

ARTICLE

Toleration, discrimination, or acceptance? How majorities interpret and legitimize minority toleration depends on outgroup threat

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Abstract

The notion of tolerance is widely embraced in plural contexts, but little is known about how majority members interpret the toleration of minorities. With four studies, we investigated majority group members' interpretations of a minority toleration situation (compared to full acceptance and discrimination situations) as a function of outgroup threat. Study 1 ($N=214$) showed that higher perception of threat from Syrian refugees was associated with Turkish natives' stronger likelihood of interpreting a refugee toleration situation as 'acceptance'. Studies 2 ($N=161$, threatening context: Syrian refugees-Turkish natives) and 3 ($N=206$, non-threatening context: homosexuals-liberal heterosexual students) demonstrated that toleration was interpreted more as a form of acceptance in a high-threat context, whereas it was perceived more like discrimination in the non-threatening context. Experimental Study 4 ($N=150$, pre-registered, Muslims-Christians in the UK) indicated that increasing outgroup threat led to higher legitimization of toleration, which, in turn, related to lower support of minority rights. It is concluded that outgroup threat affects how people interpret the way in which minorities are treated, which has implications for initiatives and policies that try to stimulate tolerance towards minority groups.

KEYWORDS

acceptance, discrimination, intergroup toleration, refugees, threat

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"Tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them. Tolerance, thus, involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition. This intermediate status makes tolerance a puzzling attitude"

(Scanlon, 2003, p. 187).

INTRODUCTION

Tolerance of dissenting beliefs and ways of life is widely considered an indispensable ingredient for societal functioning (e.g. Creppell et al., 2008; Verkuyten, 2023; Von Bergen et al., 2012). Whereas intolerance causes tensions and hostilities between individuals and groups (e.g. Sekulić et al., 2006), tolerance makes it possible to live together despite contrasting and conflicting perspectives about how people, or even society, ought to behave. The question of tolerance arises when people dislike, disapprove of, or disagree about the value of different viewpoints and ways of life (Cohen, 2004; Forst, 2012; Furedi, 2011; King, 1976). Tolerance implies endurance or forbearance, and it makes little sense to say that we tolerate things that we like, approve of, or agree with. Research shows that people often recognize that they object to particular beliefs and behaviours of others, but simultaneously acknowledge the importance of not interfering and allowing others to live as they want (Verkuyten, 2023; Zitzmann et al., 2022).

Tolerance thus offers an important answer to the question of how to manage meaningful differences in societies, communities and organizations despite the inevitable disagreements, dislikes and disapprovals that will exist. It is, therefore, understandable that tolerance is widely embraced and promulgated in initiatives, interventions and policies across settings, for various sorts of differences and in relation to minority groups in particular (see Verkuyten, 2023). However, our ability to create, evaluate and implement appropriate measures is limited by tolerance being 'a puzzling attitude' and a complex construct that can be perceived and understood differently in practice (Cvetkovska et al., 2022; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Specifically, the notion of tolerance has been criticized by both progressive (Brown, 2006) and conservative critics (Carson, 2012), because it can be considered insufficient in being far too negative evaluatively, or rather as being too positive in terms of the behavioural acceptance of objectionable conduct (Verkuyten, 2023). As such, some people might view tolerance as an inadequate response to minorities ('mere tolerance') and see it as a form of discrimination ('unrestrained opposition'; quoted above), particularly because of its negative evaluation (dislike, disapproval) component that implies a lack of full recognition and appreciation that minority members need and deserve (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Cvetkovska et al., 2022). Other people might interpret tolerance as a construct that is rather similar to 'wholehearted acceptance', because of its 'non-interference' aspect which implies self-restraint in not acting on the negative evaluation that one has. These different interpretations imply different standards by which people judge situations and, therefore, can have important implications for the various initiatives and policies that try to encourage tolerance towards minority groups.

In the current study, we aimed to examine these possible differential interpretations of tolerance in relation to outgroup threat. We argued that how majority members construe and respond to minority group tolerance in practice will shift as a function of outgroup threat. To test these expectations, we conducted four studies whereby we examined how majority group members (Turkish citizens/heterosexuals in Turkey and Christians in the UK) interpreted and responded to the toleration of dissenting minority group members (Syrian refugees/homosexuals and Muslims) and whether outgroup threat predicted the legitimization of toleration and, in turn, support for minority rights.

Tolerance as a puzzling attitude

Tolerance, discrimination, and full acceptance can each be conceptualized to be comprised of two components: the attitudinal evaluation and the corresponding behaviour (Verkuyten, 2023). As shown

TABLE 1 Evaluation-behaviour combinations for discrimination, toleration and acceptance.

	Discrimination	Toleration	Acceptance
Evaluation	Dislike (-)	Dislike (-)	Appreciation (+)
Behaviour	Exclusion (-)	Inclusion (+)	Inclusion (+)

in Table 1, with both discrimination and acceptance, the evaluation and the corresponding behaviour match in terms of valence. More specifically, discrimination typically occurs when someone has negative feelings towards a minority group and is exclusive in terms of behaviour, such as disliking refugees for their dissenting cultural values and beliefs and excluding them in public and private life. Full acceptance, on the other hand, occurs when someone has a positive evaluation of a certain group and is inclusive in terms of behaviour, such as appreciating immigrants' culture and welcoming them into one's life. By contrast, tolerance sits in between these two forms of responses, with the disapproval involving the negative evaluation component of discrimination that is combined with the behavioural inclusion component of acceptance, such as someone who dislikes refugees' different ways of life, but nonetheless includes them in their personal and professional circles.

