such shootings in the U.S., see instead systemic causation. They recognize that 'people kill people', so agency is part of the understanding; but they also recognize the role of the gun – not as the sole or primary cause of the killing action, but in making it far easier and so more likely. The slogan might be recast, in the logic of this model, as 'guns don't kill people, but they make it a whole lot easier.' This reasoning leads to more multi-faceted solutions incorporating the causal contributions of ease of access and vast proliferation of guns. Shooters should be punished, but other

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measures might be taken that address prevention. For example, it could be suggested that guns should be kept out of the hands of criminals and those with histories of violence; or, the number of guns in the society should be reduced through less permissive gun laws. The focus in the model on benefits to the society such as safety and security leads to looking past the immediate context of a shooting to more widely operating causal forces and thus other solutions.

Is the Strict Father model always associated with direct causation, and the Nurturing Parent model with indirect and systemic causation? In fact, no. One example in which it is not is the case of the Stanford swimmer Brock Turner, caught raping an unconscious woman he had just met at a campus party. Turner was given a 6-month sentence, instead of the expected 6 years. The judge cited the ‘severe impact’ a stricter sentence would have on him, without paying heed to the impact of his actions on the victim. Turner, while not admitting responsibility, offered to perform community service in lieu of a jail sentence, delivering speeches designed to ‘change people’s attitudes towards the culture surrounded by binge drinking and sexual promiscuity.’ Turner’s father argued similarly, stating that his son planned to educate college students so that ‘society can begin to break the cycle of binge drinking and its unfortunate results.’ These statements draw the behavior of rape victims into the causal chain of date rape, implying that the victim’s rape was caused by her drinking and sexual promiscuity, echoing the aggressive questioning of the victim about what she had drunk and worn on the night of the assault. The rape, then, was simply an ‘unfortunate result’ of a binge drinking culture, rather than a violent sex crime. In the view presented, the personal agency of the rapist is effectively erased from the causal chain, and instead, additional, more indirectly operating factors are cited,

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which subtly shift focus to the behavior of the victim. The usual Strict Father narrative of personal responsibility of the perpetrator is suspended and the systemic nature of the cause is suddenly highlighted.

Indirect and systemic causation are probably the most appropriate construals for the complexity of human social interactions. But human beings tend to see the social world in terms of simple agentive causation – unless they have special reasons to highlight the indirectness and systemic nature of causation. The social-conservative view, with its emphasis on personal agency and responsibility, is especially likely to prefer explanation in terms of agentive causation, but it can also view the effects of actions in terms of more indirect causation types. This can happen in cases in which the group it identifies with most, i.e. the most normative, privileged group is the one whose agency is in question for a reprehensible act. Conversely, the social-liberal model-holders tend to reach more immediately for the more complex, indirect forms of causation as explanatory forces, except where issues of social asymmetries between groups are concerned. In this case the factor of social justice and equal treatment under the law comes into play, and moral agency for reprehensible actions is highlighted, as in the Turner case. Thus agentive causation becomes the preferred explanation.

Lakoff's metaphorical cognitive models of society are illuminating for understanding the cognitive basis of the American political divide on social morality. I have suggested that the two models interact with causation types in a more complex way than Lakoff described. Specific elements within each model may affect the choice of causation type and thus the cognitive explanations offered.

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