seemingly minor differences in question wording can have a dramatic effect on the results (see Sullivan and Minns, 1976; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1978), so a little more caution here would be in order.

If we assume that there is comparability between the "content-controlled" questions and the Stouffer items (or if we merely assume that differences of wording do not bias the Stouffer questions to deflate tolerance), the very data presented by Sullivan and his colleagues suggest that tolerance may have increased between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s. For example, in his 1954 survey Stouffer found that only 27 percent of his cross-sectional sample would allow a communist to speak in their communities, and only 37 percent would allow an atheist to speak. In 1976, 70 percent of the Twin Cities survey, and in 1978, 50 percent of the NORC sample would allow a member of their "least-liked" group to speak. In 1954, only 6 percent thought a communist should be allowed to teach at a college, and only 12 percent thought an atheist should be allowed to teach at a college or university. In 1976, 26 percent of the Twin Cities sample would allow a member of their "least-liked" group to teach in a public school, and in the 1978 NORC sample, 19 percent would. Of course, we do not know how many respondents in 1954 would have allowed a member of their "least-liked" group to speak or to teach. As communists could hardly have been everyone's least-liked group, tolerance might have been even lower (although it's hard to get below a figure of 6 percent tolerant). But it does appear that respondents were more likely to be tolerant of their least-liked group in the 1970s than they were toward communists or atheists back in the mid-1950s.

Certainly, tolerance may still be fairly low. Certainly, we would be well advised to accept some of the cautions that Sullivan et al. have raised. But I do not think we need to accept their pessimistic conclusion that tolerance may not have increased much at all during the last two decades. Indeed, the very data they present provide at least some evidence that tolerance has increased.

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TO THE EDITOR:

In a recent article in the Review, and also in a popular presentation in Psychology Today, John L. Sullivan, James E. Piereson, and George E. Marcus shed new light on the problem of political tolerance. A number of recent studies have claimed to find increases in tolerance since the low levels noted by Stouffer in the 1950s, but Sullivan and his colleagues raise serious problems for this entire research tradition.

Their study makes two major points, one methodological and one substantive:

1. The methodological thesis. The standard measurements of tolerance are flawed by a serious methodological problem; as a result the studies that show increases in tolerance are invalid.

2. The substantive thesis. Although the levels of tolerance for particular groups such as communists have increased, overall levels of tolerance have not increased significantly since the 1950s. "The mass public," according to the authors, "is still generally intolerant today" (1979, p. 789). "Intolerance has by no means disappeared; it has simply shifted targets" (Psychology Today, p. 87).

In what follows I will argue that Sullivan and his associates are on much firmer ground with the methodological thesis than they are with the substantive thesis.

The substantive thesis does not follow directly from the methodological thesis. The fact that an argument is invalid does not mean that its conclusion is false. Someone might present

References


an invalid argument to show that the sun is the center of the solar system. Although the argument would be invalid the conclusion is still true.

In the same way, Nunn and others may have used invalid arguments to show that Americans are becoming more tolerant (Nunn et al., 1978). The fact that those arguments are invalid does not show that levels of tolerance remain unchanged. It is perfectly possible that tolerance has increased, even though the methods used to prove this are fallacious.

In order to see why Sullivan and his associates believe that tolerance has not changed, it is necessary to review the details of their argument. Previous studies of political tolerance have used a measurement strategy that might be described as “content-bound.” In this approach the respondent is asked about specific actions performed by members of unpopular groups, the groups being chosen by the researcher. Stouffer, for example, asked questions such as whether communists should be allowed to teach in public schools.

Their insight is that such questions measure two different things—general levels of intolerance and attitudes towards specific groups. The discovery that these content-bound questions are ambiguous raises serious problems for those who use them to measure changing levels of tolerance. The fact that more people are willing to tolerate communists today than 20 years ago does not necessarily prove that people are more tolerant. It may only prove that people are now less concerned about communists.

Sullivan and his associates use an alternative measurement that employs “content-controlled” questions. They first ask the respondent to select his least-liked group. The respondent is then asked questions concerning tolerance of members of that least-liked group. The theory is that the respondent's willingness to tolerate members of his least-liked group is a truer reading of tolerance than questions concerning tolerance for members of groups selected by the investigator.

Sullivan and his associates thus provide a devastating critique of the studies that show increases in the level of tolerance, and they also provide a promising new way to measure tolerance. None of what has been said so far, however, establishes the substantive conclusion that levels of tolerance have not changed since the 1950s.

In order to say that levels of tolerance have remained constant over the last 20 years, one must have at least two points of reference for comparison. Sullivan and his colleagues derive their finding of lack of change by comparing the responses given to Stouffer's questions in the 1950s with the responses given to their own content-controlled questions in the 1970s.

What does this comparison prove? The finding that Americans are just as intolerant as they were 20 years ago is based on a comparison of content-bound questions asked during the 1950s with content-controlled questions asked in the 1970s. But content-bound questions and content-controlled questions do not, as the authors have shown so convincingly, measure the same thing. How then can they be used as the basis of comparison?

