On Toleration in Social Work

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Abstract

Toleration is one of many responses toward diversity and difference. With the growing diversity, the theme of toleration has often taken centre stage in discussions of multiculturalism and social pluralism. Nonetheless, it has not received much attention in the social work profession. Social workers often encounter situations in which they face a choice between tolerating and not tolerating. We argue that toleration is a legitimate and relevant topic in social work discourse. To make this point, first, this paper discusses different conceptions of toleration. Then, it demonstrates its relevance to social work and explores a potential benefit of including the idea of toleration in social work discourse. Social work code of ethics implicitly supports toleration, or at least respect-toleration and esteem-toleration. Incorporating toleration in social work discourse may help social workers to better cope with or reduce ethical stress and disjuncture.

Key words: Toleration, Tolerance, Social work, Code of ethics, Diversity

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Introduction

Diversity is a defining characteristic of social realities all over the world. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make up 2.5% of Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a). Approximately 43% of people have at least one foreign-born parent in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b), and one in four Australians was born overseas. Globalisation has further contributed to the world's growing diversity. There are many different and sometimes competing responses to this phenomenon. They range from open hostility toward the "other" to the positive appreciation of difference. Toleration is one response that arguably marks a value at the heart of an open and inclusive, pluralist democratic society. Thus, the theme of toleration sometimes takes centre stage in discussions of diversity and difference, multiculturalism and social pluralism–and it is often seen to play an important role in ensuring civility, peaceful cooperation, and even mutual respect and recognition.

Social workers are often at the forefront of societal efforts to relate to diversity and difference. As service providers and street-level bureaucrats, social workers are often in a position of power to provide, withhold, or withdraw services or to support or intervene in challenging situations. They often work with clients from diverse backgrounds who face circumstances that can lead to behaviours, or ways of life, that challenge standards or values that social workers endorse on professional or personal grounds, such as their moral, political, or religious convictions. They are often tasked to act as advocates and supporters of social, cultural, and other forms of diversity and differences–consider, for instance, the complexities of supporting the integration of migrants in often less than fully accommodating social environments of their host societies–while acting, as well, in the capacity to represent institutions that also discipline and enforce laws, public policy, or social norms. It matters greatly how social workers conceptualise and respond to such mismatches–for the sake of their clients, their own, and the wider community. And yet, toleration is not widely discussed in social work literature. Few scholarly articles have recently engaged this complex theme. One exception is Galambos (2009). Galambos concedes that toleration can be congruent with social work values, but she calls into question whether social workers are sufficiently tolerant. In her view, there should be discourses that allow for a wide range of disagreements even if this comes at the risk of having extremist and other radical views expressed, and even if it comes without any shared commitment to reciprocity, respect, or mutual tolerance. There are other articles on issues related to toleration, such as issues of religious and political diversity and difference among social workers and social work students, but these articles rarely use the terms 'tolerance' or 'toleration'. And these terms are almost entirely absent from professional codes of ethics such as the *Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics* (2010). This document aspires to specify principles, values and aims that social work must uphold, and details functions social work must perform (Banks, 2003). Strikingly, though, tolerance or toleration is not expressly included in these principles, values, goals or functions. And while the practical use of this document has been questioned (Rossiter et al., 2000 cited in Banks, 2008), it maintains a practice-defining role at least in that it marks standards of professional best practice that aspires to orient professional conduct (Banks, 2003; Galambos, 2009). The absence of any express emphasis on tolerance or toleration thus seems to suggest that toleration is not recognised as an important principle or value in the social work profession. (Some authors place importance on a distinction between 'toleration' as a practice and 'tolerance' as an attitude (Murphy, 1997). We acknowledge that this distinction can be relevant; but as our focus here is on generic features of toleration that can be shared by practices and attitudes, amongst other things, we will use the words

interchangeably.)