Tolerance is thus a 'puzzling attitude' because of its combination of a negative evaluation with inclusive behaviour. Previous research has shown that this puzzling nature of tolerance is often recognized by minority group members for whom 'being tolerated' stands as an intermediate majority response, which is evaluated better than 'being discriminated against', but worse than 'being fully accepted' (e.g. Cvetkovska et al., 2020). Although tolerance can create negative implications for minority group members' social and psychological well-being due to its 'dislike' aspect (e.g. Bagci et al., 2020; Cvetkovska et al., 2022), the inclusive behavioural aspect of tolerance may also stand as a critical barrier against discrimination (Verkuyten et al., 2019).

The combination of negative evaluation with inclusive behaviour is likely to make the understanding of 'being tolerated' even more complex and ambiguous for majority group members. Although for majorities, forms of discrimination and acceptance of minorities can be ambiguous and situational (e.g. West et al., 2022), this might be even more prevalent in cases where minorities' ways of life are tolerated, similar to the ambiguous nature of microaggressions (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Rather than considering the negative evaluation and inclusive behaviour in combination, people might want to avoid the implicated cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999) and focus more on one of the two components of tolerance: either the negative evaluation or the inclusive behaviour. As a result, in the former situation, toleration might be interpreted as a form of discrimination and might be less justifiable, while in the latter situation, it might be considered a form of full acceptance and a fair treatment that is justifiable. Considering the ambiguous nature of toleration, our first expectation, therefore, was that majority group members would vary in their interpretation and justification of a job-related minority toleration situation, shifting their understanding between discrimination, toleration, and full acceptance.

Tolerance and the perception of threat

We further posited that how a situation of toleration is interpreted and justified would depend on perceived outgroup threat. Research has shown that people generally tend to be less tolerant when they perceive outgroup threat (e.g. Crawford, 2014; Gibson, 2006). This does not only occur in highly stressful and very threatening contexts, such as the aftermath of a terrorist attack (Skitka et al., 2004) but also in more ordinary threatening situations (e.g. Capelos & Van Troost, 2012). The perception of outgroup threat is likely to trigger emotional responses of fear and anxiety (e.g. Jonas et al., 2014), which, in turn, are associated with negative responses towards outgroup members (e.g. Bagci, Verkuyten, & Canpolat, 2022). For example, when there is a potential threat to the ingroup, majority members are less likely to recognize and act against discriminatory behaviours towards minorities (e.g. Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015) and display resistance towards inclusive minority strategies (e.g. Callens et al., 2019).

Threat has been further identified as a critical social psychological mechanism that explains how negative attitudes turn into discriminatory behaviours (e.g. Pereira et al., 2018). With increased threat, people may become less concerned about how negatively minority group members are evaluated and focus more on the ‘not acting on the negative attitude’ (behavioural inclusive) aspect of tolerance. As a result, toleration as a potentially ambiguous intergroup process might be interpreted as a form of acceptance in which threatening minorities are included behaviourally. In contrast, when there is no outgroup threat, people are less likely to justify their negative attitudes and particularly their dislike and disapproval involved in toleration. This might make toleration a less legitimate treatment (‘mere tolerance’) and more like a form of discrimination in which the focus is on the negative evaluation of the non-threatening outgroup.

Tolerance and support for minority rights

Furthermore, we expected that the suggested shifts in the interpretation of toleration may relate to differential support of minority rights. Majorities' support for these rights is largely predicted by how much threat they perceive from the relevant outgroup (e.g. Landmann et al., 2019; Verkuyten, 2009), and how fairly this group is perceived to be treated in society. For example, Bağcı et al. (2017) demonstrated that increased minority discrimination resulted in increased support of minority rights among majority group members. Therefore, when a situation of toleration is considered a form of discrimination that is unjust, majority group members are likely to display more support for minority group rights. In contrast, full acceptance involves both appreciation and behavioural inclusion and is, therefore, more likely to create the feeling that the minority group already receives equality and recognition and may not need further support from the part of majority group members. Therefore, the more toleration is interpreted as a form of acceptance and the more it is legitimized, the less majorities are expected to display support for minority rights.

Overview of the studies

Study 1 examined how Turkish majority members interpret (either as toleration, discrimination or acceptance) and respond to a scenario depicting a minority group member (Syrian refugee) being tolerated in a job application, and whether higher perceived outgroup threat is related to increases in participants' interpretation of the scenario as acceptance, consequently relating to lower support of refugee rights. Studies 2 and 3 investigated how situations of either toleration, acceptance or discrimination are interpreted in relation to Syrian refugees (high-threat context; Study 2) and homosexuals (low-threat context; Study 3) in Turkey. Study 4 involved a pre-registered experiment examining the effect of a threat manipulation on the understanding of toleration of Muslims in the UK.

In all studies, we measured responses to different minority treatments by testing the perceived legitimacy of the relevant situation, as well as majority group members' support for minority rights. We conceptualized threat as a broad ‘outgroup threat’ construct, without distinguishing its specific forms in order to generalize the use of the same variable across the different intergroup contexts. We based our scenarios on both attitudinal and behavioural aspects of the treatment (see Table 1) and used forced-choice categorical responses as in previous studies (Cvetkovska et al., 2020). Such a procedure makes the differences between the various treatments (toleration, acceptance and discrimination) salient and allows us to compare the different meanings participants attributed to each of these treatments.

STUDY 1

Study 1 used a job-based toleration scenario involving a Syrian refugee to investigate how majority Turkish citizens would interpret this treatment (as either toleration, discrimination or acceptance).

Syrian refugees in Turkey constitute a devalued and threatening cultural 'other' in various societal contexts. Millions of Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey since the beginning of the war in Syria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] and Government of Turkey, 2021), and many of them moved into the cities and were granted work permits (Içduygu & Diker, 2017). As Syrian refugees gained more rights in Turkey, such as access to health and education as well as economic resources, zero-sum beliefs among many Turkish citizens emerged, with outgroup threats, prejudices and hostility increasing over time (Bagci, Baysu, et al., 2022; Erdoğan, 2020). Furthermore, Syrian refugees are perceived as being culturally dissimilar in their different ways of life leading to rejection and lower support for their rights (Içduygu, 2015; Yitmen et al., 2021).

