# Chapter 2
# Social Justice as an Ethic of Social Work

**Abstract** Social justice has long been an important aim and driving aspiration for social work. The pursuit of social justice is enshrined in ethical codes, practice standards and social work literature around the world, and social work may be considered as an organised attempt at working for social justice. This chapter explains the historical background and meaning of social justice before exploring how social justice is understood in the discipline of social work. Particular emphasis will explore the conceptualisation of social justice in social work ethical codes and theory texts, noting the tension between structural and individual accounts of social justice.

## Introduction

Social justice is a core value of social work and has remained a central focus of social work's mission and purpose since its establishment (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Marsh, 2005; Payne, 2005). Marsh (2005) states that 'social and economic justice is the organizing value for the social work profession' (p. 293). It should be said that social justice is not just the purview of social work—it has been taken up in many other professional contexts, such as youth work, policy, disability studies, women's studies, and Indigenous studies. Ideas about social justice are also located in various traditions in philosophy and political science, and it is a guiding ideal in terms of many rights-based movements, such as workers' rights, women's rights, and disability rights movements. Furthermore, social work's commitment to social justice is said to derive its moral foundations (such as compassion) through its early links to Christian charity organisations. It is said that social work and some faith groups often share social justice interests, particularly in relation to social inclusion and ensuring that all people have access to the resources that provide for their needs and ability for self-determination (Judd, 2013).

As suggested in chapter one, social work's stated commitment to social justice is becoming increasingly urgent—in light of the march of globalisation and capitalism—'to address human concerns that transcend national, geographic, and cultural borders and domains of practice' (Finn & Jacobson, 2003, p. 57). Hence, the ideas

surrounding social justice and what it points to are diverse, meaning that social justice is an essentially contested concept (Ruben, 2010) with different philosophical, political and practical orientations. Nevertheless, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how social justice is conceptualised in the social work ethics literature, and in particular, the development of social justice in social work codes of ethics. Some of the debates about social justice in social work include distributive versus critical theories, structural (social) versus micro (individual) focus of social justice work, and universal versus specific levels of analysis. This brief discussion will lay the foundations for later chapters, where several of the key themes identified here are explored later in more detail.

## Defining Social Justice

The modern concept of *social justice* (not simply justice) is actually a fairly recent idea in the long history of philosophy and debates about justice generally (Jackson, 2005). Although social work has had a focus on social justice since its inception through its work with poor and disadvantaged people and communities, the concept and theory of social justice as an ethical value is more recent. It is to be expected, then, that social justice—despite its universal adoption and acceptance in the discipline of social work—will hold various and contested meanings and interpretations. Solas (2008a, p. 124) states that although social justice is a 'cardinal value' of social work, its meaning remains unclear (see also Bonnycastle, 2011). The reason for this is because the development of social work values, which include social justice, 'lack…philosophical foundations, application of ethical theory or any reference to important normative concepts' (Stewart, 2013, p. 165). This problem leads to confusing and often arbitrary lists and descriptions of core social work values, which include social justice.

At the same time, social and economic justice shows promise in serving as a central organising principle for social work generally, but what it means and how it should be obtained is by no means settled (Stewart, 2013). For example, Cournoyer (2014, p. 118) explains that the term social justice can be broken down to include distributive justice (the fair and just distribution of a society's resources, opportunities and burdens), procedural justice (the fair and just means of decision-making in institutions, organisations and policies), retributive justice (fairness and justice associated with punishment and reparations for harm done to others), restorative justice (the repairing of damage done through compensation or rehabilitation), intergenerational justice (the benefits or burdens left from one generation to another), and environmental justice (concerning who has access to a clean environment, who does not). While social work ethical codes cover common ground in explaining social justice, there are many and varying ideas in these descriptions, some of which seem arbitrary and ad hoc (see below). Immediately we can see that social justice may contain different orientations, different levels of analysis and different applications in practice.

