Abstract

Accepting the disliked. The practice and promotion of tolerance.

Four propositions guided and informed the central research question of this dissertation. First, the occurrence of intolerance is a universal phenomenon, part and parcel of social categorization and intergroup differentiation processes that take place naturally within and between groups. Second, the mobilization of intolerance is easier than the mobilization of tolerance, precisely because of this ‘natural’ occurrence of intolerance towards out-groups. Third, since it is not self-evident to respond tolerantly towards things one dislikes, disagrees with or disapproves of, tolerance is to be learned. And such learning takes place through intragroup interaction rather than intergroup contact. Fourth, social norms play a pivotal role in the promotion of tolerance. It is through the diffusion of tolerant norms within groups that tolerant attitudes and behaviour on the part of their members is promoted.

The central research question was addressed from various angles. First, a qualitative study examined the promotion of tolerance at three Dutch secondary schools. Schools were selected on the basis of the different philosophies of life they endorse, assuming that this would lead to value conflicts to emerge at school. The focus of the analyses was such instances of value conflict, between values connected with the philosophy a school socializes its pupils into and the value of tolerance. I assumed and found that when tolerance is put to practice, such value conflicts are likely to occur and interfere with the promotion of tolerance. For example, how do teachers deal with the promotion of tolerance towards homosexuality when that is intolerable according to their own religious values? Or how do teachers deal with intolerance among Muslim pupils towards those criticizing Islam? The study showed that the philosophy of life a school endorses determines where the line between the tolerable and the intolerable is drawn. So social categorization and intergroup differentiation appear to go hand in hand, resulting in intolerance towards deviation from group values. Teachers experience dilemmas when they need to promote tolerance towards things they reject on the basis of the school’s world view. Teachers without exception aimed to promote tolerance at school. In practice, however, they frequently communicated group norms about what is tolerable and what is not, thereby restricting the practice of tolerance in the classroom. By contrast, when teachers do encourage pupils to discuss diverging opinions, including those opinions a teacher considers intolerable, they stimulate the practice of tolerance in the classroom. Intragroup norm communication thus appeared essential to the learning of tolerance at school.

This first study also provided an insight into the conceptually complex nature of tolerance, calling for its concise operationalization in the subsequent research. The study showed that support for the principles of tolerance does not automatically imply its practice in specific cases. Since the practice of tolerance had my primary interest, not support for global tolerant values, a measure of practiced tolerance was required for the subsequent research.
Therefore I conducted three studies in order to develop and validate a quantitative measure of the practice of tolerance in specified and concrete cases relevant to the Dutch research context. As a result of these studies, I constructed a practiced tolerance scale based on vignettes, assessing the practice of tolerance of five Muslim practices – a specific subject of tolerance and intolerance that appeared particularly relevant to the Dutch research context. Practised tolerance varied considerably between respondents, but also within respondents depending on the specific Muslim practice at issue. Some practices appeared more tolerable than others, although, on average, tolerance was skewed to the intolerable side of the scale. The practised tolerance scale proved to be a valid and reliable measure of practised tolerance, predicting tolerant and intolerant behavioural inclinations of Dutch non-Muslims more adequately than existing political tolerance scales. In addition, the research indicated that, on average, support for the principles of tolerance is stronger than tolerance in concrete and specific cases. Furthermore, prejudice towards a tolerated group has a stronger effect on practised tolerance than it has on political tolerance. And lastly, the well-educated are more politically tolerant than the less well-educated – although, when it comes to practised tolerance, these two groups respond in largely the same way. Hence, the newly developed measure seems to be less sensitive to effects of educational attainment.

In the third and final part of the research, the newly developed tolerance scale was used in an experimental survey study testing the effects of norms on tolerance. The hypothesis was that respondents presented with tolerant norm communication would respond more tolerantly towards Muslim practices than those subjected to intolerant norm communication. This study demonstrated the complexities of promoting tolerance through norm communication, showing that this is not as easy as has been assumed in previous research, and also revealed that pre-existing attitudes towards Muslims both hinder and help the promotion of tolerance through norm communication. Among those holding relatively positive attitudes towards Muslims, tolerant norm communication is more likely to be noticed and to stimulate tolerant attitudes and behavioural inclinations. However, those holding relatively negative attitudes towards Muslims seem inclined to perceive intolerant norms, withstand tolerant norm communication. Moreover, it appeared considerably easier to mobilize intolerance of Muslim practices than tolerance. Even the relatively tolerant appeared reluctant to act upon their tolerant attitudes. The results of this study mitigate the expectancy that tolerant norm communication effectively promotes tolerance of a generally disliked subject of tolerance, in this case Muslims’ religious practices. The idea that norm-inducing interventions are a promising pathway for the promotion of tolerance should thus be nuanced on the basis of these results. When people perceive only those norms that align with their pre-existing anti-Muslim attitudes, and ignore counter-attitudinal norm information, tolerant norm communication will not yield tolerance of disliked practices.

With regard to the four propositions, the following can be concluded. Intolerance does indeed appear to be a universal and natural phenomenon. The qualitative study showed how every school (i.e. group) limits tolerance towards ideas, groups and practices that oppose the group’s central values. Even if the principle of tolerance is propagated at school, pupils’ deviation from in-group values and norms is dilemmatic for teachers aiming to promote tolerance. Nevertheless, teachers appear to have some influence over pupils’ tolerance through the way they deal with instances of value conflict. When
teachers encourage discussion about diverging opinions, they may increase the chance that pupils actually learn to put tolerance into practice. The experimental survey study showed how tolerant norm communication is easily ignored or overseen when tolerance of generally disliked practices is required. This is a second indication that intolerance is a ‘default’ mindset; not only did most people reject the Muslim practices at issue, they also perceived consensus for their intolerant attitudes, despite attitude-incongruent norm communication. Pre-existing negative attitudes towards Muslims were hard to overcome, given the limited effect of tolerant norm communication.

Furthermore, those inclined to react tolerantly were not as willing to put their attitudes into actions as those inclined to react intolerantly. With regard to the second proposition, therefore, it should be concluded that the mobilization of intolerance is indeed easier than the mobilization of tolerance. Lastly, intragroup communication, specifically of norms, appears to play a vital role in the promotion of tolerance. The qualitative study suggested that, through the communication of group norms, pupils learn what is to be tolerated and what is not. But the experimental survey indicated that the effect of norms on tolerance is not as straightforward as is suggested in the literature. Individuals not only derive norms from intragroup communication, they also perceive such norms to be in line with their own attitudes, as the study in Chapter 5 demonstrated. So when one is intolerant of Muslim practices, one also perceives intolerant norms, which in turn justify intolerant attitudes and actions. As long as intolerance towards Muslim practices is more common than tolerance, it will be particularly hard to promote tolerance through tolerant norm communication.