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Testing the Robustness of the Association Between Personal Respect Norms and Tolerance in Polarized Contexts

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Abstract

Societies worldwide are challenged by heated debates around important societal topics like migration policies, gender equality, transgender rights, and climate change. These debates are perceived as highly polarized thereby increasing intolerance toward opposing opinions. Previous research has shown that respecting "disapproved others" as equals might foster tolerance, even in polarized contexts. Yet, an empirical test to establish whether the relationship link between respect and tolerance toward opposing others is still observable in the case of extreme opinions, strong disapproval of opposing opinions, and even strong perceived threats from opposing others, is still missing. In our research, we will test whether the strength of the association between personal respect norms and the tolerance of opposing opinions depends on the extremity of one's own opinion, the strength of disapproval of the opposing opinion, and the perceived threat from the out-group. Results based on survey data from more than 12,000 respondents from 12 European countries reveal that the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is unaffected by extremity, strength of disapproval, and perceived threat. The pattern of results is replicated with few exceptions across all 12 countries and six different controversial social topics. This is held in most cases even when considering differences in political views. We discuss the implications of our findings, their robustness, and the potential limits of the respect–tolerance link.

Keywords

norms; polarization; respect; tolerance

1. Introduction

In many societies, discourses on important social topics are perceived as becoming increasingly polarized (Koudenburg & Kashima, 2022). Research on perceived polarization highlights its negative consequences even beyond those of actual polarization (Lelkes, 2016; Westfall et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2020), especially when it is accompanied by a strong aversion toward those who hold opposing opinions (i.e., affective polarization; see, e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019) and an "us versus them" mentality (Jost et al., 2022). Some of the negative consequences include increased intolerance, avoidance of opposing groups, and open hostility (e.g., Berntzen et al., 2024). In the face of perceived polarization and the growing dislike and distrust toward individuals with opposing opinions, a promising strategy is to foster tolerance by cultivating respect for "disapproved others" (i.e., grounded in the recognition of others as equals; Renger & Simon, 2011; Simon, 2023; Verkuyten et al., 2023). Studies indicate that respect for groups whose cultural practices or political views are disapproved can enhance tolerance toward these practices or views (e.g., Eschert & Simon, 2019; Simon, 2023; Velthuis et al., 2021). Consequently, fostering respect appears to be an effective way to increase tolerance in polarized contexts, particularly when respect is perceived to be a generalized principle in society (i.e., a social norm) and applied to all societal groups and individuals, including those with differing opinions. Initial empirical evidence supports this, showing that respect norms are associated with tolerance toward disapproved and disliked others (Schäfer et al., 2024). However, the role of personal norms (internalized norms) of respect in promoting tolerance has not yet been evaluated and research on potential boundary conditions for the respect norms–tolerance link is limited. Thus, it remains unclear how respect norms are manifest in those with extreme positions (i.e., when disapproval of another opinion is stronger, or when one's own opinion is more extreme) or who feel threatened by those with opposing opinions. For instance, studies suggest that intolerance and negative behaviours toward groups and individuals with differing opinions are more likely when opinions are more extreme (Bos et al., 2023; Van Boven et al., 2012; Westfall et al., 2015), or when individuals feel threatened by those with opposing opinions (Carriere et al., 2022). To fully understand the potential of respect norms in fostering tolerance in polarized contexts, it is crucial to investigate potential boundary conditions. This study addresses the following general research question: Does the relationship between personal respect norms and tolerance persists when individuals hold extreme positions on a controversial social topic and perceive a greater threat from those holding opposing opinions?