## *Some Background to Social Justice*

Social justice, as broadly understood today, is said to have emerged in the political philosophy literature around the late eighteenth century (Jackson, 2005). Its historical formation presupposes a number of assumptions and conditions for it to make any sense. These are summed up by Jackson (2005) following a review of key research texts into the history of social justice. First, as Jackson points out, social justice emerged as a social virtue because people began to see that social (in)justice was not simply due to destiny, or divine command, or what individuals did or did not do. Instead, it became accepted that social institutions are implicated in the distribution of resources and social positions (power), and social institutions can make or break social justice. Accepting that social institutions are implicated in social (in)justice is to acknowledge that 'there is some agency, classically the state, that is capable of initiating and directing the institutional changes necessary to create social justice' (Jackson, 2005, p. 357). Social workers have long held this view in regard to the role of the welfare state and social institutions to create the potential for social justice (Clark, 1999). But the state also holds a darker propensity to perpetuate oppression and injustice (Arendt, 1958). Hence, the birth of the state is important to the ability to deliver or frustrate programmes of social justice. When social workers critique the nation-state and its institutions and benefactors for failing to deliver social justice (or for perpetuating injustice, violence and oppression), they are intimating that the state is reflexive, has agency and exists *in potentia* to different arrangements that *ought* to deliver social justice. There are good reasons to see the *state* in this way, and it is due to the long history of social contract theory in political philosophy. This conception, traced back to Thomas Hobbes, considers the *state* as a third person. In this conception, the state is a creation, and while it can be seen as a fiction, it nevertheless has had a strong effect on the emergence of welfare states. In this conception, the state is *not* the people, because they have ceded some power in a covenant in order to create a society, and it is also not a sovereign as the *head* of the body politic of the society. Instead, it is an authorisation given to a third entity which we have come to call 'the person of the state' (Skinner, 2016, online). It is on this authorised power that social workers are calling in their claims for redress of social injustice.

Second, Jackson (2005) states that social justice emerged as a political idea because the goal of reducing poverty and inequality gradually became framed as 'a matter of justice rather than charity' (p. 360). While some forms of social work have, and perhaps continue to be, predicated on charity models, more recent advances in social work thinking along the lines of critical and radical traditions reject a charity approach in favour of the political aspects of social justice as *justice* (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Ferguson, 2007; Fook, 2016; Pease & Nipperess, 2016). This emphasis on the political aspects may be traced to protests and activism against the approach of the Charity Organisation Societies (COS) by early socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb (Burnham, 2011). The underpinning theoretical and philosophical view that supports an approach to justice as politics (as opposed to justice as charity)

was due to an increasing acceptance—backed by a voluminous social science evidence base—that inequality is not a matter of destiny or divine luck. Rather, fortune and misfortune, wealth and poverty, distribution and redistribution, are the result of human-made systems (Jackson, 2005). Again, there is a reflexive notion of agency here in the belief that people *could* and *should* collectivise in struggles for justice. Injustice, by extension, is now morally problematic, particularly insofar as it became increasingly obvious that injustice causes such harm, not just to individuals, but to society generally. This is certainly the position adopted by social work: to see that injustice is not inevitable, that social justice is possible and morally desirable and worthwhile, and to see that it can be pursued and attained through organised human effort—like social work.

## The Structural Analysis in Social Justice

In social work, social justice has largely been conceptualised in structural terms to include a focus on the sociopolitical organisation of society, including a critique of the limits of market mechanisms to meet human need, and the role that capitalism as a socio-economic system plays in creating injustice (Ferguson, 2007; Ife, 2016; Mullaly, 2007). Craig (2002) argues that market systems are the root cause behind so much social and economic injustice, and injustice must be addressed through the development of 'social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on acceptance of difference and diversity' (pp. 671–672). According to Craig (2002), the values that ought to underpin such policies include fairness and equality, dignity and worth, meeting needs, reducing inequality and participation of the most disadvantaged; the latter of which may include much greater attention towards service user involvement in 'shaping service provision and related matters of planning, evaluation and education and training' (Thompson, 2002, p. 717).

This structural focus situates the attainment of social justice at the level of policy and service development (Marsh, 2005), and importantly, highlights the centrality of values and ideologies for social workers seeking after social justice. It is along these lines that Ife (2016) argues that social justice must address structural disadvantage and inequality through empowerment and attention to locally and contextually derived concepts of human need. A structural focus also includes a human rights perspective that moves beyond individual notions of civil and political rights, to include '*economic, social and cultural rights*, namely, the right to health care, to housing, to education, to employment, to adequate social security and so on' (Ife, 2002, p. 67, original italics). Similarly, Finn and Jacobson (2003) outline what they refer to as a 'just practice framework' (p. 69), which is a structural analysis framework oriented towards (1) the interpretations people hold about the world and their experience in it, (2) 'the circumstances and conditions that surround and influence particular events and situations' (p. 70), (3) an analysis of the operation of power, particularly in relation to inequalities of power, (4) the way that historical conditions and circumstances

shape present situations, and (5) the possibilities and hopes for change and social transformation.

