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# COMMUNICATIVE TOLERANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS AS A SOCIAL FACTOR IN THE SHAPING OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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## Abstract

Tolerance is one of the most significant socio-psychological attitudes and behavioral traits of people and social groups. The causes of tolerance and, all the more so, of destructive tolerance in the present-day socio-cultural, economic and political context, have steadily grown in number, hence the need for a multidimensional study and explanation of these phenomena. The authors examined the communicative tolerance of higher education students in the Caucasian Mineral Springs area by taking a socio-economic measurement of the level of development of qualities and characteristics of intolerant people in terms of interpersonal relationships. The research study was carried out in the following higher educational institutions: the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the Pyatigorsk State University, the North-Caucasus Federal University and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution. The survey conducted in March and April 2019 among 240 respondents, aged 18 to 25, revealed that intolerance is one of the distinctive psychological traits peculiar to this age group.

## Keywords

Learning environment – Social dimension – Tolerance – Communicative tolerance –Youth

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## Introduction

The learning environment in higher educational institutions is composed of social and material factors involved in the operation of these institutions and ensuring the self-development of active and creative personalities, formation of their professional qualities and evolution of innovative capacities. The learning environment's social dimension implies a close, goal-oriented teacher/student relationship aimed at developing students' reflection on their activities, their professionally relevant personal qualities, i.e. the personal and reflexive aspect of professional competence. Another factor affecting the formation of the higher education environment that fosters the development of student personality is the implementation of multicultural educational component. In the current context, promotion of tolerance among young people is one of the challenges of its socio-cultural development[1]. The importance of fostering tolerance is determined by various processes taking place in Russian society and, more globally, in the international community. In the first place, this relates to various manifestations of extremism, aggressiveness and the expansion of conflict zones and situations. These social phenomena mostly affect young people who tend to think in a black and white manner and aspire, due to their age, to simple and quick solutions of complicated social problems[2]. Attention should be paid to the importance of exploring the causes, motivations and arguments of intolerant attitudes and behaviors, which is essential for the study of counter-arguments as part of character-building activities involving higher education students.

Given the multifaceted nature of manifestations of tolerance in present-day society, modern science has developed many methodological approaches to the research issue under consideration, which determines the difficulty of studying the notions of tolerance. By tolerance, the present paper means the voluntary acceptance and respect of freedom of thought, ideas and actions while recognizing other people's right to live in accordance with their own worldviews. Scholars and experts perceive the formation of tolerant attitudes/behaviors and prevention of various types of intolerance as a global challenge of our times. At the same time, they acknowledge the historical nature of tolerance and intolerance themselves. Consequently, raising the young generation in a spirit of tolerance is, without a doubt, one of the major social challenges as a key contributor to the shaping of the learning environment[3]. Currently, the issue of tolerance is starting to take on a new meaning resulting, mostly, from ongoing global processes. One can argue as to whether a common economic or cultural space exists, yet the growing interdependence between individuals is clear. No independent community can exist in isolation any longer in the face of issues such as environmental challenges. Even very different individuals – and, therefore, different cultures – have to contact each other nowadays[4]. The information technology boom has brought about a sharp increase in intercultural exchange, virtually universal, and showing tolerance to cultural differences is becoming essential for dialogue between different groups of people. Notwithstanding the difficulties in fulfilling this condition, there is no viable alternative to tolerance yet.

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Tolerance should be regarded as a social norm comprising the following components: social receptivity of interacting subjects; interest to each other's characteristics; recognition of partners' equality; rejection of dominance and violence; willingness to accept another person as such; trust, the capacity to hear and listen to others; empathy.

Communicative tolerance is one of the major and descriptive human traits[5].

