

Not Forbidding Isn't Allowing: The Cognitive Basis of the Forbid-Allow Asymmetry

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SURVEY RESEARCH has repeatedly demonstrated that minor changes in the wording of a question can have a major impact on the obtained responses (see Kalton and Schuman, 1980, and Schuman and Presser, 1981 for reviews). A wording effect that has received much attention in more than four decades of research is the forbid-allow contrast identified by Rugg (1941). He reported that Americans were more likely to support freedom of speech when the appropriate question was worded, "Do you think the United States should forbid public speeches against democracy" (yes/no?) rather than, "Do you think the United States should allow public speeches against democracy" (yes/no?). Specifically, only 54 percent of the respondents who were asked

Abstract Previous research demonstrated that respondents are more likely to endorse the idea that something should "not be allowed" (or "not be forbidden") than to endorse the idea that it should be "forbidden" (or "allowed"), even though these expressions seem logically equivalent. The hypothesis is advanced that this asymmetry is due to the response behavior of indifferent respondents who neither endorse that something should be forbidden nor that it should be allowed, resulting in higher endorsements of the negative form of both question wordings. Data consistent with that explanation are presented and the cognitive mechanism underlying the response behavior of indifferents is discussed.

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the forbid form of the question felt that those speeches should be "forbidden," but 75 percent of the respondents who were asked the allow form of the question felt that they should "not be allowed." Similarly, only 25 percent of the respondents felt that these speeches should be "allowed," but 46 percent responded they should "not be forbidden."

Since this original study, the effect has been successfully replicated over a wide range of issues, and Schuman and Presser (1981:296), in reviewing this work, noted that it is "the largest wording effect we have discovered," producing differences of up to 30 percentage points. Three factors that possibly contribute to the effect have been suggested. First, and most notably, "forbid" and "allow" carry different connotations: "the former sounds harsher and may therefore be more difficult to endorse, whereas the latter in some context might seem to encourage a deviant behavior and therefore may invite opposition" (Schuman and Presser, 1981:280). Second, the terms create different grammatical structures, and finally, the effect may be limited to abstract issues such as speeches against democracy. Unfortunately, none of these explanations received unequivocal support in studies reported by Schuman and Presser, and they conclude that they "are hard put to see any obvious source for the effect" (1981:296).

However, it seems to us that these authors discarded the connotation explanation somewhat prematurely on the basis of a potentially inadequate test. Specifically, Schuman and Presser (1981:281) found large and reliable wording effects for abstract items (e.g., speeches against democracy) but small and unreliable effects for more concrete items (e.g., the showing of X-rated movies, or cigarette advertisement on TV). They concluded from this pattern: "If forbid and not allow (or not forbid and allow) convey somewhat different meanings, the effect of the verbal difference taken alone is not large. For the alternative formulations to have much impact, it would appear that they have to be joined to abstract issues like free speech or communism" (1981:282). Interestingly, Schuman and Presser also reported higher don't know levels for their abstract than for their concrete items, and they concluded that "the higher the don't know level the larger the forbid-allow effect" (p. 283). To the extent that high don't know levels indicate a high level of indifference in the public opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1980), this finding suggests a variant of the connotation explanation that might well account for the data reviewed by Schuman and Presser (1981) in the manner outlined below.

Specifically, we want to suggest that the forbid-allow asymmetry is primarily due to the response behavior of indifferent (or ambivalent) respondents. We assume that respondents who hold a strong attitude

toward the issue under study will give consistent responses to both forms of the question. That is, respondents opposed to the issue will endorse the forbid statement as well as the not allow statement, while those in favor of the issue will endorse both the allow and not forbid statements. However, indifferent respondents may respond "no" to *both* questions. Specifically, when asked whether something should be forbidden, indifferents may say "no" because they are not opposed to the issue but only indifferent. However, when asked whether it should be allowed they may respond "no" for the same reason—even though a "no" response seems to imply different opinions depending on which question it is given to. Two factors may contribute to this phenomenon, namely, the connotations of "forbid" and "allow," and a cognitive bias to focus on positive instances of a behavior rather than to consider the implications of its absence.

