CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Advancing Social and Economic Justice

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Considerable attention has been paid during the past decade to the increasingly diverse appearance of the United States. Much of the attention has focused on the significant increase in non-white populations and projections of increasing numbers of "minority majority" cities, regions, and states. There seem to be two prevailing responses to this reality. First, dominant white America clearly shows signs of being threatened, as evidenced by increased use of institutional and individual violence to maintain dominance and oppression over people of color. Some examples are widespread anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action sentiment and political action, growing numbers of hate crimes, and a proliferation of white hate groups and on-campus accusations of balkanization of student bodies. The intensity of the anti-immigrant sentiment has even spilled over to include immigrants with European backgrounds.

A second predominant response is an attempt to successfully prepare for a significantly more diverse workplace. This response is characterized by a proliferation of education and training efforts aimed at cultural awareness and multicultural competence in the workplace. For social work and other helping professions, this translates into a focus on preparing professionals to effectively serve clients from diverse cultures. The notion of cultural competence has become the center of this response; it is defined by Cross et al. (1989) as a "set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (p. 13).

While the two predominant responses to changing demographics represent either a stance of resistance or a stance of working together to strengthen the economy, this chapter proposes a third response. The fundamental premise of this chapter is that, in order to be truly culturally competent, it is necessary to understand the meaning of diverse cultures and difference. And, the experience of difference means both culture as a source of strength (i.e., capacity to overcome life circumstances and mobilize social movements) and group membership as a basis of inequity, injustice, and oppression. The threat many people feel in the face of an increasingly diverse U.S. society is related to fear of losing their position of dominance and privilege over those who are assigned a subordinate status primarily because they are perceived as "different."
Thus, while successfully navigating the new multicultural terrain does indeed require an understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures, it also requires an equal understanding of the sources and dynamics of injustice and oppression that are inextricably connected with cultural difference. While social workers, in particular, have professional responsibilities to provide culturally competent services, they have additional mandates to challenge social injustice and to promote social and economic justice. These mandates are expressed in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996a), the International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 1994), and the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2002).

For almost three decades, social work education has increasingly addressed the need to develop social justice practitioners who are culturally competent. Beginning in the early 1970s, the inclusion of diversity has been mandated by social work curriculum standards for purposes of accrediting educational programs. In 1992, the Council on Social Work Education’s curriculum requirements for accreditation specifically mandated content on women, people of color, gay men and lesbian women; on the patterns, dynamics, and consequences of oppression related to these and other vulnerable groups; and on skills to promote change for social and economic justice (CSWE, 1992).

In CSWE’s (2002) most recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, the purposes of social work as a profession are delineated and include the following two purposes related to this chapter:

- To enhance human well-being and alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice
- To develop and apply practice in the context of diverse cultures

The standards go on to state that in order to achieve these purposes, social work education prepares social workers to alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice; to practice without discrimination with respect, and with knowledge and skills related to clients’ age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation; and to recognize the global context of social work practice. The standards clearly delineate that the foundation curriculum content in all social work education programs must be consistent with these purposes of the profession and social work education by integrating content on diversity and cultural competence; social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression; and implementation strategies for combating discrimination, oppression, and economic deprivation and for promoting social and economic justice so that students are prepared to advocate for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems.

This chapter addresses issues related to these professional mandates. In the first section, the argument is made that culturally competent practice insists on a commitment to promoting social and economic justice. The role of social justice advocate requires that social workers engage in critical thinking that begins with serious reflection, awareness, and analysis of their own personal beliefs about what is fair and just. Thus, the second section suggests some exercises as a place to begin that work. This is followed by a section of social justice theory that presents perspectives against which one’s personal perspectives can be critically assessed. The connections between social justice and
oppression are then presented, followed by a section that makes global connections
between human rights and oppression. The chapter ends with a discussion of, and exer-
cises aimed at increasing understanding and practice of, social change strategies.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE MEANS PROMOTING SOCIAL
AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

The definition of cultural diversity, as that term is used in this chapter, refers to differ-
ences between groups with distinctive characteristics and social identities based on cul-
ture, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and class. Diversity is
seen as inseparable from issues of oppression and social and economic justice. The inte-
gration of cultural diversity and social justice recognizes the historical and ongoing
oppression and privilege that different social identity groups experience in our society. It
recognizes economic class as a prime indicator of oppression and, in fact, sees the cre-
ation of a class system based on difference as a function of oppression. It further recog-
nizes the intersection and complex interaction of multiple social identities and a
continuum of harm and privilege that these identities confer.

Multiculturalism thus refers to issues of representation and democratic inclusiveness
with its roots in the relationship between politics and power, within the context of a
historical past and a living present where racist exclusions were “calculated, brutally
rational, and profitable” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 105). Thus, in order to be culturally com-
petent, social workers need to learn how to “interrogate, challenge, and transform
those cultural practices that sustain racism” and to “link the struggle for inclusion with
relations of power in the broader society” (Giroux, 2000, p. 499). In sum, the defini-
tion of culturally competent social work, as that term is used in this chapter, begins with
Lum’s (1999) definition as “the set of knowledge and skills that a social worker must
develop in order to be effective with multicultural clients” (p. 3) and includes as a
requirement a commitment to promote social justice arising from a clear understand-
ing of the impact of oppressive systems on individuals and families. Ultimately, the goal
of culturally competent practice is to transform oppressive and unjust systems into
nonoppressive and just alternatives (Gil, 1998). This means that, in an increasingly
diverse and inequitable society, social workers face the challenge of not only under-
standing societal oppression, but also translating that understanding into actions
designed to facilitate social change for social justice. The challenges are daunting and
require careful study, reflection, and action.

In a book called Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach by Louise
Derman-Sparks and Carol Brunson Phillips (1997), the authors provide the following
parable:

Once upon a time a woman, strolling along a riverbank, hears a cry for help and, seeing a
drowning person, rescues him. She no sooner finishes administering artificial respira-
tion when another cry requires another rescue. Again, she has only just helped the second person
when a third call for help is heard. After a number of rescues, she begins to realize that she is
pulling some people out of the river more than once. By this time the rescuer is exhausted
and resentful, feeling that if people are stupid or careless enough to keep landing in the river,
they can rescue themselves. She is too annoyed, tired, and frustrated to look around her.
Shortly after, another woman walking along the river hears the cries for help and begins rescuing people. She, however, wonders why so many people are drowning in this river. Looking around, she sees a hill where something seems to be pushing people off. Realizing this as the source of the drowning problem, she is faced with a difficult dilemma. If she rushes uphill, people presently in the river will drown, if she stays at the river pulling them out, more people will be pushed in. What can she do? (pp. 1–2)

The second woman’s thoughts suggest that she may be questioning why the people in the river share particular characteristics and if a selection process is underway. Consider that both women who witnessed people drowning in the river are social workers who want to help. If we define racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of oppression as the force on the hill, then this metaphor suggests three alternative solutions for social workers: (1) rescue people in trouble and return them to the oppressive conditions that caused the problem; (2) after rescuing people, teach them how to manage their problems so that if they “get pushed into the river again,” they at least will not drown; and (3) organize with people to destroy the source of the problem (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 2).

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, there is an inextricable connection between diversity and social justice. Thus culturally competent practice requires choosing the third position. Social workers need to do more than respond to the symptoms or consequences of oppressive conditions. They need to develop strategies for responding to the sources of oppression. Further, they must be willing to reevaluate their own role, or both personal and professional levels, in the continuation that oppression. What social work must ultimately be about is recognizing the problem and learning to understand and to eliminate it.

The metaphor presented in the story of the two women at the river raises several questions:

- If the river represents a situation of oppression or disadvantage, what is it like to be in the river? In other words, what are the conditions and processes of oppression, and how do they affect people’s lives and life chances?
- Who are the people being pushed into the river? What characteristics do they have in common? What is the singular facet of their experience that puts them at risk?
- What people are not being pushed into the river? What are their common characteristics? How do they benefit from having others pushed into the river?
- If the force on the hill that is pushing people into the river represents racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other systems of advantage, how does the force operate? How much of this is to be understood in individual, psychological terms and how much as a “business-as-usual” patterning of institutional practices? What is the mix of factors that keep the force on the hill operating?
- What happens so that people who used to be in the river but got out then go up the hill to push people who look like them into the river?
- What role can social workers learn to take in helping the people pushed into the river?
- What organizational, collaborative, and advocacy skills can social workers develop in order to eliminate the force that is pushing them into the river? How can social workers differentiate business-as-usual discrimination from behavior motivated out of personal bias?
In order to address these questions, social workers need to understand the centrality of race and racism as "a mode of human relations involving domination and exploitation" which, on an economic level, creates a class system (Gil, 1998, p. 103). They must further understand the complex interaction of racism with the systemic dynamics of oppressions based on gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, and the concept of multiple identities. Striving for such understandings is not easy. As Gil (1998) so poignantly states:

Understanding injustice and oppression and their sources—domination and exploitation—tends to be fraught with multidimensional existential dilemmas and emotional stress, for it implies the need for people to make significant changes in their ways of life, work, and patterns of social relations. It means therefore exchanging the "bliss of ignorance" for the burden of holistic social knowledge along with difficult new choices, conflicts, and fears. (p. 130)

A PLACE TO BEGIN: AWARENESS, REFLECTION, CRITICAL THINKING

In our efforts to understand diversity and social justice issues and to develop cultural competence aimed at social change, we must start with ourselves. Social workers need to consciously engage in a process of becoming aware of their personal values and beliefs about social justice, reflect on where those values and beliefs originated, and engage in critical thinking about the implications of their current perspective.