Solas (2008a) argues that social justice ought to entail a commitment to radical egalitarianism, which is a strict form of equality that at the same time promotes cultural diversity and difference. For Solas (2008a), social justice along these lines would involve institutionally sanctioned corrective measures to bring equality to fruition through maximising people's capabilities, opportunities and collective rights. In a similar way, Hodge (2010) outlines an approach for social justice education for social work to include three key principles. These are 'epistemic pluralism; client-centred conceptualisations of social justice; and fundamental human rights' (p. 202). Like Solas, essentially what Hodge is appealing to is wider appreciation of a diversity of experience and perspectives, especially the inclusion of service user perspectives on social justice and how service user experiences are often marginalised, silenced and subject to institutional discrimination and oppression and rights violations. In this sense, social justice concerns both a structural analysis of sociopolitical arrangements of society, as well as valuing diversity and difference (Mullaly, 2007). These key points are also reflected in social work ethical codes, a point we return to later in this chapter.

## The Therapeutic Turn: Whither Social Justice?

This twin focus of sociopolitical structural factors as well as the identity politics of various groups seeking after justice points to some parallels between social work and broader social movements and social activism. Thompson (2002) suggests that although social work cannot be seen itself as a social movement, its focus on 'empowerment and social transformation' (p. 720) means that social work may align well with the transformative force of various social movements striving for social justice. Aligning with social movements may support Thompson's point that social work is:

> Now in a much stronger position to move away from the traditional individualistic approach which paid little or no attention to wider cultural and structural factors and acts as a force for social amelioration and the challenging of injustice, discrimination and oppression. (Thompson, 2002, p. 721)

However, how much of a focus on social reform and activism really goes on in social work practice? This is a matter of contention. The provocative book *Unfaithful Angels* by Specht and Courtney (1994) chronicles in detail the way that social work in the United States in the twentieth century inexorably shifted from its historical focus of working in solidarity with poor and disadvantaged people and communities, to an almost wholesale adoption of psychotherapeutic techniques concerned with therapy and self-improvement in private practice settings. In Specht and Courtney's analysis, social work has abandoned its central concern with social justice, because, as they say, social workers in droves have embraced individualistic therapeutic modes of practice, styling themselves as 'secular priests in the church of individual repair'

(1994, p. 28). Likewise, Kam (2014) is critical of the way that the 'social' has been expunged from much social work practice, diminishing the capacity for social justice. For example, by 'moving into private practice to serve clients predominantly from the middle class' (p. 726), by emphasising the technical-rational aspects of practice to a general neglect of social and political causes of injustice, and to what Kam calls the 'therapization of social work' (p. 727), which is characterised by the 'increasing dominance of casework, clinical models and therapies' (p. 727).

This tension is driven by the changing context of practice, which includes the privatisation of social welfare, and a political and cultural valorisation on individual responsibility and self-reliance; the effect is that services are rationed out not according to need, but on provision that people adhere to prescribed compliance obligations. In following, Asquith and Rice (2005) state that social workers have become fixated with following correct bureaucratic procedure at the expense of the needs and interests of service users. This situation also seems to be driven by the context of practice. A Canadian study into Master of Social Work (MSW) graduate's uptake of social justice knowledge and anti-oppressive practice in their field placements, found that clinical or case-based practice settings were perceived by students to be *less amenable* to the pursuit of social justice practice due to their focus on competencies and clinical knowledge and skills (Bhuyan, Bejan, & Jeyapal, 2017). An artefact of this situation, according to Kam, is that although social work espouses the rhetoric of social justice, it is invariably more concerned with the professional project of being in 'competition with other professions in order to achieve legitimacy and respectability as a profession' (Kam, 2014, p. 729).