With regard to the connotations of "forbid" and "allow" it has already been noted that to "forbid" is a rather harsh statement while "allowing" something may be construed as inviting it, rather than tolerating it. That is, to *forbid* something implies stronger opposition than *not to allow* something, because forbidding refers to an active act of opposition against the issue under consideration while not allowing something only refers to abstaining from active support. Similarly, *allowing* something refers to active support while *not forbidding* something refers to abstaining from active opposition.

Thus, respondents who do not hold a strong attitude may be unlikely to endorse *either* the forbid or the allow statement, responding "no" to both question forms. In doing so they seem to endorse the opposite position. However, they may miss this in the interview situation because they focus on the behavior they are asked about. In this regard, research in the area of social cognition demonstrated that individuals pay more attention to positive instances of a behavior than to the absence of a behavior (cf. Nisbett and Ross, 1980 for a review). For example, they feel that what a person does do provides more information about the person than what the person does not do (e.g., Fazio et al., 1982). This "tendency of both animals and humans to exhibit greater difficulty in the processing of nonoccurrences than occurrences" (Fazio et al., 1982:404) is usually referred to as the *feature-positive effect*. Similarly, when asked if something should be done (allowed or forbidden), individuals may focus on the implications of the behavior under consideration, and they may *not* consider the implications of the *absence* of this behavior. Such a bias could contribute to the forbid-allow asymmetries by clouding the idea that not allowing or not forbidding something indeed amounts to forbidding or allowing it, respectively, thus resulting in the feeling that one has only said it

shouldn't be allowed without ever commenting on whether it should be forbidden.

Note that this explanation predicts that the asymmetries are primarily due to the behavior of indifferent or ambivalent respondents and should not be obtained for respondents holding a clear pro or con attitude. In line with this hypothesis, the forbid-allow effect was found to be more pronounced the more abstract the issue and the lower the education of the respondents, both factors that may affect the number of indifferent respondents, which is also partially reflected in increasing don't know levels.

In this article we will report evidence that to forbid and to allow are stronger statements than not to allow or not to forbid (Experiment 3), and that the forbid-allow asymmetry is limited to indifferent respondents and is not obtained for respondents holding a strong attitude (Experiment 4). Because our studies were conducted in West Germany, however, we will first demonstrate that the basic forbid-allow effect is cross-culturally replicable (Experiments 1 and 2).

Experiments 1 and 2: The Forbid-Allow Effect in German Samples

To test the cross-cultural stability of the forbid-allow effect, two split-ballot experiments were conducted. The first experiment was carried out in July 1982 as part of the second wave of a small face-to-face panel survey with a random sample of adults (more than 18 years of age) living in an industrial city in West Germany and selected from registries (response rate first wave: 63 percent; second wave: 89 percent). The second experiment was carried out in April 1983 as part of a larger face-to-face survey (quota sample) with 146 German adults. Quotas were based on an intersection of age, sex, and years of education. In the first experiment, 48 of 88 respondents were asked if peep shows should be allowed (yes or no), and 40 were asked if they should be forbidden (yes or no). To provide a stimulus replication, 146 respondents in the second survey were asked if the showing of X-rated movies in public cinemas should be allowed ($N = 72$) or forbidden ($N = 74$). Both peep shows and X-rated movies are legal in West Germany.

Both studies replicated the forbid-allow asymmetry, demonstrating its cross-cultural stability. Specifically, 27.7 percent and 26 percent of the respondents, respectively, endorsed the statement that peep shows and the showing of X-rated movies should be forbidden, while 50 percent and 40 percent, respectively, reported they should not be allowed, $\chi^2(1) = 3.5$ and 2.9, respectively, $p < .06$ and $.10$ (three and two subjects, respectively, provided a don't know response). Thus, differ-

ences of 23.3 and 14 percentage points were obtained as a function of question wording, using two issues that qualify as concrete rather than abstract in Schuman and Presser's terminology. As in Schuman and Presser's (1981:282) data for X-rated movies, the effects were only marginally reliable. However, a combined analysis of both studies (following a suggestion by Rosenthal, 1978) indicates the statistical reliability of the general forbid-allow asymmetry in both German samples, $z = 2.49$, $p < .01$, one-tailed.