1.1. The Respect–Tolerance Link as a Means to Counter Polarization

Tolerance is often regarded as a fundamental cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling individuals and groups with differing views, opinions, and practices to coexist peacefully (Verkuyten, 2023). Importantly, tolerance does not require abandoning one's own beliefs or ceasing to disapprove of opposing opinions. Instead, it involves accepting differing beliefs, opinions, and practices while maintaining one's disapproval. This nuanced understanding of tolerance arises from balancing reasons for disapproval with reasons to accept dissenting opinions, beliefs, or practices (e.g., Verkuyten et al., 2023). When the reasons for acceptance outweigh those for rejection, tolerance becomes possible (Gibson, 1989; Sullivan et al., 1979; Verkuyten, 2023). Respecting others as equal fellow citizens, which is a fundamental component of democratic societies, serves as one promising counterweight (i.e., the respect conception of tolerance; Forst, 2013; Scanlon, 2003). Indeed, recent research shows that respect is a powerful predictor of tolerance: Individuals who respect others as equals, despite their disapproval of them, are more likely to grant them the

rights to live according to their chosen way of life (Simon, 2023; Simon & Schaefer, 2016; Zitzmann et al., 2022). Moreover, research suggests that the respect conception of tolerance is particularly promising in highly diverse societies, proving more effective than other forms of tolerance, such as coexistence tolerance (Velthuis et al., 2021). For a discussion of different conceptions of tolerance see Forst (2013), Hjerm et al. (2020), and Verkuyten and Yogeeswaran (2017). There is also initial evidence that respecting others as equals helps to overcome bias in polarized political contexts. Eschert and Simon (2019) experimentally showed that inducing respect can reduce the negative evaluation of out-group arguments on contested topics. Thus, promoting respect seems to be an effective strategy for fostering tolerance in polarized contexts, especially when respect is perceived as a generalized principle in society (i.e., a social norm) applied to all societal groups and individuals with varying perspectives (Schäfer et al., 2024).

1.2. Respect Norms and Tolerance

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that perceived social norms play a key role in shaping individual behaviour, serving as the informal rules that guide our daily lives (Bicchieri et al., 2023; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Perceiving what others approve of (injunctive norms) or commonly do (descriptive norms) can motivate individuals to act similarly (Cialdini et al., 1990; Miller & Prentice, 2016; Nolan, 2021). Research has shown that perceived social norms help to improve intergroup relations such as reducing hate speech (Bilewicz et al., 2021), promoting positive attitudes towards out-groups, greater appreciation of diversity (Murrar et al., 2020), willingness for intergroup contact (Meleady, 2021), and interest in cross-group friendships (Tropp et al., 2014). There is also evidence that social norms of tolerance can foster political tolerance (i.e., the willingness to permit the expression of ideas or interests that one opposes; Neuner & Ramirez, 2023). Moreover, in a recent cross-European survey study, Schäfer et al. (2024) showed that inclusivity norms—norms that define how to approach members of society with differing opinions by emphasizing respect, dialogue, and unity—are associated with greater tolerance, increased willingness to collaborate, and reduced tendencies to avoid individuals with opposing opinions. These findings provide the first evidence for the potential of respect norms to avoid the negative consequences of increased levels of perceived polarization in societies. Further experimental evidence shows that respect norms increase tolerance toward LGBTQ+ rights in Poland (Estevan-Reina et al., 2024).

In our research, we specifically focus on personal norms (Bicchieri, 2017), which are defined as social norms that are internalized—that is, personal beliefs that align with societal standards. Personal norms thereby become an independent motivation to act (Thøgersen, 2006) and form a significant part of an individual's identity (Bar-On & Lamm, 2023). There is evidence that such (internalized) personal norms are strong predictors of behaviour (e.g., Cialdini & Jacobson, 2021). In the present research, we measure interindividual differences in personal respect norms. In that regard, personal respect norms represent individuals' support for the belief that all members of society should be treated as equals. We assume that personal respect norms are associated with tolerance towards individuals and groups with differing and disapproved opinions on important social topics.