We often hear the expression "life is not fair," especially when something bad has happened to us or to someone we care about. The expression is perhaps a manifestation of a belief that life is, indeed, not fair. Is it fair that our destinies are often shaped and determined by accident of birth (i.e., by race, gender, class, abilities, country of origin, etc.)? A more relevant question, when considering issues of social justice, might be: Is life just? The exercises in Tools for Student Learning 14.1 are aimed at individual and small-group exploration of issues related to those questions.

TOOLS FOR STUDENT LEARNING 14.1

Reflection Exercises

Take some time to answer the following questions. Write down your thoughts so you can look at them later and also discuss them with others.

1. What are rights? What do people have a right to (i.e., what should people get just because they are human beings)?

2. What are privileges (i.e., what do people deserve because they have earned it)?

Now consider the following more focused questions.

3. Is it fair to take (e.g., through taxes) from one group and give to another group? When is it fair and when is it not fair? Does it have to with rights or privileges? When is it a form of justice and when is it an infringement on people's freedom?

4. If there is a situation in which the goods and services produced are inadequate to satisfy everyone's desire for them, on what basis or according to what principles
can these goods and services be distributed justly? For example, if you believe that everyone has a right to food and there is an inadequate supply, how do you distribute it? If you believe that having food is a privilege, then what do people have to do to earn it? And what should be done when people who have not earned it get it and those who earn it do not get it?

5. If there is a situation in which the goods and services produced are adequate to satisfy everyone's desire for them, on what basis or according to what principles can they be distributed justly?

Reflection and Discussion

Now take a moment to read your responses and reflect on them. Do any themes emerge? Are you surprised by any of your responses? What beliefs do you think underlie your answers? Where do those beliefs come from? How comfortable are you with your responses?

In a small group of three to four of your peers, discuss each of the questions. Hear how others responded and compare their responses with yours. Be sure to talk about where your beliefs come from.

Classroom Exercises

After reflecting on and discussing the previous questions, two exercises for use in the classroom are suggested to help you think further about your perspectives on justice and identify the principles upon which you judge whether a situation is fair or not.

Exercise 1. Provide a bag of small candy bars such as those you can buy at Halloween (or you might just imagine that you have a bag of candy bars). Small groups of four to six students, depending on class size, meet to discuss how to distribute the candy to the class according to what they think is just. Each group presents their proposal (if the candy is imaginary) or actually distributes the candy according to the distributive system they have developed. If the candy is actually distributed, it will need to be collected for the next group to implement their distribution plan. After each group has presented their method of distribution, discuss the following questions.

a. What was your distribution system based on (e.g., everyone should get an equal amount)? Should distribution should be based on need-like who did not eat breakfast this morning? Should distribution should be based on what people deserve according to a merit system?

b. Which system would you consider to be the most fair?

c. Which system would you consider to be the most just?

d. Might there be a situation when one system would be more fair and just than in another situation? How do you decide?

Exercise 2. Read the following case scenario and then discuss the questions that follow.

A Staff Association at a major university is calling for a “sick out” to call attention to a number of their demands. One of the demands was that all staff getting salaries up to $60,000 should get an increase of $321 per month. Discuss the following questions about their demand.

a. Would you consider this to be a just demand? Would you consider it to be fair? Why or why not?
Chapter 14 Advancing Social and Economic Justice

b. Would it be just (fair) to give the same amount to a person who has been working at the university for a short time (say one year) at a salary of $59,500 as to a person who has been working for more than 10 years and still only makes $15,000 a year?

c. On what basis do you think the cutoff point (in this case, $60,000) should be set? Why not set it at $30,000 or $35,000? On what basis would you make such a decision?

d. What do you think about demanding a monthly increase for workers earning salaries in the bottom quintile?

The intent of the previous discussion exercises is to stimulate awareness of your own perspective and the diverse meanings of social justice. The point is that, when discussing issues and strategies related to promoting social and economic justice, it is important to understand how the term justice is being used and to have guiding principles from which to make decisions about justice claims. We need to struggle with the question of justice. What is it? Is justice equality? Is justice having freedom? Whether we are aware of them or not, each of us believes in certain principles about and theories of justice. And, as Figure 14.1 illustrates, our perspective on what is just and fair is often related to our own position in society.

SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY

As the previous section aimed to illustrate, we need to be rigorous in our thinking about what social justice means and how to go about achieving it if we are to take the social work mission seriously. Many of us have experienced the phenomenon of finger-pointing, both

FIGURE 14.1 Perspectives of justice

- Life is really fair and just.
- Life is getting fair and just.
- Life is not fair and just.
within the profession and with our student peers, with some people claiming to be for social justice while others accuse them of not being for social justice. There seems to be a misperception or myth among social workers that we all mean the same thing when we use the term social justice. Social workers need to develop a knowledge base and frameworks for understanding social justice as an organizing value of our profession. We must begin by examining and critically challenging our personal perspectives about justice, developing a knowledge base about social justice perspectives and principles that are coherent and congruent with social work values, and translating these understandings into effective strategies and actions to promote justice and fairness.

What follows is a brief review of a few principles and contemporary social justice theories that are prevalent in the literature, with a focus on the different types of social justice and different perspectives about the type of justice called distributive justice. This section aims to highlight the complexities of social justice issues that point to the need for critical thinking and continuous knowledge development as professionals.

**Types of Social Justice**

First, when we speak about social justice, it is important to recognize that conceptually there are different types of justice: distributive, legal, and commutative. The types are based on the social contract tradition that has prevailed among political philosophers from Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Rousseau to John Rawls and Robert Nozick. The three types of justice are illustrated in Figure 14.2. When looking at the contract involving what society owes the person, we are talking about the type of justice called distributive justice. When looking at the contract involving what the person owes to society, we are talking about the type of justice called legal justice. When we look at the contract between persons—what we owe each other—we are talking about the type of justice categorized as commutative justice.

**FIGURE 14.2 Types of justice**
Distributive Justice as an Organizing Framework for Social Work

While social work is concerned about all three types of social justice, Wakefield (1988a, 1988) argues that the organizing value of social work is distributive justice and that Rawls’s particular perspective (described later in this section) on distributive justice provides the most coherent framework for our profession. Distributive justice has particular relevance for the professional role of advocating for social and economic justice. The following definition of justice for social work, proposed by Beverly and McSweeney (1987), emphasizes its distributive quality: “Justice . . . means fairness in the relationships between people as these relate to the possession and/or acquisition of resources based on some kind of valid claim to a share of those resources . . . the justice or injustice of a particular policy or situation is determined by looking at the fairness of the distribution of resources in relation to the claims or demands made for those resources” (p. 5). For social workers, the distribution of goods other than political or economic resources, such as health services, education, and leisure, is within the realm of social justice. To begin thinking about distributive justice, do the exercise in Tools for Student Learning 14.2.

TOOLS FOR STUDENT LEARNING 14.2

A Beginning Exercise

Read the following statistics and then reflect on the questions that follow. It is suggested that you write your reactions on paper before engaging in classroom discussion.

Imagine a society in which the top .5% of the population owned 55% of the wealth and the top 10% owned 80% of the wealth while 80% of the population scrambled over the remaining 20% of the wealth.1

1. Is such disparity just or unjust?
2. Can you think of any situation or condition in which this kind of disparity might be just?
3. What principles would be used to conclude that such disparities are, in fact, just?