We specifically tested participants' interpretation and legitimization of the toleration scenario and whether these responses were predicted by perceived outgroup threat. We hypothesized that the more people feel threatened by refugees' ways of life, the more likely they are to justify toleration by interpreting it as a situation of acceptance and to provide less support for refugee rights. We also expected higher legitimization of tolerance (i.e. as a more favourable attitude) to be linked to lower minority support.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

We collected data from 214 adults (all Turkish citizens, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.71$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.31$, 121 females, 87 males, 2 non-binary, 4 did not wish to declare), who were mostly undergraduate students from a private university. They were recruited through the university's internal data collection platform and were offered course credit in exchange for their participation.¹ Mean socio-economic status ('How would you rate your socio-economic status?' ranging from 1 = *Very low* to 7 = *Very high*) was $M_{\text{SES}} = 4.90$, $SD_{\text{SES}} = 1.02$. Political orientation ranging from 1 (*Extremely left*) to 10 (*Extremely right*) was $M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.48$. After providing their consent and filling out the demographic questions, participants read a vignette that depicted a hypothetical scenario whereby a Syrian job applicant was being tolerated (disliked but included, see Table 1) and then were asked various questions about the scenario.² G-power analyses for each study are included in the Appendix S1. All data in this project, along with Appendix S1 including full versions of the scales can be reached through this link: https://osf.io/efk2z/?view_only=b7f50eb8853b42589c34f708a92b9ec7.

Materials

The scenario

Based on previous research, we designed a toleration scenario that clearly conveyed a negative outgroup evaluation together with inclusive behaviour (e.g. Verkuyten et al., 2020). After reading the scenario below, participants were instructed to elaborate on their feelings and thoughts about it with a couple of sentences:

¹ Participants who were not Turkish citizens were planned to be excluded from the data since their majority status would be difficult to interpret; however, none of the participants were excluded from the data since all were Turkish citizens.

² We initially planned for this study to be an experimental one where threat was manipulated. However, our manipulation check across the control and high refugee threat conditions failed, $t(212) = .644$, $p = .520$. It is likely that a ceiling effect occurred, as both groups perceived substantially high levels of perceived threat, $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.14$, $M_{\text{control}} = 5.01$. Hence, data were combined into a single group.

...Muhammed is a Syrian refugee who lives in Turkey. After he arrives in Turkey, he starts to look for a job, and gets called for an interview. After the interview, the interviewer asks him to fill out a form that includes questions about his life in case there is anything additional he wants to share. Muhammed indicates in this form that he is a refugee. A week later, he receives an e-mail from the interviewer. The interviewer says that "We are happy to inform you that you got the job. Although our company does not welcome and appreciate refugees, it has the policy to give everyone who deserves it a chance, so good luck".

Measures

The response scale for all items ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree; Not at all*) to 7 (*Strongly agree; Very much*) unless otherwise stated.

Interpretation of the treatment

Participants were asked to choose a single-word definition for the treatment encountered in the scenario out of a list of three: 'Which one of the options below would provide the best description for the scenario you have just read?': (a) Toleration, (b) Discrimination, (c) Acceptance.

Perceived legitimacy of the treatment

We measured this construct with four items asking how *positive*, *acceptable*, *just* and *moral* participants perceived the treatment (e.g. 'How positive do you think this experience was?'). Higher scores indicated greater legitimization ($\alpha = .89$).

Support for minority rights

We measured support for minority rights with two items adapted from Yitmen and Verkuyten (2018): 'Syrian refugees should have the same rights and protection as Turkish citizens', and 'Syrian refugees should be protected against workplace discrimination' ($r = .58, p < .001$).

Perceived threat

Following previous research that used straightforward and single items to measure perceived rejection (e.g. Cvetkovska et al., 2020; Stronge et al., 2016), we measured perceived threat with a single item which asked, 'How much do you think Syrian refugees pose a threat to Turkey?' (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means and standard deviations for the main variables and intercorrelations are displayed in Table 2. Perceived threat was relatively high and higher threat was associated with perceiving the minority treatment in the job application as more legitimate and with lower support for minority rights although this association did not reach significance ($p = .07$).

Interpretation and perceived legitimacy

An examination of participants' interpretations showed that 36.4% of the sample interpreted the treatment in the scenario as toleration, whereas another 36.4% defined it as acceptance. A smaller percentage of participants (27.1%) described the situation as a form of discrimination. Participants' ratings of legitimacy were in line with their understanding; those who defined the toleration scenario as 'discrimination' rated it the least legitimate ($M = 2.72, SD = 1.18$), whereas those who defined the scenario as 'acceptance' rated it the most legitimate ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.36$), and those who

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables in Study 1.

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations		
				1	2	3
1. Perceived legitimacy	214	3.74	1.59	—	.181**	-.126 [†]
2. Perceived threat	214	5.07	1.42		—	-.349***
3. Support for minority rights	214	4.29	1.61			—

[†] $p = .07$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

defined it as 'toleration' rated it moderately legitimate ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.48$). Legitimacy ratings of the three interpretations differed substantially from each other, $F(2,211) = 40.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .278$. Tukey's post-hoc tests revealed that legitimacy ratings were significantly different between those who opted for tolerance versus discrimination ($p = .005$, 95% CI [1.192, 1.305]), tolerance versus acceptance ($p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.825, -.797]) and discrimination versus acceptance ($p < .001$, 95% CI [-2.615, -1.503]). However, there was no effect of participants' interpretation of toleration on support of minority rights, $F(2,211) = .131$, $p = .877$.

