

PART 1

Theoretical and Historical Perspectives

ONE

Injustice and Oppression: Meaning, Links, and Alternatives

AS NOTED in the introduction, social workers are required by the NASW Code of Ethics “to challenge social injustice” and “to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class.” The code does not specify, however, the meanings of these terms, as if they were self-evident. Yet social justice cannot be promoted and oppression, domination, exploitation, and social injustice cannot be overcome unless their meanings, sources, and dynamics are clarified.

Unraveling these meanings, sources, and dynamics is, however, fraught with difficulties, mainly because oppression tends to be more effective in achieving its ends—the enforcement of domination, exploitation, social injustice, and constraints on liberty—when people are not conscious of the societal dynamics involved, when victims and victimizers perceive these conditions as natural and inevitable, and, especially, when the victims share illusions of being free citizens of a democracy. Throughout much of human history, denial and rationalization of oppression and injustice, and their validation as sacred and secular law and order, may actually have been the most effective means in the defense