

# Tolerance and intolerance: Cultural meanings and discursive usage

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## Abstract

The notion of tolerance is widely embraced across many settings and is generally considered critical for the peaceful functioning of culturally diverse societies. However, the concepts of tolerance and intolerance have various meanings and can be used in different ways and for different purposes. The various understandings raise different empirical questions and might have different implications for the subject positions of those who are tolerant and those who are tolerated. In this study, we focus on cultural understandings of tolerance and intolerance and how these terms are used in discourses. We first describe how in an open-ended question in a national survey lay people use a classical and a more modern understanding of tolerance to describe situations of tolerance and intolerance. Second, we analyze how those who tolerate and those who are tolerated can flexibly use these different understandings of (in)tolerance for discursively making particular “us–them” distinctions. It is concluded that the notions of tolerance and intolerance have different cultural meanings which both can be used for progressive or oppressive ends.

## Keywords

Tolerance, intolerance, lay understandings, discursive usage, minorities

Tolerance is considered a critical and adequate response to the challenge of how conflicting ways of life can freely express themselves and peacefully coexist with each other. A society that is culturally, religiously, and ideologically plural implies diversity of substantive worldviews and lifestyles. This diversity gives rise to moral controversies over contrasting and conflicting perspectives about how people, or even society, ought to

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behave. The need to manage these controversies makes tolerance both relevant and urgent: “Tolerance makes difference possible, difference makes tolerance necessary” (Walzer, 1997, p. xii). Tolerance of dissenting beliefs and ways of living is seen as a necessary condition for societal functioning, whereas intolerance breeds separation, and tensions and hostilities between individuals and groups. Political leaders, the European Union, the United Nations (UN), and nongovernmental organizations have all warned against intolerance; emphasized the importance of tolerance for peaceful societies; and proposed policies that promote tolerance. For example, in 1996, the UN General Assembly invited member states to observe November 16th as the *International Day for Tolerance*, following from the *UN Year for Tolerance* in 1995. In Europe, there is the “*European medal of tolerance*,” the “*European day of tolerance*,” and a “*European model law for the promotion of tolerance and the suppression of intolerance*.” Furthermore, a *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance* (ECRI) has been installed. Similarly, religious and civic associations as well as schools worldwide promulgate tolerance and teach tolerance as a mode of addressing cultural and other forms of diversity.

Thus, the concept of tolerance is widely embraced across many settings for many sorts of differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality), and across a diverse ideological and left–right political field (Brown, 2006). However, our ability to create, evaluate, and implement appropriate policies is limited by tolerance and intolerance having various meanings that can be used in different ways and for different purposes. For example, sometimes the concept of tolerance refers to endurance and putting up with things one dislikes and disapproves of, and sometimes to open-mindedness and the general willingness to accept a broad range of differences, and even for embracing and celebrating the practices and behaviors of dissenting others (Galeotti, 2015). These different understandings raise different empirical and practical questions. They might have different implications for the efforts to manage diversity in pursuit of a more civil society made up of our cultural, religious, and ideological differences.

One academic response to this conceptual situation of “disarray” (Ferrar, 1976) is to offer a systematic conceptual analysis ((Cohen, 2004); Forst, 2013) or to develop a theoretical framework about the psychological processes underlying different understandings of tolerance and intolerance (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017). Another response is to focus on cultural understandings of tolerance and intolerance and how these terms are used in everyday life and discourses. Such a focus can deepen our understanding of the various meanings of (in)tolerance and how these function in different settings and for different purposes.

Our aim is to provide a second type of response. First, we describe the various word semantics of tolerance and intolerance and examine concrete examples of tolerance and intolerance situations that lay people give in an open-ended question in a national survey. Second, we analyze how the different understandings of (in)tolerance can be flexibly used in discourses for making particular “us–them” distinctions. To situate the research and the findings in the literature, we begin with a short overview of the main ways in which tolerance and intolerance are conceptualized in the academic literature.

## Tolerance and intolerance

Tolerance has been discussed in the literature as a complex, paradoxical, and multidimensional construct. Various forms and distinctions have been proposed. For example, Walzer (1997) argues that there are five types of tolerance of cultural and religious differences, which vary from resigned acceptance for the sake of peace to enthusiastic endorsement of diversity (see also Ricoeur, 1996). Similarly, Forst (2013) makes a distinction between four conceptualizations of tolerance: the permission, coexistence, respect, and esteem conception. Others make a distinction between tolerance in the domains of politics, social relations, and moral issues, and empirically demonstrate that these are different matters (Lee, 2014; Vogt, 1997). Further, it has been argued that tolerance is an attitude, a belief, a virtue, a value orientation, a discourse, and a practice (King, 2012).

