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Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege
A Critical Approach to Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Privilege Theory and Practice
Bob Mullaly
Juliana West
Third Edition

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In solidarity,

bob mullaly, Fredericton and juliana west, Kamloops

Preface

This third edition puts forth an urgent call to social work theory and practice to change the way we have to date understood anti-oppressive social work. Namely, we contend that anti-oppressive social work can only occur in tandem with anti-privilege theory and practice: without anti-privilege work, social work falls short of being anti-oppressive. While the previous edition added a formative chapter introducing privilege, this edition reflects a substantive interweaving of privilege and anti-privilege theory and practice throughout the book. This fundamental shift in understanding oppression and privilege as different sides of the same coin and anti-oppression and anti-privilege as interdependent approaches in the pursuit of social change is transformative for social work theory and practice. This edition includes case scenarios demonstrating how oppression and privilege are manifest in people's lives, classroom exercises utilized and honed over years of teaching, and specific strategies at the personal, cultural, and structural levels for implementing an anti-oppressive and anti-privilege practice.

Anti-oppressive social work is by now a prominent part of social work theory and practice in Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand and to a lesser extent in the US. In Canada, as a standard of accreditation, every university-based social work program must demonstrate its commitment to social justice and anti-oppressive objectives and principles in its curriculum content, its faculty composition, and its student admissions. Although the term "anti-oppressive social work" is relatively new, Garrett (2002) reminds us that the ideas and strategies associated with anti-oppressive social work are not new but rather are by-products of the struggles throughout civil society from the late 1960s on the part of a variety of social movements. These include a reinvigorated struggle for workers' rights and workplace democracy, the campaigns for women's equality and for LGBTTQ liberation, the fight for racial equality and civil rights, the birth of the disability movement and grey power, the decolonization struggle of Indigenous peoples, and the mental health survivors' movement. Accompanying these social movements has been the development of contemporary emancipatory social work theories and practices beginning in the 1970s with the emergence of radical social work. In the 1980s, progressive forms of social work theory and practice expanded beyond radical social work and its major preoccupation with class-based oppression to encompass gender, race, and several other forms of oppression. Then, in the early 1990s, anti-oppressive social work began to emerge, with a focus on intersecting bases of oppression—a focus that was absent in the earlier singular approaches to oppression.

Anti-privilege scholarship has a much shorter history. While privilege has become a part of a few other disciplines, social work has only recently started to include it in its discourse. Even now, however, it is often used only in relation to personal privilege and to specific areas of privilege such as white privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, and class privilege. Just as oppression was once oblivious to its interactional nature, so too today is privilege oblivious to its own interactions, including the interactions between oppression and privilege and anti-oppression and anti-privilege. To date, there has been limited theorization or conceptualization of the nature of an anti-privilege social work practice, its dynamics, the different forms

it takes, the different levels of society at which it occurs, and there is little conceptualization of what anti-privilege may look like. A discussion of the multifaceted nature of anti-privilege and its critical inclusion with anti-oppression is what makes this book innovative and timely and acts as a call to other critical theorists, critical scholars, critical pedagogics, and critical practitioners to join in the pursuit of a society characterized by social equality and social justice. We argue in this book that to achieve such a society we must formulate and incorporate an anti-oppressive and anti-privilege social work practice. To focus on one and not the other is to leave one side of the coin blank.

Each of us has been involved in teaching and developing progressive forms of social work for the past number of years—approximately 25 years for Bob and for the past two decades for Juliana. These have been different paths. For Juliana, her social location as a newer academic is influenced by her experience as clinical practitioner, executive director of a non-profit organization, university instructor, and as a queer cis-gendered woman and child of non–English speaking immigrants. For Bob, his location is influenced as an established scholar, university administrator, and social activist in both Canada and Australia. However, because each of us occupies a number of privileged positions—that is, we are both white, bourgeois, non–visibly disabled, Canadian born, and assumed to be Christian—we are frequently asked how we can write and teach about oppression when we do not appear to be members of an oppressed group (we do not receive the same questions about our privileges—both real and assumed). In other words, how credible is our teaching and writing about oppression? What business do we and others like us have in talking about issues with which we have had little direct experience, regardless of our commitment to the cause? Leaving aside any arguments that we have experienced oppression in our lifetimes (as has just about everybody), we respond to this question in the following way.

It is true that we cannot fully understand the experience or phenomenology of many forms of oppression, but lived experience is not the only legitimate source of knowledge. To believe otherwise is a form of parochial reasoning. Why would we bother studying or researching any form of social phenomena if experience were the only way of understanding it? And one's own experience is not generalizable to understanding the nuances of others with similar experiences, as no two people experience an event the same way. None of us can experience everything in the social world, but we can supplement what we know from our own experiences by studying the experiences, research, and writings of others—which we have both been doing since we received our respective PhDs years ago. During that time, we have designed and taught courses in structural and anti-oppressive social work and critical social work theory. One of us has written several articles and books on these subjects, and the other has a significant practice and teaching history and a respectable beginning publication record in these areas.

With respect to our credibility in teaching and writing about oppression, we have found that oftentimes we have more credibility among privileged group members than do members of oppressed groups. We know, for example, that from his presentation of feminist issues in his teaching of anti-oppression or structural social work that male students are more likely to take Bob seriously than they do our female colleagues teaching the same material. This credibility stems from two main sources: (1) his membership in a privileged group, which means that he possesses an assumed (and unearned) authoritative status; and (2) no perceived self-interest on

his part in what he is teaching—in fact, what he teaches would seem to run against his own privileged interests. Many members of privileged groups feel defensive when they are presented with material on oppression, especially if they are white or male or heterosexual or non-disabled or middle class. Johnson (2006) contends that this defensive reaction has probably done more than anything else to perpetuate our current paralysis with respect to taking steps to eliminate dominant–subordinate relations in society. As members of several privileged groups, we know about defensive feelings from our own lives. But as researchers and theorists, we also know that it is possible to understand the world and our places in it in ways that help us go beyond our defensive feelings to the responsibility we have to work for fundamental social change.

To some extent, this book cannot help but have a white, non–visibly disabled, middle-class point of view, because this is who we are. Although these characteristics may limit us in some ways, they also, as argued by Johnson (2006), provide us with a bridge from our own experiences to some part of almost every reader's experiences. We cannot know, from our own experiences, for example, what it is like to be disabled or racialized or Indigenous in this society. But we can bring our experience of class privilege to the struggle of poor people to deal with class supremacy. Similarly, Bob can bring his experiences as a man to challenge sexism and male privilege and Juliana can bring her experiences as a white settler person to challenge white privilege, racism, and colonialism. We can both bring our experiences as Canadian-born citizens to confront obstacles and discriminatory policies and behaviours directed at refugees and immigrants. We can use our experience with privilege as perceived non-disabled persons to help other non-disabled people support and participate in the disability movement. We can also bring our experiences with privilege as assumed Christians to help confront and overcome persecution of non-Christian groups. These are some of the areas of oppression and privilege where we have struggled in attempting to lessen or alleviate the effects and hurt that our privileges have caused subordinate groups. And, of course, it is these experiences that we bring to this book. We do not feel either guilty or proud about being white, middle class, non–visibly disabled, and so on, because we had no say in or control over these characteristics. What matters is what we do with our privileges. As privileged members of society, we feel a strong moral obligation to study and understand the privileges that have been conferred upon us by society on the basis of the social groups in which we find ourselves and to engage in political action to try to change the society that confers privilege on a minority and oppression on the majority. For us, the first step in our anti-oppressive scholarship and practice was to admit that we had benefited from privilege. This does not mean that we believe we are frauds with respect to any success we may have achieved, but it does mean that we have a choice about what we do with our successes and privilege. Writing a book such as this is one important choice that we have made.

This book begins with Chapter 1, which discusses the concept and nature of oppression, including its origins, its causes and sources, its various forms, its dynamics, the social processes and practices that produce and reproduce it, the political functions it performs for dominant groups, and the three levels of society at which it occurs. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the flip side of oppression—privilege. We believe that privilege is much more difficult to confront than oppression, because it is easier to gaze outward and explore the problems of oppressed groups than it is to turn our gaze inward and explore our own roles in perpetuating oppression.

The chapter explores the nature of privilege (its dynamics and invisibility), presents examples of privilege across multiple areas, discusses how social work has overlooked privilege as a practice issue, and offers ideas on what we can do to deal with privilege. Chapter 3 takes social work to task for not paying enough attention to causal explanations for social problems. The chapter emphasizes the need for sound critical theory as the basis of good social work practice and presents the theoretical framework used in the book to analyze and explain oppression and privilege and to develop anti-oppressive and anti-privilege social work practice. Oppression and privilege at the personal level in both overt and covert forms are discussed in Chapter 4 along with some of the ways that oppressed persons cope with their oppression and that privileged people benefit from their privilege and from the oppression of others. Chapter 5 examines several cultural contexts for oppression and privilege, including the mass media, entertainment, and advertising, as well as negative stereotypes and dominant discourses. Chapter 6 looks at oppression at the structural or institutional level and shows how oppression at this level is actually a form of violence or social terrorism perpetrated on oppressed persons. The psychology of oppression and the concepts of internalized oppression and domination and internalized privilege are examined in Chapter 7, and an attempt is made to explain why oppressed persons may often behave in self-harming ways that contribute to their own oppression. Chapter 8 considers the notion of multiple or interlocking oppressions and privileges and presents several models showing the complex interactive nature of oppression and privilege. The chapter also discusses the heterogeneity that exists within any oppressed group. Chapter 9 articulates an anti-oppressive and anti-privilege social work practice at the personal and cultural levels, including oppression and privilege at the organizational level. Similarly, the final chapter (Chapter 10) presents an anti-oppressive and anti-privilege social work practice at the structural level, along with a number of principles that are prerequisites for or correlates of anti-oppressive and anti-privilege social work practice.

1 Oppression: An Overview

All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

In order to carry out anti-oppressive social work, one must know as much as possible about oppression. This chapter looks at the concept of oppression, which plays such an integral role with respect to social problems, social inequality, and social injustice. Social work deals with the effects of oppression on people, families, communities, institutions, and society as a whole every day. Oppression is very difficult to deal with, as it is complex, multifaceted, and carried out in ways that are often indirect, unrecognized, and without evil intentions on the part of oppressors. Making it even more complex and difficult to deal with is the fact that almost everyone occupies the role of oppressor in their daily life, even those who are obviously oppressed themselves.

This chapter examines oppression along several dimensions. It is described here as a second-class type of citizenship that is assigned to people not on the basis of failure or weakness or lack of merit, but because of their membership in a particular social group. For the most part, persons have no control over being a member of these social groups (such as one's race or gender) because they are usually born into them and, for the most part, there is no escape from them. A number of positive functions that oppression carries out for the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups will be examined, and many of the myths that rationalize oppression as necessary for the preservation of society will be presented. A common approach to social justice in the social work and social welfare literature is that of "distribution/redistribution" of goods, services, and opportunities view; this will be analyzed and its limitations identified. A competing social justice perspective—the politics of difference—will be explored with respect to its utility for combating social inequality and for carrying out anti-oppressive social work. A limited number of competing accounts of the genealogy of oppression will be presented and the common element among them will be explored—that is, although oppression is remarkably stable and resistant to change once it is established, it is not a fixed, essentialist, or natural social condition.

Although there are different forms, sources, levels of severity, and experiences of oppression, a common set of dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups will be identified and explored. Iris Marion Young's (1990) five categories of oppression, of which all oppressed groups experience at least one (and usually more), will be presented. This categorization is important because it encompasses both distributive issues of social justice and practices that go beyond distribution. Finally, a model of oppression (the PCS model) that locates oppression at three interrelated levels—personal, cultural, and structural or institutional—will be examined.

Diversity, Difference, and Oppression

The basis of oppression (and privilege) is difference (Preston-Shoot 1995; Stainton and Swift 1996; Thompson 2002)—not the fact or reality of difference but how we respond or do not respond to it. Society is characterized by immense variation, not only across such social groups as class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and ability/disability but also within them (Thompson 2002). Michael Preston-Shoot (1995) has defined oppression as the exploitation of difference by a dominant group, whereas G. Singh (1996) has defined it as the denial of difference. In the former case, the dominant group uses difference to maintain and solidify its privileged position, and in the latter case, by denying difference, the dominant group also denies different levels of power and oppression in society, thus maintaining its privileged position in society. Oppression, of course, can occur from either the exploitation or denial of difference. Johnson (2006, 16) argues that the difficulty we encounter with respect to diversity or difference is that we have "a world organized in ways that encourage people to use difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass."

Rather than exploiting or denying difference, a society may actually promote, affirm, and even celebrate the diversity that exists within it. This approach is sometimes called "the diversity approach" (Thompson 2002) or the "politics of difference" (Young 1990). Historically, however, those regarded as different have been ignored, devalued, blamed, and dehumanized, with their difference used to justify such treatment (Preston-Shoot 1995). Most people who experience social problems and are served by social workers are members of groups different from the dominant group. Central to this is the power of some individuals and groups over others to define relationships and impose beliefs (Hugman 1991, cited in Preston-Shoot 1995).

