

ENIGMAS OF INTOLERANCE:
FIFTY YEARS AFTER STOUFFER'S
COMMUNISM, CONFORMITY, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

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Over the 50 years since Samuel Stouffer published *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* a great deal of attention has been devoted by social scientists to the problem of political intolerance. In the United States alone, major national surveys were conducted and reported by Nunn, Crockett, and Williams (1978), Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982), Gibson (1992), and Davis and Silver (2004), in addition to a variety of highly focused projects (e.g., Hurwitz and Mondak 2002) and projects with a broad scope but using more limited samples (Marcus et al. 1995).¹ And of course the ongoing General Social Survey (GSS) routinely includes a battery of items measuring political tolerance (for a recent study based on these data see Mondak and Sanders 2003a). Although more effort has most likely been devoted to understanding the voting preferences and behavior of ordinary citizens, political intolerance is one of the most investigated phenomena in modern political science.

That social scientists would allocate so many resources to investigating intolerance is understandable since the problem of political intolerance is one of the most pressing issues facing the world today. As cultures have come into closer interaction with each other over the last century (through globalization and emigration), clashes have often resulted, and tolerance is one of the few solutions to the tensions and conflict brought about by multiculturalism and political heterogeneity. Tolerance is the essential endorphin of a democratic body politic. Is tolerance an issue of great import? Certainly Muslims in the United States, Arabs in France, Chechens in Russia, and Communists, Jews, and atheists throughout the world — to name just a few — would undoubtedly answer a resounding “yes!”

With so much research effort devoted toward understanding intolerance one might suppose that few important questions remained unanswered. In fact, that is decidedly not so. As studies have accumulated, at least four major conundrums have emerged. These are all crucially important theoretical and empirical issues and, until progress is made on solving these puzzles, it is unlikely that a better understanding of (and hence means to control) intolerance will emerge. In short, the pressing enigmas of

¹Because the study of political intolerance is a multi-disciplinary preoccupation, it is difficult to identify all relevant literature. A useful recent review can be found in Sullivan and Transue (1999).

intolerance are:

❑ The single most important predictor of intolerance – perceptions of the threat posed by one’s political enemies – is an *exogenous* variable in nearly all studies of intolerance. Thus, the key determinant of intolerance is itself poorly understood. Despite several concentrated research efforts, we simply know very little about why some people are more threatened by their foes while others are less threatened.

❑ Perhaps one reason why threat perceptions cannot be explained is that threat turns out to be a multidimensional concept. At a minimum, a crucial distinction exists between sociotropic threat – “a generalized anxiety and sense of threat to society, the country as a whole, or the region where one lives” (Davis and Silver 2004, 34) – and egocentric threat – “a sense of threat to oneself or one’s family” (Davis and Silver 2004, 34). And perhaps counter-intuitively, personalized threat perceptions are *not* the most efficacious predictors of intolerance. Instead, those who see threats to their “way of life” — not their personal safety — often tend to be the most intolerant.

❑ A less well known but equally significant puzzle lies in the finding that social intolerance (prejudice in particular) and political intolerance are *not* closely connected. The conventional expectation that both are grounded in strong personality attributes (such as authoritarianism) has been repudiated in a variety of quite diverse research settings.

❑ Finally, one might add to this list growing concern over the measurement of intolerance. Since Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus first developed the so-called least-liked measurement technology, various scholars have expressed reservations about both the validity and reliability of the data produced by the questions. More recently, a provocative thesis has been asserted by Mondak and Sanders (2003a), who contend that tolerance is essentially *dichotomous*, not continuous. These measurement issues threaten to unravel further the progress that has been made to date in understanding intolerance.

The fifty-year anniversary of Stouffer’s pathbreaking study presents a propitious time for a review of progress in the study of political intolerance. Indeed, this anniversary stimulates us to both look backwards and assess the progress that has been made in understanding intolerance, and to look forward

and develop a research agenda for a major new attack on the crucial unanswered questions in the field. That is precisely the objective of this paper.