For those working in clinical practice settings who are committed to the value and ideal of social justice, this kind of analysis may seem unfair. Furthermore, it is the case that the majority of social workers are actually employed in state-sponsored organisations, where the main technologies of practice require specialised skills in working with *individuals* (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). What happens to social justice under these arrangements? The question of whether or not social justice practice is even possible in clinical settings has been the subject of research, mainly through unpacking a dichotomy that has slowly developed in social work between traditional/progressive, individualist/collectivist, problem/strengths, and casework/community-work practices (Maschi, Baer, & Turner, 2011; McLaughlin, 2011; Parker, 2003). Many students entering social work are introduced to this dichotomy when the history of social work is presented to them as a dualism between community organising and social casework. Regardless of this dichotomy, we think that even in these settings there are opportunities for social workers to act in socially just ways and enact practices that increase the agency, voice and opportunities for vulnerable people.

For example, Parker (2003) explains that therapy is political and is therefore ripe for integrating a focus on power and privilege into the therapeutic process; for example, through the use of critical, narrative, feminist, empowerment, strengths, ecological and constructivist approaches to therapeutic and clinical work (Maschi et al., 2011; McLaughlin, 2011). Maschi et al. (2011) conducted a content analysis on articles about clinical social work and social justice. They identified numerous

examples and illustrations of the way that social justice can be incorporated into clinical work, concluding that 'clinical social workers…have a wealth of information as to how a theory of social justice translates into practice' (p. 249).

In a similar vein, Breton, Cox, and Taylor (2003) are critical of the way that social work makes a demarcation between macro, mezzo and micro practice (another common heuristic in social work). They say that this unhelpfully splits up social work thinking and separates social work's concern for social justice away from the domain of social policy. It is better, they say, to explore the ways that social workers might fruitfully work across these levels, rather than see them as domain-specific silos. Given that policy can be the cause of much injustice, this macro/micro schism creates a disjuncture between social work's stated aim for social justice and the pursuit of just policies. Instead, they argue for an interdependent model of social work *qua* policy, where social workers can develop a practice specialisation that may be clinical but one that is at the same time deeply connected with the institutional arrangements of service delivery and policy making. In other words, social workers should remain connected to questions of social justice at all levels of practice so as to 'develop partnerships with individuals and groups who have diverse issues and interests related to the pursuit of social justice' (Breton et al., 2003, p. 19).

Still, the question of social work adopting therapeutic, psychological and even biological and neuroscientific theories and discourses of practice is an important critique to engage with, namely, due to the way that this orientation may, little by little, move social work away from the *social* and, by extension, further away from its social justice roots (see further in chapter five, this volume). It is this appeal to the *social* in social work that Kam (2014) argues for as a key way to keep social justice central to the mission and purpose of social work. The social framework proposed by Kam includes:

- Being informed and aware of what is happening at a social and political level.
- Making sure practice reaches the most disadvantaged and oppressed groups in society as a matter of priority.
- Using systems and person-in-environment theories and perspectives.
- Recognising that many social and individual problems are the result of socially constructed forces.
- Seeking change at the level of community and society, not merely focussing on the individual as the site for change.
- Striving to achieve equality and human rights (Kam, 2014).

A shorthand way to keep the central focus of social justice priorities front and centre in the thinking and practice of social work is through an explicit focus on social justice in social work ethical codes.

## Social Justice and Social Work Ethical Codes

Social justice is a core value that is defined and articulated in social work codes of ethics globally (for example, Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2017; Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010; Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2004; The British Association of Social Workers, 2012) and social work education and practice standards mandate the inclusion of social justice knowledge and ethics in curriculum and practice standards (for example, Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013a, 2013b; International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). Hence, looking to ethical codes can illuminate much about how social work portends to understand what social justice is and how it should be achieved.