In this paper, we aim to raise the profile of toleration in social work. We shall suggest that there are reasons to take toleration seriously as a relevant value in social work practice. Not only is it the case that social workers often encounter situations in which they face a choice between tolerating and not tolerating. It is also the case that codes of conduct such as the *Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics* at least *implicitly* support toleration, or some forms of toleration. Not least, we shall submit, including the theme of toleration in social work discourse can help social workers to respond to, and reflect on, the normative complexity of social work practice in ways that can help them to better cope with or reduce 'ethical stress' (Fenton, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2008) or 'disjuncture' (DiFranks, 2008). Given these limited aims, we will not attempt to outline a normative view of toleration–one that proposes a suitably case-sensitive view of when, on what grounds, and within what limits social workers should tolerate. This goes beyond what can be attempted here. Instead, we suggest that the theme of toleration is an important focus of reflection in social work–and this, of course, not only in the Australian context. As especially made evident by recent migration movements across Europe and elsewhere, it is inevitable for social work professionals to engage different and often conflicting cultural, moral, and other expectations, norms, and values (Williams and Graham, 2014; Boccagni and Richard, 2015)–such conflicts mark deep challenges that are systemic across professional field of social work. We hope that our discussion inspires normative reflection on how social workers could best engage in practices of toleration in encountering such challenges.

We will approach our topic indirectly: the first two sections will elaborate on some conditions, the structure and forms of toleration; on this basis, the last two sections outline our main suggestion relevant to the social work discipline. We adopt this indirect strategy for two reasons. First, we believe that social work discourse can benefit from an account of toleration. We conjecture that the absence of any more detailed discussion of the topic in social work discourse is (partly) owed to the fact that talk of toleration often has a bad ring to it. It sometimes comes with a connotation to the effect that where people tolerate others, they fail to duly respect or appreciate them, while assuming a position of power in relation to these others. As we shall see, however, this is true at best of token forms of toleration, rather than toleration as such. And these forms of toleration are neither the only nor the most relevant ones for social work. We thus believe that it may be of independent interest to shed light on the complexity of the idea of toleration–which may have the added benefit of helping to situate views of the relevance of toleration. The second reason for our indirect strategy is that once the varieties of toleration are recognised, it becomes clear that some variants can give expression to a commitment to respect and recognise diversity and difference in cases where the tolerator does not share or fully approve of whatever is being tolerated.

Not least, we wish to acknowledge the significance of a perspective on the theme of toleration that we will not engage at this occasion. Toleration is sometimes discussed with regard to power relations–e.g., by engaging many ways power relations can bear on and shape practices of toleration, or what counts as toleration in a given social, economic, or political, environment. And in the context of such discussions, toleration often has predominantly negative connotations. Like others, we take it that this marks an indispensable perspective on the theme. But it does not exhaust the theme, or so we shall submit. Following leading theorists in recent moral and political philosophy (e.g., Forst, 2003a; Rawls, 2005), we believe that there can be positive, normatively desirable forms of toleration that are emancipatory, rather than oppressive or marginalizing, and that can mark valuable, empowering forms of support for their beneficiaries. Drawing on these theorists marks an instance of interdisciplinary "cross-fertilization" (Banks, 2008).

Preconditions

As a point of departure, consider the saying that "to tolerate is to insult" (which is sometimes attributed to Goethe; Forst, 2014, p. 126). Whatever positive meaning toleration may have in some contexts, it sometimes has a negative connotation. Toleration negatively understood is a way of *putting up with* something or someone from a position of (presumed) power, or with a capacity to interfere with what is being tolerated. So understood, toleration can be a way of misrecognising others, of patronising them, or of not taking them, their views, or their ways of life seriously. And yet, in other contexts, toleration can have positive connotations: to some people, it is a core value of a morality of mutual respect between free and equal persons who aim to interact on grounds that all can share despite their differences and disagreements. To be tolerated would here not mean to be insulted, but to be respected as a free and equal person.

This heralds that toleration can be exercised and understood in ways that vary greatly in the meaning and value they have for their recipients. It also heralds that practices of toleration draw on, and give expression to, other underlying normative commitments. To unpack this, let us elaborate on the structure of toleration. This will set the stage to consider the role of toleration in social work practice. We shall begin with preconditions of toleration. Not every situation in which we do not interfere with something or someone is a situation in which we tolerate. For a relationship between agents–individuals, groups, institutions, legislative bodies, and so on–to be one of toleration, several preconditions must be met, including the following.