1.3. Potential Boundary Conditions for the Link Between Personal Respect Norms and Tolerance

Individuals vary not only in their opinions on controversial social topics but also in the extremity of those opinions and the strength of disapproval of opposing opinions on such topics. Likewise, individuals can

perceive those with opposing opinions as more or less threatening. Research has shown that the extremity of an opinion on social topics (i.e., extreme opinion and/or strong disapproval of differing opinions) and perceived threat directly influence the approach toward opposing others (e.g., with more negative attitudes, more avoidance) and whether they are tolerated or not. For instance, Bos et al. (2023) showed that respondents with more extreme attitudes are more intolerant towards those with opposing opinions. Westfall et al. (2015) found that people perceive greater political polarization when they hold extreme partisan attitudes aligned with their own identity due to a polarization projection (Van Boven et al., 2012). Likewise, there is ample evidence showing that perceived intergroup threat is associated with more negative attitudes (Riek et al., 2006), the restriction of human rights (see Carriere et al., 2022), and less tolerance (e.g., Chanley, 1994; Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Haas & Cunningham, 2014; Skitka et al., 2004).

Therefore, extreme positions concerning a controversial social topic and perceived threats from those with opposing opinions might also influence the extent to which personal respect norms translate into tolerance toward those with opposing opinions. In cases of extreme positions and higher perceived threats, reasons to reject opposing opinions might outweigh reasons to accept them, making tolerance less likely (Verkuyten et al., 2023). Thus, extremity of the "own opinion," strength of disapproval, and perceived threat might moderate the link between personal respect norms and tolerance. It is therefore important to test whether the association between personal respect norms and tolerance towards those with an opposing opinion on a controversial social topic is weakened or even absent when individuals strongly disapprove of those with opposing opinions, have an extreme position on the respective social topic, and feel threatened by those with differing opinion.

1.4. The Role of Political Orientation and Opinions Across Topics

We will also explore potential differences in the strength of association between personal respect norms and tolerance depending on the political orientation of individuals as well as their opinion on a controversial social topic (i.e., progressive or conservative). Several scholars argue that liberals and conservatives are equally intolerant of those with ideologically dissimilar views or those of whom they disapprove (Brandt et al., 2014; Chambers et al., 2013; Crawford, 2014). However, there is also evidence that liberal (or left-leaning) individuals tend to emphasize more strongly the importance of equality, diversity, and tolerance of differences compared to conservative (or right-leaning) individuals (Jost, 2017) and, therefore, tend to be more tolerant of differences (Badaan & Jost, 2020).

Moreover, the level of perceived polarization varies between controversial social topics. For instance, Herold et al., (2023) found substantial variation in the level of affective polarization based on survey data from Europe, with high levels of polarization for the topics of "climate change" and "immigration" and comparably low levels of polarization for the topics of "gender equality in society" and "social benefits and their financing."

For a more exploratory purpose, we will also examine the potential influence of political orientation and type of opinion (i.e., progressive or conservative) on a given controversial topic on the personal respect norms–tolerance link alongside the hypothesized moderating influence of extremity of the own opinion, strength of disapproval of the opposite opinion, and perceived threat.

1.5. Aim of the Study/Research Questions

To fully understand the potential of respect norms in fostering tolerance in contexts that are perceived to be polarized, it is crucial to investigate potential boundary conditions of the respect norms–tolerance link (Busse et al., 2017). For this reason, in this preregistered study (see Data Availability, for more information), we will test our research questions using survey data from more than 12,000 respondents from 12 European countries. Specifically, we will test whether the strength of the association between personal respect norms and tolerance of opposing opinions on different controversial social topics is dependent on the extremity of one's own opinion (RQ1), the strength of disapproval of the opposing opinion (RQ2), and the perceived threat from those with opposing opinions (RQ3). Additionally, we will explore whether the pattern of results is comparable for left-leaning and right-leaning individuals (RQ4.1) as well as for those holding progressive (e.g., in favour of accepting more refugees in the country) and conservative opinions (e.g., against accepting more refugees in the country) as a moderator (RQ4.2) across topics.