The problem is that there is a tension between the methodological thesis and the substantive thesis. When Sullivan and his colleagues are discussing methods of measuring tolerance, they are quick to discredit the technique used by Stouffer. The authors write that Stouffer's method of measuring tolerance "is inadequate because it does not fully capture the meaning of the concept of tolerance. It is time-bound because it presumes that these particular groups are the only important targets of intolerance in the society" (1979, p. 792). In order to make their methodological point, then, they reject Stouffer's findings.

When the authors come to establishing their substantive conclusion, however, they rely on the Stouffer study. The thesis that levels of intolerance have not changed since the 1950s follows only if one is willing to take the Stouffer study as a benchmark. But in taking Stouffer’s results as a benchmark, Sullivan and his colleagues commit themselves to the validity of content-bound measurements of tolerance, the very mistake that they condemn in others. The comparison only works if one assumes that Stouffer's tests were an accurate measurement of tolerance in the 1950s. Sullivan and his colleagues give no evidence for believing this, and their general critique of content-bound measurements gives us strong reasons to disbelieve it.

Logically speaking there is a world of difference between “earlier studies fail to establish increases in tolerance,” and “there are no increases in tolerance.” The article is very persuasive in making a case for the former, but much less convincing in its argument for the latter. In fact, Sullivan and his colleagues are usually rather cautious in how they state the substantive thesis. In most places they limit themselves to defensible statements such as: “Intolerance has not necessarily declined much over the past 25 years” (p. 792). At other times, however, they formulate the substantive thesis in ways that are technically correct but easily misinterpreted even by an educated
reader. Compare for example the technically correct formulation of the thesis given by the authors in the Psychology Today article with the headline for the article (written presumably by the magazine’s editor):

From the article: "When people are asked specifically about the groups they dislike most . . . they prove to be just as intolerant as they were during the 1950s toward Communists and atheists."

From the headline: "A new study asserts that people are just as intolerant today as they were in the early 1950s. Only the targets have changed" (Psychology Today, p. 87).

The first statement if supported by the evidence but the second is not. There is a very fine line between what Sullivan and his associates have proved and what they have not proved. Because they themselves are often not clear about it, it is easy to see how others could become confused as well.

JOHN IMMERWAHR

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References


Reply

TO THE EDITOR:

We are indebted to John Immerwahr for taking the time to read our article carefully and to think seriously about its conclusions. Though his comments are fair and judicious, we cannot agree with everything he says.

His objections to our article may be summarized as follows: Though our methodological critique of the earlier literature is sound, as is our measure of tolerance, our substantive thesis that levels of tolerance have not increased in the United States since the 1950s is not demonstrated by our analysis. Since the Stouffer measures are rejected as unreliable, we have no standard by which to compare current levels of tolerance with those that might have existed in the 1950s. As a result, we cannot prove conclusively that levels of tolerance have not increased during this period; the most we can show is that others have not affirmatively proven that levels of tolerance have increased. There is a world of difference, he suggests, between the claims that “earlier studies fail to establish increases in tolerance” and “there are no increases in tolerance.” Our article makes a strong case for the former, but is much less convincing in relation to the latter. Thus, the title of our paper, in which we describe these reputed changes as “illusory,” is inaccurate and misleading.

What exactly did we say in our article? After showing that existing measures of tolerance are inadequate, we proceeded to develop our own measure and to compare the results derived from this measure with those derived from the Stouffer measures. We showed beyond a reasonable doubt that the Stouffer measures, because of their focus on left-wing groups, exaggerate the real level of tolerance as measured by our “content-controlled” procedure. We therefore inferred, quite safely, we think, that studies based on recent replications of the Stouffer items overstate the amount of real change that has occurred in levels of tolerance since the 1950s. Since the current level of tolerance is not as high as these studies suggest, it is hard to see how things could have changed as much as their authors assert.

The most problematic question here is, how much have things really changed? We suggest in the article that levels of tolerance have not increased much since the 1950s, or may not have increased very much, or have not necessarily increased much. This is where Immerwahr leaves our company, because he says we have no evidence whatever to support this claim. The truth, therefore, seems to lie somewhere between the ranges of “tolerance has not increased since the 1950s” and “tolerance has not increased as much as current writers claim.” It is now impossible to determine precisely how much things have changed, since the Stouffer measures are the only ones that we have from the earlier era, and these have been rejected as invalid. Thus, any evidence bearing on the question must be to some degree inconclusive. But if the evidence for our case is not fully conclusive, neither is it for the alternative view that levels of tolerance have increased greatly since the 1950s. It is thus unfair to impose the entire burden of proof on us, since those who disagree with our conclusion are obliged to provide some affirmative evidence that levels of tolerance truly have increased—that is, if they find our methodological argument persuasive.