However, despite being a repository for statements of value that can guide social work, we should be aware that social work ethics and ethical codes are themselves products of the historical and intellectual ideas of their age (Hugman, 2003). Social work ethics are relatively new, although they constitute a burgeoning field of research and education (Banks, 2008). Although social work ethics have been formed and developed with a social work disciplinary frame in mind, they are still indebted to wider philosophical and intellectual periods in history. This history has included the Enlightenment ethical theories of utilitarianism and deontology, the subsequent modernist exposition of objectivist and rational models of ethical decision-making and judgment, through to recent postmodern ethics that include a more subjectivist and pluralist approach to ethics (Banks, 2008; Hugman, 2003). Hence, Reamer (1998) explains that social work codes of ethics have evolved over time, beginning with a focus in the early twentieth century on the moral conduct of the poor, to an exploration of the values of social work in the 1940s and 1950s where the focus of ethics and morality turned towards social work itself. Following advancements in applied ethics generally, social work took upon itself in the 1970s and 1980s to develop discipline-specific ethical concepts out of moral philosophy and produced decision-making models and tools for practice. Reamer (1998) notes particularly that revisions to the US code sought to capture the ever-increasing complexities of social work practice, including a focus on accountability and risk management. And more recently still, critics have argued for a stronger focus on Indigenous knowledges in social work ethics on recognition that social work ethics are laden with assumptions about Western moral universalism (Briskman, 2001; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). Ethical codes, therefore, are subject to an evolving process of critique, revision and reformation.

While ethical codes may act as repositories for the ethics and values of social work, their translation into practice is more complicated, largely due to the fact that employing organisations and bureaucracies carry considerable weight and influence over their own ethics and standards, some of which may be at odds with social work ethics (Clark, 1999). Furthermore, social work codes of ethics are criticised on the grounds that they are often unclear, contain conflicting priorities and principles, are ignored, and they should not be used as a substitute for moral judgment (Clark, 1999).

Consequently, Hugman (2003) raises questions about the form and function of social work ethical codes by asking: how useful and relevant are ethical codes and ethical decision-making tools if they are narrow and prescriptive (see also, Gray & Gibbons, 2007)? Particularly, to what extent do codes capture and express a multiplicity of different voices and perspectives so important in multicultural contexts (Hugman, 2003)? Likewise, Healy (2007) asks whether or not social work ethics should be unifying and universal, or within the context of globalisation, multiculturalism and diversity, should perhaps social work ethics be more diverse and culturally relative? This is essentially a debate between universal and relativist conceptions of ethics. In moral philosophy, it is most often captured as a debate between the universalist and categorical deontological moral philosophy of Kant (that is, Kant's categorical imperative emphasises the development of moral rules and principles that ought to have universal application) and the context-specific and potentially relativist position of Act Utilitarianism (Barcalow, 2007). This may be seen along a continuum, from strict universal positions at one end, and complete cultural relativism at the other. According to Healy (2007), social work ethics may be best served by adopting a mid-range position, by adhering to universal ethical principles that may be adapted or interpreted in relation to diverse cultures and contexts.

How this is to be achieved is less clear. An example of a mid-range position might be a distributive notion of social justice, which appears to have universal appeal at the level of generality, even though its interpretation and adoption into practice may be subject to local and cultural variability; for example, by focusing on specific groups who are identified as being disadvantaged and having particular needs for distributive justice. Yet, Pelton (2001) argues that social justice should be non-discriminatory, that is, it should be applied even-handedly to everyone and should not be administered as a means to an end. In making this argument, he is critical of programmes of social justice that single out *groups* of people for special treatment, rather than being targeted to the need itself, which may be individually felt and experienced. He writes that:

> Policies based on group constructs, statistical or otherwise, are discriminatory in that they make of fiction of individual realities. (Pelton, 2001, p. 434)

Scanlon and Longres (2001) respond directly to Pelton's argument firstly by exploring the full force of his claim, particularly the point Pelton makes that 'a desire to seek justice for some groups should not be used to exclude needy individuals from other groups' (2001, p. 442). Examples of categorical groupings based on statistical or stereotyping models in policy and programmes include class, gender, race and so on. As shown below, social work ethical codes adopt this position to hone the social justice focus on specific groups. There may be good reasons to use a group categorical model for social justice aims, such as 'levelling the playing field when some groups are much more disadvantaged than others' (Scanlon & Longres, 2001, p. 443). But the problem is that this approach risks pitting different groups against each other in struggles for justice, rather than building political solidarity across groups that might be united by common concern and experiences (Scanlon & Longres, 2001). They explain that:

> Only social justice movements with goals that will benefit large numbers of citizens and which recognize the shared human rights of all individuals are likely to foster widespread political engagement. (Scanlon & Longres, 2001, p. 442)

This is a question concerning what, and who, social justice is for? However, we are still left with the problem of the exact conceptualisation of social justice, what it covers and what it omits, and how social workers interpret and apply these ideas to their practice. According to Solas (2008a, 2008b), social work ethical codes need to conceptualise equality and social justice more broadly than simply a focus on economic distribution, to include cultural, social and political equality as well.