Part of the diversity or politics of difference approach to difference is where we are located in society. This location, which is determined by the social categories that we occupy, is referred to as our "social location." Differences of power and privilege exist among people in society according to gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, ability status, and other categories of difference (Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas 2015). In other words, privilege and oppression are experienced differently by people according to their social location. For example, white people have more power resources and privilege than people of colour, males have more power resources and privilege than females, affluent people have more power resources and privilege than poor people, and so on. However, as Moosa-Mitha (2005) reminds us, oppression is a much more complex concept than (i) simply treating people as if they occupied a single social location or (ii) dividing the population into two groups (i.e., oppressor and oppressed) or (iii) assuming that everyone who is a member of a particular identity group is oppressed or privileged in the same way or to the same degree as others in the same identity group. Mouffe (1992, as cited by Moosa-Mitha, 2005) refers to these as "false universals." Most people have multiple identities and might occupy an oppressor role in one identity and an oppressed role in another identity at the same time. For example, a white woman occupies an oppressor role along race lines but an oppressed role along gender lines. This phenomenon of having multiple identities in which one could be both the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time is called "multiplicity." And, the point at which a person occupies two or more different identities is called the point of intersection between and among these

identities. More will be said about the multiplicity and intersectionality of social identities later in this chapter and in Chapter 8.

As social workers, we must be aware of our own social location if we are to guard against disempowering those service users with whom we work (Hick et al. 2010). We need to know and understand the social, economic, political, and cultural structures (which include all the complexities associated with social identity and social location) embedded within our social work practice. "As social workers, we hold power and privilege associated with our roles, titles, and education. The use of critical consciousness [to be discussed in subsequent chapters] deepens our awareness of our privilege as well as our experiences of oppression. In our encounters with participants (i.e., service users) and staff at our agencies we need to challenge these hierarchical assumptions . . . inherent in the social worker/participant [service user] relationship and seek more egalitarian and collaborative approaches" (Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas 2015, 141).

The "diversity" or "politics of difference" approach to difference is based on the belief that the existence of diverse populations is a good thing in itself rather than a problem needing attention. However, because diversity is based on difference, there is always a possibility of difference leading to discrimination in a negative and unfair way rather than to a celebration. Thompson (2002, 43) argues that "discrimination is not simply unfair in a narrow ethical sense, but [is] also a major source of disadvantage, pain, suffering and degradation—in short, oppression." Although the concept of difference is widely used today in academic and everyday discourse, its meaning is not at all clear. In a very perceptive article looking at the concept of difference and how it does and should relate to social work curricula, Stainton and Swift (1996) review three separate theories of "difference": (1) difference as value-neutral empirical phenomena; (2) difference as value-neutral but socially constructed; and (3) difference as a value-driven socially constructed approach.

Stainton and Swift's Critique of Theories of "Difference"

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to present a complete overview of each theory, a brief summary of Stainton and Swift's critique is included here. They reject the "difference as value-neutral empirical phenomena" theory on a number of grounds, including the fact that there is much literature suggesting that an objective, empirical realm lying outside the social realm is, if not impossible, at best unimaginable (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Featherstone and Fawcett 1994; Foucault 1978). Also, Foucault (1978) has argued that knowledge is produced by discourse and is a social product rather than the articulation of some kind of empirical fact or universal truth. Stainton and Swift reiterate Noel's (1994) contention that one of the most effective means of oppression has been the reification or treatment of social phenomena as "natural facts."

This naturalization of social phenomena leads to the differences between privileged and oppressed groups being considered normal because they flow from nature and any social hierarchies or dominance that are created should not be tampered with. Examples of oppression based on claims of objective differences are women's traditional exclusion from the public sphere on the basis of their natural association with the private realm (in the form of caring for family members and being responsible for domestic chores) (Pateman 1989, cited in Stainton and Swift 1996) and black people being considered genetically inferior to white people, as reflected in the immigration policies

of Canada, the US, Britain, and Australia, which gave preferential treatment to white Europeans to enter these countries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On these bases, Stainton and Swift (1996) reject the value-neutral empirical concept of difference. The acceptance of objective knowledge as the basis of difference would conceal the power of the dominant group to decide what is and what is not accepted knowledge, thus allowing it to retain a claim to truth, which would ensure its power and control over subordinate groups—in the name of truth.

The second theory of difference presented by Stainton and Swift (1996) is the "value-neutral but socially constructed view." Although the theory presents ideas as socially constructed, this construction suggests neither an imbalance of power nor the existence of a dominant group. This view is part of the larger liberal ideology (see Mullaly 2007 for a detailed overview of the liberal paradigm and its influence on social work), which has been dominant in North America since the Second World War and influential in varying degrees in most other Anglo democracies. It minimizes social, economic, and political differences and subscribes to a belief in "equal opportunity" as the solution to significant or unacceptable levels of inequality in society. In other words, inequality may exist in society, but if people work hard, play by the rules, and take advantage of opportunities available to them, then differences can be overcome or at least modified to the point that they are not problematic.

This liberal view of society tends to overemphasize "sameness"—deep down, we are all the same, and because we all have the same opportunities for development and success in life, then we should not interfere with this arrangement, which means that everyone should be treated the same way. Both social work and the social welfare systems in North America developed within a liberal paradigm, and as such, both reflect liberal values and beliefs, such as ignoring diversity and difference and developing social policies that provide superficial equality. An example of the latter would be the development of human rights legislation in Canada. Every province has the equivalent of a human rights commission to deal with instances of persons having their human rights violated (e.g., housing, employment, or public services denied to them on the basis of race, creed, gender, and so on). However, these commissions tend to deal with individuals only, and they focus on acts of "discrimination" (i.e., violations of human rights legislation), which are much more restrictive than many acts and forms of "oppression." As pointed out by Preston-Shoot (1995), "discrimination" is a legal term (with legal remedies), whereas "oppression" is a social term (much of which has no legal remedies, such as the attitudes and acts of aversion and avoidance discussed in Chapter 4). In effect, by virtue of being part of the liberal paradigm, traditional social work and the welfare state have tended to reinforce the power and privilege of the dominant group in North American society.

Not only is the focus on "sameness" problematic, so too is an overemphasis of "difference." This approach subjugates the individual to the group of which they are a member through both reductionist and essentialist processes. With respect to the former, the overemphasis on difference serves to confine the individual to roles predetermined by dominant groups, such as "a black person," "a poor person," "a disabled person." In this way, the dominant group defines the "Other" in ways that mask differences within the subordinate group. (This is one of the main criticisms of multiculturalism, which will be discussed in Chapter 6). The essentialist view is premised on the idea that all members of any particular subordinate

group possess an innate essence, an example being that all women are considered natural caregivers or all poor persons work-shy or all gay persons perverts. In effect, an overemphasis on difference can lead to a justification of stereotypes as part of an identification of subordinate group members by the dominant group (Stainton and Swift 1996). And on a more personal level, an overemphasis on group differences interferes with the individual's ability to define themselves just as much as the imposition of sameness by the dominant group on subordinate groups does.

Given the above critique of the two value-neutral theories, Stainton and Swift reject them and choose instead the "difference as a value-driven and socially constructed theory." This theory rejects both versions of the "neutral" approach to difference and instead defines it as the exercise of power by a dominant group, which, as will be discussed below, often remains unintentional and invisible. In this way, difference always entails an "Other" and always implies power and oppression. Dominelli (2002) points out that identity formation (to be discussed in Chapter 4) uses difference to mark one individual or group from another in an evaluative sense by setting up binary opposites, which allows one trait to be identified as superior or more desirable than another. "These differences can emanate from a number of sources including the physical, psychological and sociological terrains" (2002, 37). Only by viewing difference in terms of oppression can we begin to unmask the dominant one and identify the dynamics and mechanisms of oppression, which is necessary to develop processes of emancipation (Stainton and Swift 1996).

Also, "when the mechanisms of oppression and emancipation become the focus of analysis, rather than particular identity features creating difference, we have a means of encouraging solidarity rather than fostering competing claims" (Stainton and Swift 1996, 80). In other words, the value-driven approach permits an analysis of social relationships that retains "Otherness" without accepting the dominant construction of an identity defined as different.

Social Work Approaches to Difference

As noted above, mainstream social work, or what Dominelli (2002) calls the (social) maintenance school of social work, developed within the liberal paradigm and therefore tends to reflect liberal values and beliefs. It has emphasized "sameness" in dealing with different groups, as evidenced by its stated belief in such value positions as impartiality, colour-neutral equal opportunity, equal treatment, universal knowledge, unitary theory, and objective and value-neutral practice. Peter Leonard (2001, 1) criticizes the notion of "sameness" on a societal level when he says,

> The emancipatory narrative of Western modernity has been shown to be based on claims to universal, objective knowledge, supported by a linear view of history whereby the West assumed the role in bringing development to the rest of the world—the steady march of Civilization. The ethnocentric arrogance of these claims leads to a profound inability to respond creatively to difference, and results in the suppression of the voices of the Other.

Mainstream social work in its liberal and modernist traditions is part of this "ethnocentric arrogance." It has attempted to deal with difference by accepting the dominant group as the norm and any differences to be the result of deviance, with the treatment plan being to restore the deviant individual or group to (dominant group) "normalcy." And mainstream social work education has traditionally taught from the voice of the dominant or oppressor group (Stainton and Swift 1996).

Over the past number of decades, social work education and practice have extended their focus to include particular subordinate groups such as women, people of colour, Indigenous persons, and people living with disabilities. Unfortunately, this development has been uneven and more than a little politicized. Stainton and Swift (1996) suggest that it has gone to the other extreme of sameness by overemphasizing difference, thus obscuring the commonalities across oppressed groups. The proliferation of different groups all demanding a "course of their own" in social work curricula contributes to this phenomenon. Stainton and Swift refer to it as an "identity" model. These authors also express concern about a further ghettoization, prompting competition among subordinate groups for teaching resources and attention in the curriculum. As with any competition, there are winners and losers, with groups closest to the dominant group having their issues addressed while others are ignored. For example, the survey of social work curricula carried out by Stainton and Swift (1996) revealed that the curriculum content reflected the social power of each particular identity group such that courses on women were the most numerous while courses on gay and lesbian issues were the least numerous.

Another concern with the "identity model" is that specialized courses may address the concerns of groups that are closest to the dominant group—women, for example—but ignore not only other subordinate groups but more marginalized subgroups of women such as women of colour, lesbians, and women with disabilities. A couple of other limitations to an identity model is that it overlooks the fact that groups of oppressed people are not homogeneous but have much diversity within them and most oppressed people are oppressed in more than one way—that is, they are multiple-oppressed (e.g., a woman of colour is oppressed along both gender and racial lines).

The advantages of a theory centred on difference itself are that such a theory actively promotes an examination of both the dynamics and the techniques of oppression and emancipation and includes difference within subordinate groups along with multiple or intersectional oppression in its explorations. It is this approach to difference, oppression, and privilege that this book adopts. This is not to say that such an approach is problem-free. For example, Williams (1999) warns of two interrelated concerns around the concept of difference. First, how do we connect specific positions that identity groups hold within a frame of larger social movements for equality? And second, how do we acknowledge differences within groups without losing the potential to mobilize around commonalities? These are among the issues discussed in Chapter 8.

The Nature of Oppression

Oppression is generally understood as the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful (politically, economically, socially, and culturally) group. It entails the various ways that this domination occurs, including how both structural arrangements and a ruling culture

(i.e., the culture of the dominant group) favour the dominant over the subordinate group. However, "oppression" as a term is not wholly satisfactory, as it implies, for some people (e.g., Lerner 1986), forceful subordination or evil intent on the part of oppressors. It also assumes a "fixed identity" on the part of both oppressors and oppressed—that the world is divided into two groups and people belong to either one or the other but never to both. This dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed and the interaction between the two is the traditional view of oppression. "Useful as these insights into oppression are, they are inadequate for painting a full picture of oppression: how it works; how it is experienced; how it is reproduced; and how it might be resisted and eradicated" (Dominelli 2002, 7).

A major purpose of this book is to move beyond the limited concept of oppression as a binary relationship between people and to theorize and analyze oppression in ways that illuminate many of its complexities and facilitate effective forms of anti-oppressive social work practice. I agree with Lena Dominelli (2002) when she suggests that it is not enough for social workers to believe in social justice and equality. They must also understand oppression and the dynamics that (re)produce it. Otherwise, they run the risk of further oppressing members of subordinate groups directly and indirectly when they try to help them become part of the broader society and/or assume more control over their lives.

The position taken here is similar to that of Caroline Ramazanoglu (1989), who argues that although a single term is limited, "oppression" is a relatively loose concept that can be qualified in different situations or at different historical moments. It does not need to entail, for example, evil intent on the part of men, with women as passive victims. Nor does it necessarily deny that persons can be both oppressors and oppressed (the subject of Chapter 8). For example, poor people over the course of history have been exploited and oppressed by affluent persons, yet poor people do not comprise a homogeneous group, as evidenced by the fact that there are "working" and "non-working" subgroups of poor people. Although both subgroups are dominated by affluent groups and are oppressed in the form of classism, the working poor also oppress the non-working poor in that they have been among the most vocal critics of the non-working poor and the welfare benefits that go to them. And, of course, in addition to these two subgroups of poor people, there are also other subgroups such as poor women, poor older people, poor people of colour, poor people with physical and mental disabilities, and poor white males. It is worth noting as well that members of the latter group may be oppressed as poor people but can also be oppressors in their role as white males.

