

Tolerance, Dissenting Beliefs, and Cultural Diversity

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ABSTRACT—*Divergent cultural, religious, and ideological beliefs and practices are often challenging to contemplate and difficult to accept when they conflict with an individual's own convictions and way of life. The recognition that children and adolescents grow up in an increasingly diverse world has led to a general interest in fostering tolerance. In this article, we discuss three central questions on tolerance and related research. First, we consider age-related patterns of responses toward tolerance of diversity and whether they depend on the type of dissenting beliefs and practices children are asked to tolerate. Second, we focus on how and why children are asked to be tolerant. Third, we discuss the boundaries of tolerance—the reasons and conditions that make tolerance less likely. Overall, we conclude that tolerance and intolerance can occur at all ages and depend on what, how, why, and when individuals are asked to tolerate belief discrepancy and dissenting practices.*

KEYWORDS—*beliefs; culture; diversity; social cognition; tolerance*

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Tolerance makes difference possible, difference makes tolerance necessary. (Walzer, 1997, p. xii).

At the very least it is necessary to consider whether the moral imperative of tolerance overrides the moral violations that may be embedded in the cultural practices. (Turiel, 2002, p. 183).

Children today grow up and function in an increasingly diverse world with substantial differences regarding convictions, beliefs, and practices. These differences are often challenging to contemplate, and they can be difficult to accept when they conflict with an individual's own convictions and way of life. The recognition that plural societies depend on allowing others to live the lives that they want has led to a general interest in fostering tolerance among children and adolescents. International organizations (e.g., United Nations, UNESCO), religious and civic associations, and schools and educators worldwide promote tolerance. For example, the Council of Europe proposed making tolerance part of the national curriculum and all member states agreed (Barrett, 2020). However, to create and evaluate appropriate tools and policies for stimulating tolerance, we need to understand children's thinking about the diversity of belief and how children's acceptance of discrepancies in beliefs and dissenting practices develops.

Tolerance implies that people accept ideas and lifestyles with which they do not agree and that are incompatible with their own ideas and lifestyles (Cohen, 2004). A distinct construct, tolerance is not the opposite of prejudice (Van Zalk & Kerr, 2014; Verkuyten, Yogeewaran, & Adelman, 2020); it is not the same as valuing diversity since children can tolerate what they do not find desirable (Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001). Three important aspects of tolerance are reflected in the three questions we discuss.

First, tolerance is not indifference or neutrality but involves not interfering with others' beliefs or practices that are evaluated negatively, such as when others engage in cultural practices or voice beliefs that are unappealing, unsettling, or uninviting. Thus, the first question is about possible age-related developmental patterns of responses toward tolerance of diversity.

Second, tolerance implies having moral reasons for accepting what someone is negative about. It is not tolerance when

someone refrains from acting out of fear, social disapproval, possible sanctions, or concerns over self-image (Cohen, 2004). Thus, the second question is why children and adolescents are tolerant and which factors make tolerance less and more likely.

Third, tolerance does not mean that anything goes and that children's judgments of relativism differ from their tolerance of divergent beliefs. Children use nonrelativistic criteria for evaluating beliefs that reflect disagreements (Turiel, 2002; Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis, 2004). Thus, the third question relates to the boundaries of tolerance.

In this article, we discuss these three questions about tolerance and related research. We also describe important issues that need to be addressed and provide directions for research.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES

Despite the broad call for tolerance of diversity, there is little recent developmental research on tolerance. However, how children think about and evaluate belief discrepancy and behavioral dissent likely differs by age. Early research on children's conceptions of tolerance adopted a stage model of developmental change, describing a progression from a generalized intolerant orientation during childhood to a more reflective orientation in adolescence, which involves considering various pieces of information about the person and his or her belief (Enright & Lapsley, 1981). Other research has also found broad age-related changes in tolerance without proposing a stagelike developmental sequence that depends on the particular issue (Sigelman & Toebben, 1992; Wainryb, Shaw, & Maianu, 1998). More recent research indicates that children's tolerance is not stagelike, but depends on their understanding of the nature of the discrepant beliefs or divergent practices (Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 2002; Wainryb et al., 1998). Several developmental changes can be important for tolerance; next, we briefly discuss some of these findings.