The role of perceived threat

A multinomial logistic regression analysis showed that perceived threat was a significant predictor of how participants interpreted the scenario, $\chi^2(2) = 8.002$, $p = .018$. As expected, participants who scored higher on perceived threat were more likely to define the scenario as acceptance in comparison with the baseline category of toleration ($b = .328$, $SE = .120$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [1.097, 1.756]). There was no effect of perceived threat on participants' likelihood of defining the scenario as discrimination when compared with the baseline category of toleration ($b = .112$, $SE = .120$, $p = .354$, 95% CI [-.883, 1.415]).

Further, as results of linear regression analyses show, participants who perceived higher threat from Syrian refugees rated the toleration experience as more legitimate ($b = .203$, $SE = .076$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [.054, .352]) and showed lower support for minority rights ($b = -.395$, $SE = .073$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.539, -.251]). The relationship between perceived legitimacy of the toleration scenario and minority rights support was negative, but non-significant ($b = -.128$, $SE = .069$, $p = .065$, 95% CI [-.264, .008]).

Overall, the extent to which there was disagreement as to how to interpret a situation of minority toleration is worthy of note and confirms previous research about how toleration can have different meanings (Cvetkovska et al., 2022; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Only one-third of the participants considered the scenario as toleration and an equal percentage interpreted it as acceptance. Importantly, this latter interpretation was more likely with higher outgroup threat, and threat was also associated with greater legitimization of the minority treatment. These findings correspond with our reasoning that threat justifies negative outgroup feelings which makes the 'non-interference' aspect of toleration more salient: with increased threat tolerance is more likely to be perceived as a form of acceptance, rather than discrimination.

STUDY 2

Study 2 used the same high-threat refugee context but considered three different scenarios in a randomized between-subjects design (toleration, discrimination and acceptance).³ This allowed us to inves-

³ We conducted a pilot study in Turkey with approximately 40 participants to check the clarity and validity of the scenarios. While we observed various levels of agreement with the meanings of the constructs, broadly, the scenarios were considered understandable and realistic.

tigate whether variation in the interpretation of the treatment is unique to toleration and whether situations of full acceptance and discrimination, in which the valence of evaluation and behaviour correspond, are more easily recognized as such. Importantly, in the scenarios, both the evaluative dislike component and the behavioural component were explicitly mentioned. Hence, we did not, for example, present the evaluative message of dislike in an indirect or subtle way because this would have introduced a confound in partly examining the distinction between an indirect message and an explicit one (i.e. the hiring decision). We also tested whether perceived legitimacy and minority support differ across the three scenarios and whether these two constructs are associated.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

We collected data from 161 participants through convenience sampling (108 females, 52 males, 1 other, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.90$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.09$; 123 Turkish, 38 other ethnic group which did not include any Syrian background, $M_{\text{SES}} = 4.21$, $SD_{\text{SES}} = 1.10$, political orientation $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.63$). Participants were recruited from the extended social circles of researchers and research assistants.⁴

Materials

In the demographics section of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, citizenship status, ethnic background, level of education, income, political orientation and religiosity. To investigate reactions to different minority treatments, we created three different scenarios where a Syrian refugee is either discriminated against, tolerated or accepted. Based on Table 1 and previous research (Cvetkovska et al., 2021; Verkuyten et al., 2020), we designed the scenarios according to the different combinations of evaluation and behaviour valence.

The scenarios

After providing their consent, participants were presented with a scenario depicting either a toleration, discrimination or acceptance job-application situation involving a Syrian refugee. Subsequently, they reported their feelings and thoughts. The toleration scenario was exactly the same as in Study 1, and the acceptance and discrimination scenarios only included different final statements about the treatment:

The discrimination scenario

We are sorry to inform you that you did not get the job. Our company does not welcome and appreciate refugees, and it does not have the policy to give just everyone a chance. So, I wish you good luck elsewhere

The acceptance scenario

We are happy to inform you that you got the job. Our company welcomes and appreciates refugees, and it has the policy to give everyone who deserves it a chance, so good luck!

⁴ Similar to Study 1, those participants who do not hold Turkish citizenship were planned to be excluded from the data since their majority status would be ambiguous; however, no one was excluded since all were Turkish citizens.

TABLE 3 Interpretations of the Three Scenarios in Study 2.

Scenario	N	Interpretation (%)		
		Toleration	Discrimination	Acceptance
Toleration	59	32.2	30.5	37.3
Discrimination	53	5.7	77.4	17.0
Acceptance	49	32.7	24.5	42.9
Total	161	23.6	44.1	32.3

Measures

Interpretation of the treatment, Perceived legitimacy of the treatment ($\alpha = .89$; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.80$) and Support for minority rights ($\alpha = .73$; $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.65$) were measured in the same way as in Study 1, except that we had an additional item in the support scale ("Would you be willing to share the incident in the scenario with others, for instance through social media?"). To check whether Syrian refugees were indeed seen as a threatening outgroup, we measured perceived threat with two items, for example: 'Syrian refugees in Turkey pose a threat to our lifestyle' ($r = .64$). The level of threat was again relatively high ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.87$) and associated with lower support for minority rights ($r = -.573$, $p < .001$). Importantly, perceived threat was similar across the three experimental conditions, $F(2,142) = .214$, $p = .807$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpretation and perceived legitimacy

As can be seen in Table 3, there was significant variation in the interpretation of the tolerance scenario, $\chi^2(4, N = 161) = 36.813$, $p < .001$. As in Study 1, roughly one-third of the participants reading this scenario interpreted the treatment as toleration, one-third as acceptance and another third as discrimination. In the acceptance scenario, around four in ten participants interpreted the treatment as acceptance, but one-third interpreted it as toleration and one in four considered it a case of discrimination. Therefore, a situation of acceptance was also interpreted differently and surprisingly even as a form of discrimination. The written comments indicated that this latter interpretation was related to considering the acceptance scenario as favouring Syrian applicants and thus as being potentially discriminatory towards Turkish majority members applying for the job. In the discrimination scenario, most participants interpreted the situation as discrimination which indicates that this treatment was more easily recognized than toleration and acceptance.