Oppression, then, is not a static concept but a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and relational one. Dominelli (2002) points out that although oppression involves relations of domination that divide people into superior and inferior groups, these relations occur as interactions between people not only at the interpersonal level but at the cultural and institutional levels as well. Gil (1998, 11) argues that once oppression is "integrated into a society's institutional order and culture, and into the individual consciousness of its people through socialization, oppressive tendencies come to permeate almost all relations." He points out, however, that the intensity of oppression is not constant but varies over time as a result of acts of resistance and the emergence of liberation movements based on solidarity to overcome oppression (Freire 1994 [1970], cited in Gil 1998). Dominelli (2002, 9) agrees with this position: "[O]ppression is socially constructed

through people's actions with and behaviors towards others. Its interactive nature means that oppressive relations are not deterministic forces with preordained outcomes. . . . Thus, resistance to oppression can always take place. . . . [and] can be undertaken both by individuals and through groups."

To understand what oppression is, it is necessary to know what oppression is not. As discussed in Chapter 3, no one in society is free from social structures. Such structures consist of boundaries, barriers, expectations, and regulations. We could make a loose argument that everyone in society is oppressed because our choices or freedoms are restricted by the facts of social structures. For example, when a person drives an automobile, they are obliged to buckle the seat belt, drive on one particular side of the road, and obey all traffic laws and regulations. These restrictions on our freedom cannot be regarded as oppressive. Not everything that frustrates or limits or hurts a person is oppressive. So if we wish to distinguish between what oppression is and is not, we have to look at the social context of a particular restriction, limit, or injury (Frye 1983).

Everyone suffers frustrations, restrictions, and hurt. Oppression is determined by whether a person is blocked from opportunities to self-development, is excluded from full participation in society, does not have certain rights that the dominant group takes for granted, or is assigned a second-class citizenship, not because of individual talent, merit, or failure, but because of their membership in a particular group or category of people. Examples of such groups in Western society are people of colour, women, poor people, and gay and lesbian persons. "If an individual is oppressed, it is by virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized. Thus, to recognize a person as oppressed, one has to see that individual as belonging to a group of a certain sort" (Frye 1983, 8).

Case Example 1.1 *What Is Oppression?*

A group of social work students were overheard one day discussing the "oppressive actions" of their faculty. "They have all the power and they abuse it. They expect us to read all kinds of material, write papers, attend classes, participate in discussions, and they evaluate everything we do. On top of this, they are always asking us what areas we want to focus on, what methods of evaluation we should have, what our learning objectives should be, and what we think about everything. Jeez, they want us to do their job for them. There is just too much pressure on students in this program. It is so oppressive!"

At another school, a group of social work students were overheard discussing the oppressive actions of their faculty. "They never ask what we want to learn or how we can learn it or what ways of evaluation we think would be most valuable and helpful. They have rules and policies for everything and if we don't follow them—watch out! They never ask our opinions. They think just because they are the faculty that they know everything and that students have nothing to offer. It's so oppressive in this program!"

Arguably, not all groups in society are oppressed. Nor are all oppressed groups equally oppressed. Those in the dominant mainstream of society are less likely to be oppressed and more likely to be among the oppressors. Women are more likely to be oppressed (by men) as women. Men are less likely to be oppressed as men. People of colour are more likely to be oppressed (by white people) as people of colour. White people are less likely to be oppressed as white people. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons are more likely to be oppressed (by heterosexuals) as gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons. Heterosexual persons are less likely to be oppressed as heterosexual persons. This is not to say that oppression is a simple matter of dividing society into two groups: bad people (i.e., the oppressors) and victimized people (i.e., the oppressed). It is much more complex. As indicated above, given the relational nature of oppression, people may be oppressed in some relations and oppressors in others, while some relations may involve mutual oppression (Gil 1998). These issues are addressed in some detail in Chapter 8.

There is also a danger in presenting oppression as based on a singular group characteristic. Postmodernism cautions us against reducing oppression to monocausal structural explanations (Agger 1998), for as Lyotard (1988) points out, such explanations simplify the complexities and varieties of social reality by not acknowledging the incredible diversity inherent in people's differing gender, class, race, age, and sexuality positions. In other words, not all persons within an oppressed group will experience everything the same way. Thus, not everyone within a particular oppressed group will be hurt equally by oppression. For example, although all women may be oppressed as women, the great diversity among women will result in more oppression for some women and less for others. It is true that all women are oppressed by patriarchy (although there is no agreement among feminists as to how much), but many women are also oppressed by race, class, age, sexuality, standards of beauty, and so on. And many women may assume the role of oppressor along these same lines. Oppression is a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon.

Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas (2015, 19–20) identified five separate features of oppression that highlight its complexity and multifaceted nature:

- Pervasiveness: social inequality is woven throughout social institutions as well as being embedded within individual consciousness;
- Restrictiveness: oppression represents structural and material limitations that significantly shape individual opportunities and one's sense of possibility;
- Hierarchical: oppression denotes a hierarchical relationship in which members of privileged groups have unearned advantages at the expense of disadvantaged groups;
- Complex: power and privilege are relative, because individuals hold multiple, complex, and intersectional social group memberships that give relative privilege and disadvantage in different ways, depending on different contexts; and
- Internalization: oppression also resides in the human psyche where oppressive beliefs are internalized.

In addition to the above features and the fact that oppression is group-based (i.e., dominant groups tend to be the oppressors of groups outside the mainstream), another feature of oppression is that it is not accidental (nor is it usually intentional): "The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction" (Albert et al. 1986, 19).

Why Does Oppression Occur?

Given that oppression is perpetrated and perpetuated by dominant groups and is systematic and continuous in its application, a logical question is: why does it occur? Freire (1994 [1970]) argues that oppression occurs because it benefits the dominant group. It protects a kind of citizenship that is superior to that of oppressed groups. It protects the oppressors' access to a wider range of better-paying and higher-status work as well as preferential access to and treatment from our social institutions. Oppressed people serve as a ready supply of labour to carry out the menial and dangerous jobs in society, and they also serve as scapegoats for the dominant group during difficult times, often blamed for inflation, government deficits, crime, recessions, social disruptions, and so forth. In short, oppression carries out certain social or political functions for the dominant group, ensuring that society reproduces itself and maintains the same dominant–subordinate relationships.

The dominant group in society probably does not subscribe to the idea that it uses oppressive behaviour as a means of protecting its favourable position. Most people would not consider themselves as oppressors. In fact, most people would probably believe that oppressive behaviour should not be a part of a democratic society. Why, then, do they engage in oppressive practices? Paulo Freire (1994 [1970], 45) eloquently answers this question:

> The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves. . . . For them, having more is an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own "effort," with their "courage to take risks." If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy, and worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude towards the "generous gestures" of the dominant class. Precisely because they are "ungrateful" and "envious," the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched.

Myths Underpinning Oppression

Thus, the view that many oppressors tend to hold of oppressed groups is that they constitute potentially dangerous classes that must be controlled for the good of the whole society. This view is underpinned by a number of myths detailed by Bishop (2002) and summarized below. These myths are part of a larger ideology of oppression that rationalizes it as necessary for the preservation of society. These myths not only underpin oppression and

subordination, but as will be discussed in the next chapter, they also support privilege and domination.

- Myth of scarcity: There is not enough to go around, which deflects attention from the fact that a small minority owns most of the world's resources.
- Myth of objective information: It is possible for one group (mainly white, Anglo-Saxon, bourgeois males) to observe humanity objectively, thus becoming the authoritative knower.
- Myth of might is right: The majority rules even if it means tyranny of the minority.
- Stereotyping: All members of a group are the same.
- Blaming the victim: People are responsible for their own oppression.
- Separation, competition, hierarchy: Human beings are competitive by nature and aspire to be ahead/above others.

To this set of myths that supports oppression, Haney (1989) adds two others:

- Myth of supremacy: The dominant educational system, with its emphasis on Western civilization, leads to a belief in the supremacy of a white, Western, male culture.
- Myth of class: Most people belong to the middle class, which lives in harmony with a "higher" (superior) class—this belief mandates and then sanctions a dominant class and a subordinate class.

We would add one more myth to the above list—the myth that underpins liberal ideology: *the myth of equal opportunity (or meritocracy)*. Because civil and political rights have been equalized under the law, it is believed that if one works hard and takes advantage of the opportunities (in education and in the job market, for example) available to all, one can succeed in life. If a person fails, the judgment is that the person did not take advantage of available opportunities (and therefore should not be helped). This myth overlooks or does not recognize the fact that not all people are in the same position to take advantage of so-called opportunities, since social position and resources will give some people preferred access to these so-called equal opportunities. And, of course, since the majority of the people who "fail" are disproportionately from historically disadvantaged and subordinate groups, the notion of superior/inferior groups is reinforced—an example of a process that Ryan (1976) calls "blaming the victim" (outlined in Chapter 3).

Social Hierarchy

Dominant–subordinate relations form part of a social hierarchy marked by differences in power, status, and resources. A hierarchy is often shaped as a pyramid, with small numbers (a privileged elite) near the top and large numbers (less-privileged subordinate people) near the bottom (McGregor 1997; Moane 1999). Most major systems in Western societies

are hierarchically organized and male-dominated—politics, economics, religion, art, culture, health, and education (Seager 1997). However, this male domination is more prevalent in some countries (e.g., France, Portugal, and Greece) and less prevalent in others—the Scandinavian countries have the highest number of women in the top positions of these hierarchies (Karl 1995). Also, the males at the top of the hierarchies are primarily of a particular race (white), religion (Christian), class (bourgeois), and sexual orientation (heterosexual) and tend to be able-bodied (Moane 1999). It must be noted here that hierarchies also exist within subordinate groups themselves (Walkerdine 1996; Wineman 1984), a theme that will be explored in Chapter 8.

When a hierarchy becomes established, a dynamic of superiority-inferiority or domination-subordination is inevitable, and there is difficulty maintaining the conceptualization of the lesser (inferior) person having as much intrinsic worth or value as the superior person (Miller 1986). Once a group is defined as inferior, the label tends to become permanent (Gil 1998). The superior group judges members of inferior groups as incapable of performing roles or functions that the dominant group values and therefore assigns them roles and functions that are poorly valued (such as providing unpaid or ill-paid services). Dominelli (2002) and Miller (1986) remind us that superior-inferior relations are socially constructed by the dominant group and that the socially constructed inferior capacities of members of subordinate groups are considered innate or natural and immutable. For example, many men consider women to be biologically inferior and emotionally weak but also natural caregivers. Therefore, it is believed, the best place for a woman is in the home (of a man), looking after it and (his) children—functions that are not valued. Such stereotypes reinforce, in the dominant group's eyes, the need for hierarchies, because they reflect normal and natural social divisions and relations.

Using anthropological studies, Gil (1998) shows that relations of domination, subordination, and exploitation within and among human societies were never, nor are they now, normal, natural, and inevitable. Rather, they were and are the results of human choices and actions. An essentialist argument is sometimes made that domination and subordination are natural and inevitable outcomes of our human nature because all around us the evidence suggests that we naturally compete and try to gain dominance over others and pursue our own individual interests in almost all activities.

However, "human nature" is a slippery concept. Gil (1976b) contends that by using selective evidence you can make an argument that human nature is whatever you want it to be. A counter-argument to the inevitability explanation of domination-subordination, for example, is that a preponderance of evidence shows it is natural for people to co-operate with each other and work towards the collective good of society. In other words, it may be human nature (if there is a human nature) to be both competitive and co-operative, and the society will emphasize one or the other. That is, human nature is socially constructed or produced and changeable, not universal, innate, and essential. Gil (1998) also argues against the inevitability thesis of oppression by referring to (1) societies in the past that were not characterized by oppression and inequality and (2) liberation movements throughout history that have emerged to challenge and overcome oppression and injustice.

Oppression as a Social Justice Issue

Most anti-oppressive social work writers base their ideas and writings on some notion of "social justice." However, there is no agreement on the meaning of this concept in the literature. David Gil (1994) makes the point that although social work professional codes of ethics require social workers to "promote social justice," these codes do not specify the meaning of social justice, instead treating it as if it were self-evident. Yet social justice cannot be promoted unless its meaning is first clarified, and we must also examine its relationship to oppression/anti-oppression.