2. Methods

2.1. Respondents

This study uses data from a large cross-national survey (Schäfer et al., 2024) conducted between November 9 and December 6, 2023, as part of a research project concerning social norms in polarized contexts (INCLUSIVITY), with approximately 1,000 respondents from each of the 12 European countries, including countries from Northern (Finland, Sweden), Western (France, Germany, the Netherlands, and UK), Southern (Italy, Greece, and Spain), and Eastern Europe (Czechia, Hungary, and Poland). Data were collected with web-based questionnaires by an established German survey company with access to national data online panels across Europe. The samples were quoted to approximate the demographic composition based on census data of each country in terms of age, education, and gender (for more details of the sample compositions see the Supplementary File, Table S1).

2.2. Procedure

Respondents were first presented with instructions emphasizing that the following questions pertain to all individuals living in their country, encompassing people from diverse social groups based on cultural or ethnic backgrounds, as well as those who shared opinions on controversial social topics. Thereafter, respondents' personal respect norms were measured. Tolerance, extremity of one's own opinion, and strength of disapproval of the opposite opinion were assessed using an adapted version of the least-liked-group approach focusing on groups with opposing opinions (Gibson, 1992; Skitka et al., 2013). This approach ensured that respondents had an opinion on the topic they were presented with, identified to some degree with a group linked to the topic, and exhibited disapproval towards individuals holding the opposite opinion. The procedure consisted of three steps. First, from a list of six controversial social topics (i.e., climate change, migration and refugee policies, gender equality, transgender rights, Covid-19 vaccination, and meat consumption) respondents chose the one on which they felt they had the firmest stance. The topics provided were selected based on previous research on groups with opposing opinions and polarization in Europe (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Herold et al., 2023). After selecting a topic (e.g., asylum and migration policy), respondents stated their opinion related to that topic as being either in

favour (e.g., accepting more refugees in the country) or against (e.g., not accepting more refugees in the country). Subsequently, respondents indicated the extremity of their opinion, the strength of their disapproval of the opposite opinion, and their perceived threat from people with opposing opinions on the contested topic. Thereafter, respondents' tolerance was assessed. Finally, political orientation was measured along with sociodemographic information at the end of the survey.

2.3. Measures

The main independent variable, *personal respect norms*, was assessed using three items adapted from previous research: "Everyone should always be treated as a human being of equal worth"; "All in all, everyone should be treated equally" (Renger et al., 2017); "Everyone should be recognized as a fellow citizen of equal worth" (Simon & Schaefer, 2018). The items were measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Omega reliability coefficients for these items ranged from .77 to .90.

The moderators were measured with single items in the case of extremity of opinion and strength of disapproval and with multiple items in the case of perceived threat. *Extremity of the own opinion* was measured after respondents selected a topic and indicated their opinion. Using one item adapted from Skitka et al. (2013), respondents answered the question, "How strongly do you hold this opinion?" on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very weakly*) to 7 (*very strongly*). *Strength of disapproval* was assessed with one item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very weak*) to 7 (*very strong*). Respondents were asked: "How strong is your disapproval regarding the opinion that [opposite opinion]?" *Perceived threat* from individuals holding an opposing opinion was measured across four dimensions: *sociotropic threat* (i.e., perceived threat to the normative social order); *egocentric threat* (i.e., perceived threat to an individual's personal freedom); *threat to safety*; and *threat to autonomy*. The first three dimensions were based on Gibson et al. (2020), while the items measuring perceived *threat to safety* were adapted from Doosje et al. (2012). Sociotropic threat, egocentric threat, and perceived threat to safety were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*applies completely*). The two items assessing *sociotropic threat* read: "People who [opposite opinion] are dangerous for [country] society in general" and "People who [opposite opinion] are dangerous for the normal lives of people in [country]." Two items assessing *egocentric threat*: "People who [opposite opinion] reduce my personal political freedom" and "People who [opposite opinion] would affect my personal safety if they gained power," and two items measuring *threat to safety*: "People who [opposite opinion] are prepared to use violence against other people to achieve something they consider very important" and "People who [opposite opinion] are prepared to disrupt public order to achieve something they consider very important." *Threat to autonomy* was assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*very likely*) using the following two items: "How likely is it that people who [opposite opinion] will gain a lot of power in [country] society?" and "How likely is it that people who [opposite opinion] will affect your or your family's quality of life?" To measure perceived threat from the out-group, we combined the eight items derived from the four subscales described above. Omega coefficients for the composite scale ranged from .72 to .92. Additionally, we measured *political orientation* using an 11-point left–right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right) and that read as follows: "People often talk about 'left' and 'right' in politics. How would you classify your basic political stance?"