First, there must be an *object* of toleration or something that is being tolerated–such as practices, identities, life-styles, beliefs, habits, character-traits, and so on. It is not always evident what this object is even where it is evident that toleration occurs. E.g., to tolerate Paul's drinking, Paul's wife might not interfere with it; but from the perspective of Betty, his social worker, this really means that his wife tolerates its effect on his children, or his job performance–where these effects may not have crossed his wife's mind at all. Multi-perspective cases such as these can make it difficult to identify the object of toleration–is it Paul's drinking, its effects, or something else? For our purposes, we will assume that the object of toleration is observer-relative. Where involved agents disagree about the object of toleration, we can face difficult choices when it needs to be decided what perspective to go by–and it may or may not always be possible to choose for reasons that all involved agents can suitably accept. In any case, we shall assume that neither the tolerator nor the toleratee has any automatic monopoly on defining what the object of toleration is.

Next, all toleration has a *vehicle*, or something through which toleration is being enacted. In simple cases, the vehicle consists in an act or omission through which the tolerator expresses or shows toleration. E.g., Betty shows her toleration of Paul's drinking by *not discussing* his drinking, by *not alarming the authorities*, or by *persuading Paul's wife to ignore* Paul's habit, and so forth. Vehicles of toleration can vary widely; they can include actions, omissions, policies, legislation, incentive schemes, sanctions of various sorts, and so on.

Not least, third, all toleration supposes that tolerators have a *power* to interfere with the toleratee. Betty's non-interference with Paul's drinking can constitute toleration only if she can interfere with his drinking. And her capacity must be under her voluntary control: if Paul has threatened Betty not to interfere with his drinking, Betty's non-interference may not constitute toleration. Next, for Betty to have a power to interfere with Paul's drinking, Paul must be vulnerable to Betty's interference with his drinking (e.g., Paul is afraid of having his child taken away). If Paul was all-powerful, Betty could not have this power; thus, her non-interference would not constitute toleration. Thus, all toleration supposes a pattern of power: if we know that Betty tolerates Paul, we know already that she has a power to which he is

vulnerable. These patterns are not necessarily asymmetrical. Where toleration is mutual, they are symmetrical: if Betty and Paul tolerate one another, each has a power to interfere with the other to which the other is vulnerable.

Forms of toleration

Let us now turn to the concept and conceptions of toleration. The 'concept' of toleration refers to a normative structure that all genuine forms of toleration share. 'Conceptions' of toleration consist in substantive views of toleration–e.g., views of how we should tolerate, what means and ends we should employ, or on what grounds we should tolerate–that prescribe distinct styles, practices, or dialects of tolerating. E.g., Betty and Paul can agree on what toleration is, but adopt different views of how, why, within what limits we should tolerate. Say, Betty tolerates as a matter of recognising the value of difference, while Paul tolerates as a way of keeping peace. Thus, they agree about the concept of toleration, but adhere to different conceptions of toleration.

As to the concept, where we tolerate, we both disapprove and approve of something: all toleration involves an "objection" component and an "acceptance" component (Forst, 2003a, 2003b, 2014; King, 1976; McKinnon, 2006). The tolerator must take it that there is something about the object of toleration that is objectionable, rejectable, or lacking, but also that there is something acceptable, good, or positive about it. Without both elements, there is not toleration, but indifference; and without disapproval, there is not toleration, but some shade of acceptance. What features of an object of toleration are counted as meriting disapproval and approval can vary with the ethical perspective of the tolerator. And different ethical perspectives may disapprove or approve on different grounds–e.g., consequentialist, deontological, or virtue-ethical grounds. From a consequentialist perspective, Paul's drinking might merit disapproval insofar as it has undesirable, harmful consequences for, or effects on, Paul's children, his wife, or Paul himself; from a deontological perspective, Paul's drinking might merit disapproval insofar as it violates relevant moral, parental, spousal or other duties or responsibilities; and from a virtue-ethical perspective it might merit disapproval insofar as it promotes, or expresses, undesirable attitudes and character-traits of some relevant kind or other. (Needless to add, these illustrations do not exhaust the various ethical perspectives that might be invoked; at the same time, real-life assessments of the value or disvalue of (possible) objects of toleration will often cut across, or intertwine, these and other perspectives.) In any case, that toleration requires the presence of disapproval *and* approval, or objection *and* acceptance, has led some theorists to question whether toleration is a coherent, viable, or desirable stand to take (Fletcher, 1996; Galeotti, 2002; Mendus, 1988; Newey, 2013; Scanlon, 2003; Williams, 1996).We recognise their concerns here, but for our purposes we will assume that toleration, or some forms of it (see below), can be coherent and even desirable.