FOUR TOLERANCE ENIGMAS

The Multidimensionality of Threat Perceptions

Evidence that threat perceptions are not unidimensional has recently emerged, and several scholars now distinguish between sociotropic and egocentric perceptions of group threat (e.g., Davis and Silver 2004).² For instance, Gibson (2004a) reports that a set of threat perception measures are actually *three* dimensional, with factors defined by sociotropic and egocentric threat perceptions and a third factor (largely orthogonal) defined by the perceived power of the group (for a similar finding on group power, see also Marcus et al. 1995). The conventional view that threat perceptions constitute a unidimensional continuum no longer seems tenable.

Moreover, sociotropic threat perceptions have greater consequences for intolerance than egocentric threat, a finding that reveals something about the nature of intolerance. Political intolerance is a social, not individual, attitude. It refers to what people think their political system ought to do about political nonconformists. Intolerance increases not necessarily when people feel their own security is at risk, but rather when they perceive a threat to the larger system of which they are a part.

Unfortunately, little systematic effort to establish the validity, reliability, and dimensionality of measures of threat perceptions has been conducted. Davis and Silver, for instance, report that the two types of threat are correlated at .44 (Davis and Silver 2004, 35), which is actually a fairly strong relationship for survey data. Are the two types of threat truly distinct, and how might valid and reliable multiple indicators of each type of threat be created?

² This distinction originates in research on citizen perceptions of the economy, with researchers distinguishing between the individual's own economy and the country's economy. Sociotropic economic perceptions generally are more useful for predicting political phenomena than egocentric perceptions.

The distinction between sociotropic and egocentric threat has largely emerged as a result of induction rather than deduction. The original threat items were constructed without making an explicit distinction between sociotropic and egocentric threat. Obviously, a phrase such as “dangerous to society” is measuring sociotropic threat, as is “not willing to follow the rules of democracy.” Alternatively, a query asking the respondent to assess whether the group is “likely to affect how well my family and I live” is tapping egocentric concerns. However, some adjectives are ambiguous (e.g., “unpredictable”), and in general little careful consideration has been given to developing separate egocentric and sociotropic measures of group threat.

Other frailties afflict the conventional indicators of perceived group threat. For instance, most studies measure threat perceptions using seven-point semantic differential scales. Since the threat questions are asked of an extremely disliked political group (by definition, given the least-liked technology³), it should not be surprising that a majority of respondents — for some items, an extraordinary majority — selects the most extreme point on the scale. This produces skewness and degenerate variance, which no doubt has considerable statistical consequences. Therefore, the response sets for the threat scales are also in need of reconstruction.

Thus, one major focus of future research on intolerance should be to develop and test new indicators of sociotropic and egocentric threat perceptions, as well as to explore more thoroughly perceptions of the power (and power potential) of hated political enemies.⁴ With independently constructed, multiple indicator measures of all aspects of group threat it should be possible to investigate

³The least-liked approach to measuring intolerance allows the respondent to identify her or his own target group. The intolerance questions are then asked about the group named by the respondent as “most disliked” (which means that the phrase “least-liked” is something of a misnomer). Except for the GSS, the least-liked approach has become the dominant measurement strategy among those who study intolerance.

⁴One important deficiency of the GSS tolerance measures is that no measure of perceived group threat is available for the five groups about which the questions are asked. Some scholars have attempted ingenious ways of developing surrogates for such measures, but these are indeed surrogates, not direct measures.

the connection between egocentric and sociotropic threat perceptions, and to determine how and why each relates to political intolerance. The utility of using visual rather than word-based measures of group threat should also be explored.

Threat as an Exogenous Variable

In what is surely the most important post-Stouffer study of intolerance in the United States, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) developed the model depicted in Figure 1 to account for political intolerance.⁵ Tolerance stems from three primary sources. First, those who are more threatened by their political enemies are less likely to tolerate them. Second, tolerance is typically connected to a larger set of beliefs about democratic institutions and processes. Those who believe in the basic institutions of majority rule, with institutionalized protections of minority rights, are more likely to tolerate even their most hated political enemies.⁶ Finally, psychological insecurity contributes directly to intolerance. Those who are insecure tolerate less, and not because they are more threatened by their enemies (i.e., the effect is direct, and is not mediated through threat perceptions). These three variables provide a powerful explanation of political tolerance.

[PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

An obvious hypothesis is that those who are more psychologically insecure — and in particular those more willing to strictly divide the world into friends and foes (the definition of dogmatism⁷) — are

⁵There have been other important attempts to account for the variance in tolerance (e.g., Bobo and Licari 1989), but most other research identifies no additional predictors with a strong theoretical grounding and consistent predictive capacity.

⁶However, this relationship may be fairly weak in transitional regimes, and in fact earlier research on the connections between tolerance and other democratic values in Russia indicates that only a modest correlation exists between these two values (Gibson 1998b, 1995; Gibson and Duch 1993a, Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992).

⁷Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982, 218) refer to psychological insecurity as the general concept. However, their empirical analysis makes plain that the overwhelmingly dominant influence on the measure of insecurity is dogmatism (or closedmindedness). The failure of the other dimensions of

more likely to perceive group threats. Despite the compelling logic arguing that threat perceptions should be grounded in personality attributes, in fact no empirical evidence of this has been discovered (e. g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982). For instance, based on my three-wave Russian panel, I found that threat perceptions are *entirely* independent of both support for democratic institutions and processes, and, even more surprisingly, psychological insecurity (Gibson 2004b).⁸ A few projects have been able to link threat perceptions to factors such as social identities (Gibson and Gouws 2001, 2003), personality structures (e.g., Marcus et al. 1995), and perceptions of social stress (e.g., Gibson 2002b; Gibson and Gouws 2003), but no existing research provides anything remotely resembling a powerful explanation of variation in perceived group threat.

Thus, a second major objective of future research on political intolerance should be to launch a new attack on explaining the variance in perceived threat. Several avenues seem potentially fruitful, ranging from developing better and additional measures of personality attributes (e.g., Stenner 2003 focuses on attitudes toward child rearing practices; an obvious possibility to consider is Sidanius' Social Dominance Orientations; etc.) to investigating the etiology of each type of threat perception independently.⁹ For instance, it may be that sociotropic threat perceptions are grounded in (or associated with) feelings of nationalism or patriotism, whereas egocentric threat perceptions are more personality based.¹⁰ Surprisingly, this hypothesis has never been subjected to systematic investigation. It should be.

insecurity to predict intolerance is an important but often overlooked finding from their research.

⁸Indeed, when the threat measures are regressed on both the dogmatism and democratic values indicators, the resulting explained variances (R^2) in 2000, 1998, and 1996 are: .00, .00, and .00. No relationship whatsoever can be found.

⁹The connection between threat perceptions and intolerance varies according to the specific groups named by the respondents in the least-liked question. However, since the least-liked approach is said to be "content controlled," investigators have paid little attention to this finding. I suspect that the predominant type of threat posed by groups varies according to the type of group. It seems unlikely that the threat stimulated by homosexuals is the similar in nature to the threat produced by atheists.

¹⁰Recent research (e.g., de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003) has shown that nationalism and patriotism are quite distinct phenomena, and therefore that they most likely have different consequences for different

The Independence of Social and Political Intolerance

In the original work of Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982), an important but little-noticed finding was presented to the effect that social distance from a group (prejudice) and political intolerance are distinct. This finding is certainly compatible with the marked divergence between scholars studying intergroup prejudice and political tolerance. To a truly remarkable degree, those who study intergroup prejudice and those who work on political intolerance rarely intersect.

Many scholars presume that prejudice and intolerance fit “hand in glove.” For instance, Stenner’s forthcoming book (2003) makes this assumption explicitly. She asserts: “This work began with the conviction that racial, political and moral intolerance, normally studied in isolation, are really kindred spirits: primarily driven by the same fundamental predispositions, fueled by the same motives, exacerbated by the same fears” (2003, 389). Yet, to date, no data have been produced specifically documenting that political intolerance (especially as measured by the least-liked technology) and intergroup prejudice are strongly intercorrelated.