While most social workers would jump to the quick conclusion that the disparities given in the exercise are definitely unjust, others might consider that their justness or unjustness could depend on certain qualifying conditions, and still others might even say that they are actually just. How do we account for such differences of perspectives, even among social workers? The following brief overview of four theories of distributive justice will illustrate how each would judge the justness of disparities in wealth differently. The first three perspectives-utilitarian, libertarian, and egalitarian—are prescriptive, not descriptive; that is, they present a case for what social justice should be or how each theorist would want us to define social justice. They do not describe the situation as it is now; that is, they do not discuss what the state of our society and the world is in relation to achieving any semblance of social justice as they define it. The fourth theory, called the

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racial contract, is critical to understanding social work’s role of promoting social and economic justice. The racial contract perspective of distributive justice is descriptive, in that it explains the inequities of the actual social contract, and normative, in that analysis of the way things actually are is used normatively to point to reform.

Utilitarian Perspective. The major proponent of the utilitarian theory was John Stuart Mill (1863, as reprinted in Sterba, 1992). The key question from the utilitarian perspective is: What distribution of goods, what principles of justice, what ascription of rights are such that their acceptance is in the general interest? Justice is arrived at by weighing the relative benefits and harms of a situation or condition and determining what maximizes the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

So, from a utilitarian perspective, it may be determined that social justice exists even if some people have no rights met while others have all their rights met as long as it is determined that it is for the common good. Utilitarian justice would tend to produce a distribution of goods and services similar to a bell curve (Figure 14.3).

The “common good,” however, is open to varied definitions, and the definition determines whether one believes a situation is just or not. For example, some people believe that it would not serve the common good if some people are provided for when they can provide for themselves; on the other hand, others argue that when some people are not provided for, the common good is not served because there may be unrest or because it harms us morally as individuals and as a society.

Libertarian Perspective. In contrast to the utilitarian perspective, the libertarian position advanced by Robert Nozick (1974) is based on the principle that the distribution of resources occurs by means of a natural and social lottery. Thus, this theory is considered to be basically amoral and based on a description of the social contract as it occurs naturally. According to the libertarian perspective, people hold certain rights by entitlement, and justice consists in the widest possible latitude of freedom from coercion in what they accumulate and what they dispose of and when. From this perspective, it is good to give to others, and charity is considered a virtue. However, in a just society each person has total freedom to determine how much, to whom, and when to give. No institution or person should interfere with that freedom.

FIGURE 14.3 Distributive Justice. Utilitarian Justice
When a segment of the population appears to be unjustly treated and lacking in access to goods and services, the libertarian perspective argues that we are only looking at one slice of history and that the long-term historical picture would reveal that that same population, at another point in time, may have occupied a privileged position. In other words, the natural social lottery is at work, and there is an inherent justice to it over the long term.

Egalitarian Perspective. Egalitarianism, developed by John Rawls (1971) and based on Locke's theory of the social contract, maintains that designing a just society needs to be done under a veil of ignorance—that is, with the sense that none of us would know in advance what our position in that society would be, and thus we would all have a stake in avoiding extreme inequalities at the outset.

Rawls developed two egalitarian principles upon which such a just society would be based. His principles rule out justifying inequalities in order to achieve a greater common good (utilitarianism) or to maintain individual freedom (libertarianism). The first principle requires that basic liberties must be equal, because citizens of a just society have the same basic rights to freedom, to fair equality of opportunity, to access to goods and services, and to self-respect. The second principle asserts that although the distribution of income and wealth need not be equal, any inequalities in power, wealth, and other resources must not exist unless they work to the absolute benefit of the worst-off members of society.

Thus, from an egalitarian perspective, in contrast to the libertarian view, redistribution of resources is a moral obligation. The unmet needs that should be redressed first are those of the least-well-off people. This means that, in order to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social positions. According to egalitarian principles, then, greater resources might be spent, for example, on the education of the less rather than the more intelligent students in our schools, at least in the earlier years, in order to ensure equality of opportunity in life.

The Racial Contract. While the three contemporary distributive justice theories discussed so far serve as useful tools for social work, they have serious limitations in terms of explaining why certain groups of people consistently get less justice, nor do they explain the phenomenon of oppression. The Racial Contract (Mills, 1997) is a perspective that provides a way of making a connection between contemporary mainstream theories and the injustices prevalent in our society and the world. The racial contract perspective is based on the social contract tradition, as are the others. However, Mills's viewpoint is different in that he sees the notion of the social contract as being the basis of Western democratic societies as, in fact, a myth. He contends that the real basis of Western societies is a "racial contract." The basic difference between Mills's perspective of social justice and the other perspectives is that the peculiar social contract to which Mills refers is not a contract between everybody (as in "we the people"), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people (i.e., were considered to be fully human when the United States was founded—"we the white people").

Utilitarians, libertarians, and egalitarians use the social contract as a normative tool—to present an ideal social contract that explains how a just society would be formed, ruled by a moral government, and regulated by a defensible moral code. Mills's usage of the social contract is again different: he uses it not merely normatively, but descriptively, to
explain the actual genesis of the society, how government functions, and people's moral psychology. The racial contract thus explains how an unjust, exploitative society, ruled by an oppressive government and regulated by an immoral code, came into existence.

According to this perspective, it is crucial to understand what the original and continuing social contract actually was and is, so that we can correct for it in constructing the ideal contract toward which social work can then strive. Mills points out that the social contract has always consisted of formal and informal agreements between the members of one subset of humans who are designated as white and are thus considered to be full persons. The remaining subset of humans who are designated as "nonwhite" and of a different and inferior moral status of subpersons are not a consenting party to the contract but are the objects rather than the subjects of the agreement. The moral and legal rules normally regulating the behavior of whites in their dealings with one another do not apply in dealings with nonwhites or apply only in a qualified form. Mills's main point is that the general purpose of the social contract, as it has been and is, is always the differential privileging of whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group. From the beginning, then, race is in no way an "afterthought" or a "deviation" from ostensibly raceless Western ideals of the social contract, but rather a central shaping constituent of those ideals.

The racial contract makes a strong claim to being an actual historical fact as Mills describes specific subsidiary contracts designed for different modes of exploiting the resources and peoples of the rest of the world for Europe, including the expropriation contract (which granted Europeans dominion over all territories of the world, not by virtue of any conquest of them, but as a right acquired simply by "discovery"), the slavery contract, and the colonial contract.

The racial contract is a conceptual bridge between two areas now largely segregated from each other. On the one hand, there is the world of mainstream philosophy (including the utilitarian, libertarian, and egalitarian theories of social justice) that focuses discussions of justice and rights in the abstract. On the other hand, there is the world of First Nations Peoples, African American, and political thought of the global South that has historically focused on issues of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, race and racism, slavery, Jim Crow, reparations, apartheid, Afrocentrism, and so on.

In order to endorse or emulate an ideal social contract, the nominal contract as it exists needs to be demystified and condemned. So, the point of analyzing the injustices as they exist both historically and in the present—predominantly along race and gender lines—is to explain and expose the inequities of the social contract as it actually is in order to see through the theories and moral justifications offered in defense of them. Just as Mills provides a framework for analyzing the social contract related to race, Carole Pateman's (1988) book, *The Sexual Contract*, provides a similar analysis of how the social contract has been based on gender. The point is that analysis of the way things are does normative work for us by enabling us to understand the social contract's actual history and how its values and concepts have functioned to rationalize oppression, in order to reform them.

**Differing Perspectives and Social Work.** What this all means is that there are differing popular perspectives about what social justice is or should be. So, when we say that social workers need to see social problems and individual troubles through a social justice lens, it is important to recognize that there are different lenses that provide differing views on
what is just. It is often proposed that the egalitarian theory of justice is closest to traditional values and ethics of social work. Wakefield (1988) supports this view by arguing that: "social work strives to ensure that no person is deprived of a fair minimum level of those basic social goods to which everyone is entitled," and supports Rawls's inclusion of self-respect in the list of social goods (p. 187). Yet, there is some empirical evidence that social workers, while perhaps holding to egalitarian principles as the ideal, may tend to operate from a utilitarian perspective (Conrad, 1988; Reisch & Taylor, 1983). Terms such as cost-benefit analysis and "triage" strategies related to managed care realities might point to a utilitarian approach in practice. The racial contract perspective provides a conceptual tool for the integration of diversity, social and economic justice, and the impact of oppression.

The questions with which the social work profession continues to struggle include the following: Which perspectives are compatible with what social work is about? Which justice principles should be adopted to provide guidance for our profession? The combination of the racial contract and the egalitarian perspective merits serious consideration for the profession. While the racial contract explains and describes injustice, the egalitarian perspective can point the way for reform.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND OPPRESSION: MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

The social justice theories briefly described in the previous section provide a foundation for understanding the complexity of our notions about what social justice is and what social justice should be. Analysis of notions about social justice point to their race- and gender-based nature. The questions posed about social justice at the beginning of this chapter were: "Is life fair? Is life just?" In this section, we turn to the related question: Justice and fairness . . . for whom? As we examine the meaning of social justice for the profession and social workers struggle to promote social and economic justice in everyday practice, it is important to analyze the differing views and make explicit the connections between these concepts and oppression. We now turn to a discussion of those connections.