However, in general, two broad conceptualizations of tolerance can be distinguished. The first one is central in the philosophical and political science literature and follows the classical understanding of tolerance as forbearance and putting up with something that one disapproves of or is negative about (Cohen, 2004; King, 2012). In this understanding, tolerance involves acceptance *despite* disapproval whereby the latter is a critical ingredient: “one cannot tolerate ideas of which one approves” (Gibson, 2006, p. 22). Tolerance requires self-control, and a more tolerant person is more likely to accept conduct that they continue to disapprove of. The reason for acceptance is that the disapproval of the practices or beliefs of another group (e.g., ritual slaughter of animals) is considered less important than the reason to nonetheless accept those practices or beliefs (e.g., religious freedom). This understanding of tolerance differs from cultural relativism because people tend to apply the liberal minimum and the harm and rights principle to decide whether something should be tolerated or not (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017). So classical tolerance also implies the existence of boundaries because not everything can and should be tolerated, such as injustice, oppression, and harming others. In the classical understanding, intolerance implies that specific practices and beliefs are considered to deviate in a non-tolerable way from a presupposed moral norm (Cohen, 2004).

The second, more modern understanding of tolerance is common in social psychology and sociology and defines tolerance as openness, being well disposed toward cultural others, or having a generalized positive attitude toward them (Allport, 1954; Hjern et al., 2019). A tolerant person is someone who is appreciative, open-minded, and “on friendly terms with all sorts of people” (Allport, 1954, p. 425). In contrast to the classical understanding, dislike or disapproval of dissenting beliefs and practices is not considered a necessary aspect of tolerance but rather the opposite of it. According to this understanding, it would be odd to say that a person who is favorably disposed toward minorities is not tolerant of them or a person who accepts more and values diversity more is less tolerant. Claiming that a person is tolerant would not mean that they endure many things that they disapprove of, but rather that they disapprove of little. Tolerance in this understanding implies a positive response to diversity itself, and intolerance is equated with dogmatism, closed mindedness, and prejudice more generally.

## Cultural understandings

Research on “culturomics” uses computational methods for examining semantics in large corpus of data and focuses on the range of other words with which a target word is collocated (Bybee, 2010; Michel et al., 2011). This approach relies on dense representations of words (embeddings) that result, for example, in visual representations such as “word clouds.” This work has resulted in two different word clouds for “tolerance.” The first one contains words such as “endurance,” “forbearance,” “restraint,” and “self-control,” and therefore is in line with the classical understanding of tolerance.<sup>1</sup> The second one has words such as “multicultural,” “friends,” “happy,” and “respect,” and is more similar to the modern understanding of tolerance.<sup>2</sup> For intolerance, there is only one main type of word cloud in which terms such as “prejudice,” “biased,” “racism,” and “discrimination” are prominent.<sup>3</sup> Thus, whereas tolerance seems to have two different cultural meanings, intolerance seems to be commonly associated with negative words and not as a reasonable response to normatively unacceptable beliefs and practices.

These word clouds tell us something about the broad cultural meanings that exist but do not focus on how common people understand situations of tolerance and intolerance. Yet, the ways in which examples of tolerance and intolerance are understood in everyday life are important to consider. To gain insight into this, we included an open-ended question in a survey for a subsample ( $N = 170$ ) of a national sample of ethnic Dutch participants. This survey was conducted in March 2020 using the national panel of the survey company Kantar. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 85 years, 51.4% was women, and 26.1% had low-level education, 33.1% had mid-level education, and 40.8% had high-level education. People were asked randomly to either share a concrete example of tolerance ( $N = 90$ ) or of intolerance ( $N = 80$ ) that they had experienced themselves or heard about. Subsequently, they were asked to explain why they considered this an example of (in)tolerance and then to indicate when this would no longer be a case of (in)tolerance. In the introduction to the open-ended question, half of the respondents were given the classical definition of (in)tolerance as (not) putting up with something one disapproves of, while no definition was provided to the other half of the respondents. The reason for this distinction was to examine whether people’s spontaneous understanding is similar or rather differs from their guided understanding. A number of respondents ( $N = 53$ ) did not answer the three questions and indicated that they did not know an example or could not think of one at the moment ( $N = 32$ ), or that they did not understand the question with using, for example, a question mark ( $N = 16$ ), or did not fill in anything ( $N = 5$ ). The participants who did and did not provide an answer did not differ in gender, age, and level of education.