Next, in toleration the acceptance element *trumps* the objection element: it must be strong enough to provide "positive reasons which trump the negative ones in the relevant context. The said practices and beliefs [i.e., the object of toleration] are considered to be wrong, but not intolerably wrong" (Forst, 2003b, p. 72). For instance, Betty disapproves of the effects of Paul's drinking on his children, but she does not interfere with it because she thinks these effects are mild and because she sees it as his coping mechanism and an expression of his autonomy that she is committed to respect. In this case, there is an element of objection but also a trumping element of acceptance, so that the resulting non-interference constitutes toleration. However, the tolerator's acceptance reasons might not be reasons that the toleratee can accept, and they might have little to do with respect for, or recognition of, the toleratee. Nor do they necessarily reflect a positive value judgment about the object of toleration. We shall return to this below.

Not least, toleration is normatively bounded. Where we tolerate, we draw two normative lines. One line separates things that we accept from things that we reject but tolerate–in a sense, past this line our practice of toleration begins (Forst, 2003b, p. 72). Another line separates these things from the things that we fully reject as intolerable–it effectively marks the outer boundary of our practice of toleration, or where it *ends*, and as such it is sometimes referred to as the limit of toleration (Forst, 2003b). It may not always be clear how we limit toleration in a given context, and what views of the limits of toleration actual toleration practices build on. In any case, it is a familiar matter of much political, moral, religious and other debate to identify how toleration should be limited, on what grounds this may be done, and how the (allegedly) 'intolerable' should be treated (Forst, 2003a, 2004). That toleration practices have such limits has led some theorists to question whether these practices can *truly* be tolerant–rather than imposing on the 'intolerable' views of what must fully be rejected that in their own right are dogmatic, parochial, or intolerant. The problem of intolerantly limited toleration is sometimes referred to as a 'paradox' of toleration–which can raise considerable challenges for normative theories of toleration (Besch, 2010; Forst, 2003a, 2003b; Newey, 2013). For our purposes, we shall set aside this problem. We will take it that while there are limits to toleration, some ways of limiting toleration may be better than others: for instance, they may not be dogmatic, parochial, or intolerant, where they are suitably justifiable to all affected people (whatever this calls for in a given context).

Turning next to conceptions of toleration, following Forst, there are at least four such conceptions. They are distinct, but they can be simultaneously present and interwoven in toleration practices and discourse. First, there is a 'permission' conception. In permission-toleration, a tolerator grants the benefit of toleration from a position of (alleged) superiority to serve her own, self-regarding ends. Permission-toleration is an asymmetrical and instrumental relationship (Forst, 2003a, 2003b). E.g., Betty tolerates Paul's drinking to deepen his dependence on her; a government legalises recreational drugs to broaden its electoral appeal. Second, there is a 'coexistence' conception. Coexistence-toleration is instrumental, but symmetrical: the tolerators serve self-regarding ends, but they tolerate one another as a *modus vivendi* so long as this is needed to serve their ends (Forst, 2003b). E.g., two otherwise hostile religious groups abstain from interfering with one another's rituals to avoid a detrimental conflict; Betty tolerates Paul's drinking to extract his support for a counselling program.

Two further conceptions depict toleration in more positive terms. Third, there is a 'respect' conception of toleration–it is the focus of much liberal political thought on the topic. Respect-toleration is symmetrical and non-instrumental: it builds on, or expresses, a form of respect that the tolerating parties (allegedly) owe to each other. E.g., Betty and Paul might disagree about great many things, including moral, political, social, or religious matters, but "they respect each other as moral-political equals in the sense that their common framework of social life should (…) be guided by norms that all parties can equally accept" (Forst, 2003b, p. 74), and so they are committed not to interfere with each other unless there are mutually acceptable reasons to do so. How best to construe of the nature, grounds and the practical implications of the kind of respect that animates respect-toleration is contested. To mention a few candidates, it is sometimes argued to be a matter of recognising, or acting on, the limitations of our powers of reasoning and judgment; our individual or collective rights, or our autonomy; our status as free and equal persons; or our shared but finite reasonableness (Kymlicka, 1996; Larmore, 1990, 1994; Macedo, 1991; Rawls, 2005; Raz, 1986). Whatever we take to be the moral point of respect for persons, however, the essential idea is that there is something important about people, or the way in which they express their capacities, that gives us strong, non-instrumental reasons not to interfere with them even where we disagree–unless there are trumping and respect-compatible reasons to do otherwise. In a sense, the

value of persons is here seen to give rise to strong (though not unlimited) non-instrumental reasons to let them be.