My forthcoming book (*Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?*) develops independent measures of intergroup prejudice and political intolerance. As Figure 2 depicts, both of these are multiple indicator constructs.¹¹ Remarkably, the correlation between intergroup prejudice and political intolerance among black South Africans is .08!¹² And this is despite the fact that both intolerance and prejudice are measured with high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .75 and .85, respectively) and with considerable validity as well. Those who would not tolerate political activity by hated groups are no more or less likely to express prejudice toward white South Africans. This is a highly unexpected and puzzling finding.

types of threat perceptions.

¹¹Additional details about these measures can be found in Gibson 2004a and especially in Gibson 2004c.

¹²The correlation between simple summated indices of the two concepts is .09.

[PLACE FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Are the South African findings idiosyncratic to South Africa? Available data suggest not. In a recently completed paper (Gibson and Howard 2004), we investigated anti-Jewish prejudice in Russia based on data from my 1996-1998-2000 panel. Within the 2000 interview, both political intolerance and anti-Jewish prejudice (stereotypes, scapegoating, etc.) were measured. As Figure 3 depicts, the correlation between prejudice and political intolerance is .03! This too is a remarkable and quite unforeseen finding.

[PLACE FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Why are social and political intolerance so weakly connected? One answer may have to do with measurement – the political tolerance items assure that all respondents are reacting to a highly disliked political enemy (through the least-liked technology). Prejudice items, on the other hand, typically preselect a group (as in the items asking about Jews) and therefore are asked of at least some respondents who hold no animus whatsoever toward the group.¹³ Nonetheless, these findings from both South Africa and Russia present major mysteries for those who would understand the nature of intolerance.

Investigating the relationship between prejudice and intolerance should be one of the most important components of future research. To begin, measures of social intolerance (prejudice, social distance) for the groups identified in the least-liked questions should be developed. This will allow the assessment of whether the types of intolerance are related, based upon social and political questions asked about exactly the same group.

Future research should also extend the least-liked logic to ethnic groups, asking the respondents to identify the ethnic group they dislike the most. Social and political intolerance questions can then be asked about this group. This strategy also allows the assessment of the relationship between the two types

¹³However, this may not be much of an explanation for the findings. Based on a separate measure of general affect (like versus dislike) of Jews it is possible to consider this correlation among that portion of the Russian sample expressing any degree of negative affect toward Jews. This group is therefore asked the anti-Semitism questions about a group about which they feel negatively, and the intolerance questions of course addressed highly disliked groups. The correlation of prejudice and intolerance among this portion of the Russian sample is an amazing -.01. Prejudice and intolerance are absolutely unrelated.

of intolerance.

Of course, with better measures of the personality attributes of the respondents, researchers may well discover a common origin to both types of intolerance.

Experimental vignettes (e.g., Gibson and Gouws 1999 and Gibson 2002a) that manipulate both type of group (political versus ethnic) and type of threat (sociotropic versus egocentric) would also constitute an important avenue of research since they would allow the investigation of the causal relationship between these factors and intolerance.

Respondents might also be queried in open-ended questions about any apparent inconsistencies between their social and political intolerance. In the final analysis, it may be that expressing prejudice toward one's political enemies is simply not a precondition for political intolerance. What groups stand for is a sociotropic factor, which is quite different to the perceived characteristics of the members of the group.

Measuring Intolerance

The least-liked technology introduced by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus has been a major contribution to the study of intolerance, and there is some evidence available to suggest that intolerance measured in this fashion behaves similarly to intolerance as measured by the traditional Stouffer items (Gibson 1992).¹⁴ Nonetheless, many have expressed unease with the least-liked approach to measuring intolerance (e.g., McClosky and Brill 1983, Gibson 1986, Sniderman et al. 1989, Chong 1993), and it is perhaps extraordinary that we know so little about the psychometric properties of this dominant approach to measuring intolerance (but see Gibson 1992).

Because the GSS continues to churn out data on intolerance based on the Stouffer measurement approach, scholars continue to do the best they can in using these data to understand intolerance in the

¹⁴ The GSS version of the Stouffer questions current asks about five groups and three activities, for a total of 15 individual questions.