The main dependent variable, *tolerance*, was assessed using four items adapted from Simon et al. (2019) and had already been used in a recent work/publication by Schäfer et al. (2024). Respondents indicated their

disagreement or agreement to the following four items on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): "These people should be able to stick to their opinion, even if others try to persuade them otherwise," "These people should be allowed to speak their mind freely and openly"; "These people should be allowed to meet in public spaces and give speeches"; "These people should be given the chance to pursue their interests just like others." Omega reliability coefficients for these items ranged from .78 to .87, indicating good internal consistency.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptives

The ranges of means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all measures and countries are presented in Table 1 (for descriptives and correlations for each country see the Supplementary File, Tables S2–S13). Across all countries, and consistent with previous research (Simon & Schaefer, 2016, 2018), we find positive and significant correlations between personal respect norms and tolerance, with correlation coefficients (r) ranging from .15 to .37.

Bivariate correlations between personal respect norms and the moderators are generally low, indicating that these variables are mostly unrelated. Specifically, correlations between extremity of the own opinion and personal respect norms range from $r = -0.02$ to $r = 0.16$. Strength of disapproval is largely unrelated to respect norms ($r = 0.00$ to $r = -0.10$), whereas correlations between perceived threat and personal respect norms are generally significant, ranging from $r = -0.06$ to $r = -0.25$. The low correlations show the advantage of using the adapted version of the least-liked-group approach: Individuals with high and low personal respect norms reported comparable scores on how strongly they held their views, how much they disapproved of opposing views, and how threatened they felt, thus, making comparisons between these groups more meaningful.

Bivariate correlations between the moderators and tolerance are mostly negative. Extremity of the own opinion is negatively and significantly correlated with tolerance in six out of twelve countries (Czechia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Spain, and the UK; $r = -.08$ to $r = -.23$), but shows no significant correlations in the remaining six countries (France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden). Strength of disapproval shows consistently negative and significant correlations with tolerance across all countries ($r = -.10$ to $r = -.44$), with the exception of the Netherlands. Similarly, perceived threat is significantly and negatively related to tolerance in all countries ($r = -.20$ to $r = -.44$).

With regard to political orientation, bivariate correlations with personal respect norms are generally significant and negative. This indicates that the individuals who lean more to the left end of the political orientation scale tend to endorse personal respect norms more strongly ($r = -.04$ to $r = -.27$). Correlations between political orientation and tolerance are mostly non-significant. However, we find significantly negative correlations in France, Germany, and Hungary ($r = -.07$ to $r = -.13$), but a significantly positive correlation in Spain ($r = .08$).

Table 1. Range of means and standard deviations for all countries.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Personal respect norms	5.76–6.32	0.89–1.33					
2. Disapproval	4.69–5.32	1.58–1.96	.00 – −.10**				
3. Extremity	5.81–6.23	0.97–1.33	−.02–.16**	.18**–.48**			
4. Threat	3.94–4.47	1.31–1.57	−.03 – −.25**	.10*–.45**	.17**–.32**		
5. Political orientation[1]	5.56–6.43	1.85–2.74	−.04 – −.27**	.01 – −.15**	.00 – −.14**	−.01–.17**	
6. Tolerance	4.69–5.11	1.18–1.40	.15**–. 37**	.04 – −.44**	−.01 – −.23**	−.20** – −.44**	.00 – −.13**

Notes: *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively; intervals represent the minimum and maximum values; [1] 10-point scale (1 = left to 11 = right); * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

3.2. Main Analysis

To test RQ1–RQ3, we conducted multiple regression analyses for each country sample (Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) using the *dplyr* package in R (RStudio version 2024.09.1+394). In all regression analyses reported, variables used to create interaction terms were mean-centred. We tested the effect of each moderator (extremity of the own opinion, strength of disapproval of the other opinion, and perceived out-group threat) in separate analyses. Specifically, each model included personal respect norms, each of the aforementioned moderators, and their interaction terms as predictors, allowing us to examine whether the association between personal respect norms and the tolerance varies across levels of each moderator.