Finally, there is an 'esteem' conception of toleration. It is closely related to the respect conception, but places more weight on the affirmative role of toleration. As Forst puts it, esteem-toleration entails acceptance beyond respect: tolerated beliefs or practices are seen as attractive or valuable in their own right, even though this esteem is still a "reserved esteem," i.e., an acceptance of a belief or a practice as something "that for some reason you still find is not as attractive as the one you hold. (Forst, 2003b, p. 75)" For instance, Betty is a Muslim and Paul is a Christian, but she supports, or does not interfere with, his religious commitment since he, just like her, is a dedicated monotheist (but she still thinks that she is closer to the truth than him). Betty here in her own right values what she tolerates: esteem-toleration thus builds on, and expresses, a positive (albeit reserved) value judgment about its object.[1]

Toleration in the Code of Ethics

We can now see that the idea that "to tolerate is to insult" is at best owed to one dialect of toleration, rather than toleration as such. Yes, all toleration involves disapproval and permission-toleration disapproves from a position of (presumed) superiority. This sits well with the view that toleration insults. But things begin to differ where toleration is a *mutual* necessity of coexistence. And they are different entirely where it gives expression to a form of moral respect that abides by an aim of interacting on mutually acceptable reasons–and even more clearly so where it entails positive esteem, albeit in reserved form, for the toleratee, or the object of toleration. Thus, respect-toleration and esteem-toleration do not insult: instead, they mark ways to relate to difference that can be positive and recognitively meaningful for toleratees–without denying or suppressing the actual complexity of the tolerator's evaluative stand. We suggest that there is reason to consider whether these normatively richer forms of toleration can be useful in social work practice, and whether they can contribute to a better understanding of its nature and challenges.

Social workers face many situations in which they face a choice between tolerating and not tolerating. Social work is often at the forefront of societal efforts to relate to, engage, recognise, include, protect, support, yet sometimes also buffer, or contain and regulate difference. Social work must often build bridges to mediate between distinct and sometimes competing identities, cultures, values, norms, interests, and so on. And it is part of the point of social work to make professional support available even where, as the social worker sees it, objections are in place. Betty's clients might reject political, moral, religious, professional, or other convictions that she is committed to; her clients might engage in behaviour that, from

[1] One intriguing question that can be raised here is whether it is possible to disagree and interfere with something and nevertheless be tolerant of it. This is a complex question. Insofar as all toleration involves the presence of an objection component, all toleration involves some degree of disagreement or disapproval, widely conceived. But where we are tolerant of something, we also see reasons to agree with or approve of our intended object of toleration, or to let it be, and we regard these reasons as trumping. This suggests that if we do interfere with something, we do not tolerate it–after all, if we knowingly and willingly interfere with it, we do not treat as trumping whatever reasons we might have, if any, to let it be. However, the situation is often more complex than this. Social workers operate under multiple, and not necessarily fully homogenous values, norms, and standards. Some of these values, norms, or standards, can call for toleration where others require interference. For instance, social workers might face situations in which they are morally committed to tolerate what they are legally required to interfere with. Or they might have no choice but to tolerate when interference seems to be desirable in light of other values social workers adopt. Such situations can raise difficult questions about the commitments and priorities of social workers, and the challenge to integrate their professional responsibilities and obligations with their personal beliefs and convictions. We shall touch on this below when we address the matter of ethical stress. We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this question.

her perspective, inflicts harm, unduly burdens relevant interests, or is improper, misguided, or problematic. Yet it is part of her role as a social worker not to evade these things or suppress awareness of them, but to offer and provide services, and often in ways that are sensitive to and informed by them.