Experiment 3: Forbidding and Allowing Are Stronger Statements Than Not Allowing or Not Forbidding

To test the hypothesis that to allow something or to forbid something are stronger positions to take than not to forbid or not to allow it, ratings of statements containing these expressions were obtained.

METHOD

As part of a self-administered questionnaire 54 adults (more than 18 years of age) of a quota sample (quotas were based on an intersection of age, sex, and years of education) read a sentence stating that "Mr. Mueller feels the legislator should forbid (not allow, allow, not forbid) peep shows," and subsequently rated Mr. Mueller's opinion on an 11-point bipolar scale labeled "extremely in favor of peep shows" vs. "extremely opposed to peep shows." Each respondent read and rated only one statement.

RESULTS

As expected, "allowing" peep shows was rated as representing a more favorable attitude, $M = 2.1$, than "not forbidding" peep shows, $M = 3.1$, $t(50) = 2.14$, $p < .04$. Similarly, "forbidding" peep shows was rated as indicating stronger opposition, $M = 10.5$, than "not allowing" them, $M = 9.2$, $t(50) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, demonstrating that the terms are perceived as differing in extremity even though they may be logically equivalent in their consequences. The differences are small, however, and there is no doubt that "not forbidding" is seen as a statement in favor of the issue while "not allowing" is seen as a statement in opposition to the issue.

Experiment 4: The Forbid-Allow Effect Is Limited to Indifferent Respondents

Central to the present argument is the assumption that indifferent respondents may respond negatively to both a question asking them

whether something should be allowed and a question asking them whether it should be forbidden. Moreover, it is assumed that this response behavior accounts for the higher overall endorsement of the negative form of both questions. To test this hypothesis, respondents in favor of, opposed to, or indifferent toward spreading salt on the roads for safety in winter—a popular topic in the current ecological discussion in West Germany—were asked whether using salt to melt ice and snow should be allowed (yes or no) or forbidden (yes or no), resulting in a 3×2 factorial design with attitude (pro, con, indifferent) and question wording (forbid, allow) as between subject factors.

It was expected (a) that more respondents overall would endorse the “not allow” than the “forbid” and the “not forbid” than the “allow” statements, and (b) that this would be primarily due to the responses of indifferent subjects, and would not be obtained in the responses of subjects holding a strong attitude.

METHOD

A random sample (selected from registries) of 720 adults (more than 18 years of age) living in an industrial city in the Federal Republic of Germany participated in a mail survey (response rate 78 percent) concerned with environmental issues. Early in the questionnaire (question number 10) respondents reported their attitudes toward 12 environmental issues, including the use of salt for road safety in winter. Specifically, the question read, “Salt should no longer be used to melt ice and snow on the roads.” Respondents were asked to check one of three response alternatives (“agree,” “don’t agree,” “indifferent/don’t care”).

Later in the questionnaire (question number 34) half of the respondents were asked whether the use of salt to melt ice should be allowed (yes or no), while the remaining respondents were asked whether it should be forbidden (yes or no). The question read: “The use of salt during the winter is dangerous to plants and trees near the road. Do you think that one should generally allow (forbid) the use of salt (yes/no)?” A “don’t know” option was not provided with this question.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the responses of the total sample as a function of question wording. As expected, more respondents endorsed the “not allow” than the “forbid” statement and the “not forbid” than the “allow” statement, $\chi^2(1) = 23.2, p < .001$. Thus, the data replicate the forbid-allow asymmetry resulting in a wording effect of 16.5 percentage points.