Donna Baines (2011, 20–2) claims that the following are 10 common themes or core insights that are integral to promoting social justice in everyday, front-line social work practice:

- Oppression is generated by both micro- and macro-level social relations.
- Our everyday experience is shaped by multiple oppressions.
- Social work is a contested site where conflicts over power, resources, and affirming identities occur.
- Social work is not a neutral, technical profession, but an active political process.
- Social justice–oriented social work assists individuals while simultaneously seeking to transform the forces that generate and benefit from inequity and oppression.
- Social work needs to build allies and work with social causes and movements.
- Social work's theoretical and practical development must be based on the struggles and needs of those who are oppressed and marginalized.
- Participatory approaches between practitioners and service users are necessary (and dignity-robbing, dependence-creating "expert" models of practice avoided).
- Self-reflexive practice and ongoing social analysis are essential components of social justice–oriented social work practice.
- A blended, heterodox (i.e., anti-mainstream) social justice perspective provides the most potential for politicized, transformative social work practice.

Distributive Justice

One of the oldest and most ubiquitous concepts of social justice is that of distributive justice, which focuses on distribution and redistribution issues with respect to how rights, opportunities, and material resources are allocated in society (Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas 2015). However, if we are to adopt a social justice form of social work, we must recognize the severe limitations of the distributional view of social justice. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young presents a concept of social justice that goes beyond mere distributive/redistributive notions of social justice. Because it encapsulates such elements of oppression as social practices and processes that cause inequitable distributions in the first place, we believe that Young's concept of social justice has much more potential for understanding oppression than any distributive notion of social justice.

In defining social justice as "the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression," Young (1990, 15) contends that contemporary philosophical theories of justice do not

conceive justice so broadly. Instead, they restrict themselves to an interpretation of social justice as the morally proper distribution (or redistribution) of benefits and burdens among all of society's members. The benefits to be distributed would include both material resources, such as wealth and income, and non-material social goods, such as rights, opportunities, and power. Issues of distributional justice are analogous to people dividing a stock of goods and comparing the amount or size of the portions individuals have. Injustice, according to this distributive notion of social justice, would be defined as a situation in which one group has a monopoly over a particular good. Even explicitly socialist discussions of social justice fall within the distributional theory, since the principles of distribution (need versus market) are considered paramount in social justice. What distinguishes the distributive perspective of social justice, then, is the tendency to see social justice and distribution as co-extensive concepts.

Welfare capitalism and conventional social work have also adopted the distributional concept of social justice in that the focus has been on the distribution and redistribution of income and other resources (often defined in terms of some kind of social minimum such as a "minimum wage"). Discussion has tended to centre on inequalities of wealth and income and the extent to which the state can or should alleviate the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged. Even progressive social work and social welfare writers tend to equate social justice with a redistribution of goods and services. An example is Lena Dominelli, who has written landmark books on feminist social work (Dominelli and McLeod 1989), on anti-racist social work (Dominelli 1988), and on anti-oppressive social work (2002). She contends that "those endorsing an emancipatory approach to social work have an explicit commitment to social justice" (2002, 4). She then criticizes the law as limited in pursuing social justice: "Its [the law's] tendency to individualise collective problems can only mean that *redistributive justice* remains beyond its scope. Yet it is precisely *this form of justice* which black activists, women, and other oppressed groups are demanding" (1988, 14; emphasis added). It may be that some oppressed groups are demanding this form of justice, but again, it is limited justice because it does nothing to alter the processes and practices that allow for an unjust share of society's resources to go to one group in the first place.

Obviously, the immediate provision of basic goods and services for people suffering severe deprivation must be a first priority for any group or program seeking social justice. Any conception of justice must take into account the vast differences in the amount of material goods that exist in our society, in which thousands starve and live on the streets while others can have anything they want (Young 1990). From an anti-oppressive perspective, Young identifies a major limitation of the distributional notion of social justice. Equating the scope of social justice with distribution only is misleading in two ways: (1) the social structures, processes, and practices that caused the maldistribution in the first place are ignored; and (2) the limits of the logic of extending the notion of distribution to such non-material goods and resources as rights and opportunities are not recognized. Let us examine these two limitations.

1. *Ignoring social structures, processes, and practices.* Young notes that the distributional view of justice assumes a social atomist or individualist perspective of people in that they are externally related to the goods they possess and only related to one another in terms of a comparison of the amount of goods they possess. The institutional contexts within which distribution occurs are ignored. These institutional contexts go beyond a narrow Marxist account of the mode

of production and include all social structures, processes, and practices, the rules and norms that guide them, and the language and symbols that mediate social interactions within them. It is this institutional context that affects distribution—what is distributed, how it gets distributed, who distributes it, who receives it, and what the outcome is. An example Young presents is economic inequality. Distributive discussions often omit the decision-making structures that determine economic relations in society. Young writes:

> Economic domination in our society occurs not simply because persons have more wealth and income than others, as important as this is. Economic domination derives at least as much from the corporate and legal structures and procedures that give some persons the power to make decisions about investment, production, marketing, employment, interest rates, and wages that affect millions of other people. Not all who make these decisions are wealthy or even privileged, *but the decision-making structure operates to reproduce distributive inequality and the unjust constraints on people's lives* [1990, 23; emphasis added].

2. *Limits of extending the notion of distribution to non-material goods and resources.* Advocates of the distributive theory of justice claim that any issue of justice, including such non-material goods as rights and opportunities, may be treated as some thing or aggregate of things to be possessed and/or distributed and redistributed. Young argues that such treatment produces a misleading conception of the issues of justice involved because it reifies aspects of social life that are better understood as functions of rules, relations, and processes than as things.

Because rights and opportunities are not possessions, distributing or redistributing rights and opportunities is not the same as distributing or redistributing income. Some groups may have rights and opportunities that other groups do not, but extending them to the groups that do not have them does not entail the formerly privileged group surrendering some of its rights and/or opportunities as it does with a redistribution of income. Rights are not things but relationships, institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to others. "Rights refer to doing more than having, to social relationships that enable or constrain action" (Young 1990, 25).

Given that the dominant group does not lose any of its rights by extending the same rights or opportunities to others, it would seem that such social changes would be relatively acceptable and straightforward. However, the infamous Proposition 8, passed in the November 2008 election by the voters of California, changed the state constitution so that it restricted the definition of marriage to a union between a man and woman, thus eliminating the right of same-sex couples to marry. In effect, a dominant (heterosexual) group had a right that the subordinate (gay and lesbian) group did not have. Furthermore, if the right to marry were extended to same-sex couples, it would not interfere with the right of heterosexual couples to marry. This differential treatment was rationalized by the dominant group on the belief that same-sex marriage would damage society, threaten the sanctity of traditional marriage, fly in the face of religious teachings and scripture, and legitimate sexual promiscuity and perversion. Support for Proposition 8 was a clear example of the dominant group using a socially constructed negative view of a subordinate

group to oppress it. Proposition 8 was struck down in 2013 when the US Supreme Court found it unconstitutional. However, laws that are found unconstitutional do not get erased; they just lose their legal force. So, the text of the ban lies in wait for a more conservative Supreme Court ruling to reverse it. Donald Trump has provided such an opportunity by appointing a conservative Supreme Court judge (Neil Gorsuch) in April, 2017 who will likely produce a 5–4 split among the judges in favour of the conservative jurists. This new conservative majority would have little inclination to respect the right to same-sex marriage.

It should be noted here that even when certain rights are extended to subordinate or oppressed groups, there is no guarantee that the subordinate group members will be able to exercise these rights. In other words, people may be given certain rights but still be unable to exercise them because of particular social constraints based on class, gender, race, and so on. For example, a person living in poverty may have a right to a fair trial but be financially unable to hire proper legal counsel.

Similarly, opportunity connotes *doing* rather than *having*. It is a condition of enablement rather than possession, which usually involves a system of social rules and social relations as well as an individual's skills and abilities. Having opportunities may lead to securing material goods such as food, shelter, and a job, but it is no guarantee that these goods and services will be secured. Just as people may have certain rights but are unable to exercise them, so too might people have certain opportunities but because of particular social conditions and practices be constrained from using them. For example, in Australia or in North America, we may say that Indigenous persons have the opportunity to obtain an education, but education occurs in a complex context of social relations. Indigenous communities tend to have inferior schools, fewer material resources, and less access to tutors and computers. As well, Indigenous children often experience a degree of culture shock in schools outside Indigenous communities. This is not to say that distribution is irrelevant to educational opportunities, but opportunity has a wider scope than distribution (Young 1990).

The above discussion of the distributive theory of social justice shows that it contains a major limitation. By focusing on something that must be identifiable and assignable, the theory reifies social relations and processes and institutional rules. It gives primacy to substance over relations, rules, and processes by conceiving of people as social atoms, which fails to appreciate that individual identity and capacities are themselves the products of social relations and processes (Taylor 1985, cited in Young 1990). Such an atomistic social ontology ignores or obscures the importance of institutional contexts and rules and social relations and processes for understanding issues of social justice. An adequate conception of social justice must enable an understanding and evaluation of these social phenomena as well as the substance of distribution.

Agnes Heller (1987) suggests a conception of justice that includes the above social phenomena that are absent from the distributional concept. She views justice as primarily the virtue of citizenship wherein persons collectively deliberate about problems and issues facing them within their institutions and actions, under conditions free from oppression and domination, with reciprocity and mutual tolerance[1] of differences. Young argues that this conception of justice shifts the focus from distribution issues to procedural issues of participation in deliberation and decision making. A norm would be just or fair only if the people who followed it had an effective voice

in its consideration and acceptance. A social condition would be just only if it enabled all people to meet their needs and exercise their freedoms. A social process would be just only if it were an inclusive process with respect to different social groupings. A social practice would be just only if it were in accordance with the way that people carrying it out would like to be treated themselves. Social injustice from this perspective entails not only an unfair distribution of goods and resources but also any norm, social condition, social process, or social practice that interferes with or constrains a person from fully participating in society—that is, from becoming a full citizen.

This concept of social justice is empowering because it goes beyond a concern with distribution to include the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and co-operation (Young 1990). Oppression consists of institutional conditions that inhibit or prevent people from becoming full participants in society. A society may be evaluated as just to the degree that it contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the promotion of the universal value that everyone has equal intrinsic worth. For all those concerned with developing an adequate conception of social justice and for those committed to social justice in practice, oppression must be a central concern. This contention is consistent with such anti-oppressive social work writers as Donna Baines (2011) in Canada, Lena Dominelli (2002) in the UK, and Karen Morgaine and Moshoula Capous-Desyllas (2015) in the USA.

The Genealogy of Modern-Day Oppression and the Politics of Identity

As pointed out above, most members of a dominant group would not consider themselves oppressors. Rather, their oppressive and exploitative behaviours, policies, and practices make sense to them because they are largely compatible with the pursuit of socially sanctioned goals and with the internal logic of established social institutions. Gil (1998, 233–4) asks, "[H]ow and why did human societies evolve ways of life in which oppression and injustice came to be taken for granted and considered legitimate, and appropriate?" Looking for a single, universal causal explanation for oppression is of course futile, given its complexity and its historical and contextual variability. However, a number of writers have attempted to develop genealogies of oppression. A review of a few of them increases our understanding of oppression as a social phenomenon.

Using anthropological, historical, and archaeological sources, Gil (1998) contends that oppression is not inevitable, since it became firmly established in human societies only within the past 10,000 years (out of a history of 300,000 years) following the development and spread of agriculture, animal husbandry, and crafts, which gradually generated a stable economic surplus. These new conditions facilitated the emergence of complex divisions of work, social castes, and the spatial and social differentiation of societies into rural and urban areas—all of which set the conditions for oppression and injustice.

Using comparative cultural studies, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that before economic systems began to produce and sustain surpluses and wealth, social structures were relatively flat, with the exception of gender and age hierarchies that they claim are essentially universal across

all known societies. "As soon as a society can produce an economic surplus, this surplus facilitates the development of role specialization, coalition formation among males, and the creation of an arbitrarily-set [sic] hierarchy" (1999, 299). Arbitrarily set hierarchies include such social characteristics as class, race, ethnicity, tribe, and nation.

Haney (1989) presents another historical analysis of oppression. She cites four formative events between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and England that shaped contemporary patterns of racism, sexism, classism, and other expressions of oppression: (1) the slave trade; (2) the "enclosure movement" whereby men with money began to regard land as a commodity to make more money; (3) the rise of the modern family and "invention of childhood" whereby patriarchy became entrenched and the home became a private, intimate space—the king's castle; and (4) the period during which nature became increasingly viewed as an object to be subdued and mastered rather than simply understood or lived with—leading to an image of nature as penetrated and raped (i.e., nature became feminized).

Whatever genealogical account of oppression is presented, there is agreement in the anti-oppression literature, especially among feminist writers, that oppression today was most influenced by post-Renaissance "man," his science, and his theories (Weedon 1997). Modern-day forms of oppression are not superstitious carry-overs from the Dark Ages. On the contrary, Young (1990) states that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific and philosophical discourse explicitly proposed and legitimated formal theories of race, sex, age, and national superiority. She also contends that the methods of science and the attributes of the scientist have in part contributed to the formulation of these theories of superiority/inferiority.