A one-way ANOVA demonstrated significant differences across the three scenarios for perceived legitimacy, $F(2,154) = 10.181$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .117$: the acceptance scenario was rated as the most legitimate one ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.76$), followed by the toleration ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.86$) and then the discrimination scenario ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.45$). Tukey's post-hoc tests revealed that there was a significant difference between discrimination and toleration ($p = .001$) and with acceptance ($p < .001$), but not between tolerance and acceptance ($p = .736$). Thus, a toleration situation involving a Syrian refugee as a member of a relatively threatening outgroup was interpreted again as being more similar to acceptance than to discrimination.

Support for minority rights

The three scenarios did not lead to different levels of support of Syrian refugees, $F(2,142) = .277$, $p = .758$, and perceived legitimacy was not significantly associated with minority rights support ($b = -.090$, $SE = .077$, $p = .242$, 95% CI $[-.242, .062]$).

In summary, Study 2 confirmed the findings of Study 1 in showing that a toleration situation can be understood in different ways, with only one-third of the participants interpreting the treatment as an example of toleration. However, this ambiguity also existed in the interpretation of the acceptance scenario, whereas there was much less ambiguity in the discrimination scenario. Consistent with Study 1 and our expectations, we found that participants were more likely to interpret a situation in which a member of a threatening outgroup is tolerated as a form of acceptance and to see this treatment as equally legitimate as being fully accepted. This indicates that the behavioural inclusion despite the explicit negative evaluation (tolerance), of a member of a threatening outgroup is perceived rather favourably.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we aimed to test the generalizability of the findings in Studies 1 and 2 by examining how the majority group (heterosexuals) interprets the three treatments targeting a different minority group member (homosexual individual) in a rather low-threat context (among heterosexual students from a liberal university). More specifically, we tested whether the toleration of a minority member in a low-threat context is more likely to be interpreted as a form of discrimination rather than acceptance. Additionally, as in Study 2, we investigated legitimacy and minority support across the different scenarios and whether legitimacy predicted support. Although in representative samples in Turkey, prejudice is prevalent against LGBTI individuals (Bagci et al., 2020; Pew Research, 2013), university students (particularly the ones in big cities and from more liberal private universities such as the current setting) often hold favourable attitudes towards LGBTI, with a substantial increase in the number of associations and student clubs, as well as action-oriented support (Bagci, Acar, et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2013). For example, an unpublished study collected from a similar student sample ($N=103$, Anonymous) indicated that attitudes (measured on a feeling thermometer that ranges from 0 to 100 degrees) towards Syrian refugees and LGBTI individuals substantially differ, with on average a negative attitude towards Syrian refugees ($M=41.95$, $SD=26.20$) and a positive attitude towards LGBTI ($M=78.81$, $SD=25.75$). In addition to their positive evaluation, and unlike refugees, LGBTI individuals are also less likely to represent a competitive outgroup in terms of job applications.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

We collected data from 206 undergraduate heterosexual students (93 men and 113 women, $M_{\text{age}}=21.92$, $SD_{\text{age}}=1.61$, $M_{\text{SES}}=4.58$, $SD_{\text{SES}}=1.12$, political orientation $M=3.64$, $SD=1.37$) in exchange for extra credit for one of their courses at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey.⁵ After providing their consent, participants filled out a demographics questionnaire in which they answered questions about their age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, income and political orientation. The rest of the procedure was the same as Study 2.

Materials

The scenarios

The scenarios we used in Study 2 were the same as in Study 3 except that the target of the experience was a homosexual man. Full scenarios are given in Appendix S1.

⁵ Participants who indicated they were not heterosexual were excluded from the study.

TABLE 4 Interpretations of the Three Scenarios in Study 3.

Scenario	N	Interpretation (%)		
		Toleration	Discrimination	Acceptance
Toleration	75	34.7	49.3	16
Discrimination	71	0	98.6	1.4
Acceptance	60	5	15	80
Total	206	14.1	56.3	29.6

Measures

We used the same measures as in Study 2 by adapting the scales to the relevant intergroup context. Reliabilities for the measures ranged from acceptable to excellent: Perceived legitimacy of the treatment ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.96$) and Support for minority rights ($\alpha = .57$, $M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.05$). As was expected, perceived threat ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) was very low in this context ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.06$) and did not differ between the three experimental conditions, $F(2,203) = 1.070$, $p = .345$. Higher threat was associated with lower rights' support ($r = -.428$, $p < .001$), and higher legitimacy was also associated with lower support ($r = -.306$, $p < .001$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpretation and perceived legitimacy

As can be seen in Table 4, participants differed less or more in their interpretations depending on the scenario they were presented with, $\chi^2(4, N = 206) = 152.674$, $p < .001$. In the toleration scenario, approximately one-third of participants interpreted this treatment as toleration, which is similar to the findings in Study 2. However, unlike Study 2 and in line with our expectation, the percentage of participants interpreting this scenario as a situation of discrimination was much higher with almost half of the participants seeing it as a form of discrimination. Compared to Study 2, the discrimination and acceptance scenarios were both more likely to be recognized as such. These results show that the greatest level of ambiguity emerged regarding the interpretation of toleration, and this time, the toleration situation was perceived to be more similar to discrimination than to acceptance.

A one-way ANOVA demonstrated significant differences for perceived legitimacy, $F(2,203) = 73.464$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .420$, such that the acceptance scenario was rated as the most legitimate one ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.81$), followed by the toleration situation ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.55$) and the discrimination scenario which was considered the least legitimate ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 1.09$). Tukey's post-hoc tests revealed that all pairwise comparisons were significant ($p_s < .001$). Thus, minority toleration was perceived to be more legitimate than discrimination, but less legitimate than acceptance.