Who Is Entitled to Justice? The Concept of Moral Exclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, some exercises were suggested to promote self-reflection and examination of our personal beliefs about social justice and a critical assessment of them within the context of contemporary theories. Grounded in the notion of racial (and sexual) exclusion as the basis of Western society's social contract, we can now look at how we also have beliefs about which people should be treated justly. The concept of moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990) provides a useful framework for understanding personal beliefs in relation to different groups in society.

Moral exclusion occurs when persons or groups are perceived as being outside the boundary in which values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply—that is, outside the boundaries of social justice. Persons outside our moral boundaries are seen as expendable or undeserving, and thus harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just. The process of categorizing groups negatively and excluding them from the realm of acceptable norms or values is linked to stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes related to
ethnocentrism. It is linked to the notion that the social contract has always been and is an exclusionary one.

While seldom conscious of them, we all have beliefs about which people should be trusted justly, and the breadth or narrowness of our moral boundaries is influenced by prevailing cultural norms (e.g., it is no longer considered acceptable in the United States to own people as slaves or to make interracial marriages illegal, but it is generally considered acceptable to exclude gay men and lesbians from certain benefits such as partner benefits and the right to marry).

The exclusion of an out-group from the norms of fairness is a cognitive, affective, and behavioral phenomenon that enables otherwise considerate people to engage in self-serving behavior or inaction in everyday situations in order to gain benefits to themselves even though at injurious costs to others. We live in a world where certain groups of people benefit from an implicit and explicit contract that disadvantages other groups. At the same time, most people who benefit from the contract do not think about it or, if they do think about it, consider it to be just the way things are rather than as the outcome of a history of political oppression (Mills, 1997).

The concept of moral exclusion provides a tool for making obvious one’s own personal processes of excluding certain people from the boundaries of fairness. There is a considerable body of research on moral exclusion, disengagement practices, and the possibility to justify exclusion, and antidotes to exclusion. Analyzing one’s own moral boundaries within the context of oppression theory, along with research evidence of antidotes to marginalization, suggests strategies for change.

**Oppression and Its Common Elements**

The racial contract perspective reveals that some people are seen as expendable or undeserving and are thus excluded from the realm of social justice. The process of categorizing groups negatively, and thus justifying their exclusion, is linked to stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes related to ethnocentrism. The result is a condition of oppression, which is defined as a situation in which one segment of the population acts to prevent another segment of the population from attaining access to resources or which acts to inhibit or make them less than in some way in order to dominate them (Bulhan, 1985).

Persons who have been and are excluded from the realm of the norms and values of social justice include people of color, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons; and people with disabilities. While the conditions and manifestations of oppression may vary, as well as each person’s unique experiences of its effects, there are common elements that characterize all oppression. The definition in the previous paragraph, for example, is one that fits all oppressions. In addition, the condition of oppression always involves power and advantage, which are granted to certain people and denied to others based on the notion of the “other” that is different from what is considered to be the norm. The defined norm (white, male, heterosexual) is the standard of rightness wherein all others are judged in relation to it. The “other” is not only different from the norm, however, the “other” is also believed to be inferior and deviant, which justifies advantage for those who fit the norm and disadvantage for the “other.”

Power is an essential factor in all oppression. Racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not personal prejudices based on stereotypes; they include social and economic power 2
an essential part of the equation that makes the difference between talking about prejudices and discrimination (which we all engage in) and a system of advantage that confers economic, social, judicial, and political power on people who fit the "norm." To understand oppression, we can look at indicators in any of those areas. For example, in the political arena. How many senators are black, women, or openly homosexual?

Another common element of oppression is that all oppressions are held in place by ideology and the use or threat of violence. The ideology on which Mills (1997) contends that the racial oppression is based is that of superiority based on race (i.e., white supremacy); the ideology on which sexual oppression is based is that of gender superiority; and the basis for homosexual oppression is an ideology of heterosexual superiority and morality. With an ideology of superiority as its foundation, violence is used to enforce and maintain all oppressions. The violence may be physical and direct (lynching, rape, and battering, gay bashing), or it may be personal and psychological, such as name-calling (nigger, bitch, faggot/sissy). It may be indirect, or it may be institutionalized and characterized by indicators such as differential poverty rates, the predominance of men of color in the criminal justice system and on death row, and the reality of police brutality.

Another element that is common to all oppressions is that they are institutionalized, which means that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are built into the norms, traditions, laws, and policies of society so that even those who have nonracist, nonsexist, and nonheterosexist beliefs are compelled to act otherwise. Institutionalized racism ensures that whites, males, and heterosexuals benefit regardless of the intentions of individuals in those institutions. Pinderhughes (1986) writes about how institutional racism ensures that whites benefit and exonerates them from responsibility while at the same time blaming people of color. She points out that there is considerable resistance against comprehending the institutional aspect of racism and that the process of understanding its systemic nature can be very painful, especially for whites who have seen themselves as different from whites whom they view as racists. She further writes about how it is particularly devastating for white people who have been involved in civil rights activities to face the implication that they, along with other whites, could be the beneficiaries of racism. There is a sense of injury that stems not only from recognition of themselves as trapped in the systemic process of racism that benefits them and exploits people of color, but also from the realization that, while for many people of color this reality has been obvious, for them it has heretofore been obscure.

Implications for Social Workers

If the mission of social work is truly to promote social and economic justice, it is imperative that we translate that commitment into culturally relevant and nonoppressive social work practice. Social workers need to do their own work in relation to understanding their own boundaries of moral exclusion and developing a stance of inclusion, in which all people are entitled to the same values, rules, and considerations of fairness. Further, social workers need to understand the elements of oppression and how they operate and translate that understanding into antioppression practice. Van Voorhis (1998) suggests that practitioners need to integrate the following elements into their direct practice with clients: knowledge about oppression; self-awareness and acceptance of one's own multiple identities and position in relation to power and privilege; knowledge about the
psychosocial effects of oppression for people in all marginalized groups; and skills in listening to clients' stories, assessing the psychosocial effects of oppression on clients, intervening to enhance identity and change oppressive social conditions, and evaluating practice interventions by monitoring client progress related to empowerment outcomes.

**HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPRESSION: MAKING GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**

The NASW Code of Ethics (1996a) mandates that social workers promote social and economic justice not only in the United States, but globally. In Ethical Standard 6, the Code clearly states that "social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments" (Standard 6.01) and, further, that "social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally" (Standard 6.04c).

Social work as a profession is grounded on humanitarian and democratic ideals with a focus on meeting human needs and developing human potential and resources. This focus on human needs shapes a professional conviction that the fundamental nature of these needs means that their being met is not a matter of choice but an imperative of basic justice. This imperative of basic justice applies to all humanity. A 1992 United Nations' publication, *Teaching and Learning about Human Rights: A Manual for School of Social Work and the Social Work Profession*, moves the discussion of diversity and social justice to a consideration of human rights as the organizing principle for professional practice (p. 9). A transition from an orientation of meeting human needs to one of affirming human rights is necessary because substantive needs must be met. Thus, the idea of human rights has become a powerful social construct to fulfill human needs (Wronka, 1998). In this section, the discussion revolves around the connections between affirming human rights and promoting social and economic justice from a global perspective.

### What Rights Are Human Rights?

The United Nations (1987) defines human rights as those rights that are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights are basic for a life in which the inherent dignity and work of each person receives respect and protection. Human rights are universal and apply to every person without discrimination.