The social construction of a white, bourgeois male as a superior being should not be surprising. In Western thought, the philosopher and the scientist (i.e., the knower and the producer of knowledge) came from the same social context—from bourgeois and male-dominated European families. Only children of bourgeois or aristocratic families had the resources to pursue education and scholarship (among other opportunities, such as politics, commerce, or leadership of the armed forces). Garner (2000), in her overview of the development of Western social theory, points out that by the end of the nineteenth century, many social theorists taught at universities and every major theorist was a man of European background. She states that

> women did not enter organized scholarly intellectual life till the turn of the [twentieth] century; they published books of travel observations and insightful memoirs, but were simply not included in the more abstract, ongoing conversations about the nature of society that formed the heart of social theory. Equally excluded were all people in colonized societies and in regions outside of the western, Christian world. Most workers and peasants, wherever they lived, were excluded because they were unlikely to obtain the education needed to enter intellectual and academic life. Elites in the Americas and eastern and southern Europe were marginally included in modern, western intellectual life if they spoke English, French, or German, and appeared like western Europeans in looks and culture, but both distance and western European prejudices kept them at the edge of academic and intellectual life [2000, 3–4].

Thus, the group of aristocratic white males not only controlled the economy, the political system, the army, and the culture but also controlled the production of ideas and knowledge. And as will be argued below, the ideas and knowledge they produced under the banner of science both reflected and reinforced their claims of superiority and their positions of power and dominance.

Criticism of Modern Scientific Reason

There has been much criticism of modern scientific reason by critical theorists, feminists, and postmodernists. These criticisms, summarized in Chapter 3, have in part punctured the authority of modern scientific reason. A major aspect of the criticism has been directed at the construction of the scientist and philosopher as a knower or subject standing outside the objects of knowledge—autonomous, objective, and neutral. The subject is a socially detached observer, standing in the immediate presence of reality but without any involvement in it. Moreover, as Foucault (1977) notes, these observations are not mere passing looks but normalizing gazes that assess their object according to some hierarchical standard. Some of the particulars or attributes of the object are then defined as deviant or are devalued in comparison to the norm.

Closely related to Garner's work (noted above) on how Western scholarship developed a Eurocentric, male bias is Young (1990), which cites other scholarship revealing the bourgeois, male, and European biases that have been attached to the notion of rationality. That is, the virtues of science have also become the virtues of masculinity—detachment, careful measurement and the manipulation of instruments, comprehensive generalizing and reasoning, and authoritative speech supported by evidence (Keller 1986 and Merchant 1978, both cited in Young 1990). Those articulating and carrying out the code of modern scientific reason were white, bourgeois males speaking for themselves and unmindful that there might be other positions. In other words, not only did they become the knowers or truth-seeking subjects, they also became the standards against which all other groups (objects) were measured. This already privileged group assumed the privilege of the authoritative subject of knowledge, and groups they defined differently became the objects of their distancing and mastering observations.

> The imposition of scientific reason's dichotomy between subject and object on hierarchical relations of race, gender, class, and nationality . . . has deep and abiding consequences for the structuring of privilege and oppression. The privileged groups lose their particularity; in assuming the position of the scientific subject they become . . . agents of a universal view from nowhere. The oppressed groups, on the other hand, are locked in their objectified bodies, blind, dumb, and passive. The normalizing gaze of science focused on the objectified bodies of women, Blacks, Jews, homosexuals, old people, the mad and feeble-minded. From its observations emerged theories of sexual, racial, age, and mental or moral superiority [Young 1990, 127].

This superior/inferior, normal/abnormal, good/bad distinction did not guarantee respectability and superiority for all white, bourgeois men, however, because even they were subject to disease and deviance, especially if they succumbed to sexual impulse. The nineteenth-century

medical and moral literature is replete with male fears of becoming effeminate. Therefore, manly men had to protect their health and beauty (i.e., their manly virtues) by exercising control over sexual urges. Bishop (1994) contends that every oppressed group has been assigned at least one negative sexual myth, usually that the oppressed group is sexually out of control, immoral, or perverted. All women secretly want to be raped. Gays and lesbians are perverts who engage in unnatural sex acts and want to seduce children. Poor people breed like rabbits. Black men want to rape white women. Black women are sexier than white women. Indigenous women cannot say no. Disabled and old persons have no sexuality. These stereotyped attributes, of course, reinforced the socially constructed and scientifically legitimated belief that groups other than young, white, bourgeois males were inferior and degenerate.

Scientific legitimation of inequality along lines of gender, class, race, and other social divisions is by no means an artifact of the nineteenth century. The past few decades have seen a resurgence of attempts to define human nature as the product of biological inevitability and assertions that biology determines destiny—including capitalist competition, gender roles, race relations, national and international antagonisms, and so on (Rose 1982). "Biological determinism" is an attempt to provide a full explanation of human social existence on the basis of two principles: (1) social phenomena are the direct results of the behaviours of individuals; and (2) individual behaviours are the direct results of inborn physical characteristics (Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984). Biological determinism has been adopted as a social theory by some sociologists and is known as sociobiology. It has provided the dominant group in general, and the New Right in particular, with a reductionist theory of human nature that ascribes all inequality or social differences to perceived physical differences such as gender, skin colour, and class. However, there is nothing biologically intrinsic in being, for example, black, Jewish, gay or lesbian, or poor. In addition, biological determinism is more than a theory. It is politics as well, for if social inequalities are the result of our biologies, then no social intervention can significantly alter social structures or the positions of people within them. Indeed, we should not even try, because differences among human beings are biologically determined and therefore natural and fixed.

Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin (1984) cite some examples of studies in which policy-makers used biological explanations of social phenomena to reject or terminate social programs. The difference in IQ scores between black and white persons was attributed in one American study (Jensen 1969) to the genetic inferiority of black people (not to any cultural or linguistic biases of the instruments) and suggested that they would be better served if they were educated for the mechanical tasks to which their genes predisposed them. This claim of genetic inferiority was extended from black people to the working class in general in a subsequent study by psychologist Richard Herrnstein (1971). The Nixon administration in the United States seized upon these genetic arguments to make cuts in education and welfare. In the 1970s, claims of intellectual inferiority associated with (non-white) race by a psychologist (Eysenck 1971, 1973) in the UK became an integral part of the campaign against Asian and black immigration in order to curb demands on the welfare system. Claims of basic biological differences between men and women with respect to temperament, cognitive ability, and "natural" social roles (i.e., claims for the immutability of male supremacy by such academic biologists as E.O. Wilson) contributed to the rejection of

the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution of the United States in the mid-1970s. In spite of being discredited time and again, biological determinism is still used by dominant groups and their allies to legitimate domination and social inequality.

Biological determinism, or sociobiology, is really an ideology of oppression, or what Rose (1998) calls "ultra-Darwinism," rather than science. Feminists and postmodernists, among others, have shown us that social categories are by no means self-evident and unproblematic. The production of social identity changes for any group over time with respect to its defined membership, its relationship to the mainstream, and its position of privilege or punishment (Adam 1978). In addition, the essentialism of biological explanations implies that there are no differences within social categories—all women are the same, all black people are the same, and so on. Social inequality requires the means to distinguish between sameness and difference, self and other, among people. And biological determinism helps to provide such means.

In a pre-figurative work to postmodernism, Adam (1978, 10) states:

> A moment's reflection will reveal the extraordinary triviality of traits per se by which disqualification from social opportunities is achieved. A momentous world of meanings accrues about, for example, gender, skin tone, erotic preference [sexual orientation], etc., as these qualities are seized upon as bases for social inequality. The minority [subordinate] situation is more a matter of social definition than of social difference.

Once a social definition is constructed, various social practices and psychological responses come into play to contribute to its institutionalization. In effect, an aggregate of differentiated individuals are categorized (constructed) as a distinct group and consequently share a common status assigned to them by others and are subject to categorical treatment. They become united only by a negative identity.

The Dynamics of Oppression

As argued above, racial, gender, class, mental, and other theories of superiority generated by biological determinism and by nineteenth-century scientific reason have been discredited by twentieth-century research and social movements. There is now a considerable number of pieces of social legislation and social rules in the form of civil, political, and human rights and affirmative action and employment equity programs that express a commitment to equality among social groups. Ideologies of natural superiority and group domination no longer hold the influence they once did in our society. Nonetheless, various forms of oppression are still rooted in contemporary society, but they appear in different manifestations, having both continuities and discontinuities with past structures.

In its current form, oppression does not mean the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group (at least not in democratic societies). Oppression does not usually occur today because of evil intentions on the part of a dominant group or through some coercive rule of law, although sometimes it does, as in cases of anti-union legislation or in the recent law—referred to as the "bathroom bill"—passed and enacted by North Carolina on 23 March 2016 that discriminates against

transgender people by requiring them to use public washrooms based on the biological gender noted on their birth certificates as opposed to their preferred and more recently acquired gender. Oppression today mostly occurs through the systemic constraints on subordinate groups, which take the form of unquestioned norms, behaviours, and symbols, and in the underlying assumptions of institutional rules. Young (1990, 41) contends that people suffer disadvantage and injustice "not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society." Oppression is more effective in achieving its apparent function of maintaining the privileged position of the dominant group when both victims and perpetrators are unaware of the dynamics of oppression. When people perceive their situation as natural and inevitable and there is an illusion of freedom and opportunity, no other weapons are necessary to defend and legitimate unjust ways of life that benefit the privileged groups at the expense of the oppressed groups.

Much of modern-day oppression in Western democracies is structurally systemic, covert or hidden, and unintentional.

> In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms, in short, the normal processes of everyday life. We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions [Young 1990, 41].

Systemic Oppression

For us to understand the meaning and practice of oppression, Foucault (1977) suggests that we go beyond viewing oppression as a conscious and intentional act of one group against another. Instead, oppression is often found in such areas as education, the production and distribution of goods and services, public administration, the delivery of health and social services, and the like. In other words, many people contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression in carrying out many of their day-to-day activities, but they do not understand themselves to be agents of oppression. This is not to say that members of oppressed groups are never intentionally harmed, as evidenced by the rape of women, physical attacks on gay men, locked-out workers, and the harassment of people of colour. Nor does it mean that members of oppressed groups never oppress others, as indicated by the verbal attacks of the working poor on the non-working poor, by physical attacks of youth gang members belonging to one oppressed group against youth belonging to another oppressed group, or by attacks on members belonging to the same oppressed group. In spite of these acts of intentional oppression, the contention here is that most oppression today is systemic and unintentional because it is built into our social institutions and carried out unconsciously in our day-to-day activities.

Case Example 1.2 *"I have never been oppressed"*

One day in a class on anti-oppressive social work, a discussion took place on gender oppression. Fiona, a young, single, upper-middle-class, white student exclaimed in an animated tone, "I think all this talk on how women today are downtrodden is grossly exaggerated. I can honestly say that I have *never* experienced oppression. I had all the things I needed while growing up. No one has ever told me that because I am a woman I could not do whatever I wanted. I am in university today and will be a professional social worker when I am finished. This is not to say that some women don't have it hard, but so do other people. To say that society oppresses women today is a 'crock.'" The instructor asked the other women in the class if they agreed with Fiona. A lively and awareness-raising discussion ensued.

What are some of the systemic and unintentional daily activities that contribute to oppression in today's society? Bishop (2002) outlines several components that appear to be common to all forms or sources of oppression and help to maintain oppression.

- First, a position of supremacy is held by the dominant group, and it is backed by "power over" others. This power can include greater material resources, physical strength, weapons, information, decision making, and control of the media. Both groups internalize this hierarchy and act it out, thus reproducing the hierarchy with minimal resistance.
- Second, all social groups incur stereotypes. Although stereotypes can be positive, they are most often hurtful and used in a damaging way against subordinate groups. The more powerful groups in society cannot be hurt by stereotypes as much as those with little power.
- Third, all oppressed groups are susceptible to violence or its threat in society. Beatings, threats, vandalism, and harassment are activities sometimes perpetrated on subordinate groups to keep them in their place whenever they step out of it or think of doing so.
- Fourth, as mentioned above, all oppressed groups have been assigned at least one negative characteristic about their sexuality. Usually it is a belief that members of the oppressed groups are sexually out of control, perverted, or immoral.
- Fifth, subordinate groups are at greater risk of being separated from their children than are members of the dominant group. Poor people, Aboriginals, single mothers, blacks, gays and lesbians, and immigrants are all suspect in terms of their ability to care properly for their children, and consequently they experience more surveillance and intrusions and have less protection of their rights than those in the dominant group. Fear of losing one's children is, of course, a powerful social control mechanism for obtaining compliance or conformity from subordinate group members.

Forms of Oppression

Although all oppressed groups experience some obstacles to developing their capacities and to participating fully in society, it is impossible to give one essential or universal definition of oppression. Iris Young (1990) has developed a set of five categories or forms of oppression (summarized below) that encompass both distributive issues of injustice and social structures, relations, and practices that go beyond distribution. The first three forms or "faces" of oppression emerge from the social division of labour, the fourth from culture, and the fifth from violence. While not all oppressed groups experience all five forms of oppression, they do experience at least one of them and usually more than one.

1. Exploitation

As a form of oppression, exploitation refers to the social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups. Exploitation is primarily experienced by working-class persons, women, and people of colour. With respect to workers, capitalism systematically transfers powers from workers through the private ownership of the means of production and through markets that allocate labour and the ability to buy goods. As well, the powers of workers are diminished by more than the amount transferred because workers also suffer material deprivation and a loss of control over their work, which results in a loss of self-respect.