For *extremity of the own opinion* (RQ1), there were no significant two-way interactions with personal respect norms in 11 out of the 12 countries (see the Supplementary File, Tables S14–S25), suggesting that the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is comparable for individuals holding more extreme opinions compared to those holding less extreme opinions. Only in Poland did a significant two-way interaction with personal respect norms on tolerance emerge ($B = .06$, $SE = .03$, $p = .03$), with the association being stronger for individuals holding more extreme opinions compared to those holding less extreme opinions (for simple slopes see the Supplementary File, Figure S1).

When we included *strength of disapproval* of the opposite opinion as a moderator (RQ2), there were no significant two-way interactions with personal respect norms in any of the countries (see the Supplementary File, Tables S14–S25). Again, this suggests that the link between personal respect norms and tolerance is not dependent on individuals' strength of disapproval.

The inclusion of *perceived threat* (RQ3) revealed no significant two-way interactions across countries (see the Supplementary File, Tables S14–S25), indicating that perceived threat does not affect the association between personal respect norms and tolerance in most cases. There is an exception in the case of the UK ($B = −.09$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$; for more details see the Supplementary File, Table S25), with the relationship being stronger for individuals perceiving less threat compared to those who perceive more (for simple slopes see the Supplementary File, Figure S2).

Overall, results indicate that the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is robust and comparable for respondents differing in extremity of the own opinion, strength of disapproval, and perceived threat. To test the robustness of results of the main analysis, we then included the three-way interaction between personal respect norms, political orientation, and each of the moderators separately.

3.3. Exploratory Analyses

To explore its role more closely, we included political orientation as a moderator to test whether the strength of the relationship between personal respect norms and tolerance depends on political orientation direction (left–right leaning; RQ4.1). The results indicate mixed evidence (see the Supplementary File, Tables S26–S37). While there was no significant two-way interaction between political orientation and personal respect norms in 7 out of the 12 countries (see the Supplementary File, Tables S14–S25), significant two-way interactions between political orientation and personal respect norms emerged in five out of the 12 (i.e., Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Poland), $Bs \geq .04$, $SEs \leq .02$, $ps \leq .01$ (for simple slopes see the Supplementary File, Figure S3–S7). These findings suggest that in some countries, the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is stronger for politically right-leaning individuals. To test the robustness of the results of the main analysis, we then included the three-way interaction between personal respect norms, political orientation, and each of the moderators separately (strength of disapproval, extremity of the own opinion, and perceived threat). Including political orientation as a moderator introduces certain limitations, making the interpretation complicated. First, our analysis focused solely on the *direction* of political orientation, without accounting for its *extremity*. Second, using political orientation as a moderator in conjunction with the adapted version of the least-liked approach may constrain the interpretation of our results. In the interest of simplicity and clarity, we chose not to include the full results in the main manuscript. However, as this was a preregistered research question, the complete analyses are available in the Supplementary File (Tables S26–S37 and Figures S10–S18).

Additionally, we examined whether the strength of relationships varied across topics by grouping respondents based on the topic they chose (RQ4.2), rather than by country. Specifically, we explored whether the strength of the relationship between personal respect norms and tolerance, as well as the strength of each moderator, depended on respondents' opinions on the relevant societal issue within each topic (i.e., climate change, migration policies, gender equality, transgender rights, Covid-19 vaccination, and meat consumption; for more details on topic selection and distribution of opinions on the selected topics for each country see the Supplementary File, Table S50).