In total, 117 responses were examined:  $N = 23$  for intolerance without a definition,  $N = 29$  for intolerance with a definition,  $N = 30$  for tolerance without a definition, and  $N = 35$  for tolerance with a definition. The answers were read through carefully several times with the purpose of detecting common themes that served as coding categories (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). We kept to the meanings that participants themselves gave as our aim was to explore how participants understand situations of tolerance and intolerance. After familiarization with the answers, we coded all responses, and these codes

were condensed into themes for each of the questions, each with a list of relevant quotes. The analysis was iterative, and the themes were refined through discussion among both authors at each step.

A main distinction found was between answers that were more in line with the classical understanding and answers that were more in line with the modern understanding of tolerance.

### *Tolerance*

Some of the examples given for *tolerance* referred to openness and respecting who and what others are and want to be. Tolerance would imply withholding opinions or judgment and being favorably disposed toward those who are different. This modern understanding of tolerance was evident in around 20% of the descriptions.

However, most of the descriptions were in line with the classical understanding as putting up with someone's behavior when one disapproves of it, or when others endure one's own behavior. This classical understanding was evident in 73% of the examples when no definition was given and in 88% of the examples after a definition was provided. In the condition without a definition, people predominantly explained that the situation was an example of tolerance because it had to do with endurance, patience, or putting up with something that one objects to because of the respect for other people or their freedom to be who they are ("I disapprove of something she does, but I accept her"). With a definition, the explanation was similar in emphasizing acceptance, self-control, and putting up with things that bother you, and the types of examples given in the two conditions were also quite similar.

"My colleague is a Muslim and prays several times a day. During these times I receive his calls for him and I think he has a right to this time. Other colleagues disagree but they go for smoke for every hour and I also tolerate that." (Without definition)

"I live in a town with very religious people. I don't agree with their beliefs but I do accept and respect them." (Definition given)

"I am an atheist and I listen to heavy metal music with a lot of references regarding Germanic gods, satan, horror, death, and decay. A colleague of mine at work is very religious and is an active member of church. We respect each other and relate well to each other." (Definition given)

In both versions (with and without a definition), it was explained that if the behavior in the situation crosses certain unacceptable boundaries (e.g., hurting others, forcing your will on someone else, and disrespecting others), it would become a non-tolerable situation. Thus, in line with the classic understanding, boundaries of tolerance were recognized.

"If they would push their faith on me and I wouldn't be able to live my normal life anymore."

"Lack of respect from the other side, however much you disagree with someone reciprocal respect is a mark of civilization."

## **Intolerance**

In contrast to the examples given for tolerance, the majority of examples (84%) for *intolerance* were in line with the modern understanding of narrow-mindedness and prejudice. The situations described were considered examples of intolerance because of a lack of empathy, being judgmental, or discriminatory, and the examples most often related to race and ethnicity, but disabilities, sexual orientation, and difference of opinion were also mentioned. Further, although there were more participants who did not give an example when there was no definition presented than when a definition was provided, the types of examples were similar.

“It happened in the store where I work. A customer came and saw that there were two male customers standing holding hands. She then literally said to the men that she didn’t think that they should publicly hold hands in the store.” (No definition given)

“A lot of people say, when they read about a break-in or a hit and run ‘it was probably a Moroccan or a Turk or a Polish person.’” (Definition given)

The solutions mentioned for turning the situation into a case of tolerance were also more in line with the modern understanding of tolerance. Empathy was most often described as an antidote to intolerance. It was explained that empathy can be increased by positive experiences or similar hardships that place you in the other person’s shoes. In addition, openness and understanding were suggested as solutions that would turn an intolerant situation into tolerance.

“If you think about why something is done. If you do your best to understand the other. You may still not agree or still think their approach is wrong but you did try to understand them. You looked beyond your own world and showed respect.”

“if this person would find themselves in the same situation”

To summarize, the main difference between the situations described for tolerance and intolerance is that the latter situations were more in line with the modern understanding and the former situations tended to follow the classical understanding. Thus, the answers related to the question regarding intolerance mostly referred to narrow-mindedness and bigotry, whereas the answers related to tolerance predominantly focused on forbearance and endurance. This difference was evident in the examples given, in explaining why it was an example of (in)tolerance, when it would become a situation of (in)tolerance, and relatively independent of whether a definition was provided or not.