Separate analyses of the responses provided by respondents who

Table 1. The Forbid-Allow Asymmetry as a Function of Respondents' Attitude

| <i>Forbid Form</i> | | <i>Allow Form</i> | |
|---|-------------|---|-------------|
| Do you think that one should generally forbid the use of salt? | | Do you think that one should generally allow the use of salt? | |
| Yes (forbid) | 62.3% (215) | No (not allow) | 78.8% (283) |
| No (not forbid) | 37.7% (130) | Yes (allow) | 21.2% (76) |
| | 100 (345) | | 100 (359) |
| Response \times form $\chi^2 = 23.2$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, Don't know: $N = 16$ | | | |
| <i>Attitude Opposed to the Use of Salt</i> | | | |
| Yes (forbid) | 86.4 (186) | No (not allow) | 90.7 (215) |
| No (not forbid) | 13.6 (29) | Yes (allow) | 9.3 (22) |
| | 100.0 (215) | | 100.0 (237) |
| Response \times form $\chi^2 = 2.0$, $df = 1$, n.s. | | | |
| <i>Attitude in Favor of the Use of Salt</i> | | | |
| Yes (forbid) | 25.8 (17) | No (not allow) | 38.7 (24) |
| No (not forbid) | 74.2 (49) | Yes (allow) | 61.3 (38) |
| | 100.0 (66) | | 100.0 (62) |
| Response \times form $\chi^2 = 2.5$, $df = 1$, n.s. | | | |
| <i>Attitude Indifferent to the Use of Salt</i> | | | |
| Yes (forbid) | 18.8 (12) | No (not allow) | 73.3 (44) |
| No (not forbid) | 81.2 (52) | Yes (allow) | 26.7 (16) |
| | 100.0 (64) | | 100.0 (60) |
| Response \times form $\chi^2 = 37.3$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$ | | | |

had reported a pro, con, or indifferent attitude toward the use of castor salt are presented in the lower part of Table 1. A total of 89 percent of the respondents who reported an opposed attitude toward castor salt also wanted the use of castor salt to be discontinued. As expected, their responses were *not* significantly affected by question wording $\chi^2(1) = 2.0$, n.s., and only a small effect of 4.3 percentage points was obtained. Similarly, no significant wording effect was obtained for respondents in favor of the use of castor salt, $\chi^2(1) = 2.5$, n.s., though the difference of 13.1 percentage points was somewhat larger than for respondents holding an opposed attitude. Moreover, 32 percent of the respondents who had reported a favorable attitude on the earlier question nevertheless wanted the use of castor salt to be discontinued. This might be due to the information about its negative effects on plants and trees provided in the question text, which was not provided in the earlier attitude question.

Finally, a large and highly significant wording effect of 54.5 percentage points, $\chi^2(1) = 37.3$, $p < .001$ was obtained for respondents who had reported an indifferent attitude. Specifically, these individuals were likely to respond no to *both* the "allow" (81.2 percent) and the "forbid" (73.3 percent) form of the question, as suggested by our theoretical analysis. Thus, the present data support the hypothesis that the forbid-allow asymmetry is primarily due to the response behavior of indifferent respondents who will neither endorse that something should be allowed nor that it should be forbidden, because they want to express neither support nor opposition.

While these results are in line with our theoretical analysis, a methodological issue requires additional consideration. To identify indifferents, respondents' attitude toward the use of salt was assessed independently of and prior to the experimental question. Though the questions were separated by 23 unrelated ones, this raises the possibility of consistency effects. Most important, respondents who first reported being indifferent about the issue may be particularly unlikely to endorse a "strong," i.e., affirmative, option later on. Thus, a consistency effect might increase the size of the forbid-allow asymmetry for indifferents. While the present data do not allow us to rule out this possibility, it seems unlikely that a consistency effect alone could account for the pattern of results obtained. Moreover, the fact that 32 percent and 11.3 percent of the respondents who initially reported a favorable or an opposed attitude, respectively, gave an opposite response later on suggests that consistency pressures could not have been very strong.