Three generations of human rights are set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948. The first generation, labeled “negative rights,” represents civil and political rights as set forth in articles 2–21. These are rights devised to ensure freedom from any curtailment of individual liberty. The second generation, labeled “positive rights,” are aimed at ensuring social justice, freedom from want, and participation in the social, economic, and cultural aspects of life as set forth in articles 22–27 of the Declaration. The third, “collective rights” (article 28), set forth that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its three generations, combines the antioppression social work imperative with its calling to
promote social and economic justice. In an increasingly interdependent world, recognition of the interdependence of the three human rights generations is increasing, and the struggle for social and economic justice is being seen as one of international solidarity. As stated in the 1992 United Nations manual for social workers:

The evolution from a defensive stand against oppression to an affirmation of the right to satisfaction of material and non-material human needs and equitable participation in the production and distribution of resources is the logical outcome of an increasing socio-political consciousness and economic development mainly, but not exclusively, in industrialized nations. In developing countries the sheer proportion of need, and possibly of exploitation, lead to the collective vision of the right to social and economic development beyond the personal level to the national and regional levels, with a system of international solidarity for development as its ultimate aim. (p. 6)

Social Work and Human Rights

The social work profession's focus on substantive human needs that must be met is inseparable from the search for and realization of positive rights and entitlements. Working within different political systems, social workers around the globe uphold and defend the rights of their clients while attempting to meet their needs. Since social workers are often employed as agents of powerful institutions or agencies, many are placed in a precarious role due to their duty to be a loyal employee and their duty to serve their clients. Culturally competent social workers, as they strive to eliminate oppression and promote social justice, are often required to mediate between the people and state and other authorities, to champion particular causes, and to provide protection when state action for the public good threatens the rights and freedoms of particular persons or groups . . . as a bridging profession, social work has to be conscious of its values and possess a solid knowledge base, not least in the field of human rights, to guide it in many conflicting situations throughout its practice. While social workers through their actions may well reinforce the rights of clients, faulty judgment can lead them to jeopardize those rights. Viewing its work from a global human rights perspective helps the profession by providing a sense of unity and solidarity, without losing sight of the local perspectives, conditions and needs which constitute the framework within which social workers operate. (United Nations, 1992, p. 9)

Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice. They are inseparable from culturally competent practice. Rights corresponding to human needs have to be upheld and fostered. Advocacy for such rights must therefore be an integral part of social work. In countries under authoritative regimes, such advocacy can have serious consequences for social work professionals.

The direct knowledge that social workers have of the conditions of vulnerable populations makes them more conscious than other professionals that their concerns are closely linked to respect for human rights. Social workers understand that the full realization of civil and political rights is not possible without enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights. And, in order to achieve lasting progress in the implementation of human rights, there must be effective national and international policies of economic and social development.
The Global Context in Which Social Workers Advocate for Human Rights and Social Justice

The United Nations (1992) manual for social workers emphasizes that human rights and social work have to be considered within the context faced by the majority of people in the world. The manual offers the following poignant contextual conditions (pp. 10–11):

- It is estimated that in the 1980s alone, more human beings lost their lives as a result of economic and social deprivation than those who perished in World War II.
- Countless people have been killed and tortured or have disappeared in a world subjected to domination and oppression. Exploitative and oppressive systems and structures give rise to dictatorships and authoritarian regimes under which millions become victims of human rights violations as the price of their struggle for freedom and survival.
- Each day, 40,000 children die from malnutrition and diseases including AIDS, lack of clean water, and inadequate sanitation.²
- Of a population of about 6 billion, 900 million adults are illiterate, 10 million are homeless, and 15 million are refugees. Of the 15 million refugees, at least 75% are women and children. In some developing countries, women and children constitute 90% of the refugee population.³
- Women are prominent in the statistics of poverty and deprivation. Two-thirds of the world’s illiterate people are women.⁴ Maternal mortality rates are high in most developing countries. An African woman, for example, has one chance in 21 of dying in childbirth; an Asian woman, one chance in 51; and a South American woman, one chance in 73. In contrast, a North American woman has one chance in over 6,000.⁵
- The crisis is deepening. Military spending is about 15% of gross national product in industrial as well as developing countries. In the early 1990s, the World Bank estimated that the staggering debt burden of the developing countries (including the debts of Eastern Europe) amounting to $1.3 trillion was estimated to increase substantially in the near future.⁶

There is hope for improvement in the implementation of the human rights instruments that guide global human rights and an ever-growing international consciousness and solidarity. Social workers have a role to play in strengthening such solidarity and ensuring that the principles preserved in the international human rights instruments are “gradually translated into reality, paving the way for a world in which people’s most urgent and legitimate needs are satisfied” (United Nations, 1992, p. 11).

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It has been argued that social work has been a human rights profession from its conception due to its basic tenet that every human being has intrinsic value and its mission to promote equitable social structures. Yet, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work believe that greater knowledge and understanding of human rights is needed to improve the actions and interventions of social work professionals in advancing social and economic justice and eliminating oppression. As these two bodies state, “social workers work with their clients on a variety of levels: the micro level of individual and family; the meso level of community; and the macro level of society—nationally and internationally. Concern for human rights must be manifested by social workers at all levels and at all times” (United Nations, 1992, p. 3). The following short summary of the basic instruments concerning human rights, with the dates when they were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, illustrates the connection between culturally competent social work practice and its requisite commitment to promote social justice and human rights. Social workers need to become familiar with the documents and the specialized agencies, United Nations bodies, and mechanisms for implementing the human rights mandates.

Instruments Providing General Protection:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The Covenants on Human Rights (1966)
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
  - Right to life, liberty, and security
  - Right not co be subjected to torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment
  - Prohibition of slavery
  - Right not to be arbitrarily detained
  - Rights to freedom of expression, religion, assembly, and association, including trade union membership
  - Right to freedom of movement and residence
  - Right to vote through universal suffrage
  - Right to a fair trial
  - Rights of minorities to protection
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
  - Right to work
  - Right to social security
  - Right to protection of the family
  - Right to an adequate standard of living
  - Right to education
  - Right to health
  - Right to join trade unions

Instruments Providing Particular Protection
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)

Rules Regarding Detention and Treatment of Offenders
- Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (1955)
- Principles of Medical Ethics (1982)
- Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985)

Other Human Rights Instruments
- Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons (1971)
- Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Armed Conflicts (1974)
- Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance (1981)
- Declaration on the Right to Development (1986)

BECOMING EMPOWERED TO UNDERSTAND AND PRACTICE CHANGE
STRATEGIES AND SKILLS

In order to fulfill our mission of promoting social and economic justice, eliminating oppression, and promoting human rights, we need to translate the knowledge and understanding we gain about injustice into effective strategies for social change. Empowerment theory and the empowerment process help in our work with clients who have been marginalized and excluded from the boundaries of fairness and justice. Social workers also need to engage in an empowerment journey for themselves. Thus, this section discusses the issue of empowering ourselves for social justice advocacy.

Empowerment Process

Dictionary definitions of empowerment include phrases such as “to give power or authority to,” “to authorize,” “to enable or permit,” and “to license.” When social workers become empowered to advocate for social justice, they affirm the authority that already belongs to them as human beings and as citizens. This power is both internal, in terms of how they experience their own efficacy, and external, in terms of the power they have to persuade others in interpersonal encounters and relationships. This power enables them to protest injustice and to seek alternatives to oppression at the levels of organization, community, country, and world.

8. This section is adapted with permission from M. S. White and D. Van Soest (1984), Empowerment of People for Peace, Minneapolis, MN: Women Against Military Madness.
Empowerment is a process of discovering within ourselves and in others the capacity to bring about change. Empowerment means accepting personal responsibility to act. As social workers realize their power, they become free to transform themselves and to discover untapped strengths. Their individual actions of protest and creativity create a ripple effect that empowers others. At the heart of the empowerment process is the phenomenon of helping someone to see something that he or she has not seen before and, subsequently, to act upon that insight. It is a power to help others see new things as possible.

In the model proposed in this section, social workers are encouraged to see the empowerment process as beginning with the smallest of individual actions. When joined with others, these efforts create a chain reaction that releases human energy. Over time, this energy can build to become a critical mass that results in social change. Each person’s awareness and actions will increase the likelihood that a critical mass will accumulate and that ultimately change will take place.

Creating a just society and world is a global issue of overwhelming proportion. A transformation from injustice and oppression to just alternatives will not come about easily or quickly. Giving birth to social justice will be a long and painful process. It requires personal commitment and social transformation on a massive scale. Despite the magnitude of the problem, if social change for social justice is to take place, it will grow from the grassroots—at the level of the individual, the small group, local organizations, and communities. By starting at this level, the empowerment process provides a bridge that connects the person and the smaller group with the larger social change movement. This bridge becomes a vehicle for change as students join with others in crossing over to yet uncharted terrain. If we trust the process, empowerment will provide the energy needed for creating a just society.

**Personal Transformation and Connections**

In the 1980s it became clear that if social movements were to grow, organizations needed to focus on the individuals. Individual needs must be met if the larger cause is to flourish. In The Aquarian Conspiracy, Marilyn Ferguson (1980) describes how social activism stems from personal transformation. In the empowerment process, first steps toward such personal transformation take place when social workers acknowledge their deep feelings about injustice and oppression and the role they play as privileged or oppressed based on their social identities. Personal connections are critical, and they can be painful. However, once we begin to accept feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and other feelings of distress as normal human reactions to the horrors of injustice, we can become free to see ways in which we are all personally connected to the issue.