## **Tolerance and intolerance in discourse**

The notions of tolerance and intolerance do not only have various meanings but can also function discursively in various ways. People can use the notions of tolerance and

intolerance in different ways, in different contexts, and for different purposes. In general, the aim of a tolerance discourse is not to abolish the “us–them” distinction, but rather to manage dissent and ensure peaceful coexistence between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated (Vogt, 1997). Discourses of (in)tolerance articulate differences, constitute specific identities, and construct subject positions. However, the way in which this occurs is likely to depend on the specific meaning of tolerance that is put forward by those who tolerate and those who are tolerated.

### *Those who tolerate*

In public and political debates, tolerance is often discussed in terms of the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism and the need to accept all forms of diversity. This modern tolerance discourse focuses on preventing offense and psychological harm for vulnerable individuals and groups which can result in calls for silencing and banning those who think differently (Campbell & Manning, 2018). Those who do not fully embrace all forms of diversity are often branded as being intolerant. The open-minded, virtuous, and progressive citizen is contrasted with the close-minded, conservative bigot. In response to the charge of intolerance, conservatives can deploy the classical tolerance discourse by arguing that the so-called tolerant think they hold the moral high ground and therefore are remarkably intolerant of people with dissenting viewpoints and contrasting ideological beliefs and their right of free speech: the (classical) intolerance of the (modern) tolerant (Carson, 2012).

This classical discourse can also be used, however, in relation to marginalized groups. The next quote is from a focus group discussion among native Dutch residents of an old neighborhood in Rotterdam who are talking about immigrants living in their area, and Muslims in particular (Verkuyten, 1997).

“I simply believe, we live as Dutch in the Netherlands, and then I think if we would go to Turkey or Saudi Arabia or whatever, we also are not to walk topless on the street, than we have to adapt to the society you go to. Look, and I think that Dutch people, certainly in our neighborhood, have been tolerant enough, too tolerant even, and then I think I only will be tolerant to a certain degree, but no longer towards everybody because they themselves are not tolerant at all.”

There are three aspects in this quote that we want to highlight. The first one is that the classical understanding of tolerance is employed in which endurance and forbearance of dissenting practices is central. In this discourse, claiming to tolerate others’ dissenting beliefs and practices construes these beliefs and practices as transgressing or deviating from what is considered appropriate and right: it “manages the demands of marginal groups in ways that incorporate them without disturbing the hegemony of norms that marginalize them” (Brown, 2006, p. 36). Those requiring tolerance are marked as undesirable, marginal, or inferior: a discourse of tolerance as endurance implies power and normativity. It can hide inequality and domination by confirming and justifying existing power differences and the subordinate position of the minority group. Classical toleration

can legitimize and reinforce the dominance of those who extend the tolerance (subject of tolerance), and thereby confirms the inequality and relative powerlessness of those that are tolerated (the object of tolerance): “To tolerate someone else is an act of power; to be tolerated is an acceptance of weakness” (Walzer, 1997, p. 52). For example, the discourse of tolerance can be linked to assimilationist demands for immigrants to fully adjust to the dominant national norms and values, similar to what “we” would have to do when emigrating to another country (see the excerpt).

Second, a distinction is made between “us, the tolerant” and “them, the intolerant.” Being tolerant in its classical sense is well regarded and typically considered a sign of virtue and moral character. People showing self-restraint and putting up with things that they disapprove of can feel morally superior toward those they tolerate. Those who are tolerated are put in a relative position of moral inferiority whereby they should be thankful for being allowed by a more virtuous other to express their minority identity. So the notion of tolerance can not only be used to argue for acceptance of dissenting beliefs and practices of immigrants and minority groups but also be used for making a moral intergroup distinction whereby “they” are defined as failing to meet “our” moral standard of tolerance.