This trait is of integrative nature, since it reflects factors such as the destiny and evolution of relations, experience, culture, values, needs, interests, disposition, habits, mental specificities and, of course, the emotional behavioral stereotype. This personality trait belongs to the core, for it largely determines an individual's lifestyle and activities, i.e. the situation in his or her immediate environment and at work, career advancement and professional performance. This is an integrating trait because many other personal qualities – mostly, moral, characterological and intellectual ones – correlate with it and constitute a kind of psychological ensemble. This is why the peculiarities of communicative tolerance may be indicative of an individual's mental health, internal harmony or disharmony, and the capacity for self-control and self-correction[6].

Everyday communication demonstrates various manifestations of communicative tolerance. Thus, some are very tolerant of other people, others may be very good at hiding their hostility towards their partners, and still others are capable of using their persuasive powers to make themselves ignore other people's unpleasant qualities. Similarly, a certain level of declining communicative tolerance has a wide range of manifestations: some character traits of an individual may result in another person's partial, strong or total disapproval, irritation or zero tolerance.

**Materials and methods**

In communication, tolerance is divided into situational, typological, professional and general tolerance[7]:

- Situational tolerance refers to a person's attitude towards a specific interlocutor[8];
- Typological tolerance means an attitude towards a collective type or group[9];
- Professional tolerance is a person's attitude at work when interacting with his or her professional colleagues[10]; and

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−    General tolerance refers to tolerance resulting from one's personal experience, disposition, ethic principles and determining other types of communicative tolerance[11].

V. V. Boyko's approach for diagnosing general communicative tolerance was used to study the communicative tolerance of students of higher education institutions in the Caucasian Mineral Springs area. This tool diagnoses tolerance by measuring the level of development of qualities and character traits peculiar to intolerant people in terms of interpersonal communication. It also identifies a person's tolerant and intolerant attitudes manifesting themselves during communication with other people[12].

The research approach involves nine scales, each comprising five questions, for a totality of forty-five questions. Each scale aims at detecting an individual's intolerant traits:

1.    Zero tolerance or misunderstanding of another person's individuality;
2.    Using oneself as a reference when assessing other people's behavior and attitudes[13];
3.    Judgmental or conservative assessment of others;
4.    Inability to hide or mitigate unpleasant emotions when confronted with partners' morose manners;
5.    Intent to change/re-educate partners[14];
6.    Intent to change partners so as to make them "convenient" and corresponding to one's expectations[15];
7.    Inability to forgive other people's mistakes, awkwardness and unintentional inconveniences[16];
8.    Intolerance to physical or mental discomfort caused by others;
9.    Inability to adapt to others' individuality, habits and wishes[17].

The higher the total sum of points, the higher a university student's general communicative tolerance. The research study was carried out in the following higher educational institutions: the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the Pyatigorsk State University, the North-Caucasus Federal University and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution. The survey was conducted in March and April 2019 among 240 respondents, aged 18 to 25.

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## Results

Analysis of the results revealed that the overall level of the students' tolerance is satisfactory (Table 1).

5% of students have a high communicative tolerance and there are no students showing zero tolerance of others, and 75% of all surveyed students have an average tolerance. 14.3% of the surveyed students showing highest results among the participating higher education institutions were enrolled in the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution (Zheleznovodsk Campus). As for other rankings, other institutions are more or less at the same level.

| Institution | High tolerance (0 to 45) | Average tolerance (46 to 85) | Low tolerance (86 to 125) | Zero tolerance to others (126 to 135) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PSU | 0 | 76.9 | 23.1 | 0 |
| NKFU | 0 | 69.2 | 30.8 | 0 |
| SSPI | 14.3 | 78.6 | 7.1 | 0 |
| Total | 5 | 75 | 20 | 0 |

Table 1
General level of the communicative tolerance of students enrolled in the Pyatigorsk State University (PSU), the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution (SSPI), %

Special attention should be paid to behavioral units for which high overall points were obtained. The more overall points the surveyed person obtained for a specific position, the less tolerant he or she is when communicating with other people in this specific context, and the more difficult it is for him or her to have effective communication with them. Conversely, the fewer points the surveyed person obtained for a specific behavioral aspect, the higher his or her communicative level in this behavioral context (Table 2).