Personal connections can be many and varied. Awareness and acknowledgment of their own feelings about racism in the United States begins the change process for many people, who may begin to feel personally involved with racism in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most basic connection comes from personal fears about being victimized by racism and other forms of oppression. For those who have benefited from an oppressive system based on race, concerns about being viewed as a racist can cause some people to take action. Although some of those actions might take the form of defensiveness and attempts to prove they are not racist, connecting with the issue of racism in such a
personal way opens the door to exploring new ways of thinking. Some people become enraged when they learn about historical events of which they had previously been unaware and make new connections through those feelings of anger at not having been taught all aspects of their country’s history. Some become outraged at the lack of vital human service programs for certain populations in the United States. Others make a connection to the issue of social justice in a more direct, political way through an analysis of how economic and political interests operate to ensure inequities. Some people begin to question laws that sanction and create oppressive conditions and realize that horrors can be unleashed legally as, for example, when slavery in the United States was legal. They realize that everything done by the Nazis in Germany, based on creating a superior race, was done legally and with the approval of citizens and the establishment. Such questioning compels some people to begin to respond to higher principles. Some people feel a deep sense of commitment based on a moral or philosophical principle regarding the value of human life, a perspective that transcends traditional differences between people based on race, ethnicity, religion, and so on.

Educating ourselves about cultural diversity for social justice calls upon us to look within to identify connections such as those described earlier. By making connections between injustice and oppression and our personal lives, we begin to consider ways to respond. Thus, the empowerment process starts with where each of us is at on the issues and the personal connections that create feelings of conflict and distress.

During the process of exploring diversity and oppression, some people make a profoundly personal connection when they discover a gap between what they want to see in themselves and what they actually find in themselves. We may experience a loss of or threat to self-respect and question the self-image we want to hold as we struggle to come to terms with effects that privilege and oppression have had in our own lives (Pinderhughes, 1989). It has been proposed that such a sense of loss is triggered by a “discrediting of familiar assumptions” that creates a “crisis of discontinuity” (Marris, 1974, p. 21). Thus, learning about social justice and injustice often involves a process similar to the grieving process. By understanding the grieving process and appreciating it as a normal response, we can support and validate each person’s personal journey toward change. The following discussion demonstrates how the process of transformative learning to become social change advocates relates to issues of loss and grief.

The Grieving Cycle

As we begin to share our experiences and reactions to injustice and oppression, we may experience a process that is similar to the grieving cycle described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1975) and others in relation to death and other losses. In the following text, the five stages of grieving are summarized, and examples of how each may be experienced in relation to racism and other forms of oppression are provided.

1. Denial. While many social workers believe there is injustice in the United States and the world, they deal with their feelings by denying that a problem exists at this stage of the process. This protects them from making personal connections that thus do not need to be felt. It is a state of “psychic numbing.” In this state, we are protected against a feeling of being out of control and against feeling responsible. The denial stage helps
cushion the impact of the horrors of injustice and oppression under which we all live. We are resistant to information about injustice. Our response is automatic and unemotional. For example, upon hearing about racism as an institutionalized phenomenon, some people may experience confusion and be incapable of comprehending what that means. They may consider such ideas to be propaganda. There is a desire to hold on to a belief that the world as they perceive it is a just place and to maintain faith in our “experts” and leaders to uphold justice.

2. Anger/Rage. In reaction to loss—whether it is loss of innocence, of belief that the world is just, or of self-image—denial is often followed by anger or rage. At this stage, we react with intense feelings, for instance, as we share stories about a racial profiling incident, a hate crime, an innocent black man living on death row for decades before his innocence is proved, or any number of stories of oppression. As one social worker expressed it: “I am angry when I realize that I have always lived in a racist and sexist society and that everyone lied to me about it... I am furious when I discover that our country was founded on violence, slavery, and annihilation of indigenous people when I have always been taught that it was founded on truth and justice... I am angry when I consider that some people are considered to be expendable by the powers that be.” A student of color in a social work class expressed his anger when he wrote: “I could strangle some of the privileged white students in this program and in this class! They don’t know about police brutality? What in the world do they think slavery was about? Are they stupid or do they just choose to put their heads in the sand? I am so sick of hearing them be shocked about injustice that I want to scream!” This stage of the grieving cycle is perhaps the most uncomfortable for many, especially those of us who have been taught that it is not polite to be angry and who may cringe at the expression of anger by others.

3. Bargaining. In the bargaining stage, we may be aware of the seriousness of injustice and oppression and at the same time try to protect ourselves from understanding the full impact on both ourselves and other people. A desire to strike a bargain to minimize pain and sense of responsibility might be expressed in words such as the following: “I understand that the world is unjust and that there is work to do. Yet, it is important that we understand that things are not anywhere near as serious now as they used to be. We no longer enslave people, for example, and everyone has the right to vote. While there are still problems with some people accessing what they need, there are laws that now protect people from unfair and unequal treatment.”

4. Depression. The magnitude and ramifications of oppression, when truly faced directly, can be so overwhelming that thinking about it can produce feelings of extreme helplessness and even despair. Social workers sometimes describe their dismay at recognizing the disparity between personal anguish over the realities of oppression and injustice and the social reality of “business as usual.” Some people express feelings of self-blame, suggesting that it is they who are insane and overreacting rather than society perpetuating and allowing such injustices. When we begin to experience such feelings, we often retreat back to a state of denial in which we may refuse to acknowledge the problems and resist becoming involved in change actions.
Apathy characterizes the depression stage of the grieving cycle. Social workers who observe the consequences of oppression on a regular basis may report withdrawal symptoms and feel that they have no energy left to bear anything else about injustice. They feel hopeless, helpless, and alone. It is a state of despair. Optimism vanishes, and all that can be seen is pain, separation between all human beings, and ignorance and prejudice. There is little or no hope for changing conditions.

5. Acceptance and Reorganization. At this stage, social workers refuse to accept the inevitability of injustice. Instead, they accept responsibility to act and are able to reorganize their behavior and purposefully work toward finding solutions. They have an increased awareness of reality. They are empowered to bring about change. They have hope in the possibility of change.

The grieving cycle, as described here, can provide a useful guide for understanding what we may go through as we face the realities of racism, injustice, and oppression. The cycle is not absolute—not everyone goes through every stage in the exact sequence, or at the same predictable pace. Yet the model can help us comprehend our own feelings and behavior and those of others. It is important to also recognize that the cycle, as applied to our reactions to learning about cultural diversity and oppression, differs from other types of grieving in that we cannot foresee a final resolution of the problem, nor of our grieving, in the immediate future. As long as problems of injustice are ongoing, we may find ourselves repeating stages. In other words, the feelings of denial, apathy, despair, anger, and helplessness may return when we learn of a new situation of injustice. Social workers need to be prepared for that eventuality and to understand that, although feelings of grief can be overwhelming at times, hope cannot be bought with a refusal to feel.

The empowerment process helps us to accept the fact that experiencing the feelings in the grieving cycle is a sane reaction to facing the realities of an unjust world. It helps us to know that we are not alone in our feelings. Whether in the classroom or in a social service agency, social workers can help each other by acknowledging their mutual feelings and by talking about the problems. It is important to discover that we are all in this together. The fact that our situation is a collective one, bearing on us all, albeit in different ways depending on the status conferred by our social identities, has tremendous implications. It means that in facing oppression together, openly and deeply, people can rediscover their interconnectedness in the web of life, and this brings personal power and resilience (Marcy, 1983).

The Necessity of Actions

Actions give social workers the energy to work through the grieving cycle. Callahan (1982) writes about the effectiveness of actions:

New and different actions can change thought and feeling just as new and different thoughts can change behavior. Taking even one small step on a journey changes one’s perspective on the landscape, as well as changing one’s self-definition to that of a person who is able to move out toward new goals. Action, either practical or symbolic, overcomes the learned helplessness, inertia and apathy correlated with the absence of hope. (p. 1)
By taking action, commitment to effecting change is strengthened, and so are the chances for making social change possible.

Actions become the steps on the empowerment journey. Often the first steps are the most difficult. To act in response to social injustice is an evolutionary process. What we are able to do today may be radically different from what we may be doing next month or next year. It is important to learn that small steps lead to larger actions in a natural progression. As a first step, we may think more about racism and other forms of oppression and begin to talk about it with our families, friends, and others in our immediate circles. Gradually, we may move to reading more about the subject on our own, to speaking out at public gatherings, to writing letters, to educating others, to wearing a button, to circulating and signing petitions, to lobbying our political representatives, to advocating for agency policy changes, to peaceful demonstrations, to organizing actions with others. It is important that all efforts are acknowledged, including the smallest effort, since social justice is accomplished by laying one brick at a time, taking one step at a time.