United States. A recent example is the work by Mondak and Sanders (2003a). This important paper raises some very serious issues of measurement.

Mondak and Sanders believe that “*the question of tolerance versus intolerance is inherently dichotomous, not continuous*” (2003a, 496, emphasis in the original). What they mean by this is that some people will tolerate virtually anything by anybody, whereas the rest of the population is intolerant to at least some degree (even if it varies in both the breadth and depth of intolerance). Though theirs is a theoretically grounded argument, its empirical component has to do with the fact that about 18 % of the GSS respondents give tolerant responses to each of the 15 Stouffer items included in the General Social Survey. Also crucial here is the argument that the five groups about which the GSS asks are sufficiently varied that virtually everyone in the survey gets an opportunity to express her or his intolerance, if in fact it exists.

Mondak and Sanders conflate the theoretical and empirical issues involved in measuring intolerance. I have no doubt whatsoever that questions could be devised that would stimulate the 18 % identified by Mondak and Sanders as “inherently tolerant” to give an intolerant response (in the American context, a question about burning a flag in protest — a legal and constitutionally protected civil liberty — would surely convert a sizable proportion of these respondents to intolerance).¹⁵ Respondents must also differ in the intensity of their tolerance, despite the fact that the Stouffer items are measured on a simple dichotomous response set.

Treating both tolerance and intolerance as continuous is undoubtedly the most fruitful measurement strategy. Furthermore, the Mondak and Sanders position would be readily acceptable were it altered slightly to claim that, although the tolerance – intolerance scale is continuous, some people

¹⁵For example, Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996, 29-30) contend that nearly half of the Americans in the 1990 Citizen Participation Survey express complete tolerance. However, their measure is based on only four tolerance items. Surely Mondak and Sanders would not accept this 47 % figure, arguing instead that were these respondents asked additional, more demanding questions, their intolerance would be exposed.

adopt an absolutist position on the scale, arguing that virtually no non-violent and generally legal political activity can be denied to any organized interests in society. It is doubtful, however, that the percentage is as large as 18 % of the U.S. population.

A clear implication of this discussion is that an effort must be made to unpack the “clumpiness” in the tolerance – intolerance continuum, at *both ends* of the continuum (e.g., among the tolerant in the United States, among the intolerant in Russia and South Africa). Thus, surveys might include questions designed to measure “how far the respondent will go.” Those giving perfectly intolerant responses should be queried about whether there any limits to the repression of members of the disliked group; those expressing perfect tolerance should be questioned about whether there any limits to the activities to be permitted for the hated political groups.¹⁶ This strategy would enable the detailed consideration (with a research design that is *not* sub-optimal for the purpose) of the question of whether we profit from treating tolerance (or intolerance) as dichotomous. With this methodology, it is obviously simple to ascertain whether the respondents who are perfectly tolerant according to the 15 Stouffer items in fact express any intolerance when confronted with questions addressing their most disliked political enemies. In this fashion, it will be possible to assess the claim that tolerance is “dichotomous.”¹⁷

An obvious solution to these measurement issues is to develop a data base in which the Stouffer items and the least-liked questions are both asked of the same respondents. But to ask the questions within

¹⁶In South Africa, intolerance is fairly widespread so a substantial proportion of people score at the highest level of intolerance. In a survey currently in the field, we are asking the respondents who give three intolerant responses with regard to their least-liked group whether they would support permanently expelling members of the group from the country. This question will differentiate further those scoring as most intolerant on the traditional index, and it consumes very little interview time.

