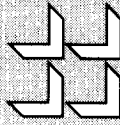


Replications and Refinements



Under this heading are brief reports of studies providing data that substantiate, disprove, or refine what we think we know. These Notes consist of a summary of the study's procedure and as many details about the results as space allows. Additional details concerning the results can be obtained by communicating directly with the author.

The Acceptance of Legalized Abortion

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TRENDS IN THE POPULAR REACTION to abortion have been studied in the United States since abortion was legalized. One important source of data is the General Social Surveys (GSS), which have been conducted annually since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). Each GSS consists of face-to-face interviews with approximately 1,500 adults who have been selected to represent the civilian population of the continental United States. Most years the set of included attitudinal items regarding abortion has been the same (Davis & Smith, 1990).

Researchers analyzing these data have either scanned them in search of distinct changes over time, without conducting the requisite statistical tests, or con-

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sidered select data from only a few years. Such practices have resulted in conflicting findings. Some investigators have concluded that the acceptance of abortion has decreased over time (Gillespie, Ten Vergert, & Kingma, 1988; Szafran & Clagett, 1988), whereas others have concluded that the acceptance of abortion has increased (Fuchsebaugh & Haney, 1980). Still other researchers have concluded that there has been no apparent change across specific years of the GSS (Barnartt & Harris, 1982; Granberg & Granberg, 1980). Possible gender differences in such trends have not been considered.

We analyzed degree of acceptance of abortion, using data from each GSS conducted between 1972 and 1991 that contained the abortion attitude items ($N = 21,195$). These items describe six different conditions under which an abortion might be sought (e.g., "if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children"). The respondent was asked whether he or she thought "it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion" under each condition ($yes = 1, no = 0$). Several investigators have demonstrated that the six abortion attitude items constitute a unidimensional scale and could function as a discrete measure of abortion acceptance (Arney & Trescher, 1976; Fuchsebaugh & Haney, 1980; Gillespie, Ten Vergert, & Kingma, 1988; Granberg, 1978; Granberg & Granberg, 1980).

We used curvilinear regression analysis (Pedhazur, 1982, pp. 396–435) to determine the nature of a possible trend in the data and included first- through fourth-degree polynomials in the regression equations, which were conducted separately for the men and the women. Although two terms passed minimum tolerances for inclusion in the equation, the regression equation for the men was not significant, $F(2, 9433) = 2.57, p < .08$, indicating that the mean level of acceptance of legalized abortion among the male respondents had not changed over time. For the women, the regression equation containing the first-degree polynomial (linear component) was significant, $F(1, 11757) = 27.78, p < .0001$, but subsequently, the higher order polynomials were not significant predictors. The women's mean levels of acceptance of abortion decreased slightly ($r = -.05$) over the years, but time accounted for only about two tenths of 1% of the variance in the women's attitudes toward abortion ($R^2 = .002$). For the women, the mean composite score was 3.80 in 1972 and 3.90 in 1991, with the highest mean score in 1974 (4.27) and the lowest in 1984 (3.68).

Although the mean levels of abortion acceptance were remarkably stable from 1972 to 1991, there was usually some random fluctuation between any two given years. Thus, researchers who have compared data from the GSS that were collected during a period of only 2 or 3 years may or may not have found "statistically significant" changes over time, depending whether the samples that were being examined capitalized on chance variation. The results of the present study supersede those of previous research, which have often led to conflicting conclusions.

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