The ability to entertain the perspective of another is considered an important ingredient in tolerance and distinguishes it from acceptance based on indifference, misunderstandings, fear, or lack of knowledge (Graumann, 1996). With age, children are more successful at taking the perspective of the other and understanding why others think and act differently. In fact, awareness of others' mental states reflects a robust literature (Green & Sobel, 2015), and recent research has demonstrated that 4- to 6-year-olds' cognitive capacities for recognizing that others have different beliefs from one's own are relevant for making social and moral judgments about others (Rizzo & Killen, 2017). These findings have implications for the contexts in which children and adolescents are asked to tolerate diversity.

Tolerance can relate to discrepant beliefs, public expression of those beliefs, and engagement in practices based on those beliefs. From around 6 years, children are more tolerant of holding dissenting beliefs than of expressing them publicly, and less tolerant of acting on those beliefs (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007;

Wainryb et al., 1998, 2001; Witenberg, 2002). It is one thing to tolerate belief discrepancy (e.g., traditional gender roles) and something else to accept people acting on divergent beliefs (e.g., gender discrimination). Although the degree of tolerance differs for holding, expressing, and enacting dissenting beliefs, young children tend to make less of a distinction between what people believe, say, and do, and therefore they differentiate less between tolerating these aspects (Sigelman & Toebben, 1992; Wainryb et al., 1998).

Young children are likely to reason that there is an intrinsic connection between believing something and acting on it. But by adolescence, responses become more differentiated so, for example, the acceptability of what dissenting people believe and of the public expression of their belief can be more independent (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007; Witenberg, 2002). Adolescents' higher tolerance of public expressions of dissenting beliefs is consistent with the notion of freedom of expression and can lead to exchanges of opinions and stimulate debate. In these cases, tolerance becomes a decision about weighing different considerations that may conflict, the willingness to support the right to free speech, and the possible social consequences of antagonistic views (Turiel, 2002).

However, considering different perspectives can also lead to age-related differences in adolescents' tolerance of public enactments of dissenting beliefs. For example, in the Netherlands, 16- to 18-year-olds were less tolerant of various Muslim minority practices than were 12- to 14-year-olds (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2008). This finding was replicated in another Dutch study (Verkuyten & Slooter, 2007). Similarly, in Australia, older adolescents were less tolerant toward ethnic minorities than younger adolescents (Witenberg, 2002). With age, adolescents not only understand more fully why discrimination is wrong but also become increasingly concerned about the nature of groups and group expectations. These concerns are often in conflict. Older adolescents might more strongly perceive minority practices as undermining the norms and values of their community and mainstream society, even when they also believe that ethnic discrimination is unfair (Arsenio, Preziosi, Silberstein, & Hamburger, 2013).

When children encounter conflicts between their own group and other groups, they are inclined to prioritize their in-group for reasons based on group affiliation, loyalty, and group functioning. However, when this occurs at the cost of unfair treatment toward others or involves inflicting harm, the consequences become morally problematic. Adolescents recognize that moral concerns are important but often struggle with these types of conflicts depending on the salience of the group identity and the functioning of the group (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013).

To summarize, tolerance depends on what children are asked to tolerate. Moreover, while tolerance does not appear to develop through a sequence of stages, relevant developmental changes do affect tolerant attitudes. Specifically, developments in

assumptions about the relation between belief and behavior, in perspective taking, and in group understandings and group dynamics are likely to be important for tolerating discrepant beliefs and divergent practices.