Third, at the end of the quote, tolerance is linked to reciprocity, which is presented as essential for the practice of tolerance. This resonates with the classical “paradox of tolerance” which implies that one cannot tolerate those who are intolerant (Popper, 1945). Being tolerant toward forces that fail to reciprocate undermines the benefits of civil liberties and equality, and therefore cannot be tolerated. In public debates, it is frequently argued that Western societies coalesce around values of equality, freedom, and tolerance in comparison to the alleged intolerance of some immigrant groups and Muslims in particular (e.g., Kundnani, 2007; Vasta, 2007). Discursively, the slogan “no toleration for the intolerant” is used by populist politicians to argue against Muslim minorities (e.g., Verkuyten, 2013). These politicians emphasize the self-defining meaning of “our” tolerance in order to criticize Muslim immigrants for their intolerance. In portraying immigrants and religious minorities as transgressing our traditional and civilized tolerant way of life, minority groups are positioned as undermining the continuity of our identity and as being incompatible with the essence of who we are. Lay people (see quote above) and populist politicians argue that we have been tolerant enough and that there is a limit beyond which “our” tolerance threatens to self-destroy our liberal society. Having been tolerant enough implies a “threshold” of tolerance whereby the circumstances, unfortunately, would make it no longer possible to continue to live up to one’s tolerant identity but rather requires a justified intolerant reaction (Blommaert & Verschuere, 2002). Here, intolerance is not used in the modern sense of close-mindedness, prejudice, and bigotry but rather in the classical sense as an understandable and justified boundary to unacceptable dissent (“zero tolerance”). In this discourse, tolerance has gone too far and is therefore portrayed as a vice, and intolerance as a virtue.

### *Those who are tolerated*

Minority members often argue for the need of modern tolerance as open-mindedness and the full acceptance of difference. They advocate for tolerance of cultural, ethnic, religious,

or sexual minorities so that members of these groups can freely express their identities and live the life that they want. In doing so, they can morally blame society and majorities for being judgmental, narrow-minded, and prejudiced, and failing to accept others for who and what they are. An example is the next quote.

“For many people of color, the Netherlands is not so tolerant at all. The country is rather characterized by polarization, discrimination, racism, xenophobia and intolerance” (Babah Tarawally *Trouw*, October, 31th 2019)

Here, the modern discourse of tolerance is employed to criticize the popular notion of the Netherlands being a tolerant society. Claiming that the Dutch are tolerant does not mean that they disapprove of many things which they nevertheless endure (classic understanding), but rather that they are broad-minded and disapprove of little (Gardner, 1993). The Dutch are proud on their history of tolerance for people of different cultural and religious backgrounds and similar to other Western countries consider tolerance a key national value. In contrast to this positive image, Tarawally argues that the country is characterized by intolerance, racism, and xenophobia. Hence, this modern intolerance discourse defines the majority as lacking the moral virtue of open-mindedness and not being free from bigotry at all. This discourse is useful for blaming the majority for lacking the tolerant attitude that a culturally diverse society needs.

In contrast to this modern understanding, tolerance in its classical sense is often not well regarded by those who are tolerated. This is indicated by the argument that it is necessary to go beyond *mere* tolerance (Parekh, 2000). While many people consider it desirable to be tolerant, they typically do not find it desirable to be “put up with,” and describing someone as tolerable has negative connotations. Minority members can feel deeply uncomfortable at the thought that they are, or should be, tolerated (Verkuyten et al., 2020). The discourse of classical tolerance can be considered inescapably patronizing and forming an inadequate substitute for a discourse of acceptance, appreciation, and respect. Tolerance is considered to be offensive and hurtful for those who are tolerated because it implies disapproval of what one believes and practices, and can be seen as reproducing inequality and domination. For example, sexual minorities in Belgium argued, “*That is the problem with toleration: others determine if they tolerate you, which rules and norms you need to meet in order to be allowed to participate. As LGBTs, we do not want to be tolerated; we want to be respected.*”<sup>4</sup> And the next quote is from the Turkish–Dutch writer Akyol.<sup>5</sup>

“If you say that you tolerate people you are actually saying ‘you are different, but we accept you.’ We turn a blind eye and accept that you are different. That’s were I think it often goes wrong in the Netherlands. Because you should not say that people are different and we endure you. No, you should accept people because they are different. That is an essential difference. When you fully accept people, you do not tolerate them, if you see people as different human beings than you fully accept them.”