The conducted research revealed that quite a number of students have a low communicative tolerance level. The NCFU showed the lowest results in the questionnaire's first four units, attesting to the inability of the students attending this university to accept the individuality of people they meet and assess people based on their own personality. These students' assessments of other people are rather objective and conservative, and they are, to a certain extent, unable to hide or mitigate unpleasant impressions in case of conflict with non-communicative people.

Students attending the NCFU show the lowest results in terms of questions relating to students' inability to forgive mutual mistakes and their willingness to re-educate and rehabilitate their partners or change them in order to make them "convenient" to communicate. As for students' tolerance of other people's discomfort and adaptability when interacting with people, all of the participants showed high communicative tolerance rates. Notably, students attending the SSPI Campus proved themselves to be tolerant personalities.

| No. | The questionnaire's main units | PSI | NCFU | SSPI Campus |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----|------|-------------|
| 1 | You are unable or unwilling to understand or accept other people's individuality | 23.07 | 30.77 | 14.28 |
| 2 | You take yourself as a reference when assessing other people's behavior, mindset or specific traits | 23.08 | 38.46 | 21.43 |
| 3 | You are cautious or conservative when assessing people | 15.38 | 38.46 | 21.43 |
| 4 | You do not know how to hide or, at least, mitigate your unpleasant feelings arising from communication with your socially-awkward classmates/colleagues | 30.77 | 38.46 | 7.14 |
| 5 | You are ready to change/re-educate others | 30.77 | 23.08 | 14.28 |
| 6 | You want to change your partners so as to make them "convenient" and corresponding to your expectations | 46.15 | 23.08 | 14.28 |
| 7 | You do not know how to forgive other people's mistakes, awkwardness and unintentional inconveniences | 30.77 | 15.38 | 21.43 |
| 8 | You are intolerant of the physical or mental discomfort caused by your interlocutor | 7.69 | 7.69 | 7.14 |
| 9 | You cannot adapt to other people's personalities, habits, ideas or wishes | 15.38 | 15.38 | 14.28 |

Table 2

Analysis of the communicative tolerance of students enrolled in the Pyatigorsk State University (PSU), the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution (SSPI), %

The research study attempted to detect prerequisites for intolerant behavior in modern society. Most students participating in the survey (32.5% of all students attending the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the SSPI) were found to be particular negative about people who are intolerant of other people's beliefs, aggressive, rude and exhibit intolerant behavior, with 10% of the respondents showing such behavioral patterns offhand. Consequently, over 87% of the respondents showed negative or similar behavior towards people who are intolerant of other people's beliefs, aggressive, rude and stop at nothing to achieve their objectives.

In studying tolerance, special attention should be given to students' response to a situation in which they were subject to aggression and rudeness. Most respondents prefer taking no notice of such behavior on the part of their interlocutors (55%), 30% of the respondents choose to be rude in response to rudeness and 12.5% of the respondents tried to make the rude person change his or her behavior.

It is particularly significant to understand the inner world of a person in a difficult situation. Most students (55%) feel hatred for life that puts people in such circumstances. The feelings of shame and hatred for those who provoked such behavior have a similar

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percentage rate (12.5%). An important positive trend has been observed recently: no respondent has ever felt satisfaction when they had to behave in an intolerant way, and only 2.5% of the respondents acknowledged that they were used to showing intolerant behavior.

According to most surveyed students attending the the Pyatigorsk State University (PSU), the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution (SSPI), the period until the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the most tolerant one in Russian history, with only 2.5% of the respondents thinking that this time was marked by intolerance and aggression. Most of the respondents (30%) consider, for various reasons, the current Putin-era to be the most intolerant period out of all the periods examined, followed by the Eltsin (10%) and Gorbachev (7.5%) years. The vast majority of correspondents (45%) is of the view that intolerant behavior has always been dominant in Russia.