The injustice of class division goes beyond the fact that a few people have enormous wealth while many people have little. Exploitation is realized through a structural relationship between the have and have-not groups. Social rules about what work is, who works for whom, how work is to be compensated, and how the results of work are to be distributed and used all operate through a systematic process to produce and reproduce relations of power and inequality.

Women are exploited not only in the Marxist sense that they are wage workers or that their domestic labour is covered by the wages a family receives but also in terms of their sexual labour—nurturing, caring, and smoothing over workplace tensions (Alexander 1987; Young 1990). These tasks, which are often unnoticed and unacknowledged, involve women expending energy in jobs to enhance the wealth, status, or comfort of others, usually men who are released to carry out what is often considered more important and creative work. In other words, the power, freedom, and status of men are often attributable to women who work for them, which constitutes a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of power and energy from women to men (Young 1990).

Along with class and gender, Young argues that there is also a race-specific form of exploitation resulting from members of non-white groups performing menial labour tasks for white people. Wherever there is racism in a predominantly white society, there is an expectation that members of non-white groups will carry out servant roles for the dominant group—domestics, bellhops, maids, non-professional nannies, porters, busboys, janitors,

dishwashers, and the like. In addition to servile, unskilled, minimum-wage, and low-status work with little autonomy, these jobs involve a transfer of energy whereby the servers enhance the status of the served.

Besides Young's contention that menial labour constitutes a form of exploitation, dangerous work can also be considered exploitative. During times of war, it is usually poor white and black working men who are on the front lines of the battle, while white bourgeois males—high-ranking officers and officials in departments of defence—direct operations far from the front lines and take credit for victory. Indigenous men are often recruited as construction workers on skyscrapers and bridges. Female workers are subject to sexual harassment on the job, a type of corporate violence to which men are not typically exposed (1 in 13 women in the Canadian military reported that they had been sexually assaulted in the period April to August 2013 according to a 2014 Statistics Canada report). Many female workers who earn a living by making repetitive wrist, arm, and back movements, such as secretaries and other keyboard operators, are subject to repetitive strain injuries such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome (Dekeseredy and Hinch 1991).

The above forms of exploitation cannot be eliminated by a redistribution of material resources. As long as current structural relations and institutionalized practices remain unaltered, the process of transferring energy and labour from the exploited to the dominant group will reproduce an unequal distribution of goods and benefits. "Bringing about justice where there is exploitation requires reorganization of institutions and practices of decision-making, alteration of the division of labour, and similar measures of institutional, structural, and cultural change" (Young 1990, 53).

2. Marginalization

Marginalization primarily affects people of colour, old and young persons, many single mothers and their children, physically and mentally disabled people, unskilled workers, and Indigenous people. These groups constitute a growing underclass permanently confined to the margins of society because the labour market cannot or will not accommodate them.

Young suggests that marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression because it excludes whole groups of people from useful and meaningful participation in society and this in turn may lead to severe material deprivation. Even though advanced capitalist societies have put modern welfare systems in place to deal with the material deprivation, in Anglo democracies, at least, welfare redistribution has not eliminated large-scale suffering, and in the present political climate there is no assurance that the welfare state will continue. As well, the welfare state in liberal democracies has been criticized for denying those who become dependent on it of certain rights and freedoms that others take for granted (Galper 1975, 1980). Welfare bureaucracies have often treated poor people, elderly persons, and disabled individuals who rely on them for support and services with punitive, demeaning, patronizing, and arbitrary policies and regulations that interfere with their basic rights to privacy, respect, and autonomy. Black youths are an example of a marginalized group that has been treated in a punitive and violent manner

as evidenced by the dozens of black youth who are shot and killed every year in the United States by police officers.

Even when material deprivation is not present, marginalization may still occur. Many elderly people, for example, have the material means to live comfortable lives, but they are excluded from meaningful social participation and cannot exercise their capacities in socially defined and recognized ways. Most of society's productive and recognized activities are age- and work-related. Thus, older people are often subject to marginality in the form of feelings of uselessness, boredom, and a lack of self-respect. Marginalization constitutes a basic feature of injustice and oppression. To overcome it requires both restructuring productive activity to address a right of participation within the wage system and establishing some socially productive activity outside the wage system.

3. Powerlessness

Powerlessness consists of inhibitions against the development of one's capacities, a lack of decision-making power in one's working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies. It primarily affects non-professional workers but to a lesser extent affects people of colour and women as well. Powerlessness is based on the social division of labour but is more complex than the traditional Marxist model of class exploitation in that it recognizes the distinction between the "middle class" and the "working class" as a social division of labour between professionals and non-professionals.

Most workplaces in advanced capitalist societies are organized hierarchically so that direct participation of workers is rare and decisions (in both the private and public sectors) are imposed on workers and citizens. However, this decision-making power is often mediated by agents who may have no say in the decision but do exercise power and authority over others in carrying out decisions and policies. The powerless are those who do not have power or authority even in this mediated sense; they "exercise little creativity or judgement in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, . . . and do not command respect" (Young 1990, 58–9). Non-professionals suffer this type of oppression; professionals (white males at least) do not.

The status privilege of professionals has three aspects (Sennett and Cobb 1972, cited in Young 1990). First, professionals develop their capacities and gain recognition by obtaining a university education and through subsequent professional advancement with an accompanying rise in status. Second, professionals have considerable work autonomy relative to non-professionals and usually have some authority over others, whether subordinate workers or clients. Third, the privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to a whole way of life or culture associated with respectability. The norms of respectability in our society—in terms of dress, speech, tastes, and demeanour—are those of a professional culture. If a person wishes to make a good impression, whether seeking a bank loan or applying for a job or appearing in court, they will often try to look "professional" or "respectable" as part of their efforts. Typically, professionals receive more respectful treatment in our society than non-professionals do.

Case Example 1.3 *Allies or Enemies?*

Carolyn and Heather, although from different geographical locations, have similar backgrounds. Both were raised in poverty and were exposed to abuse and alcoholism in their families. They and their families received constant visits from child and family services workers, police, and representatives of other regulatory agencies. They were victims of harsh and discriminatory treatment at their respective schools. Both also worked hard, struggled to get an education, received a few breaks, and eventually graduated from social work programs. Here the similarities end. Heather would bend over backwards for the service users with whom she worked, especially if they came from conditions of poverty. She had tremendous empathy for them and a keen understanding of their situations. Carolyn, on the other hand, became one of the most punitive and moralistic social workers in the agency, especially towards those who were poor. She also treated the clerical staff and others in subservient positions in the agency in an overbearing and heavy-handed manner. It is easy to understand Heather's position as an ally and advocate for poor people, but what about Carolyn's?

The power and respectability aspects that accompany the privileged status of the professional also involve racist and sexist dynamics. People of colour and women who are professionals must prove their respectability again and again. When their status as professionals is not known, they are often not treated with respect or deference, but when their status as, for example, a university teacher or a business executive is revealed, they often do receive respect. Conversely, working-class white men are often accorded respect until their non-professional, working-class status becomes known.

The injustices of powerlessness are fundamentally division-of-labour issues and bring into question the social status of those who make decisions and those who carry out these decisions. This social division of labour provides a plausible explanation for why so many social workers are co-opted by our present social system, which oppresses many people. As professionals, social workers can exercise their capacities through their university training and the professional development that they experience throughout their careers. In addition, they are in a position to exercise considerable power over others and receive the respect that goes with the privilege of professionalism. It requires considerable commitment as well as energy to work at transforming the society that has given the social worker some degree of power and privilege. An examination of privilege along with social workers dealing with their own privilege will be presented in more detail in the next chapter.

4. Cultural Imperialism

Exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness all refer to relations of oppression that occur through the social division of work. Feminists, post-colonial and cultural theorists, and black

liberation philosophers, among others, have identified a different form of oppression—cultural imperialism. This form of oppression comes about when the dominant group universalizes its experience and culture and uses them as the norm. Through a process of ethnocentrism, the dominant group, most often without realizing it, projects its experience and culture as representative of all humanity. Our social institutions are based on the culture and experiences of the dominant group, and our educational system, the media, the entertainment industry, literature, and advertising reinforce this notion of a universal culture. We are socialized into this ethnocentric view of the world. Cultural imperialism is experienced in varying degrees by all oppressed groups.

The dominant group reinforces its position by measuring other groups according to the dominant norms (which are the dominant group's own norms). Thus, the differences between women and men; between black people or Indigenous persons and white people; between Jews and Christians; between gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people and heterosexuals; and between workers and professionals become largely constructed as deviance and inferiority. These "other" groups experience a double and paradoxical oppression. Stereotypes are used to mark them at the same time that their own experiences and perspectives are rendered invisible.

The stereotypes applied to the culturally imperialized, which brand them as deviant and inferior, are so pervasive in society that they are seldom questioned. Examples are that Indigenous persons are alcoholic and lazy, gay men are promiscuous and perverted, women are good with children, black people are drug addicts and criminals. The fact that culturally dominated groups tend to be defined from the outside not only renders their own experiences and perspectives invisible to the dominant group but forces oppressed groups to look at themselves through the eyes of a dominant group that views them with contempt and amusement (Du Bois 1969, cited in Young 1990). "This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group's own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while the same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life" (Young 1990, 60). To overcome cultural imperialism, it would seem that a necessary step would be for culturally oppressed groups to take over the definition of themselves and assert a positive sense of group difference. This and other matters related to cultural imperialism are the subjects of Chapter 5.

5. Violence

Almost all oppressed groups suffer systemic violence simply because they are subordinate in the social pecking order. Violence includes not just physical attack but harassment, ridicule, and intimidation, all of which serve the purpose of stigmatizing group members. The oppression of violence lies not only in direct victimization but in the constant fear that violence may occur solely on the basis of one's group identity.

Women have reason to fear rape, people of colour have reason to fear harassment, gays and lesbians have reason to fear unprovoked assaults, striking workers have reason to fear attacks by police or strikebreakers. Violence is structural when it is tolerated, accepted, or found unsurprising by the dominant group, when perpetrators receive little or no punishment, or when structural inequalities lead to morbidity and mortality (this last point is discussed in Chapter 6). Violence is a social practice when people from the dominant group set out looking for people

from oppressed groups to beat up, rape, or harass or when members of a subordinate group carry out acts of violence on other members of the same group. This latter form of violence is called "horizontal violence." To reform institutions and social practices that encourage, tolerate, or enable violence against members of specific groups will require a change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the day-to-day reproduction of dominance and aversion. Strategies for such change are outlined in Chapters 9 and 10.

Young's (1990) five faces of oppression, summarized above, avoid the problems associated with either a unified (i.e., one form of oppression is dominant over all others) or a pluralistic (i.e., a number of oppressions run parallel to one another) account of oppression. The former tends either to omit groups that even the theorist thinks oppressed or to leave out important ways in which groups are oppressed. The latter fails to accommodate the similarities and overlaps in the oppressions of groups on the one hand and falsely represents the situation of all group members as being the same on the other.

Young's framework avoids these reductions and exclusions. Rather than representing a full theory of oppression, the five forms of oppression function as objective criteria for determining whether or not individuals and groups are oppressed. Each criterion can be operationalized and applied through the assessment of observable behaviour, status relationships, distributions, texts, and culture. Although the presence of any one of these five conditions is sufficient for considering a group oppressed, different oppressed groups exhibit different combinations of them, as do different individuals within these groups. Comparisons can be made of the ways that a particular form of oppression occurs in different groups or of the combinations of oppressions that groups experience. Obviously, the framework has significant potential for helping social workers better understand the oppressions of people with whom they work in their professional practice.

Some writers have presented sets of control factors or mechanisms (some of which overlap Young's five forms of oppression) that they believe are characteristic of systems of domination and oppression. For example, Bartky (1990) argues that stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification are central to maintaining oppression, and Ruth (1988, 438) refers to "circles of control"—economic control, cultural control, and psychological control (the latter is manifested in internalized oppression, which is the subject of Chapter 7). Geraldine Moane (1999) proposes six mechanisms of control that she argues are characteristic of oppression and have important implications for psychological functioning: violence, exclusion from power, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation, control of culture, and fragmentation or "divide and conquer." All of these mechanisms are addressed and discussed in various sections of this book.

Personal, Cultural, and Structural Levels of Oppression

Since at least 1972, writers have identified specific forms of oppression, such as racism (Bromley and Longino 1972; Dominelli 1997), violence (Galtung 1990), and oppression or discrimination in general (Thompson 1997, 1998, 2001; Sisneros et al. 2008), as occurring at three levels: the personal or individual level, the cultural level, and the institutional or structural level. These three

levels or locations of oppression are in dynamic interaction with one another, with each level supporting, reinforcing, and influencing oppression on the other two levels and in turn being supported, reinforced, and influenced by the other two levels.