In order to be advocates for social justice, we can weave the issues into our daily lives and work. We can be most effective by bringing our advocacy work with us wherever we go—in our own families, neighborhoods, workplaces, social gatherings, and agencies. Everyone has a skill or talent that can be used in the empowerment process. By focusing on the present, asking ourselves what it is we do in our clients' daily lives, and then doing it for social justice, our lives are changed but not rearranged.

Each action becomes the impetus for growth. The more we do, the greater our desire to learn and to share what we have learned. Because we choose our actions, we can set our own limits and control our rate of change. In order to get started, all that is needed is a strong commitment to work for an end to racism and other forms of oppression and injustice. We learn from the examples of others. When we begin to act, our actions join with the actions of others to provide the energy for the journey.

**Barriers to Change**

Part of the process of change in this area involves looking at the barriers that keep us from being advocates for social justice. A common block for many is personal fear: of taking risks, of standing out by making a personal statement, of being embarrassed in public, of losing security or the respect of people they had thought were friends, of being alienated from family or friends or peers.

Social workers are often deterred from social justice advocacy actions by a fear of stepping outside their personal safety zones. We all have spheres of operation in which we feel safe. Stepping outside this area is risky, for when we confront issues in a public way, we may be subjected to the ridicule, misunderstanding, and anger of others. For example, interrupting a racist joke or challenging an oppressive agency policy can be a terrifying and thus courageous action to take when the response could quite possibly be ostracism from others for doing so. The empowerment process, however, generates confidence and courage. As we become more involved and are sustained by the support of others, we discover that our safety zones expand.

Another significant barrier for many is the fear of creating communication gaps, tensions, and conflict within our own agencies if we identify the prejudice and discrimination within that system. Applying the process of empowerment to that of agency change
can be helpful in this regard. Students can be encouraged to be sensitive to each person's attitude toward the issue. Unrealistic expectations about the others' responses usually increase the tension. Communicating consideration for others while respecting one's own stage of involvement can help reduce resistance to open discussion about the issues and help one stay in the struggle.

Some people speak quite honestly about another barrier: that of losing the privileges conferred upon them based on their own social identities in an oppressive system. As one social work student wrote in his journal, "I feel terrible about the inequities I am learning about and I want to work to change the system. I must admit, though, that I am quite ambivalent about what I might have to give up in terms of the privileges and benefits I currently get from the system as it is since I am a white, heterosexual male. It is easy to think theoretically about social justice but when I think in practical terms—like maybe I wouldn't get preferential treatment in a job application situation if there were truly equal opportunity—I am ashamed to say that I have to think twice." We need to acknowledge the courage it takes to be honest about this and challenge each other to face our cognitive dissonance rather than slipping back into denial. Positive role models of people throughout history who were advocates for social justice can help in this regard as well.

Two additional barriers frequently impede progress in becoming social justice advocates: the fear of speaking out in public and the fear of not being sufficiently informed. By encouraging small steps, the empowerment process can be used to overcome these fears.

Speaking out in public will seem less frightening if we first talk to those with whom we feel most comfortable. Then, when we are ready, we can begin to speak to others in small groups and at public meetings. It can be very rewarding to find that acquaintances and even strangers are willing to talk about issues of racism, poverty, and oppression of other kinds. Often the message on a pin or button (e.g., "Stop Racism," "A social worker for justice") will help begin a conversation. Speaking out is a natural outgrowth of increased commitment and involvement.

To reduce the fear of being uninformed, it is helpful to understand that we can never have enough information or remember all the facts. Statistics change, and one fact can counteract another. What is most important is an understanding of underlying concepts. If we develop a point of view as a framework for our own thinking, the facts will fall into place. A preponderance of information exists in books, articles, and videos. To make sense out of the facts, it is helpful to absorb only small amounts of information at one time and take time to process it. We will soon be surprised by how much we know.

**Benefits of Empowerment**

As advocates for social justice, social workers are enriched and strengthened by the friendships that are made with others who share common goals. We get to know and appreciate others whose backgrounds and lifestyles may be quite different from our own. People who work for social justice are old and young, rich and poor, religious and non-religious, heterosexual and homosexual and bisexual and transsexual, and come from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Our strength grows as we celebrate this diversity and face our differences honestly. In the process we learn to trust each other enough to live justly on a personal level.
Throughout the empowerment process, our actions become seeds that germinate best within a supportive environment. As the seeds grow, we discover that we have developed previously untapped strengths and talents. We find ourselves taking actions that we thought we could never take, when the opportunity to act presented itself. Like wildflowers, our actions spread, affecting those in the world around us. Thus, the circle continues to grow. As personal transformations become interwoven with social change, lives take on new meaning and deeper purpose.

What sustains us in our social justice advocacy work is the belief that our actions can and will make a difference. Although individual acts may seem insignificant, they have tremendous power when joined with the efforts of countless others. Historically, we know that social and political changes have always stemmed from the grassroots. The abolition of slavery, the right to unionize, women’s rights, and civil rights, to name a few, all came about as a result of grassroots efforts. If social justice is to become a reality, a collective commitment to change must be made at the local level. As more and more people unite, we gain the strength to change both the world and ourselves.

Actions are clearly effective when those involved in them experience their capabilities and their strength. That exciting feeling of empowerment is something that cannot be taken away. It becomes part of how we think about ourselves, as purposeful, effective people who can express ourselves clearly on an issue of vital importance.9

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE ACTIONS

Many problems that social workers encounter at the micro, meso, and macro levels stem from injustices that are grounded in an underlying crisis of values. Social workers need to ground their empowerment strategies and actions in values and principles that hold out hope for remedying such underlying crises of values. Psychosocial and economic explanations for problems social workers encounter need to be reinforced by an understanding of different and deeper dimensions and by understanding the interrelation of the personal and socioeconomic and value structures and processes. Possible actions aimed at promoting social and economic justice are many and as the empowerment model illustrates, all are important.

Values

Social workers are faced with complex decisions about which actions to take given each particular situation. In order to guide their thinking, the following eight values are identified as being central to social workers’ decision-making process. They are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.10

1. **Life.** Value for life is essential for all social and economic justice and human rights work. The worth of life, human and nonhuman existence, is the fountainhead for all other ideas and values that follow. Social workers are called to actively support positive and life-affirming aspects of all situations. Life is intrinsically connected and interdependent in all its parts and forms. Disruption of any aspect affects the social fabric or threatens life, thereby injuring humankind. Thus, value of life implies that suffering and death are not just individual phenomena but that they touch others. Physical health is an important aspect of the value and quality of life. Environmental deterioration, the water crisis including pollution, and the nonexistence and curtailment of health programs are some of the major life-threatening factors.

2. **Freedom and Liberty.** All human beings are born free and have the right to liberty. This presupposes that each human being has the freedom of choice in the conduct of his or her life. The enjoyment of this freedom is, however, frequently curtailed by material and other constraints. Freedom is likewise restricted by the principle of not infringing on the freedom of others. Yet, freedom, next to life itself, is viewed as the most precious human value, closely linked to human dignity and to the worth of human life. The quest for freedom and liberty has inspired many people to seek release from territorial or geographical domination. The quest for spiritual and intellectual freedom has inspired heroic acts of resistance. Social workers are often in the forefront of the struggle for freedom. In parts of the world where freedom does not exist, social workers pay a heavy price in oppression for pursuing their principles.

3. **Equality and Nondiscrimination.** The fundamental principle of equality of all human beings is imperfectly applied in everyday life, not least in the manifold aspects of interpersonal relations. For social workers it is a crucial concept related to personal and professional attitudes. It is also the cornerstone for the all-important principle of justice, requiring serious consideration of just and unjust equality and inequality based on biological factors; on psychic, social, cultural, and spiritual needs; and on individual contributions to the welfare of others. Once the principle of equality is accepted, it becomes impossible to discriminate against any person or group of persons.

4. **Justice.** Various aspects of justice have to be taken into consideration, including the legal, judicial, social, economic, and other aspects that constitute the basis by which a society upholds the dignity of its members and ensures the security and integrity of persons. Social workers have long promoted such principles and are conscious of the fact that human rights are best upheld by a law-abiding state. Impartiality in the administration of justice is an important tool to safeguard the rights of the vulnerable members of society who make up the majority of social work clients. The pursuit of justice, however, has wider implications that are less easily codified. Social justice encompasses satisfaction of basic human needs and the equitable sharing of material resources. It aims at universal access to fundamental services in health, education, equal opportunities at the start, protection for disadvantaged persons or groups, and a degree of moderation in the areas of redistribution, consumption, and profit.