The respondents identified the following social spheres most representative of intolerance, violence and aggression: streets and public areas (20%), politics and health care (17.5%), sport (10%), law enforcement and the media (7.5%). The services sector, family/private life, social services and events complement this list (2.5%). According to the surveyed students, there is no aggression, intolerance or cruelty in professional life and education.

Most respondents (35%) consider that the ongoing decline in the standard of living, due to the transition to market relations, has been the main underlying reason for increased intolerance and aggression over the past years. Many students also highlighted the population's low educational and cultural level and the large-scale propaganda of aggression and xenophobia in the media (22.5% each). Besides, the weak political regime was also mentioned among other reasons. In answering the question about the reasons behind a higher level of tolerance and respect for other people in some Western countries as compared to Russia, a fairly high number of students observed that one of the main reasons is the high standard of living (32.5%) and promotion of tolerance. Most students (35%), however, claim that manifestations of intolerance can be found anywhere, and 60% of the respondents think that some processes, events, facts and people cannot be tolerated.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the above conclusions point only to the main trends peculiar to the respondent/partner relationship. An individual's personality finds more vivid and manifold expression in direct one-to-one communication.

Therefore,

−       Students attending the Pyatigorsk State University (PSU), the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution (SSPI) show a satisfactory communicative tolerance level;
−       Most students having taken part in the research study feel resentful about people who are aggressive and intolerant of other people's beliefs;
−       Over 87% of the respondents showed negative or similar behavior towards people who are intolerant of other people's beliefs, aggressive, rude and stop at nothing to achieve their objectives;

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−    The ongoing decline in the standard of living, due to the transition to market relations, has been the main underlying reason for increased intolerance and aggression over the past years.

**Discussion**

Promoting tolerance among citizens is impossible outside the construction of the educational system and relationship building. Education has always performed an educational role, yet, taking into consideration Russia's current reality, it has become necessary not only to foster principal moral criteria in individuals, but also to teach them to be tolerant and flexible in the complicated and multi-faceted world, to develop along with it and to have basic interaction skills in order to communicate with other members of society. Consequently, it is possible to make the following statement: the promotion of tolerance is becoming a strategic educational goal in Russia[18].

The aim of higher education establishments, which are today among the principle institutions for socializing individuals, is to develop the knowledge system relating to professional skills and universal cultural and professional competencies and to directly influence student personality by improving their social and pedagogical activities[19]. In this context, the promotion of tolerance is of primary significance and, accordingly, the education of students should be focused on developing their ethno-psychological competence and axiological attitude to tolerance-based intercultural exchange[20]. Concurrently, today's higher education environment is saturated with national priorities such as patriotism, national identity, spirituality, industriousness, devotion to the motherland, traditional ethnic and religious tolerance and openness to other cultures[21]. The latest sociological research reveals the impossibility to detect the main educational pattern pointing out a person's true spirituality in today's educational environment: interest in other people and in processes taking part in Russia, empathy and dialogue engagement skills. As a rule, young people's interactions and interests are limited to a basic behavioral model represented by trivial pragmatic goals. Today, high education institutions focus on responding to challenges to providing every citizen with opportunities for intellectual, cultural and moral improvement, because it is the most important stage for young people's socialization, civic-mindedness and the awareness, acceptance or rejection of social values. Awareness-raising activities seek to achieve a coordinated impact of the ethno-social environment on individuals, accumulate personal positive experience in international interactions and reduce the possible negative impact of inter-ethnic relations on them[22].

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Over the past decades, the formation of student relationships in the context of religious diversity and multinationalism have taken on a new significance in higher education institutions' activities.

In view of the above, three largest higher education institutions of the Caucasian Mineral Springs area carry out numerous related activities. As an example, the SSPI's Zheleznovodsk Campus holds an annual festival devoted to Russia's National Unity Day and carries out the so-called Tolerance Activities aimed at preventing manifestations of extremism and fostering positive inter-ethnic relations.