To do so, we repeated the analyses conducted for political orientation but included respondents' opinions on the respective topic as an additional predictor instead. We also reran all analyses reported in the main analysis section, as the analytic sample changed. In the main analyses, we conducted separate regression analyses for each country, whereas in these exploratory analyses, we sampled respondents by topic, combining individuals from different countries. Overall, the pattern of results remained unchanged.

The analyses revealed no significant interactions between personal respect norms and either *strength of disapproval* or *extremity of the own opinion* for any of the topic samples (see the Supplementary File, Tables S38–S43). For *perceived threat*, there were no significant two-way interactions in the case of migration policies, transgender rights, Covid-19 vaccination, and meat consumption. However, significant

two-way interactions emerged in the case of climate change, $B = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $p = .01$, and gender equality, $B = -.04$, $SE = .02$, $p = .02$ (for simple slopes see the Supplementary File, Figure S19 and S20).

We then included the three-way interaction between personal respect norms, opinion on the topic (i.e, progressive versus conservative), and each moderator separately. Most of the three-way interactions were non-significant, including those between opinion on the topic, personal respect norms, and *extremity of the own opinion* or *perceived threat*, respectively, across all topic groups. The interaction between opinion on the topic, personal respect norms, and *strength of disapproval* became significant for three out of the six topic groups (i.e., climate change, migration and asylum policy, and transgender rights), $Bs \geq .07$, $SEs \leq .06$, $ps \leq .05$. These findings suggest that the interaction between strength of disapproval and personal respect varies depending on individuals' opinions on these topics (for simple slopes see the Supplementary File, Figures S21–S23; see regression Tables S44–S49).

Specifically, for *climate change*, among individuals who believe it is man-made, the association between personal respect norms and tolerance tends to be weaker for those with more, than for those with less disapproval. For individuals who believe climate change is not man-made, the association is weaker for those holding less disapproval.

A similar pattern emerged for *migration and asylum policy*. Among those who are in favour of accepting more refugees in their country, the association between personal respect and tolerance was weaker for those holding more disapproval than those holding less. The pattern reverses for individuals who are against accepting more refugees in their country: The association between personal respect norms and tolerance was weaker for those holding less disapproval than for those holding more.

In the case of *transgender rights*, individuals who are in favour of gender self-determination showed a stronger association between personal respect norms and tolerance when holding weaker disapproval. The pattern was reversed for those opposing gender self-determination.

4. Discussion

In this article, we tested whether personal respect norms translate into tolerance toward those with opposing opinions, even in the case of extreme positions on controversial social topics (i.e., strong disapproval of the opposing opinion or extreme opinion on a social topic) and perceived threat toward those with opposing opinions. While previous research has shown that respecting others as different equals or perceiving social norms that emphasize respect are associated with tolerating disapproved practices and views (e.g., Eschert & Simon, 2019; Schäfer et al., 2024; Simon, 2023; Velthuis et al., 2021), potential boundary conditions have not yet been tested. In cases of extreme position and higher perceived threats that are more likely to be observed in polarized settings, reasons to reject opposing opinions might outweigh reasons to accept these opinions, making tolerance less likely (Verkuyten et al., 2023).

Our results, based on survey data including 12,000 respondents from 12 European countries clearly show that the respect–tolerance link holds even among those who endorse extreme positions on a controversial social topic (i.e., holding an extreme opinion or strong disapproval of different opinions; in line with Schäfer et al., 2024), and feel threatened by those with opposing opinions. This general pattern of results was also

observable among left—and right-leaning respondents (for details see the Supplementary File) as well as for differing opinions across the social topics examined. Thus, our results indicate that the association of personal respect norms with tolerance is relatively robust and might therefore serve as an approach to foster tolerance even in contexts of perceived polarization that are often accompanied by an increase in mutual dislike and distrust. However, this does not mean that we should discourage efforts to reduce extreme positions on controversial social issues or perceived threats toward those with differing opinions, as these factors are often related to lower levels of tolerance (See Table 1). On the contrary, further research in this area remains essential. Nevertheless, considering our findings, we propose that promoting norms of respect may serve as a complementary approach—and in some cases, a more practical and effective one, since changing norms seems to be easier than attitudes (Prentice & Paluck, 2020).