5. **Solidarity.** This is a fundamental intrinsic value that implies not only understanding and empathy toward humankind's pain and suffering, but also identifying and taking
a stand with the sufferers and their cause. Social workers are expected not only to stand by people who are struggling, but also to express their solidarity in words and in deeds in the face of any form of denial of people's political, civil, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual rights. The social work profession must identify itself with victims of violence, torture, expulsion, and curtailment of freedom anywhere in the world.

6. Social Responsibility. This is action undertaken on behalf of sufferers and victims: standing for them, championing their cause, and helping them. Social responsibility is the implementation corollary of solidarity. The principle of social responsibility is crucial for a profession such as social work because service and commitment to the poor and the needy are its raison d'être.

7. Evolution, Peace, and Nonviolence. The values mentioned so far are determining factors for the quality of interpersonal relations. Peace, as a distinct value, and not simply as the absence of organized conflict, is one additional value. It is to be nurtured and striven for, with the ultimate goal of achieving harmony with the self, with others, and with the environment. While conflicts in human relations are unavoidable, ways to solve them can be either peaceful or violent, constructive or destructive. The revolutionary "raze all and build anew" approach has held fascination for people over the centuries, producing untold human suffering. An evolutionary approach is slower, often less immediately rewarding, but in the end longer-lasting and therefore more effective. It is an approach often chosen by social workers in relation to conflicts. Confrontation and resistance in the quest for freedom are not eschewed. Neither is justice and social justice. Violence is. Although the world is not ready to abandon the use of arms, and just causes for revolutions clearly exist, it should be recognized that arbitration and conciliation are effective tools to overcome seemingly irreconcilable differences provided they are practiced consistently and with respect, understanding, and knowledge.

8. Relations Between Mankind and Nature. Respect for other species and a quest for harmony with nature are more often permeating human consciousness in the 21st century. Environmental degradation cannot be ignored. The world economic order, faulty development models, inequality with regard to all resources, consumption patterns, and nuclear, industrial, and other pollution in industrialized as well as developing countries are recognized as causes of the earth's serious plight. Excessive consumerism and extreme poverty endanger nature as well as vulnerable groups of people through greed, lack of information, and need for survival. Comprehensive policies to halt and, where possible, repair damage to the environment need to be complemented by comprehensive environmental education programs and advocacy campaigns. Social workers have an important role to play in this process by linking with other groups.

Principles

Empowerment strategies and actions, grounded in the eight values set out previously, can be guided by the following five principles (NASW, 1996b, pp. 6–8).

Development. Community development is based on tapping into and building the integrity and leadership of the members of the community. Breaking the cycle of violence
and injustice and promoting social and economic justice are development processes that local people must direct and ultimately sustain. No imported scheme can substitute for bottom-up ingenuity.

**Participation.** Participatory community development is needed to counter the powerlessness, isolation, and exclusion that is the result of oppression and injustice and that is often expressed through violence. Sustainable development must have the participation of community members. Successful participation calls for engaging people, unleashing their creativity, building their capacities, and giving them a sense of ownership.

**Reciprocity.** Successful development calls for an equitable relationship between "the givers of help" and "the recipients of help" and a blurring of who receives from whom. Assisting a community requires one to become involved with it, to learn from it, to be influenced and changed by it—in a sense, to join it. Homegrown strategies to address injustice must be retrieved and exchanged, and new methods must be devised to share learning about what works and why.

**Innovation.** As budget cuts and managed care change the face of social service delivery, U.S. social workers must become innovative. As in resource-poor developing countries, accomplishing more with less and pooling resources to achieve otherwise impossible goals are becoming increasingly important. The infusion of more community-wide approaches to treating societal issues must become part of the day-to-day jobs of social workers. Innovation demands that social workers review the root causes of problems so that they can begin to institute positive change for more people at less cost.

**Global Learning.** The gap between home and abroad, between "us and them," is rapidly shrinking. Not only do so-called Third World conditions exist in neighborhoods across America, but the globalization of the economy, immigrant flows, environmental degradation, and a host of other factors all combine to make interdependency a fact of life. Armed with a more sophisticated knowledge base by which to analyze and understand current situations and policies, social workers can enhance their effectiveness. The search for solutions to societal problems should not be limited to U.S. communities and policies.

**CONCLUSION: IDENTIFYING, ANALYZING, AND RESPONDING TO SOCIAL INJUSTICES**

Social workers work with clients on a variety of levels—micro, meso, and macro—nationally and internationally. Concerns about human rights, social inequities, oppression, and other forms of injustice need to be identified on all levels. Social workers can be guided by the values and principles suggested in the previous section. They also can be assisted by tools for analyzing situations and making decisions about strategies and actions.

The case example in Tools for Student Learning 14.3 illustrates how two individuals in two different countries are connected by the bonds of exploitation, oppression, and
poverty. In both situations, industrial initiatives that are motivated solely by the desire for profits and that confer value on individuals only to the extent that they produce profits exploit the very people who should benefit from the economic development in their communities. A framework for analyzing and responding to the social justice issues inherent in their life circumstances is provided as a tool for thinking about their situation and other client situations.

TOOLS FOR STUDENT LEARNING 14.3

Case Study: Randy Conway and Angelica Hernandez

Randy Conway is 44 years old and lives with his wife and three children in the small town of Mount Vernon, Missouri. He worked 26 years in a Zenith factory making televisions. Zenith had moved from the northern United States to Missouri in 1976, in search of workers who were willing to toil for lower wages and without the benefit of trade unions. By 1992, Randy was making $11 per hour, but then Zenith moved 20,000 of its U.S. jobs to Mexico, including most of the jobs in Missouri. Randy is now out of work. Zenith spokesman John Taylor admitted that “the wage structure in Mexico is a primary reason for our relocation there.”

Angelica Hernandez has worked in Zenith’s Reynosa, Mexico, factory since 1988. She works in a noisy plant with hazardous chemicals all around and takes home $35 for a 48-hour week. Angelica, her husband, and their seven children live in a shack with a dirt floor that measures 12 feet by 18 feet and has no electricity or running water (GATT and NAFTA, n.d.).

An Analytical Framework11

In order to fully understand the social justice and human rights issues and determine possible responses in the case example as well as other client situations, an analysis of the causes, symptoms, shortfalls, and the potential of the population (or clients) for action and solutions needs to be undertaken. The overriding justice theme inherent in Randy and Angelica’s situations is poverty. The following framework can be used to guide your thinking about the role of social workers in advocating for social and economic justice. The framework can be used in relation to other overriding justice themes (e.g., racism, gender discrimination, environment and development, religion, etc.) and vulnerable populations (e.g., children, women, people of color, refugees, people with disabilities, etc.).

I. Aspects of the Situation
   A. Quality of life
   B. Food
   C. Employment
   D. Housing

E. Health
F. Education
G. Environment/pollution
H. Access to property (land, housing)
I. Other aspects:

II. Analysis
A. Causes (e.g., inequality in global resource distribution, industrial exploitation, nonunionization)
B. Symptoms (e.g., powerlessness, unemployment, hunger, health)
C. Shortfalls (e.g., lack of social security provisions and legislation protecting workers, lack of trade unions)
D. Potential of the population for solutions (e.g., self-help groups, bulk purchases of products, political mobilization, union organizing efforts)

III. Social Work Intervention
A. Social work intervention has a long tradition and has spearheaded innovative action through cooperation with poor people themselves, nongovernmental organizations, and other partners that reinforce advocacy and a concerted thrust to combat poverty situations such as these.
B. Consider here the following question: What is the scope and what are the limits of social work interventions at different levels (micro, meso, macro)?

IV. International Human Rights Instruments
A. Consider the main international instruments addressing the theme of poverty and how they might be used to advocate for change (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—1948, the International Covenants on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights—1966, and the Declaration on the Right to Development—1986).

Questions for Social Workers and Social Work Students

1. What particular human rights issues (e.g., rights to life, to work, to an adequate standard of living) that are linked to the issues of poverty are illustrated in the case example?

2. What attitudes of social discrimination, marginalization, stigmatization, and injustice need to be combated?

3. In what way can clients—individuals, families, communities—become empowered to bring about change in their own situation and in the attitudes of others toward them?

4. In what ways can social workers become empowered to alleviate or eliminate poverty and facilitate empowerment of people in the face of industrial and global exploitation? What are the barriers to their own empowerment, and how can they overcome those barriers?
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