General Discussion

We have reported here evidence for the stability of the forbid-not allow and allow-not forbid asymmetries across cultures and languages by replicating the effect in Germany (Experiments 1 and 2). Moreover, we attempted to demonstrate that these asymmetries are due to the behavior of respondents who are relatively indifferent about the issue under consideration (Experiment 4). Specifically, we suggested that respondents holding a strong attitude in favor of or in opposition to the issue will give consistent responses independent of question wording. Indifferent respondents, on the other hand, may refuse to endorse *either* that something should be allowed or that it should be forbidden because they are neither strongly in favor of nor strongly opposed to the issue. Therefore, they will be lumped together with respondents holding a strong attitude, thus resulting in the asymmetries under study, with more respondents endorsing the negative than the affirmative form of each question.

Two factors may contribute to the response behavior of indifferents. Most important, respondents are likely to focus on the implications of *doing* what they are asked about (that is, allowing or forbidding something) rather than not doing it, thus exhibiting a well-documented bias to focus on positive instances of a behavior (cf. Fazio, et al., 1982; Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Therefore, respondents may miss the implications of their negative response, feeling that they only gave their opinion about allowing (forbidding) something without ever commenting on the opposite. Moreover, the negative wordings are weaker statements than the affirmative wordings (Experiment 3) and may thus be easier to endorse for indifferents.

The present explanation of the forbid-allow asymmetries implies that the effect should be more pronounced in aggregated data the larger the number of indifferents. Therefore, the effect should be the larger the more abstract the issue, the less salient the issue, and the lower the education of the respondents. Indeed, the data reviewed by Schuman and Presser (1981) provide evidence in support of each of these variables. In addition, the present explanation suggests that the forbid-allow asymmetries may vanish if indifferent respondents are provided the possibility of expressing their indifference. To the best of our knowledge such a study has not been conducted and the "don't know" option provided in some of Schuman and Presser's (1981) studies seems inappropriate to attain this goal. If respondents do indeed focus on the behavior described in the question, that is, to forbid or to allow, indifferents *do know* that they do not want to forbid or to allow something. Thus, responding "don't know" would not accommodate their need to express indifference. "Don't care" or "leave things as they are" categories might be more appropriate to identify indifferents, and to avoid their being lumped together with respondents holding an attitude they do not share.

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Appendix A

German text of the questions used in the reported experiments

EXPERIMENT 1

Meinen Sie, der Gesetzgeber sollte die sogenannten Peep-Shows, also das bezahlte Sichzurschaustellen nackter Frauen in aufreizenden Posen, generell verbieten (erlauben)? (Ja/Nein)

EXPERIMENT 2

Meinen Sie, der Gesetzgeber sollte die Vorführung von pornographischen Filmen in öffentlichen Kinos generell verbieten (erlauben)? (Ja/Nein)

EXPERIMENT 3

Wir hätten gerne von Ihnen eine Beurteilung der folgenden Aussage. Herr Müller meint: "Der Gesetzgeber sollte die sogenannten Peep-Shows, also das bezahlte Sichzurschaustellen nackter Frauen in aufreizenden Posen, generell verbieten (erlauben/nicht erlauben/nicht verbieten)."

Wie sehr ist Ihrer Ansicht nach Herr Müller für bzw. gegen Peep-Shows? Machen Sie bitte ein Kreuz auf der folgenden Skala.

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|----|----|----|----|---|----------------------------|----|----|----|----|
| +5 | +4 | +3 | +2 | +1 | 0 | -1 | -2 | -3 | -4 | -5 |
| extrem für Peep-Shows | | | | | | extrem gegen Peep-Shows | | | | |

EXPERIMENT 4

Q.10. Wir hätten gerne von Ihnen gewußt, wie Sie zu den folgenden Aussagen stehen. Stimmen Sie der jeweiligen Aussage zu, ist sie Ihnen egal oder lehnen Sie sie ab? Streusalz sollte bei Glatteis nicht mehr verwendet werden (ja, stimme zu; ist mir egal/weiß nicht; nein, lehne ab)

Q.34. Durch das Streuen von Salz im Winter sind Pflanzen und Bäume in Straßennähe gefährdet. Sollte man das Salzstreuen generell erlauben (verbieten)? (Ja/Nein)