Crucially, our claim is not that everything should be unconditionally tolerated. Beliefs and practices that violate general principles and moral values (Verkuyten et al., 2020) present valid reasons for witholding tolerance, even when individuals recognize the equal rights of others. This might also explain why the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is weaker in some cases, as our exploratory analyses show when taking political orientation and opinions on controversial social topics into account. For instance, among left-leaning individuals in some of the countries examined (see the Supplementary File, Figures S10–S18 and Tables S26–S37) or among individuals with progressive opinions on controversial social topics (e.g., supporting the idea that climate change is man-made, favouring migration and asylum policies, or endorsing self-determination laws), the association between personal respect norms and tolerance is weaker for those who hold more extreme opinions, show higher levels of disapproval toward opposing opinions, and feel more threatened by those with opposing opinions. These results show that personal respect norms do not always translate to the same extent into tolerance of opposing opinions. This might be an outcome of reflective reasoning, in which individuals weigh reasons for rejection (e.g., potential harm for immigrants) against reasons for acceptance (deliberative intolerance; see Verkuyten et al., 2020). However, we cannot rule out that in such cases other factors can lead people to express less tolerance (or intolerance), such as stronger negative feelings towards those with opposing opinions or immediate intuitions and emotions. These forms of less tolerance (or intolerance) have been referred to as "prejudicial" (in cases of negative out-group feelings) and "intuitive" (in cases of negative feelings and intuitions) intolerance by Verkuyten et al. (2020).

We acknowledge that our research has several limitations. First, the results are based on cross-sectional data, which inherently limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Second, our reliance on self-reported measures raises concerns about whether reported attitudes truly translate into tolerant behaviour in real-life situations (e.g., Dixon et al., 2017). Additionally, while the adaptation of the least-liked-group approach that we used offers notable strengths (ensuring that the topic chosen by the respondents was relevant to them, that they had an established opinion on the issue, and disapprove of the opposing opinion, enabling us to measure tolerance toward disapproved others for all respondents), it also introduces complexities in interpreting some of the findings. For instance, the selection of topics may be influenced by an individual's political orientation, which in turn affects the level of disapproval toward opposing opinions, the extremity of one's own opinion, and the perceived threat from opposing groups. Finally, although our samples are large enough to be considered representative (approximately 1,000 respondents per country), the number does not guarantee full representativeness, and participants are drawn from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. This limits the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, we believe this work makes a valuable contribution to the literature. Personal respect norms seem to translate into tolerance even in the case of extreme positions on a certain social issue or in the case of higher perceived threats from those with opposing opinions. For the most part, this pattern of results holds for left—as well as right-leaning individuals (although future research should examine more exhaustively the role of political orientation—direction and extremity—as a potential moderator) and among people who have progressive and conservative opinions about different controversial social topics. Lastly, but importantly, our results are based on large samples from 12 European countries with different degrees of (affective) polarization (Herold et al., 2023) and, with few exceptions, the pattern of results replicates across all the countries and six different controversial social topics. To conclude, this work shows that personal respect norms help to tolerate those with disapproved opposing opinions on important social issues, granting them the right to stick to their opinion, speak up openly in public, and pursue their interests given that all citizens have the right to do so in a functioning democratic society.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data have been collected as part of a larger research project and, thus, cannot be shared before the project has been officially ended. Data can be requested from corresponding authors until then and will be made publicly available in 2026. For more information on the preregistered study, including the research questions and methodology, please see the preregistration on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/ej8fd The study uses survey data from over 12,000 respondents across 12 European countries. A detailed psychometric report, comprehensive descriptions of all measures, and the full analysis script are available at: https://osf.io/afxcg

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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