Thompson (1997) has termed this multi-dimensional perspective as the PCS model of analysis (P for personal, C for cultural, and S for structural). As stated by Thompson (2002, 44–5), "The basis of PCS analysis is that any approaches to the questions of discrimination and oppression which do not take into account all three of these levels, and their inter-relationships, is [sic] in danger of oversimplifying a very complex set of issues." This model, which extends oppression beyond the individual to individual interactions or the practitioner-to-service-user encounters, is adopted here as the working model of oppression/anti-oppression.

In some respects, the PCS model of analysis is an elaboration of "the personal is political" analysis by feminists, social activists, and progressive social workers (Mullaly 2007). It retains the "personal" and the "political" because it recognizes that social problems are political or structural by nature and that they cause personal difficulties for many people. Furthermore, just as structural forces affect people, so too do people affect structures. This insight is behind all social change movements, ranging from small acts of resistance or protest on an individual level to large social movements such as the civil rights and environmental movements. What the PCS model adds to this perspective is an intermediary level—the cultural level. Culture (values, norms, and shared patterns of thought) tended to be lumped in with other structural forces in the "personal is political" model. However, thanks to the relatively recent emergence of cultural studies (discussed in Chapter 5), we now have greater understanding of how, by endorsing the idea of a superior culture, the dominant culture of a society reflects and reinforces oppression on the other two levels. Cultural imperialism was outlined above as one of Young's five forms of oppression.

The individual or personal level is located within both the cultural and structural contexts of society, and the cultural level is located within the structural context (see Figure 1.1). Thus, although

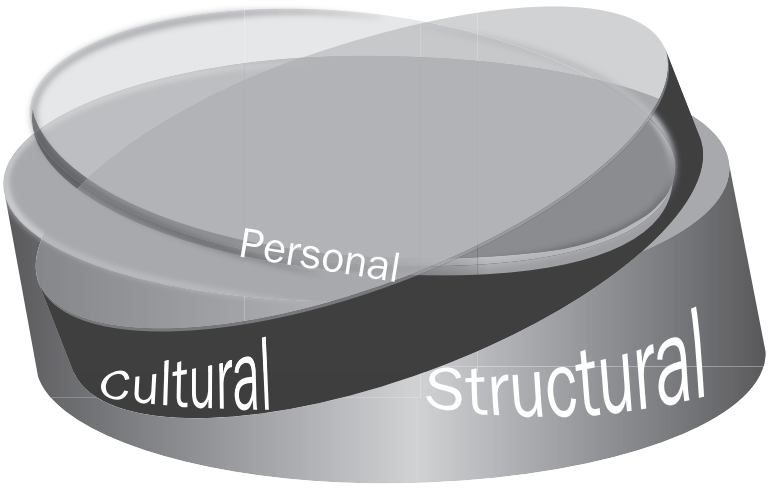

FIGURE 1.1 PCS Model of Oppression and Privilege: Dynamic Interaction Between Levels

we may examine oppression at only the personal level or at one of the other levels, it will be an incomplete examination because our thoughts, attitudes, and actions can only be understood in the larger context(s) with an awareness that the three levels continuously interact with one another.

Oppression at the personal level comprises the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours that depict a negative prejudgment of a particular subordinate social group. It is usually based on stereotypes and may be overt or covert. Without institutional or structural backing, these negative thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours constitute prejudice (Dominelli 1997; Thompson 1998). Thompson (2002) issues a warning that personal prejudice or oppression is part of the complex web of oppression and therefore we should be wary of overemphasizing its importance and thus underemphasizing the significance of cultural and structural factors. Oppression at the personal level and the responses of individual oppressed persons to their oppression are the subjects of Chapter 4.

Oppression at the cultural level consists of the values, norms, and shared patterns of seeing, thinking, and acting, along with an assumed consensus about what is right and normal, that taken together endorse the belief in a superior culture. It refers to the ways and discursive practices used by the dominant group to portray subordinate groups in history, literature, the media, stories, movies, humour, stereotypes, and popular culture. It acts as a vehicle for transmitting and presenting the dominant culture as the norm, the message being that everyone should conform to it. Ultimately, it can lead to ethnocentrism—that is, to a narrow view of the world only from within the narrow confines of one culture (Thompson 1998). It is the cement of cultural oppression that reinforces the personal and structural oppression (Dominelli 1997).

Unfortunately, social work has tended to equate culture with ethnicity in developing practices of cultural awareness and sensitivity and has overlooked a broader view of culture, one that is related to everything we see, hear, believe, and do. Even social work writers who profess social justice ideals and approaches, such as Baines (2007) and Dominelli (2002), tend to lump culture in with structural variables. Not only do they miss out on what Agger (1992) considers the most exciting development in critical theory today (i.e., cultural studies), but they underplay how the dominant group in a pluralistic society maintains hierarchical divisions of class, race, gender, age, and so on and how it promotes, imposes, and universalizes its own culture while repressing others. Oppression at the cultural level is crucial to understanding how oppression works and in developing strategies of liberation. Oppression at the cultural level is the subject of Chapter 5.

Oppression at the structural level refers to the means by which oppression is institutionalized in society. It consists of the ways that social institutions, laws, policies, social processes and practices, and the economic and political systems all work together primarily in favour of the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups. At this level, oppression is often given its formal legitimation. An analysis of how social structures produce oppression, including structural violence, is the subject of Chapter 6.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the concept of oppression along several dimensions. Oppression was described as a second-class citizenship that is assigned to people not on the basis of failure or lack of merit but because of one's membership in a particular group or category of people. Oppression

exists because it carries out a number of positive functions for the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups. A number of myths that rationalize oppression as necessary for the preservation of society were presented. It was argued that the (re)distributional concept of social justice that has historically underpinned social welfare and social work practice only compensates victims of oppression. It does nothing to alter the social processes and practices that produce and reproduce inequality. A few competing accounts of the genealogy of oppression were presented, the common element among them being that although oppression is remarkably stable and resistant to change once it is established, it is not a fixed, essentialist, or natural social condition.

Although there are different forms, sources, levels of severity, and experiences of oppression, there is a common set of dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups. Iris Marion Young's five categories of oppression, of which all oppressed groups experience at least one (and usually more), were presented. This categorization was adopted here because it encompasses both distributive issues of social injustice and practices that go beyond distribution. Finally, a model of oppression that locates oppression at three levels—personal, cultural, and structural or institutional—was outlined. Chapters 4 to 6, inclusive, offer a more in-depth look at oppression at each of these levels.

Critical Questions for Discussion

1. Most oppressors would never think of themselves as oppressors. Why are they oppressors, and why don't they realize it?
2. Some authors (e.g., Thompson 1997, 2001) refer to "anti-discriminatory social work" instead of "anti-oppressive social work." What is the difference between discrimination and oppression and between anti-discriminatory social work and anti-oppressive social work? Can you give some examples?
3. If we are equal before the law and all have the same rights, which are protected under human rights legislation and Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, isn't this enough equality? What are some examples of rights that the dominant group has and various oppressed groups do not have?
4. How is "difference" treated in the curriculum of your social work program? That is, which subordinate groups have *more* than one course (half course or full course) devoted entirely to their issues? Which have one course devoted entirely to them? Which have no courses devoted entirely to them but are a significant part of at least one course? Which receive only passing reference in the curriculum? And which are not even mentioned in the curriculum? How do you account for these variations?
5. Given that we all have multiple identities, most of us belong to at least one oppressed group. Using Young's five faces of oppression, can you think of instances in your own life when you experienced any of these five forms of oppression (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, or violence) because of your membership in a particular subordinate group?

6. Take any source or form of oppression, such as poverty, sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, religion, and so on, and give some examples of how it occurs at the personal level, the cultural level, and the structural level.
7. Is the gender division of labour natural? Why or why not?

Further Readings

Baines, Donna, ed. (2011). *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social Justice Social Work*, 2nd edition. Winnipeg: Fernwood. This book focuses on integrating anti-oppressive theory into politicized, transformative social work practice. Using practice vignettes, personal experiences, and case work examples, the contributing authors focus on social work practice in a variety of settings and suggest ways that social work on the front lines can resist oppression and challenge injustice while at the same time transforming larger systems.

Dominelli, Lena (2002). *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. This book, written by one of the leading theorists in the field of progressive or critical social work, focuses on how social workers can assist individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and society at large to challenge and transcend the many sources and forms of oppression (e.g., poverty, racism, sexism, disability, mental illness) that disempower them. It explores the limitations of traditional mainstream social work in dealing with the complexity of the range of levels at which oppression occurs and argues that these models be replaced with social justice–oriented approaches such as anti-oppressive social work.

Gil, David (1998). *Confronting Injustice and Oppression: Concepts and Strategies for Social Workers*. New York: Columbia University Press. The author presents perspectives and strategies to transform unjust and oppressive institutions into alternatives that are conducive to human development, empowerment, and liberation. The book explores the meanings, sources, and dynamics of injustice and oppression and calls for social workers to embrace the core values of progressive social work—equality, liberty, co-operation, and affirmation of community. In Gil's view, anti-oppressive social workers must be overtly political, advocate human rights, facilitate critical consciousness through dialogue, and build social movements through activism.

Morgaine, Karen, and Moshula Capous-Desyllas (2015). *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice: Putting Theory into Action.* Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage. This book integrates concepts of anti-oppressive practice with generalist practice course content. This comprehensive approach introduces concepts of social justice and offers detailed insight into how those principles intersect with the practice of social work at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The book covers ethics, values, and social work theory and discusses the fundamentals of working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The book also highlights policy and social movement activism and practice within a global context. Maintaining an integrative approach throughout, the authors effectively bridge the gap between anti-oppressive principles and practice.

Shera, Wes, ed. (2003). *Emerging Perspectives on Anti-Oppressive Practice.* Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press. This book contains 27 chapters, each developed from a paper originally presented at a conference held by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work on anti-oppressive social work practice. These papers address a number of themes or areas of anti-oppressive social work, including theory, fields of practice, critical issues, social work education, and future challenges. The chapters in this book laid much of the groundwork for anti-oppressive social work scholarship and practice today.

Thompson, Neil (2016). *Anti-Discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice*, 6th edition. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. Addressing the common concepts and issues across the various forms of discrimination, this book explores the reasons why the development of anti-discriminatory practice is so vital, and examines the steps that need to be taken towards constructing a social work practice based on principles of anti-discrimination and the promotion of equality. The author presents a clearly articulated theory base—the PCS model (personal, cultural, structural)—that has been used by a number of leading theorists in the development of anti-oppressive and social justice approaches to social work. Written in an extremely clear and accessible manner.

Young, Iris Marion (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. A seminal book in a number of scholarly and professional areas, including social justice and anti-oppression. The author makes probably the most convincing case for the emancipatory implications of postmodernism. The book presents a critical analysis of different theories of justice and finds them lacking in that they do not contain the claims of excluded groups with respect to decision making, cultural expression, and division of labour. By assuming a homogeneous public, traditional theories of justice (including distributive or redistributive justice) fail to consider institutional arrangements for including people not culturally identified with white European male norms of reason and respectability. Young identifies concepts of domination and subordination to cover issues not included in the distributional model and argues for a principle of group representation in democratic decision making.

2 Privilege: An Overview

Privilege is not something I take and which I therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.

—Harry Brod, cited in *Men's Lives*

Introduction

Why must we study "privilege"? After all, as social workers are we not most concerned with people who experience social problems that are derived from oppression? Is this not the major group with whom we work? Would not a focus on privilege direct our attention away from oppression and its negative effects on those individuals and groups who suffer from it? While it is true that social work has historically focused on oppressed persons as its primary target group, there are several reasons why privilege and privileged people should be a major concern not just for social work, but for all people who occupy at least one position of privilege. The major reason why social work ought to be concerned with privilege is that a singular focus on oppression ignores or overlooks the fact that oppression and privilege go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. Together they form a symbiotic relationship.

The flip side of the coin of oppression is privilege. However, compared to oppression in general and anti-oppressive social work in particular, not much has been written on privilege in the social work literature. And what has been written usually focuses on a single source or form of privilege such as "white privilege" or "male privilege" or "class privilege," which ignores the multiplicity and intersectionality of oppression (to be discussed in Chapter 8). The fact that not much has been written in the social work literature on privilege is most unfortunate, because the main reason we have oppression is because we have privilege. It is similar to the relationship between poverty and wealth—we have poverty because we have wealth. If we want to truly understand poverty, we must understand wealth. If we want to do something serious about poverty, we must do something serious about wealth. And if we want to truly understand oppression, we must understand privilege. Just as privilege opens doors of opportunity, oppression slams them shut (Johnson 2006). Just as poverty will always be with us until we do something about wealth, we will always have oppression until we do something about privilege. As articulated by Harry Brod in the quote above, privilege is not something we take; it is given to us by society if we possess the characteristics that society values, such as being male, white, heterosexual, affluent, and non-disabled.