Support for minority rights

Another one-way ANOVA showed significant differences across scenarios in terms of support for LGBTI rights, $F(2,203) = 5.78$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .054$. While support for these rights in the toleration condition ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 0.89$) was very high and did not significantly differ from support in the discrimination condition ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 1.04$, $p = .990$), participants in the acceptance condition reported lower support ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.16$) compared to the toleration and discrimination conditions ($p = .010$ and $p = .008$, respectively).

In summary, Study 3 showed that in a low-threat intergroup context, the understanding of a toleration treatment was again ambiguous, but this time it was more likely to be interpreted as a form of discrimination. Additionally, and in contrast to Study 2, discrimination and acceptance were more readily recognized as such. We further found that in terms of legitimacy, toleration was perceived to be in the middle of acceptance and discrimination, and situations of tolerance and discrimination elicited equally high levels of minority rights support. These findings support our expectation that in a non-threatening intergroup context, toleration with its negative evaluation component of dislike is considered more like a form of discrimination and perceived to be less legitimate than acceptance.

STUDY 4

The first three studies provided evidence for a consistent ambiguity in the understanding of toleration, depending on the intergroup context. We specifically argued that the different findings in Studies 2 and 3 could be explained by the level of threat posed by the target outgroup, which is implied by the strong difference in perceived threat levels in Study 2 (from Syrian refugees) and Study 3 (from LGBTI individuals). However, we did not directly test the causal effect of threat on the interpretation and perceived legitimacy of the toleration treatment. It is possible that differences across the two studies were due to the nature of the target outgroup, regardless of threat perceptions. Different minority groups may elicit different emotions and behavioural reactions (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) and may vary in terms of egalitarian normative concerns they evoke (e.g. Pereira et al., 2009). For example, among university students, explicit negative evaluations of homosexuals might be considered socially less acceptable and, therefore, as a form of discrimination, compared to the increasing country-wide expressed negativity towards Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Therefore, in order to test whether threat does indeed causally explain how majority group members interpret a minority toleration situation, we conducted a pre-registered experiment in Study 4 (https://osf.io/b74dk/?view_only=779b22d5619c4dc4bc4e6c6e44a7e654). We manipulated the perception of threat from Muslims among the majority Christians in the UK. In this study, we further added a more general description of toleration to the scenario to make sure that participants have a basic understanding of that notion. Furthermore, we explicitly focused on disapproval of Muslim values and lifestyles rather than mere negativity towards Muslims as a social category. Theoretical conceptualizations highlight that toleration involves the disapproval or dislike of specific beliefs and practices, rather than general outgroup negativity (e.g. Bader, 2013; Verkuyten, 2023). Tolerance is considered to signify an approach towards dissenting others 'insofar as it pertains to beliefs and opinions and forms of behaviour linked to them' (Furedi, 2011, p. 11). Thus, the proper objects of tolerance are not social categories per se but rather specific beliefs, behaviours and practices that one disapproves of (Horton, 1996). However, categorical differences can be culturalized and category members can be disliked because of the group beliefs, values, norms and acts held to define them. In Studies 1 to 3 we focused on the target group of Syrian refugees that in Turkey is considered to have culturally dissimilar beliefs and practices and on homosexuals who are perceived to have a dissenting way of life. Therefore, in Study 4, we explicitly focused on the disapproval of the norms, practices and lifestyle of the Muslim outgroup.

We hypothesized that with increased threat, participants would (a) be more likely to interpret a Muslim's toleration scenario as acceptance than discrimination, (b) legitimize toleration more, (c) display lower support for Muslims' rights and that (d) we would observe a mediation effect where threat would lead to higher legitimization of toleration and, in turn, would be associated with lower support, since higher legitimization of toleration should diminish the perceived necessity of further support for minority rights. Such an effect would provide insights into how higher legitimization of toleration could have tangible negative consequences for minority group members when it leads majority group members to withdraw their support.

METHOD

Participants

We collected data from 150 participants who identified as Christians (111 females, 37 males, 2 non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 41.24$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.99$, $M_{\text{SES}} = 3.93$, $SD_{\text{SES}} = 1.10$, political orientation $M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.64$) through a survey platform in the UK (Academic Prolific). We specifically recruited those participants who previously declared to be Christian on the survey platform and were based in the UK. After providing their consent, participants filled out a demographics questionnaire in which they answered questions about their age, gender, income, political orientation and religiosity. Subsequently, they were presented with the experimental material and the related questions.

Procedure and materials

The threat manipulation

Based on previous research (Pavetich & Stathi, 2021) participants were randomly given a short newspaper report either about how Muslims' values and morals were incompatible with the progressive values of the Western World (threat condition) or an unrelated report about agriculture in the UK (non-threatening control condition; see Appendix S1 for the scripts of the two conditions).

The toleration scenario

After the manipulation, we first provided participants with a brief text that included a description of toleration (objection without negative behaviour) and an example that depicts a situation in which a Muslim man was being tolerated (similar to Studies 1–3):

Sometimes, there might be situations in which non-Muslim people have objections to Muslims' norms, practices, and lifestyle, but do not behave negatively. Please read the script below which constitutes an example of this:

Mohammad is a Muslim immigrant who recently moved to the UK. He started to look for a job and got called for an interview. After the interview, the interviewer asked him to fill out a form that included questions about him in case there was anything additional he wanted to share. Mohammad indicated in this form that he was a Muslim. A week later, he received an e-mail from the interviewer. The interviewer said: "We are happy to inform you that you got the job! Although Muslim community's values and lifestyles are not really appreciated here, our company has a policy to give everyone deserving a chance, so good luck".

Measures

The response scale for all items ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree; Not at all*) to 7 (*Strongly agree; Very much*) unless otherwise stated.