An example may concretise this. During a home visit to a refugee family, Gerry, a social worker, witnesses that Chelsea spanks her disobedient child. Gerry disapproves of corporeal punishment and so sees reasons to interfere with Chelsea–and he could use his standing as a social worker to do so. However, Gerry also sees that the spanking is mild enough to not cause serious harm and that it is a child rearing practice that in Chelsea's culture of origin counts as permissible and is widely followed. Not least, Gerry knows that Chelsea has been under adaptation pressures since she fled her home that are beginning to break her–and she would experience Gerry's interference as an attempt to take away from her even more of the life that she lost when adversities hit and set her and her family adrift. Together, for Gerry these things mark reasons not to interfere, or acceptance reasons of sorts. Thus, his stand in the situation at hand involves an objection component, an acceptance component, and he has a power to interfere. And as he cannot simply walk away or suppress awareness of his own objections, the situation presents him with a choice between tolerating and not tolerating. Now, given what is at stake in the case at hand, this choice might come easy. But in other cases the stakes will be higher, and sometimes there will be serious repercussions whatever the social worker will decide–in such cases, the choice might not come easy.

Let us highlight that we do not claim that social workers *always* face situations in which they encounter what they regard as objectionable. Nor do we claim that they should *always* tolerate what they find objectionable. Our point is a different and modest one, namely, that social workers will often encounter situations in which they face a *choice* between toleration and non-toleration–and this fact already suggests that there should be a good place for the idea of toleration in reflection on social work practice. Now, at what occasions social workers face this choice and how they should go about it–or when they should tolerate rather than not tolerate–depends, as well, on what standards they apply, or should apply, in a given situation. And while some of these standards will not be specific to their role as social workers, such as fundamental moral standards, others will be part of what defines their professional role. And with this we come the second point that we want to address in this section–and this point, too, supports the view that toleration marks a relevant topic for social work.

Relevant codes of social work conduct are supportive of toleration. For our purposes, the *Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)' Code of Ethics* (2010) (Code of Ethics thereafter) is chosen, but our point generalises to other social work codes of ethics. To link the Code of Ethics to toleration may seem counter-intuitive. For the Code of Ethics expressly refers to toleration only once, when its appendix recognises the authority of the UN General Assembly's 1981 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (Code of Ethics, p. 49)–a declaration that calls for toleration in a way that is exemplary, albeit narrow in scope. But the Code of Ethics calls for normative attitudes that are core ingredients of respect-toleration and esteem-toleration. It univocally calls for social work practice that is guided by, gives expression to, or promotes, respect for people, their autonomy, their dignity, their uniqueness and individuality; and it asks social workers to positively value diversity, to show cultural sensitivity, and to recognise the value of, and positively respond to, difference (Code of Ethics, pp. 9, 12, 17, 25). Here is an exemplary passage from the Code of Ethics' section on 'respect for human dignity and worth':

> a) Social workers will demonstrate *respect* for clients and seek to *preserve and promote* their dignity, individuality, rights and responsibilities. b) Social workers will *respect* others' beliefs, religious or spiritual world views, values, culture, goals, needs

> and desires, as well as kinship and communal bonds, within a framework of social justice and human rights. c) Social workers will *value* the unique cultural knowledge and skills, different knowledge systems, history, lived experience and community relationships of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and take these into account in the making of decisions. (Code of Ethics, p. 17; emphasis added.)

Another representative passage is from the section on 'culturally competent, safe and sensitive practice':

> c) Social workers will *recognise and acknowledge* the diversity within and among cultures, taking into account individual, family, group and community needs and differences. (…) d) Social workers will *recognise, acknowledge and remain sensitive to and respectful of* the religious and spiritual world views of individuals, groups, communities and social networks, and the operations and missions of faith and spiritually-based organisations. (Code of Ethics, p. 18; emphasis added.)

These and many similar passages in the Code of Ethics express standards of professional conduct to the effect that social workers must respect diversity and difference; they must recognise, or attribute positive value to, diversity and difference; and they must actively protect or support diversity and difference.

