

A Controversy in Values

5

Attitudes About Abortion

Americans disagree about all sorts of moral, religious, and political issues, but few debates have been as intense and as bitter as the controversy surrounding abortion. In this chapter, we will continue our analysis of American values by exploring responses to a series of questions about the conditions under which legal abortions should be available. We will also search for causal relationships and see if we can identify some of the reasons why abortion attitudes vary from person to person. The Frequency and Crosstabs procedures and percentage distributions, chi-square, and Cramer's V will continue to be our primary analytical tools.

OBJECTIVITY AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Feelings about abortion are strong, and a word of caution about objectivity and science may be in order before we begin. In the context of scientific research, objectivity means that the investigator's personal opinions and values are not allowed to affect his or her procedures or conclusions. Obviously, if objectivity is not maintained, the usefulness of a research project will be compromised.

In reality, it is difficult for even the most dedicated scientist to achieve complete objectivity, especially when the topic involves emotionally charged issues such as abortion. Social scientists recognize this difficulty and maintain a number of protections against bias and value judgments. For example, before the results of a research project are published in a professional journal, they are critically and anonymously reviewed by colleagues who look for biased or unjustified conclusions, faulty logic, and other problems.

As a student, you will not have the benefit of professional reviews of your thinking as you complete the projects in this chapter. Still, you need to keep the ideal of objectivity in mind and pay close attention to what the data say (not what you wish they would say). Above all, remember that the goal of this chapter is to measure and analyze public opinion on abortion, not to resolve the issue or to say which side is right or wrong.

EXERCISE 5.1 DO AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT ABORTION SHOULD BE A LEGAL RIGHT?

The GSS-2006-tabular data set includes three items that measure attitudes about abortion. The items are listed, along with their SPSS variable names, in Exhibit 5.1. Note that rather

than asking a single, general question (e.g., “Do you favor or oppose abortion?”), these three items ask people to react to different circumstances. One advantage of this multi-item format is that it permits researchers to see if attitudes are absolute and unchanging (if people always support or oppose abortion regardless of circumstance) or if attitudes are contingent and change as situations change. It may be that people have more than one attitude or set of feelings about abortion, and if so, these complex reactions could only be captured with multiple survey items.

Exhibit 5.1 Three Items From the General Social Survey That Measure Approval or Disapproval of the Right to a Legal Abortion

<i>Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion</i>	<i>SPSS Variable Name</i>
1. if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby	ABDEFECT
2. if the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy	ABHLTH
3. if the women wants it for any reason	ABANY

As a first step in the analysis, we can measure the extent to which the sample opposes or supports the right to a legal abortion by running the Frequencies procedure for each variable in Exhibit 5.1. See Command Block 5.1 for the necessary commands and use the output to complete Research Report 5.1. You may want to save or print the output, or you can just copy the relevant information from the screen.

COMMAND BLOCK 5.1 Running the Frequencies Procedure for Attitudes on Abortion

- Click **Analyze** → **Descriptive Statistics** → **Frequencies**
- Highlight ABANY
- Click the arrow pointing to the **Variable(s):** box
- Highlight ABDEFECT
- Click the arrow pointing to the **Variable(s):** box
- Highlight ABHLTH
- Click the arrow pointing to the **Variable(s):** box
- Click **OK**

RESEARCH REPORT 5.1
Approval of the Right to a Legal Abortion

NAME _____

INSTRUCTOR _____

DATE _____

1. Record the percentage of respondents who said “yes” to each item:

<i>Item</i>	<i>Percentage “Yes”</i>
ABDEFECT	_____
ABHLTH	_____
ABANY	_____

2. Are Americans generally in favor of the legal right to an abortion or generally opposed? Explain.