¹⁷A related issue has to do with the role of contexts and situations in making tolerance judgments. Mondak and Sanders (2003b) argue that particular contexts are highly influential on Americans, while Gibson and Gouws (2001) found that context had virtually no influence at all on the tolerance judgments of South Africans. These contradictory findings could be addressed by developing a contextualized vignette (since even Mondak and Sanders would not contend that the Stouffer items present the best means of addressing the hypothesis). With both the Stouffer data and the vignette, the role of context can be thoroughly addressed.

the same survey would not result in useful data since pressures toward consistency (based on the norms of fairness and equal treatment) would most likely produce systematic measurement error. Thus, the most useful research design would be one involving a panel, in which the Stouffer items are asked during one interview, and the least-liked items asked during a subsequent interview.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Whether heterogeneous societies can live peacefully and democratically together is a question of immense practical importance throughout the world today. An enormous amount of money is being spent worldwide on questions of political tolerance. By what mechanisms can Catholics and Protestants be induced to live together in peace (Northern Ireland); will Israelis and Palestinians ever peacefully coexist; will the uneasy truce in the former Yugoslavia ever be converted to true tolerance; and can those who were masters and slaves under apartheid tolerate each other and create a multiracial democratic political system? Intolerance not only threatens established democratic systems, but it also makes democratic transitions arduous by threatening the consolidation of democracy. If even partial answers to these questions can be discovered through this research, the United States and the rest of the world could well become more peaceful and democratic.

In the 50 years since Stouffer's groundbreaking survey on political intolerance a number of urgent intellectual puzzles has emerged. Consider the pivotal issue of the exogeneity of threat perceptions: Are threat perceptions exogenous owing to unanticipated attributes of the least-liked measurement technology (and especially the vast heterogeneity of the groups identified by the measure)? Are threat perceptions exogenous because they are multidimensional, rendering any simple, single-minded theory impotent? Why are not threat perceptions grounded in personality attributes; how can it be that those who are psychologically insecure are not more threatened by their political enemies? How can threat perceptions be managed and/or changed? If we do not know what causes threat perceptions, then

obviously few tools are available for ameliorating perceptions of group threat.

Research on intolerance not only suffers from the problem of the exogeneity of threat perceptions, but also from profound measurement issues concerning both intolerance and threat perceptions. In addition, the startling finding that social and political intolerance are not related has enormous implications for our understanding of the etiology of intolerance(s). Without answers to these crucial and pressing questions, advances in our understanding of political intolerance cannot be achieved.

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FIGURE 1. The Conventional, Cross-Sectional Model of the Origins of Political Tolerance