The link to respect-toleration and esteem-toleration is indirect, but it comes to the fore when we consider what it takes to adhere to these standards where an objection component is present. Of course we cannot equate standards that require respect and positive recognition with standards that require toleration. There can be respect and recognition without toleration: Betty can respect or recognise Paul's lifestyle without having any power to interfere with it, or without having any objections to it. But it is part of the point of the Code of Ethics that its standards must be adhered to also in situations where social workers take themselves to have motive or reasons to object to, or disapprove of, their clients–that is, where their actual stand toward their clients involves an objection component. Needless to add, the Code of Ethics does not *deny* that there can be good reasons to interfere with a given stretch of diversity or difference. For instance, it does not deny that social workers have good reasons to interfere where culturally specific practices violate human rights, inflict severe harm, or are in breach of the law. But by emphasising the value of diversity and difference, the Code of Ethics raises the normative threshold that any objection component must pass before it may tip the balance in the direction of reasons to interfere with a given stretch of diversity or difference. It is in this indirect way, that the Code of Ethics requires social workers to show toleration for diversity and difference–or at least some variant of respect-toleration or esteem-toleration.

Needless to highlight, the relevance of toleration to social worker's codes of conduct is not limited to the AASW Code of Ethics. For instance, consider the NASW Code of Ethics (U.S.A), the BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work (UK), the Berufsethische Prinzipien of the DBSH (Germany), the Code de Déontologie of the ANAS (France), or the International Federation of Social Workers Statement on Ethical Principles. Like the AASW Code of Ethics, these documents place at practice-defining, centre stage respect for the autonomy, or self-determination, of clients, and recognition of cultural diversity and difference. On our reading, a commitment to these and related values can translate into professional commitments to practices of toleration–such as respect-toleration and esteem-toleration.

Next, we focused in this section on respect-toleration and esteem-toleration because these variants of toleration not only seem more palpable in their own right than other instrumental variants, but also since they seem especially well-aligned with the Code of Ethics. Yet we do not mean to suggest that respect-toleration and esteem-toleration are the

only forms of toleration that have a role in social work practice. To mention just one possibility, a sibling of permission-toleration might have an important role. Recall that in permission-toleration, a tolerator grants the benefit of toleration from a position of (alleged) superiority to serve her own, *self-regarding* ends. But social workers might permit objectionable behaviour as a means to an end, and in this sense tolerate instrumentally, while the end is *not* self-regarding. E.g., a social worker who monitors a child with a neglectful parent may decide to tolerate the circumstance if it does not constitute a danger to the child and if the only alternative would be the more harmful option of removing the child from home. Given the power of child protection laws, the social worker here has the power to interfere; but she does not interfere and 'permits' otherwise objectionable behaviour, as a means to the end of averting greater harm to the child. More generally, consider cases in which considerations of harm reduction apply–i.e., situations where social workers must choose amongst harmful options to opt for the least harmful one. That an option is the least harmful one out of a given set of alternatives situationally makes it less rejectable, or more permissible, than each available alternative, given the goal of harm reduction and assuming that a choice must be made. Thus, social workers may find themselves left to tolerate otherwise objectionable options in order to avoid other worse outcomes.

A potential benefit

We have suggested that toleration is a relevant topic in reflection on social work practice. It is the case not only that social workers encounter situations where they face a choice between tolerating and not tolerating, but also that the Code of Ethics supports toleration. The remainder of our discussion aims to highlight a possible benefit of employing the idea of toleration in social work practice, and reflection on this practice.

The idea of toleration can assist social workers in squaring their best practice expectations of themselves with the complexities of their actual normative stand toward their clients, or their clients' views, behaviours, commitments, and so forth, where this stand involves an objection component. More specifically, it might help them to better cope with and reduce experiences of 'ethical stress' (Fenton, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2008) or 'disjuncture' (DiFranks, 2008). Where the Code of Ethics requires social workers to respect and recognise, or to protect or support, forms of diversity and difference that they actually find objectionable, or have negative feelings about, a gap can open between their own best practice expectations and their actual normative or emotional stand toward their clients. Given their best practice expectations–as these are based on social work values, such as respect for the autonomy, or self-determination, of clients, or their ways of life–social workers may be committed to trump, or set aside, whatever actual reservations they might have toward their clients, in order to prioritize their clients' needs and interests. For instance, consider a social worker who opposes abortion on strongly felt religious grounds, but faces clients who articulate wishes for abortions that the social worker needs to support on professional grounds. In such cases, social workers may feel cornered–as if they are left to go about their jobs without due integrity by being unable to be true fully neither to their own personal commitments, nor to their professional best practice expectations. And this can lead to ethical stress, or disjuncture–a problem that can deepen especially where social workers accomplish a desirably high degree of awareness of their own emotional responses to their clients, including negative responses.