The academic curriculum includes courses on cultural studies, constitutional and civil law, and educational rights which not only gives basic knowledge of civil liberties of individuals and their protection, but also contributes to the promotion of patriotism and expertise in international and social conflict resolution and to the prevention of intolerance among students. Furthermore, each of the three main educational institutions pays special attention to the organization and conduct of large-scale recreational and sport activities, given that the rational use of students' extra-curricular time reduces tension, aggression and violations of the law.

The existing structural and functional model for promoting tolerance among students, partially implemented in the Pyatigorsk State University, the Institute of Services, Tourism and Design (campus) of the North-Caucasus Federal University and the Zheleznovodsk Campus of the Stavropol State Pedagogical Institution, draws upon on the following key humanistic ideas and multicultural principles:

−	The environment, collaboration and a joint creative effort are centered around information, target, outcome-focused and organizational components;
−	Reflect the specificities of the higher education institution's multicultural environment;
−	Ensure the coherence of the learning process and increase the tolerance level.

The main ideas represented by this model include the axiological equality of people having different national specificities and the humanization of interaction between participants in the learning process. This model for promoting tolerance among students can be successfully implemented through a set of pedagogical measures including cohesion between students' academic and extracurricular activities, their information and psychological education and training, the personality-focused student-teacher interaction, expansion program, teacher training and so on. These conditions maximize the scope of the cultural and educational interactions between participants in the learning process and improve their tolerant attitude to them.

Within this framework, goal-oriented efforts directed at promoting tolerance among students should be based on the structural and functional model for fostering tolerance among students in the multicultural higher education environment and on the graduate student model, i.e. a tolerant person ready to communicate in a multicultural environment in terms of the following qualifications:

−	Understand the need for the coexistence of different cultures as a prerequisite for sustaining life on Earth;

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- Have a holistic view of multicultural peace-building, theories and applications of international relations;
- Consider different cultures to be equal, egalitarian and equivalent;
- Aspire to know different cultures and identify their inherent traits;
- Be friendly when interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds;
- Possess international exchange skills through a language of communication, tolerance and respect of its specificities.

In our view, the graduate student model is an ideal achievable only if the structural and functional model of the promotion of tolerance is implemented. Additionally, success in fulfilling this task depends on the academic staff's willingness and ability to bring actual results closer to the desired ones.

Furthermore, student organizations, associations and movements, which are a major form of self-government, play a significant role in shaping the learning environment of higher education institutions, preventing intolerance among students and representing student interests. The public policy for youth and its implementation in all social spheres are of special importance in this context. Therefore, it is important to create an environment propitious for creative self-improvement and engagement in extracurricular leisure activities and to develop various modalities aimed at involving learners in creative activities. To this end, higher education institutions propose theatrical performances, clubs, workshops, interest groups and sports associations. Sport and mass events are the most important means of education and health promotion aimed at fostering physical education and sport, a healthy lifestyle and exciting leisure activities.

## Conclusion

Guidance counselors' pedagogical work and prevention of intolerance in student groups also involves discussions, theme-based guidance classes and personal work with students.

In our view, the tolerance level in the higher education environment can be improved by fostering the following attitudes among students:
- Ability to talk tolerantly and to defend their stance/point of view;
- Willingness to tolerate other people's statements (accepting other people's beliefs and assessments as an expression of their legitimate point of view regardless of any discrepancies with an individual's own beliefs in their regard);
- Ability to interact and reach a compromise/consensus;
- Tolerant behavior in stressful situations when there are differences in viewpoints, opinion clashes and contrasting assessments.

Present-day students who are only entering into an active social and professional life are the force that can influence the evolution of Russian society and state in the nearest future. Therefore, the development of Russian youths' tolerant qualities can be a powerful tool for further social transformation in Russia. The promotion of tolerance in the higher education environment is a major challenge of our day.

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