Ferber (2003) offers two major reasons why we have tended to ignore the issue of privilege. First, it implicates those with power, and second, it is far easier to explore the problems faced by

oppressed groups than it is to explore our own roles in perpetuating inequality. This is unfortunate, because we are all implicated in systems of oppression. "Although as individuals we may not believe that we are oppressive people, we still participate in relations of oppression and gain various privileges from that relationship" (Ferber 2003, 320). No matter how much I (Bob) write or how many classes I teach about inequality, oppression, racism, and sexism, I continue to reap the privileges of being a white male. And although I do not feel ashamed of or guilty about my race or my gender (after all, I have no control over them), I struggle with the knowledge that I am given certain privileges by society because I was born with particular characteristics that society values. I do not have privilege because of who I am as a person or because of what I have done. Rather, I have privilege because of the social categories that, for the most part, I was born into. As stated by Alison Bailey (2004, 307), "privilege is *granted* and birth is the easiest way of being granted privilege."

If we focus only on oppression, the structured invisibility of privilege is reinforced. I agree with Bailey (2004, 302) when she says that "any understanding of oppression is incomplete without recognition of the role privilege plays in maintaining systems of domination."

Why Give Up Our Privileges?

But why would one choose to give up their privileges? A number of reasons for joining the struggle against our own privileges have been identified by various writers. Rothenberg (2008) and Wise (2008), for example, in discussing white privilege have both suggested that most people (including privileged persons) have a basic sense of fairness and justice and, therefore, would feel little sense of pride or accomplishment knowing that they won a race or competition when they had an unfair advantage. We may want success and happiness for ourselves and our children, but not at the expense of others, especially those who are not privileged. "Somewhere down in our guts we understand that in an oppressive system . . . , the unearned privileges with which we live are based on the suffering of others. We know that we have things because others don't" (Jensen 2005, xx). This kind of moral or philosophical reasoning is entirely consistent with social work values and principles of social justice.

Rothenberg (2008) argues that in addition to issues of justice and moral reasoning there exist matters of self-interest and survival that provide a rationale for privileged people to give up their privileges. "History tells us that in the end, an unjust and inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities leads to terrible violence" not just for oppressed people but for privileged persons as well (p. 4). There is much literature attesting to the fact that when people become acutely deprived or when their living conditions become greatly inferior to those of others (middle class and privileged), there is increased risk of violence and crime on the part of deprived groups against more affluent groups. This issue and literature will not be repeated here. Instead, it will be argued that privilege, itself, is dangerous to the health and well-being of all people—including privileged people. Increasingly, wealthy privileged people (in North America at least) find themselves living in gated communities complete with private security companies to protect their property and their lives. This "gated" phenomenon led Rothenberg (2008, 4) to conclude that "people of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and every economic class complain of feeling unsafe on the streets and in their homes. A society that distributes educational opportunities, housing, health care, food, *even kindness* [emphasis added], based on the color of people's skin and other arbitrary variables cannot guarantee the safety or

security of its people. In this sense, all of us, . . . pay a terrible price." Thus, another set of reasons for privileged persons giving up their privileges centres around the fact that privilege hurts us all.

Privileged people suffer another way because of their privilege. Because of their social position privileged people often have a sense of entitlement when it comes to income, well-paying jobs, educational success, decent housing, acquisition of material possessions, and so on. When something happens to interrupt or threaten the flow of these privileges, a disconnect often occurs that may lead to an actual or feared sense of loss of their privileges and, in turn, unlawful outcomes to get or keep these privileges may occur. Tim Wise (2008) suggests that it is the "culture of privilege" itself that creates the risk that violence may be carried out by privileged group members in that a culture of privilege sometimes generates "a set of expectations in the minds of the privileged, which when frustrated (as they sometimes are) leads them to lash out, unable to cope with a setback" (153). Every week in the United States, where inequality is more rampant and extreme than in any other modern industrial democratic country, there is a mass killing almost every week carried out by persons "who are overwhelmingly white, almost always male, and usually solidly middle class" (153). Similarly, in our type of competitive and acquisitive society where one's self-esteem is often measured by what and how much we own, deprived persons who may be unable to acquire material goods or social status in legitimate ways may turn to crime to get or keep those things that seem readily available to people from privileged backgrounds.

Also, privilege usually comes with a penalty to the privileged person. There is no doubt that I (Bob) have benefited from male privilege, but I have also been hurt by it, as I have been locked inside a tiny box of masculinity—a box that Jamie Utt calls the "Act Like A Man" box. I want to be free and independent of those aspects of masculinity that hurt both men and women and I want to be free from such rules of masculinity as "big boys don't cry," men are the lords and masters of their own households, men must know everything even when they don't, and violence may be acceptable for solving problems. Privilege hurts both the victims and the beneficiaries of privilege even as it pays a dividend to the latter group.

Given the fact that privilege negatively affects both privileged and non-privileged people, it seems important that we as people in general and as social workers in particular know as much as possible about privilege and how it works. This chapter will explore the concept and the structural nature of privilege, some of its major characteristics (including its invisibility to privileged persons), the dynamics of privilege or how systems of privilege work, reasons why privileged persons become defensive and uncomfortable in talking about it, and why dominant groups do not see privilege as a problem. We will also discuss the myth of meritocracy as well as outline some of the specific privileges that are attached to various positions of domination. Finally, we will explore what all this has to do with us as individuals and as social workers, along with what we can do about privilege to make a difference.

The Nature of Privilege

In Chapter 1, it was mentioned that all of us suffer from some kind of frustration, hurt, and restriction at some point in our lives, but this does not mean that we are oppressed. What determines oppression is when a person is blocked from opportunities for self-development or is

excluded from full participation in society or is assigned a second-class citizenship not because of a lack of individual talent or merit but because of their membership in a particular group or category of people. Similarly, what determines privilege is not any particular advantage a person might have but whether the advantage was earned or conferred systematically by society on the basis of the person's membership in a particular social group (Heldke and O'Connor 2004; McIntosh 2003). Just as all oppression counts as harm but not all harms count as oppression, all privilege is advantageous, but not all advantages count as privilege (e.g., having a driver's licence, holding political office, becoming a naturalized citizen, which are all *earned* advantages).

What determines oppression and privilege is the systematically conferred nature of harms in the former and (*unearned*) advantages in the latter (Bailey 2004). In her classic article on oppression, Marilyn Frye (1983) argues that if we want to determine whether a particular harm or restriction qualifies as oppression, we have to look at that harm in context to see whether or not it plays a role in maintaining a structure that is oppressive. Similarly, Bailey (2004) argues that if we want to determine whether or not a particular advantage qualifies as a privilege, we need to look at the advantage in context to see whether or not it plays a role in keeping complex systems of privilege in place. Sisneros et al. (2008) point out that privileged people may experience hardship but unless these hardships are grounded in structural barriers that affect people in vital and limiting ways, they cannot be considered as forms of oppression.

Earned and Unearned Advantages

Thus, there are two kinds of advantages—earned and unearned—and those that are unearned are considered to be privileges. The corollary is that advantages that are earned (e.g., a quality education, skills, a good reputation) are not considered privileges (although one could argue that some advantages or assets are more easily earned if they are accompanied by class, race, gender, or other privileges). Bailey (2004) argues that failure to recognize the differences between earned and unearned assets allows privileged groups to equate all privilege with earned advantages. She gives a wonderful example of a failure to make this distinction, quoting a remark by Ann Richards (a political foe of George W. Bush): "Bush was born on third base, but to this day believes he hit a triple." If one were looking for a definition of privilege in accordance with the above, Marsiglia and Kulis (2009, 17) offer the following: "Privilege is the unearned advantages of special group membership." Privileges make people more powerful and profitable because they have more opportunities, advantages, access, and status attached to them (Hays, Chang, and Dean 2004). That's why white, able-bodied, heterosexual, married males continue to own most of the wealth in Anglo-American societies, occupy the most prestigious positions, and control the media and other forms of popular communication (Mullaly 2007, and as cited by many progressive politicians, such as Bernie Saunders and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 American election; and Justin Trudeau and Tom Mulcair in the 2015 federal Canadian election as well as Labour politicians in the UK and Australia).

As suggested above, privilege is often explained in terms of the natural abilities or given traits of the individual. Persons with privilege often appeal to these traits or personal characteristics as justification for having privilege in the first place (Heldke and O'Connor 2004). However,

privilege is not an individual phenomenon. Oppression will not go away even if we change the attitudes, personalities, and behaviours of all privileged people, because such changes will not end the dominance that has been conferred on members of privileged groups (McIntosh 2003). It is the nature of society and of social systems that must change. "Individualistic thinking also makes us blind to the very existence of privilege, because privilege, by definition, has nothing to do with individuals, only with social categories we wind up in" (Johnson 2006, 77).

Another explanation for privilege by those with privilege is that it is an outcome of human nature in that it is only natural for different groups to compete with each other for power, dominance, and privilege. In this competition, there will be winners and losers, with those groups who are smarter, stronger, more able and capable coming out on top and getting more than anyone else. Other variations of the human nature argument as presented by Johnson (2006) are that people cannot help but fear the unfamiliar and therefore must be able to keep other groups in their place, or that existing social groups such as men and women are so dissimilar that it is as though they came from different planets (Mars and Venus?) and it is a wonder that we can get along as well as we do, or that there is only one natural orientation (e.g., sexual, religious) and all the rest are unacceptable and bound to cause conflict whenever they become obvious. Although such arguments about human nature may be popular or persuasive among some, Johnson (2006, 3) makes the point that "the only way to hold on to them is to ignore most of what history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, biology, and, if people look closely, their own experience reveal about human beings and how they live."

Myths about Privilege

If privilege does not exist because of individual traits or characteristics or because of human nature, then why does it exist? The answer to this question can be found in the relationship between oppression and privilege. As discussed in Chapter 1, oppression occurs because it benefits the dominant group in that it protects a kind of citizenship that is superior to that of oppressed groups. Privilege occurs for the same reason. Similarly, oppression and privilege conjointly protect the privileged group's access to a wider range of better-paying and higher-status work as well as its preferential access to and treatment from our social institutions. A correlate to the invisible nature of privilege is that privileged persons believe that having more is an inalienable right that accompanies hard work, vigilance, the courage to take risks, and superior intelligence and capabilities. That oppressed persons do not have more is proof that privilege is earned and not given. Supporting these beliefs about privilege are the same myths that support oppression, as outlined in Chapter 1—namely, the myths of scarcity, of objective information, of might is right or the belief in majority rule even if it tyrannizes the minority, of supremacy or the belief in a superior culture, of class, of equal opportunity or meritocracy, of stereotyping or the belief that all members of a group are the same, of blaming the victim or the belief that individuals are responsible for their own oppression, and of competition and hierarchy.

Johnson (2006) adds two more myths supporting the existence of privilege (and oppression) to this list. As with the other myths, the two additions ignore history. First is the myth or belief that things have always been the way they are and will not change. Second is the myth of "no

effect," which is based on the belief that nothing we do can change the system because it is just too big and powerful. These myths are part of a larger ideology that rationalizes privilege and oppression as necessary for the preservation of society. In examining these myths, it is instructive to keep in mind the definition of a myth—a popular belief or idea that is fictitious or imaginary and does not reflect reality.

In Chapter 8, we will look at the intersectional model of oppression developed by Steven Wineman (1984) and at the "web of oppression" model developed by Sisneros et al. (2008) as helpful mechanisms for conceptualizing the intersectional nature of oppression and domination. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to these systems as a "matrix of domination," and Estelle Disch (2002) calls them a "matrix of privilege." Johnson (2006) asserts that if one looks at privilege or oppression as intersectional or as a web or a matrix of either domination or privilege, it simplifies and clarifies the nature of privilege. He states that by understanding that each form of privilege is related to all the others, we can dispense with the useless exercise of trying to determine which is the least or most privileged or least or most oppressive. It also helps us to avoid the trap of thinking that privilege falls along binary lines in that you are either privileged or you are not, because in reality you are usually both. In other words, you can belong (and usually do) in both privileged and oppressive categories. The intersectional models also reveal how different dimensions of privilege are connected to one another and that if we are to work for change, we need to focus on privilege in all the forms it takes (Johnson 2006). "We won't get rid of racism, in other words, without doing something about sexism and classism, because the system that produces the one also produces the others and connects them" (Johnson 2006, 53). Obviously, then, part of the nature of privilege is that all its various forms are connected and interact with one another.

Privilege: Everywhere Yet Invisible

Another major feature of privilege is the fact that it is ubiquitous at the same time that it is invisible to privileged persons (Kimmel and Ferber 2003).[1] Everywhere we look, privileged people are the standard against which everyone else is measured. Most of our political leaders, most of our corporate leaders, most people in the mainstream media and in advertising, most spokespersons, most professional people tend to be white, non-disabled, middle- and upper-class males. Privilege is all around us, and for many of us, it is us. However, privilege also tends to be invisible to those who are privileged. We are not schooled to recognize our privileges in the same way that we are schooled to recognize and be wary of people who are members of subordinate groups. People will tell us that they went to see a "female doctor," or they will say they went to see "the doctor." Very few will say that they went to see the "male doctor." People will tell us they have a "gay friend," or they will tell us about a "friend." Very few will tell us about having a "heterosexual friend." If I (Bob), as a white person, talk about a colleague at work, people will assume I am talking about a "white colleague." By identifying the race, gender, or sexual orientation of subordinate persons, we draw attention to the markers that explain why these persons are not privileged. By not identifying the markers that are associated with privileged persons, we help to keep privilege invisible.