Manipulation check

We checked whether the script in the experimental condition induced threat with two questions: 'How much threat do you think Muslim people pose to your country's values?', and 'How harmful

TABLE 5 Interpretations of the Toleration Scenario across Conditions in Study 4.

Condition	Interpretation (%)		
	Toleration	Discrimination	Acceptance
Threat	50.67	36	13.33
Control	34.67	56	9.33
Total	42.67	46	11.33

do you think Muslims are for Western morals and values?' (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*) ($r = .84$, $p < .001$).

Interpretation of the treatment, Perceived legitimacy of the treatment ($\alpha = .95$; $M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.54$) and Support for minority rights ($r = .82$, $p < .001$, $M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.29$), were measured with the same (adapted) measures as in Studies 2 and 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation check

The manipulation check demonstrated that perceived threat was significantly higher in the threat condition ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.74$) compared to the control condition ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.53$), with a medium effect size, $t(146) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, $d = .52$.

Interpretation and perceived legitimacy

A total of 56% of the participants in the non-threatening control condition interpreted the situation as discrimination, whereas this was 36% in the experimental threat condition, $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 6.040$, $p = .049$ (see Table 5). In addition, in the threat condition, an interpretation of acceptance was somewhat more likely compared to the control condition. Thus, as expected, in a non-threatening intergroup context participants tended to interpret the treatment as one of discrimination, whereas in a threatening context, they were less likely to do so and showed a small tendency to consider it as a form of acceptance (see Study 2).

Participants in the threat condition also perceived toleration to be more legitimate ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.70$) in comparison with those in the non-threatening control condition ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(148) = 2.85$, $p = .005$, $d = .20$. Thus, being tolerated appeared to be perceived as a more fair and acceptable treatment for a minority group member in a threatening intergroup context.

Support for minority rights

A further independent samples t -test showed that participants in the threat condition endorsed similarly high levels of support for Muslims ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 1.29$) as participants in the control condition ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(148) = -1.01$, $p = .314$. Given that there was a significant association between perceived legitimacy and support ($r = -.364$, $p < .001$), we additionally tested whether there was an indirect link between threat and support of rights, via legitimacy. A PROCESS mediation model (Model 4) demonstrated that higher levels of threat resulted in greater legitimization of toleration, which, in turn, related to lower levels of support for Muslims (indirect effect of threat on support for Muslims, $b = -.084$, $SE = .037$, 95% CI $[-.167, -.023]$).

Overall, Study 4 revealed that when outgroup threat was low (control condition), participants tended to interpret minority toleration as a form of discrimination. When threat increased, on the other hand, participants interpreted the same treatment less as a form of discrimination and more in terms of toleration and acceptance. These findings complement the first three studies in demonstrating that outgroup threat plays a critical role in the interpretation of toleration. Perceived legitimacy of the toleration situation also significantly differed as a function of threat; when outgroup threat increased, toleration was legitimized more. This increased legitimacy of toleration was, in turn, associated with lower support for minority rights.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Increasing forms of diversity have led many countries, organizations and institutions to promote and embrace tolerance in order to establish equality and peaceful coexistence. However, tolerance is a complex construct, since it involves behaviourally enduring things that one has a negative attitude towards (Cohen, 2004; Furedi, 2011). The notion of tolerance can be criticized for its negative evaluation aspect, which would make it an insufficient minority treatment ('mere tolerance'), similar to forms of discrimination. However, tolerance has also been considered sufficiently positive in its behavioural inclusionary aspect, which makes it an acceptable form of treatment (Verkuyten, 2023).

With four studies conducted in two countries, we investigated how a job-related minority toleration scenario is interpreted and legitimized as a function of outgroup threat. Specifically, Study 1 first assessed how people evaluated a toleration scenario and showed that higher perceived outgroup threat was associated with a greater likelihood of interpreting toleration as acceptance in the context of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Studies 2 and 3 investigated how participants evaluated toleration compared to acceptance and discrimination and demonstrated that toleration is interpreted more as acceptance in the intergroup context of relatively high threat (Syrian refugees) and more as a form of discrimination in the context of low threat (LGBTI students). Finally, Study 4 tested experimentally whether induced outgroup threat created differences in the perception of minority toleration in the context of British Muslims. Increased threat perception was found to result in greater legitimization of toleration, which, in turn, was related to lower support for rights.

Overall, we observed that in all studies toleration was an ambiguous treatment that can be interpreted in different ways and, in particular, as a form of discrimination or of acceptance, in line with its proposed intermediate status as a 'puzzling attitude' (Scanlon, 2003). However, this variation was not unique to toleration, since the discrimination and acceptance scenarios were also perceived differently across participants, which complements previous research on how majorities subjectively interpret various minority treatments, including microaggressions (e.g. Lui & Quezada, 2019; West et al., 2022). Importantly, we found across the four studies that the tendency to interpret minority toleration more like a form of discrimination or like full acceptance changed as a function of outgroup threat. When outgroup threat was relatively high, majority group members were more likely to justify the negative evaluation involved in toleration so that its inclusionary aspect makes toleration a more acceptable form of treatment. As suggested by experimental Study 4, such a view of tolerance was then associated with less support for minority group rights. In contrast, when threat was low, the negative evaluation of tolerance was more difficult to justify, potentially making it more discriminatory. These results were found while using different conceptualizations of threat across the studies. In Study 1 we focused on individual differences in perceived outgroup threat, in Studies 2 and 3 on existing intergroup contexts, and in Study 4, situational threat was experimentally induced. Thus, we found evidence for the role of threat using different approaches and in relation to different minority target groups in two countries. This suggests a rather generalizable role of outgroup threat among majority group members in their interpretation and justification of toleration (Gibson, 2006).