Furthermore, research cited by Congress and McAullife (2006) demonstrates that social workers may not actually use ethical codes to directly inform and support their practice. As mentioned, ethical codes are subject to periodic revision and redevelopment, taking into account regional variations and different circumstances and contexts (Congress & McAuliffe, 2006). Therefore, while there may be some similarities between different national social work ethical codes, there are differences as well, begging questions on how useful codes of ethics are for an effective description of social justice. Nonetheless, Clark suggests that 'a code of ethics should function like a lighthouse, as a point of light in the darkness' (p. 264). Likewise, Higham (2006) states that a focus on social justice can provide direction to social work, particularly insofar that this focus should be critical of the way that services have become plagued by managerialism, privatisation and bureaucracy. Instead, social justice helps social workers to prioritise empowerment, emancipation, rights and advocacy as central to achieving a more socially just society.

With this background and these caveats of social work ethical codes in mind, we present select extracts of the way that social justice is conceptualised in various social work ethical codes.

## *Australia*

> The social work profession: promotes justice and social fairness, by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, oppressed or have exceptional needs…advocates change to social systems and structures that preserve inequalities and injustice…opposes and works to eliminate all violations of human rights and affirms that civil and political rights must be accompanied by economic, social and cultural rights…promotes the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing…promotes community participation in societal processes and decisions and in the development and implementation of social policies and services. (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 13)

## Canada

Social workers believe in the obligation of people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity and to afford them protection from harm. Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs. Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups. (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, online)

## International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and British Association of Social Workers

challenging discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation or spiritual beliefs…recognise and respect the diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences…ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need…bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, unfair, harmful or illegal…challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society. (British Association of Social Workers, 2012, online; International Federation of Social Workers, 2012, online)

## Japan

Social workers shall seek to realize social justice founded on liberty, equality and coexistence which are free from discrimination. (Japanese Association of Certified Social Workers, 2004, online)

## New Zealand

Members advocate social justice and principles of inclusion and choice for all members of society, having particular regard for disadvantaged minorities. They act to prevent and eliminate discrimination against any person or group based on age beliefs, culture, gender, marital, legal or family status, intellectual, psychological and physical abilities, race, religion, sexual orientation, and social or economic status. (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2015, pp. 8–9)

## *United States*

> Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people. (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, online)

## Conclusion

There are several points of orientation in social work definitions and discussions about social justice that will be picked up and explored in later chapters in this book. These include theories and philosophical orientations towards:

- *Critical theories*—that respond to questions concerning discrimination, oppression, challenging injustice, and seeking social change and transformation.
- *Distributive theories*—that respond to questions concerning the fair distribution of resources, social fairness and equality of opportunity.
- *Democracy and participation*—that respond to questions concerning participation, inclusion and citizenship.
- *Perspectives on human rights and autonomy*—that respond to human rights violations and abuses, and promoting freedom, choice, opportunity and respect for cultural diversity.

It is apparent that a commitment to social justice means that social workers need to value diversity and difference and promote the attainment of social justice through the promotion of well-being at individual and sociopolitical levels using multiple

**Table 2.1** Select attributes of social justice as reflected in social work codes of ethics

| Problem foci | Levels of analysis | Broad practice approach |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Discrimination, stigmatisation, oppression | Individual, group | Promote inclusion, diversity, tolerance. Challenge discrimination. Promote social change and anti-discrimination. Advocate. Human rights |
| Inequitable distribution of resources | Group, society | Promote fair and equitable distribution of resources. Policy change and advocacy. Change social systems and structures. Increase participation |
| Vulnerability, disadvantage | Individual, group | Promote inclusion, reduce barriers. Increase participation. Empowerment. Advocate |

perspectives and methods of practice. What this means and how it might be achieved will be developed in later chapters. For now, this chapter concludes with a summary of the key themes of social justice as identified in the social work literature and codes of ethics. These are presented in Table 2.1.

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