TOLERANCE: WHY AND WHEN

Tolerance is not about valuing diversity but rather about recognizing other people's right to have different beliefs and practices, as long as these do not violate general moral values. Developmental research has demonstrated that even 4- to 5-year-olds understand the generalizability of concerns about respecting others and protecting their welfare, as well as about fair and just treatment (Helwig, Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2014). Recent research also demonstrates that tolerance implies accepting dissenting practices when this acceptance stems from internal not external reasons. For example, children as young as 7 years understand the difference between having external and internal reasons for out-group attitudes (Hughes, Alo, Krieger, & O'Leary, 2016; Jargon & Thijs, 2020). External reasons include the desire to conform to social norms and avoid disapproval, while internal reasons stem from personal beliefs about equality, harm, and fairness. Internal reasons tend to be associated more strongly and consistently with out-group acceptance than external reasons, which indicates that promoting the "right reasons" for out-group acceptance is important (Hughes et al., 2016; Jargon & Thijs, 2020).

Respecting the individual autonomy and equal rights of others as well as perceived harmlessness are important reasons for children's tolerance (Wainryb et al., 1998). Additionally, in research guided by social domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014), children's judgments about tolerance depend on the personal, conventional, or moral nature of the discrepant belief or divergent practice. As an illustration, in one study (Wainryb et al., 2004) and across four realms of diversity—morality, taste, facts, and ambiguous facts—children were told about two characters who had divergent beliefs (e.g., moral: one character believes it is all right to hit and kick others, and the other character believes it is wrong to hit and kick others; taste: one character believes chocolate ice cream tastes bad and the other believes it tastes good). From ages 5 to 9 years, children were tolerant about some areas of belief diversity (e.g., taste) and intolerant about other areas (e.g., moral). Similarly, in another study, children were more tolerant of beliefs based on dissenting information than beliefs based on dissenting morality (Wainryb et al., 1998).

In another example, in a study of Dutch early and middle adolescents, tolerance of dissenting Muslim minority practices depended on the domain these practices evoked (Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2010). For the different ages, tolerance was highest for practices that were considered to belong to the personal domain (e.g., wearing a headscarf) and lowest for perceived moral practices (e.g., homophobic statements), with the social

conventional domain (e.g., not shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex) occupying a place in between (see also Verkuyten & Slooter, 2008; Wright, 2012).

Research on children's and adolescents' understanding of group disloyalty provides further insights into the reasoning behind children's willingness to tolerate dissenting viewpoints. In one study, 9- and 10-year-olds and 13- and 14-year-olds were tested on whether they thought it was all right for a member of their in-group to deviate from the group's norms, thereby being disloyal to the group (Killen et al., 2013). Children viewed dissenting members differently depending on whether the norm was about conventional or moral issues. In-group dissenters who rejected a group norm about inequality by voicing a preference for equality were liked, as were those who rejected norms of unconventionality to support group traditions. However, adolescents recognized that groups rarely like dissenters. Thus, children and adolescents had different levels of tolerance depending on what types of norms were supported or rejected; they also recognized that groups are often intolerant of dissenters, which might conflict with their own viewpoint to support a dissenter.

THE BOUNDARIES OF TOLERANCE

Tolerance is not relativism and no individual or group can be tolerant of everything (Cohen, 2004). Specific practices and beliefs that are considered to deviate from societal and moral norms in an unacceptable way (e.g., bullying, harassment, suppression) are typically viewed as wrong and unacceptable. For example, in one study, adolescents in Belgium and Canada were tolerant of objectionable beliefs but not of hate speech (Harell, 2010). In another study, most Dutch adolescents did not tolerate an imam voicing negative opinions about homosexuals, but most did tolerate a female Muslim teacher who did not want to shake hands with men (Gieling et al., 2010). Among the common reasons children give for nontolerant judgments are harmful and unfair consequences for others (Rutland & Killen, 2017; Wainryb et al., 1998).

Apart from these moral reasons, nontolerance can also be based on concerns about the continuity and functioning of interpersonal relations and one's group. For example, children and adolescents find it more difficult to tolerate divergent beliefs of people close to them than of strangers and dissimilar others. This is because the relational consequences of these beliefs are more concrete and relevant, and people see themselves through the expression of their in-group (Capelos, & Van Troost, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright, 2012).