Akyol rejects the classical discourse of tolerance as endurance because it involves marking people as different and therefore an “object” for toleration, instead of accepting them as “subjects” because they are different. He contrasts tolerance (“I can live with you”) with fully accepting people for who and what they are (“you are okay”). Similarly, the Turkish–Dutch writer Özdil regularly states in debates “*I do not want to be tolerated in my own land. I want equality*” and “*Toleration is no acceptance. Rather, toleration leads to segregation.*” Minority members want to be more than tolerated. They are not interested in being endured, but rather in being recognized, welcomed, and respected as equals (Bergsieker et al., 2010). Thus, with the classical tolerance discourse, minority members can construe tolerance as harmful and not contributing to an equal and truly diverse society but rather as providing a license to ignore, dismiss, or patronize those who are different.

Minority members sometimes also argue that a discourse of classical tolerance can have depoliticizing implications (Insel, 2019). This argument is reminiscent of Marcuse’s (1965) analysis of repressive tolerance as a subtle social mechanism contributing to domination and Brown’s (2006) analysis of tolerance as a discourse that replaces the pursuit of justice and equality with a depoliticized attitude of self-restraint. The discourse of classical tolerance would reduce structural disadvantages and political conflicts to mere frictions between cultural groups that can be solved by self-restraint and improved manners rather than structural changes.

However, the classical tolerance discourse can also be used in ways that serve the societal and political interests of minorities. For example, Muslim minorities can use tolerance to argue against the societal demand for change and reform in the direction of a “Euro-Islam” or “Europeanized Islam” (Tibi, 2002). Some Muslims and Muslim leaders present Euro-Islam as subverting or fundamentally altering the core of their religious identity, making change or reform impossible (Bilgrami, 1992). One way in which they respond to the societal demand to develop a Euro-Islam is to argue that this demand actually means that Western societies do not live up to their self-proclaimed and self-defining tradition of tolerance and religious freedom (Yildiz & Verkuyten, 2012). So, Muslim minorities can resist societal demands for change, reform, and assimilation by mobilizing the classical discourse of tolerance that appeals to principles and standards of conduct that European states themselves profess to have developed in response to 17th century religious conflicts.

## Discussion

Increasing cultural diversity and religious pluralism has led many countries to promoting and embracing tolerance for establishing mutual acceptance, equality, and peaceful coexistence. However, the notion of tolerance has also been criticized, has various meanings, and lends itself to various discursive uses for making “us–them” distinctions (Blommaert & Verschueren, 2002; Brown, 2006).

The various “word clouds” make clear that tolerance is predominantly understood in its classical meaning of forbearance and enduring things that one disapproves of, or in its modern sense of broad-mindedness and full acceptance of cultural differences. However,

intolerance is mainly embedded in terms such as prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination. These different meanings of (in)tolerance were also found in the examples that a national sample of Dutch people gave when asked to describe a situation of tolerance or intolerance. In explaining why a situation is an example of (in)tolerance, and when the situation would turn into intolerance or tolerance, the answers related to intolerance were mostly in line with the modern understanding (prejudiced and racist), whereas the answers related to tolerance were overwhelmingly in line with the classical understanding (endurance and condoning). A possible reason for this difference might be that tolerance and intolerance are understood as being similar in their dislike or disapproval of others, but with the former additionally involving self-restraint (classic meaning) and the latter not (modern meaning). However, it should be noted that quite a number of people did not provide an example of (in)tolerance. This might indicate that they have few experiences with situations of (in)tolerance or find it difficult to interpret experiences in terms of (in)tolerance.

The findings indicate that people can have different understandings of what tolerance and intolerance mean and when something is or is not tolerated. However, the different cultural meanings of tolerance and intolerance are not fixed and can be discursively deployed in various ways for articulating differences and constituting specific (moral) identities. Toleration is always a relationship between tolerating and tolerated individuals or groups. This relationship can be characterized in different ways but typically implies inequality whereby the tolerated other is cast in a dependent and inferior position. Yet, the discourse of tolerance is subject to reversals and appropriations in which the two main meanings of tolerance can be flexibly put forward. Marginalized group members and progressives who consider themselves to be tolerant can draw upon the modern understanding of toleration as open-mindedness and valuing and celebrating diversity and minority identities in particular. They are sensitive to anything that might cause offense to vulnerable minorities which is considered a sign of intolerance and therefore should not be accepted but rather silenced or banished (Campbell & Manning, 2018). They construe conservative majority members as being prejudicial, racist, and discriminatory. In response, conservatives can deploy the classical understanding of tolerance by arguing that the self-proclaimed tolerant are the real intolerant people because they show remarkably low endurance of slight, dissent, and disagreement, and negatively interfere with others' right of free speech (Carson, 2012).