The current research makes a novel contribution to the literature by being the first to systematically investigate the meaning of minority toleration from the perspective of majority group

members. Minority members distinguish the experience of 'being tolerated' from 'being discriminated against' and 'being fully accepted', but their interpretation of specific events and experiences is not self-evident and open to debate (Cvetkovska et al., 2022). Our findings indicate that toleration also has different meanings for majority members (see also Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Specifically, the findings suggest the ambiguous and context-dependent nature of what it means to tolerate a minority group member.

Despite these contributions, there are several limitations that provide directions for future research. First, we situated our scenarios in an organizational context, and it remains to be seen how majority members interpret toleration in other settings. Situations might differ in what is expected and considered normative, and this might affect how people interpret and justify particular decisions (Velthuis et al., 2022). For example, the language of diversity and the appreciation of differences might be dominant in educational settings and voluntary associations making 'wholehearted acceptance' normative and 'mere toleration' rather inappropriate. Organizations and institutions may also differ in their type and degree of diversity policies and this matters for the normative context and whether specific decisions are considered appropriate or not. Furthermore, the interpretation of toleration might depend on the type of difference that is involved. We focused on tolerance of ethnic (Syrian), sexual and religious minorities, but people can also tolerate other dissenting normative and cultural differences which, for example, can be more easily changed or learned such as specific habits, opinions and ideological beliefs.

Second, the role of outgroup threat could be further examined by considering negative outgroup emotions. We reasoned that perceived threat triggers feelings such as fear and anxiety that justify negative actions making toleration more adequate and just and consequently more similar to acceptance. However, we did not assess these negative emotions and, therefore, did not examine whether these do indeed influence the interpretation and justification of the treatment presented in the scenarios (Capelos & Van Troost, 2012). Additionally, future research should examine whether a high-threat context with the related negative outgroup feelings makes it more likely that people focus on the inclusive behavioural component of tolerance, whereas in a low-threat context, people are more likely to focus on the negative evaluation component. Moreover, it is possible that specific types of threats play a particularly important role in the relevant intergroup context. For example, in the context of LGBTBI and Muslim minorities symbolic threats might be especially relevant, whereas in the case of refugees, realistic threats might additionally drive negative feelings and actions (Cheung et al., 2022).

Third, methodologically, our measures of toleration could be improved in further studies. While we used a single scenario and asked participants to define the described situation using a forced response scale, participants' reasons for choosing one or the other of the three constructs remain unknown. As such, qualitative research that investigates how majority group members interpret the various situations may be worthwhile (Cvetkovska et al., 2022). Additionally, we conducted four studies that relied on convenient samples and university students which means, for example, that most participants were relatively highly educated. However, we investigated different contexts and countries, and the finding that majority members can interpret situations of toleration differently has also been found among a national sample (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Additionally, the role of outgroup threat in the interpretation and practicing of tolerance has been found among national samples (Gibson, 2006). Thus, the ambiguity of tolerance and the role of threat is likely to be a more general phenomenon.

Finally, all our scenarios included an explicit statement of either positive or negative evaluation of the target outgroup member, with the aim of making both the evaluative and the behavioural aspects of the situation similarly explicit to participants. Yet, such direct communication of (dis)like might have created a particular understanding of the overall situation. For example, toleration might have been interpreted more like a form of discrimination because the dislike was directly expressed and communicated. Although discrimination can be indirect and subtle, an explicit expression of outgroup dislike might be counter-normative and more likely to be considered a form of discrimination (e.g. Jones et al., 2016). More subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination are less likely to be recognized as such and might be justified as forms of tolerance (Dickson, 2012). However, the way in which an open expression of dislike is perceived can also depend on country-level norms.

For example, in Turkey, the public expression of explicit negative evaluations of various minority groups is quite common in media platforms and public discourses (e.g. Bozdağ, 2020). In contrast, in Study 4 in the context of the UK, and even in the high-threat condition, British participants rarely interpreted the situation as one of full acceptance, suggesting stricter societal norms about the acceptability of negative outgroup evaluations. Further research could examine how different minority treatments and tolerance in particular are understood when the negative evaluation is expressed in more indirect and subtle ways.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, tolerance offers an important answer to the question of how to manage meaningful differences in organizations and communities, but it is also a complex construct and ‘puzzling attitude’ because the negative evaluation and positive behaviour do not correspond. As in studies showing various types of minority treatments to be ambiguous and context-dependent (e.g. West et al., 2022), we found the interpretation of toleration to also vary, partly as a function of outgroup threat. Future research is needed to understand the various conditions under which toleration is perceived as a more or less appropriate and fair treatment towards minorities in societies. A broader understanding of toleration from the perspective of majority group members is likely to inform policies and initiatives that are designed to improve greater equality across meaningful group differences in a range of contexts.

Policies and initiatives that try to stimulate toleration might be interpreted quite differently depending on the intergroup situation, which can lead to unintended consequences. For example, in a non-threatening context, people might consider tolerance as a form of exclusion, whereas in threatening contexts the focus might be on the behavioural inclusion of tolerance rather than the lack of appreciation. These different interpretations can have different consequences for minority members who are being tolerated (Verkuyten, 2023). In the former context, policies of tolerance can be considered misdirected in not addressing forms of discrimination, and in the latter situation, these policies can be considered insufficient (‘mere tolerance’) because minority members want to be appreciated and respected (Bergsieker et al., 2010). Hence, a greater focus on how different forms of minority treatment are interpreted, and the role of perceived threat in this can provide useful information for assessing why and when specific interventions for improving intergroup relations might be more or less successful and what the implications are for minority members.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Berfin Acar: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Sabahat Cigdem Bagci:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; supervision; resources; writing – original draft. **Maykel Verkuyten:** Conceptualization; supervision; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved in this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data and supplementary materials are uploaded to the OSF Storage: https://osf.io/efk2z/?view_only=b7f50eb8853b42589c34f708a92b9ec7.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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