Furthermore, with age, children recognize that social exclusion based on criteria that are not related to the functioning of a group (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religion) are unfair (Arsenio et al., 2013; Mulvey, 2016; Rutland, Mulvey, Hitti, Abrams, & Killen, 2015). Yet they also recognize that many groups exclude others for legitimate reasons, such as criteria that match group

continuity and functioning (e.g., sports ability for a team, musical talent for a band, academic success for college). Children and adolescents can differentiate forms of social exclusion that are unjust and unfair from those that are reasonable and legitimate. Statements about group continuity and functioning often mask underlying biases and intolerance, but also reflect legitimate concerns. We need to recognize that contexts exist in which the continuity of one's group is important for identity reasons and loyalty to one's group is productive, such as in sports or teamwork when interdependence within the group creates positive outcomes.

However, intergroup emotions such as feelings of threat can reduce children's and adolescents' tolerance of dissenting beliefs, their expression of these beliefs, and the practices based on them. For example, Dutch adolescents were less tolerant of Muslims persuading other Muslims to engage in specific practices (e.g., wearing a headscarf, refusing to shake hands with someone of the opposite sex) than of the practice itself (Gieling et al., 2010; Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2012). Trying to persuade fellow Muslims to act similarly can be seen as contributing to the Islamization of society, which could lead to lower tolerance compared to the practices themselves. In addition, feelings of threat may underlie Dutch adolescents' and young adults' intolerance of Muslim minority beliefs and practices (Capelos & Van Troost, 2012; Van der Noll, Verkuyten, & Poppe, 2010). In a study of adolescents in Great Britain, induced fear led to less tolerance toward asylum seekers than did a positive emotional state (Tenenbaum, Capelos, Lorimer, & Stocks, 2018).

Furthermore, individuals who identify strongly with their in-group are likely to be concerned about the continuity, distinctiveness, and positive value of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In one study, adolescents with stronger group identification were less tolerant of differences and dissent than adolescents with weaker group identification (Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2014; Van der Noll et al., 2010; see also Gieling et al., 2010). Also, because individuals who identify more strongly with their in-group are more concerned about in-group identity than individuals who identify less strongly, they can be expected to be less responsive to arguments and considerations for accepting dissenting beliefs and practices. In contrast, individuals who identify less strongly with their in-group tend to be less concerned about their in-group and therefore should be more responsive to additional considerations. A study of Dutch adolescents' tolerance of Muslim minority practices identified this difference (Gieling et al., 2012). However, individuals who identified less strongly with their in-group were not more tolerant when they heard arguments in favor of tolerance (e.g., religious freedom), but became less tolerant when they heard arguments against tolerance (e.g., social cohesion).

This finding agrees with the so-called *asymmetry of (in)tolerance*, which implies that it is often easier to convince individuals to become less, rather than more, tolerant because

intolerance is cognitively less demanding (Gibson, 2006). With intolerance, the negative feeling toward the dissenting belief or practice agrees with rejecting it, whereas tolerance is more contradictory because it implies accepting dissent. This asymmetry indicates that changing adolescents' intolerant reactions is not easy and that arguments against minority beliefs and practices might even increase intolerance in adolescents who, in general, are not strongly concerned about their in-group identity.

LOOKING AHEAD

Tolerance is not simply valuing diversity or being without prejudice; rather, it is a separate construct "that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition" (Scanlon, 2003, p. 187). However, in contrast to the development of prejudice, we know little about the development of tolerance. Hence, we need further research to understand the specific processes underlying children's tolerance of divergent beliefs and practices, including the boundaries of tolerance. Next, we highlight several important questions for research.

The first question concerns the age-related development of tolerance. The research we have discussed indicates that children and adolescents consider various aspects of what they are asked to tolerate and why. There are different kinds of diversity and dissent, with some more problematic than others. Diversity is not of one kind, which means that one type of reasoning cannot address all situations of difference and dissent. Thus, rather than examining the development of a general tolerant attitude toward diversity, researchers should pay attention to the different types of dissent and the ways in which children try to balance different considerations (e.g., moral, conventional, personal) in relation to these types (Turiel, 2002). However, this does not mean that there are no relevant developmental changes. We have discussed several of these changes (e.g., assumptions about the relation between belief and behavior, group understandings, group dynamics) that will likely be important and need to be examined systematically.