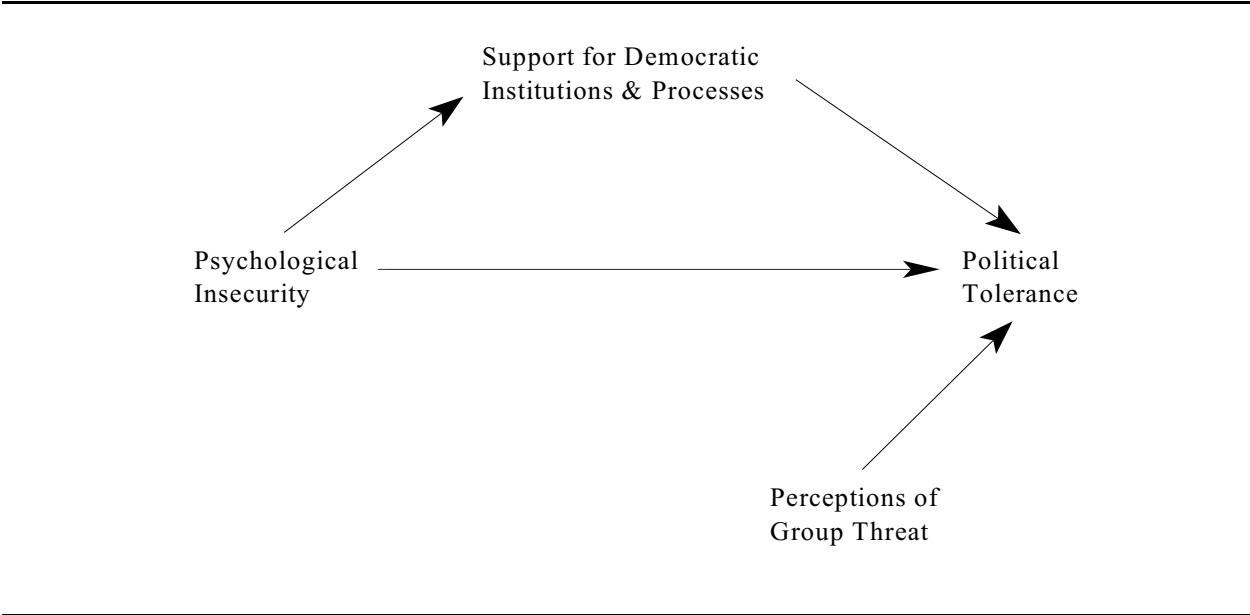
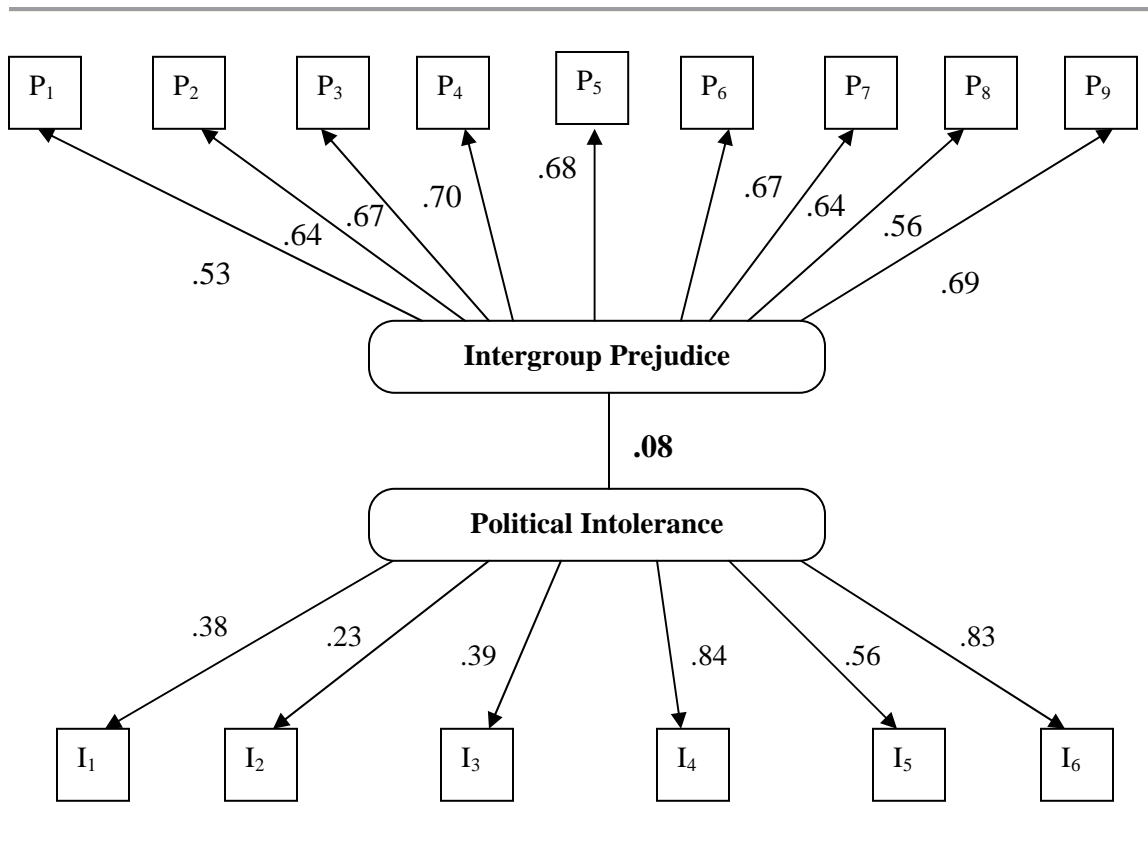