We submit, however, that once such situations of disjuncture can be comprehended as cases in which toleration is called for, a gestalt shift can occur. They can begin to look like cases in which a complex, but normatively coherent professional attitude or virtue is called for. Situations of disjuncture appear to face social workers with an odd dilemma: namely, *either* to reject their own, personal commitments or to reject the values that inform their

professional best practice expectations, *or else* to act without proper integrity. But in light of the idea of toleration, this dilemma will often be only apparent: in many situations of disjuncture, social workers will not need to reject either their personal commitments or the values that inform their best practice expectations. Toleration *combines* disapproval/objection and approval/acceptance into one coherent attitude, or virtue. Where toleration is in place, then, social workers need not reject either their reasons for disapproval or their reasons for approval. Instead, they need to rank these reasons so as to treat their reasons for approval as trumping. Thus, situations of disjuncture may not face them with the dilemma just referred to. Rather, they may reveal that integrity in social work practice can require social workers to rank their reasons to approve and their reasons to disapprove as part of the attitude or virtue of toleration. We submit that such rankings can help to respond to ethical stress or disjuncture.

Even where social workers respect their clients and positively value diversity and difference, they may not always approve of their clients' behaviours, or their ways of life. And we should not see this as a failure to be good as a social worker, or as indicating a lack of professional virtues. Social workers can perform their function in ways that are 'good enough' in a virtue-ethical sense (McBeath & Webb, 2002) and that are duly sensitive to context and consequences (Christie, Groarke, & Sweet, 2008) even when their stand toward their clients, or their clients' ways of life, involves an objection component. Respect for, or recognition of, diversity and difference does not require complete acceptance and approval; sometimes, it may instead ask for reserved acceptance and approval, or toleration. By gaining the understanding that toleration has a role to play in social work, then, social workers may realise that the presence of an objection component–or negative feelings, attitudes, or views, about their clients–does not by itself constitute professional failure. This can further help them to better cope with or reduce ethical stress and disjuncture.

Before we conclude, let us at least gesture at another matter. An individual social worker's view of toleration can come into conflict with relevant guidelines, as set by employers' goals, social policies, laws, or professional standards. For instance, from the social worker's perspective, relevant legal guidelines, professional standards, or employer guidelines might be intolerant, given the social worker's own view of what it takes to duly respect or esteem clients (for instance, consider cases where relevant guidelines require that considerations of bureaucratic efficiency, cost-effectiveness, or similar non-moral goals, take priority over considerations of respect). Or the relevant guidelines or standards might prescribe forms of toleration the social worker deems inappropriate (e.g., they might prescribe toleration as a matter of merely putting up with diversity where the social worker takes it that respect-toleration or esteem-toleration is in place). It is important to discuss what, in a given context and all things considered, might be the best course of action to take in cases of such conflicts. This would call for a case-sensitive, normative account of toleration–one that proposes a view of how, when and within what limits social workers should tolerate. This is beyond what could be attempted here. We submit, however, that an awareness of the diversity of the forms of toleration, and of the potential desirability of some of these forms, can help to evolve professional practices. And it may help to situate and sharpen the focus of normative disputes within the social work profession and at the interface between social work professionals and relevant, standard-setting bodies.

Conclusion

Toleration is one of many responses toward diversity and difference, but an important one. And yet, it has not received much attention in social work. We suggest that toleration is a legitimate and relevant topic in social work discourse. To make this point, we discussed different conceptions of toleration. We argued for its relevance to social work and explored a

potential benefit of including the idea of toleration in social work discourse. Social workers often encounter situations where they face a choice between tolerating and not tolerating; and relevant codes of conduct implicitly support toleration, or forms of it. Incorporating toleration in social work discourse may help social workers to better respond to ethical stress and disjuncture. Regarding the place of toleration in social work, we submit that especially two issues merit further discussion. First, how, or on what grounds, should social workers limit toleration, or identify what they should regard as intolerable? And second, what kinds of toleration are most suitable in social work practice? Above, we have only hinted at these complex issues. We suggest that further discussions on the place of toleration in social work should attend to these two matters.

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