Second, although the ability to entertain the perspective of another is considered an important ingredient in tolerance (Graumann, 1996), little empirical research has examined empathy or perspective taking in relation to tolerance. In one study that has done so, of Finnish middle adolescents, traitlike empathic concern strongly predicted tolerance as a democratic value (Miklikowska, 2012). Children and adolescents have the capacities to empathize and take the perspective of others, and empirical research designed to understand how individuals evaluate and interpret dissenting beliefs and practices would be fruitful. Furthermore, researchers must examine when and why intergroup feelings of fear and insecurity make tolerance more difficult, and whether feelings of security and trust make tolerance of dissenting beliefs and practices more likely. For example, would a youth with an insecure ethnic, racial, or religious identity find it more difficult to tolerate those who have a

different worldview and cultural lifestyles than a youth with a secure ethnic, racial, or religious identity (Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007)?

A third question relates to efforts to learn tolerance that organizations, schools, and educators worldwide promote (e.g., Barrett, 2020). In educational settings and to stimulate tolerance, practitioners might want to use particular examples or prototypes of tolerance in teaching youth to make judgments about the diversity of beliefs. For example, thinking about the liberties of dissenting others and the importance of letting people say what is on their mind might form paradigmatic examples of tolerance for democratic education. Furthermore, discussing relatively straightforward and uncontroversial cases of tolerable conduct (e.g., tastes, hobbies) and intolerable conduct (e.g., bullying, theft) might spur youth to evaluate more complex issues. As examples, situations involving cultural practices that reflect a diversity of views on whether the practices have negative consequences for others' welfare, such as gender roles and minority rights, provide a good starting point for discussion and reflection. This might stimulate the development of reasons based on an intrinsic motivation to care about the equality of people. In a study of 7- to 12-year-olds, egalitarian and equality messages stimulated self-endorsed reasons for accepting out-groups, whereas explicit prosocial prescriptions (e.g., "You should be nice and honest to people from other groups") led to concerns about social sanctions and compliance (Jargon & Thijs, 2020). In addition to the role of schools, researchers should examine whether and how peers and parents affect children's tolerance of dissenting beliefs and practices. For example, in one study, the democratic functioning of families was significantly related to adolescents' democratic orientation (Miklikowska & Hurme, 2011).

Finally, researchers should examine children's tolerance in non-Western societies. Diversity of beliefs and practices exists in all societies, and every society displays some degree of tolerance and intolerance. Yet cross-national differences in the degree of tolerance are grounded in political, legal, economic, and historical circumstances (e.g., Weldon, 2006). For example, in one study, the level of tolerance was higher in more democratic societies that emphasized individual liberties than in societies that were more autocratic (e.g., Widmalm, 2016). Tolerance is more likely to spread to children and adolescents in societies that promote tolerant values rather than propagating authoritarian goals, and that are committed to basic liberal values expressed in educational systems and institutions.

CONCLUSION

Disapproval, dislike, and disagreement among people is an inevitable part of life. People differ in all sorts of ways, including genuine differences in practices, beliefs, and worldviews that are impossible to reconcile. Children develop and are committed to their own convictions and beliefs, and they engage in

practices based on these beliefs. However, this does not have to mean that they want to exclude or reject those who have a conflicting worldview: Children can tolerate dissenting beliefs and conduct. Tolerance is a critical ingredient for sustaining diverse societies and protecting individual autonomy and rights. However, not everything can and should be tolerated, which suggests the importance of understanding why, when, and how children and adolescents distinguish acceptable from unacceptable dissent. Developmental research on these questions has been limited. We encourage new avenues for research on tolerance from a developmental perspective, which we hope will shed light on how to facilitate positive relationships among individuals from different sociocultural backgrounds.

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