Figure 2. Political Intolerance and Intergroup Prejudice in South Africa



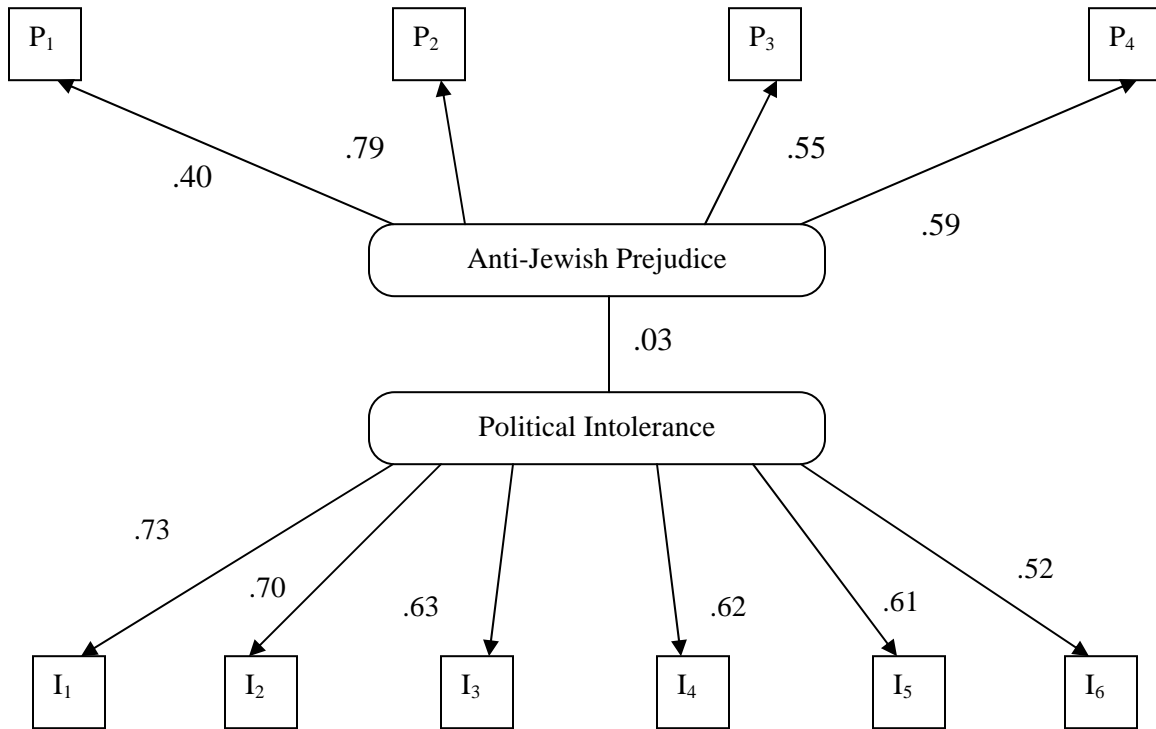
Note: Intergroup prejudice is measured with the following statements.

- I find it difficult to understand the customs and ways of [the opposite racial group].
- It is hard to imagine ever being friends with a [the opposite racial group].
- More than most groups, [the opposite racial group] are likely to engage in crime.
- [The opposite racial group] are untrustworthy.
- [The opposite racial group] are selfish, and only look after the interests of their group.
- I feel uncomfortable when I am around a group of [the opposite racial group].
- I often don't believe what [the opposite racial group] say to me.
- South Africa would be a better place if there were no [the opposite racial group] in the country.
- I could never imagine being part of a political party made up mainly of [the opposite racial group].

Political intolerance was measured with reference to the most disliked and another highly disliked political group.

- Members of the [THE GROUP] should be prohibited from standing as a candidate for an elected position.
- Members of the [THE GROUP] should be allowed to hold street demonstrations in your community.
- [THE GROUP] should be officially banned in your community.

Figure 3. Political Intolerance and Intergroup Prejudice in Russia, 2000



Note: The anti-Jewish propositions read:

- It would be better if every Jew would leave our country.
- Jews deserve to be punished because they killed Christ.
- Jews are more responsible than others for the problems that stand before our country today.
- When it comes to choosing between people and money, Jews will choose money.

Political intolerance was measured with reference to the most disliked and another highly disliked political group.

- Members of [THIS GROUP] should be officially banned in your town (village).
- Members of [THIS GROUP] should be allowed to make public speeches in your town (village).
- Members of [THIS GROUP] should be allowed to have street rallies in your town (village).