However, the classical tolerance discourse can also cast minority members in an inferior position. This discourse construes minorities as deviant and marginal, makes a moral distinction in favor of those who are tolerant, and provides a justification for defining some minority practices as beyond the boundaries of what can be tolerated, making intolerance the morally appropriate response. Minority members can recognize these "us–them" implications of the classical tolerance discourse and therefore tend to reject the notion of being tolerated. However, religious minorities can also strategically deploy this classical discourse, for example, in response to societal demands for religious reform by arguing that these demands go against Western societies' own core principle of religious tolerance. Hence, the discourse of tolerance does not have to prevent minority political action and mobilization (see Brown, 2006) because minorities can deploy the classical meaning of the concept in ways that serve their group interests.

We have discussed different understandings of tolerance and intolerance and different ways in which these discourses can be discursively used to define normative practices and construe subject positions. Majority members can deploy the discourse of tolerance to take the moral high ground, and minority members can present tolerance as patronizing and falling short of being fully accepted. The discourse of tolerance can be flexibly used to serve various purposes, and there are other issues that we did not address but could be considered in future research. For instance, tolerance can be understood and presented as being domain specific and situation specific, and as relating to dissenting practices and beliefs rather than groups of people. For example, people might understand social tolerance differently than political tolerance (Vogt, 1997), and they might use the discourse of tolerance differently in situations in which they do or do not feel threatened by dissenting others (e.g., Capelos & Van Troost, 2012). Further, populist politicians can make a distinction between group psychology and group ideology by arguing, for example, that they have nothing against Muslim minorities as people but are intolerant toward Islam as a belief system (e.g., Verkuyten, 2013). Additionally, the meanings of tolerance and intolerance in the intergroup context may differ from those in interpersonal contexts. Parents can also tolerate risky behavior (smoking and drinking) of their children, or one can tolerate certain annoying behaviors of their partner, and people can be intolerant of conduct from members of their own group (e.g., flag burning and hate speech). Cultural understandings of tolerance and intolerance and the discursive usage of (in) tolerance discourse are likely to depend on various factors and conditions.

To conclude, the notion of tolerance and the problem of intolerance is increasingly discussed in relation to the growing cultural and religious diversity of societies, organizations, and institutions. Tolerance has been proposed as giving a positive notion to difference but has also been criticized for failing to do so because it reproduces notions of normative dissent and deviation. Tolerance can be understood in different ways, and there are different tolerance discourses that work out differently in construing “us–them” distinctions. The power of the (in)toleration discourse depends on the meanings that are deployed, the way in which these are used, and who is using them and for which purposes. Tolerance and intolerance are discourses that have different meanings which can be used for progressive or oppressive ends and therefore are not by definition desirable or undesirable. Sometimes, the struggle for equality and inclusion will benefit from deploying the classical or rather the modern tolerance discourse, and sometimes these discourses are used for repressive and depoliticizing ends.

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## Notes

1. [https://www.google.com/search?q=tolerance+word+cloud&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj8\\_d3Eu-DrAhUONowKHcQLA48Q\\_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=128](https://www.google.com/search?q=tolerance+word+cloud&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj8_d3Eu-DrAhUONowKHcQLA48Q_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=128).
2. [https://www.google.com/search?q=tolerance+word+cloud&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj8\\_d3Eu-DrAhUONowKHcQLA48Q\\_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=1280](https://www.google.com/search?q=tolerance+word+cloud&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj8_d3Eu-DrAhUONowKHcQLA48Q_AUoAXoECAsQAw&biw=1280).
3. <https://www.google.com/search?q=intolerance+word+cloud&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKewjW78bFu-DrAhVSYKQKHVS0CD4Q2-cCegQIABAA&oq=intolerance+word+cloud&gs>. For intolerance, there are also many word clouds that contain medical terms and that refer to lactose intolerance and so on.
4. De Sutter and De Lille in Magazine *Knack*, May 16, 2015 [https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/wij-willen-niet-getolereerd-worden-wij-willen-respect/article-normal-570685.html?cookie\\_check=1547197763](https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/wij-willen-niet-getolereerd-worden-wij-willen-respect/article-normal-570685.html?cookie_check=1547197763).
5. <https://www.dordrecht.net/nieuws/videoportretten-over-vrijheid-en-tolerantie-bij-het-hof-van-nederland-met-o-a-oezcan-akyol-2020-07-13>.

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