

Barney's Method

In the [November/December 2002 issue](#) of *Contingencies*, a letter from Dr. Robert L. Brown of the University of Waterloo claims that there is no relationship between a circle and the expected number of deaths in a large group of lives: "... the Central Limit Theorem says that you can approximate the multiple binomials with the Normal Distribution. And, of course, the evaluation of the Normal requires the constant, π ... I continue to agree... that there is no relationship between a circle and the number of people alive at the end of a given time."

I believe he's right, but there is a relationship between a circle and the sample variance of the number of deaths in a large group.

This is clear if one thinks in terms of a modified version of the Polar Method for generating normally distributed random variables. Under the pure unmodified method, a unit circle is circumscribed by a square, points within the square are selected by using two uniformly distributed random variables, and any such point falling inside the circle "counts." Put another way, if a large number of parachutists are randomly dropped throughout the square, and those who land inside the circle die, then there's the relationship between the circle and the sample variance of the number of deaths.

Of course, this pure Polar Method would have to be modified because otherwise, the probability of death would always be pi divided by four. The size of the square would have to be increased.

Dr. Brown is correct because the circle in this modified Polar Method could be replaced by any other shape of equal area, not excluding that of Barney the Purple Dinosaur, and still the same expected number of deaths would result.

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What Are the Odds?

Your remarks about the two letters in the November/December issue responding to John Armor's article are ter-



ribly naive. First, the fact that Mr. Armor doesn't use the word "Muslim" is irrelevant—if the article had referred to "people seeking world domination," few would have any trouble finding an anti-Semitic meaning without any mention of Jews. Second, anyone who follows the news knows that the campaign contributions in question come from Muslims who claim not to be terrorists. Therefore, Mr. Armor is effectively saying that Muslims who claim not to be terrorists are, in fact, terrorists. Although this is not the same as saying all Muslims are terrorists, it is, nonetheless, a serious accusation.

I'm not accusing Mr. Armor of being anti-Muslim. However, given the sensi-

tivity of some Jews to the faintest whiff of anti-Semitism, the reaction of the two letter writers cannot be so easily dismissed. We live in a complex world. Pretending otherwise, whether from naiveté or malice, paves the way from complexity to discord. It would be far better to respect all points of view on complex issues and attempt to bring about understanding, if not reconciliation.

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A Measure of the Center

Contingencies often has very interesting articles. Sometimes the most interesting have no obvious relevance to actuarial work. The article by John Armor (["Til Death Do Us Part,"](#) September/October 2002) is one of these.

I read this article on Nov. 17 at the beginning of a long flight that would eventually take me from Austin to Kuala Lumpur. Toward the end of the flight I read the [following issue](#) with the bizarre letters to the editor slamming the above article for linking Moslems to terrorists.

I am not sure why *Contingencies* would publish such letters. Mistery Rahim and Ahmad clearly saw something in the article that was not there. You can find nutballs right here in the United States, too. In any city. Some have credentials. Some are even actuaries.

I spent 10 days in several parts of Malaysia, including Borneo, all during the month of Ramadan, when folks are most likely to be going to mosque. I spoke with many people. I visited a mosque or two. I read the English-language newspapers.



At no time did this U.S. citizen experience any animosity or hear anyone bad-mouth the United States. It was the opposite.

There was talk among the hotel staffs, travel agents, and taxi drivers about various developed nations recently warning their citizens against travel to Malaysia due to terrorism. Tourism is a big part of the economy there, so any threat to it generates a lot of concern—the way people talk about the economy in the United States. The politicians were quoted in the newspapers pronouncing everything under control due to their excellent leadership. Same self-promoting crap as in the USA.

The truth is, after seeing teenagers sporting T-shirts and ballcaps à la “rap artist” Snoop Smelly Dog without ever possibly experiencing a black ghetto in the United States, I had to bad-mouth the ever present visible signs of the USA for them. Carbonated soft drinks, fast food joints, bad movies, and lame pop music are NOT all there is to the United States! American marketing is the single greatest force on the planet.

If my sample is representative of the Malaysian population, to use actuarial lingo, Mr. Ahmad is an outlier. Is that why his hyperbole was of interest to you? How about a measure of center to further describe the distribution? Some discussion of the spread?

Malaysians consider themselves a diverse and tolerant society. Common people are proud of these things, just like in the United States. A simple majority call themselves Moslem, but there are significant Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian minorities just to name the largest groups. These religious minorities include a disproportionate share of the most educated and wealthy people. Learning English is officially encouraged, and the government is raising the related requirements of its schoolchildren.

If you're looking for a topic relating Moslems and governments, consider secularism. Is Turkey the only majority Moslem country with a secular government? When greedy old men from Amer-

ica argue with greedy old men from countries with Moslem majorities, do the foreigners play the religion card to whip up support for their greed, the same way American politicians do? Or, maybe a lighter topic contrasting the “fast first, party second” nature of Ramadan/Hari Raya with the “party first, fast second, party again” approach to Carnival/Lent/Easter? A fully funded plan versus a borrow-pay-borrow plan, if you will.

ANTHONY EDWARDS
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Genius Recognized

I've just finished reading Fred Kilbourne's “magnum opus” in the November/December 2002 issue. It reaffirms the genius for which many of us have had so much respect. That genius lies in Fred's thoughtful analysis and presentation of a complex issue.

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