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# Relevance to Psychology of Beliefs About Socialism: Some New Research Questions

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Relevance to Psychology of Beliefs About Socialism:

Some New Research Questions

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## Abstract

This paper aims to stimulate discussion about the potential relevance of the concept of socialism for what we study and the questions we ask. The economic systems of capitalism and socialism are seldom considered subjects of interest in psychology. At this particular time, however, especially in the United States, the relevance of these systems for our theories and research on human behavior, health, and human welfare seem particularly relevant and potentially significant. I argue that discussions of socialism should be helpful in expanding the context of our concerns in psychology and the identification of important new variables. The growing crisis of inequality in the U.S. is the major impetus for this argument.

Keywords: socialism, capitalism, social justice, social change, inequality

## Relevance to Psychology of Beliefs About Socialism:

### Some New Research Questions

My objective in this paper is to stimulate discussion about the relevance of the concept of socialism to what we psychologists study and the questions we ask. The “S” word is rarely considered a subject of interest in our discipline but, at this particular historical period in the United States, its potential contribution to the enrichment of our theories and research on human behavior, health, and wellbeing seems worth our careful attention. Such discussion may help us expand the context of our concerns and identify important new variables. Thus, this paper attempts to challenge the tacit acceptance of presentations in “mainstream media”, and elsewhere, of socialism as “frightening, foreign, unpatriotic, and menacing” (Goldin, Smith, & Smith, 2014, p. xi).

Like most other institutions and endeavors, [psychology](#) appears to take for granted that our current capitalist system is the best economic system thus far developed, and that its excesses can be curbed or corrected by regulations and ameliorative social policies. Our concern, as psychologists, however, is precisely with those consequences of the system that have immediate and long-term effects on human behavior and the health and welfare of individuals, families, and communities – the focus of our research and practice. In the context of this [analysis](#), capitalism signifies the current status quo, especially in the United States, while the concept of socialism is suggestive of socioeconomic changes in the direction of greater cooperative and public control of production and

resources. Beliefs and attitudes toward capitalism and socialism influence the personal and social lives of people, the maintenance of our social institutions, and efforts in the direction of social change.

The immediate impetus for this paper's questions and research suggestions is the evidence, coming from multiple reliable sources and indicators, that economic inequality is rampant and extreme. While inequality is not new in modern history, and has been a periodic phenomenon since the start of the industrial revolution (Piketty, 2014), it has become increasingly prominent and problematic in the United States. Research continues to document that the multiple consequences of economic and social inequality seriously jeopardize the health and wellbeing of persons, families, and communities. Fine (2012), referring to our current period as one of "massive inequality and sustained oppression" (p. 416), judges this to be of significant concern to psychologists. Is there, within our discipline, serious questioning of our economic system? Should we be studying and critiquing its role in the production of inequality, as we document the negative effects of such a state of affairs for human welfare?

Some critical psychologists, such as Teo (2009, p. 49), assert that our discipline has played "a role in maintaining capitalism", as well as patriarchy and colonialism. He argues that mainstream psychology "reinforces the status quo" which is "in the interest of the powerful." Parker (2007) posits that psychology serves capitalism by individualizing political phenomena, proposing false explanations of behavior, and pathologizing dissenters and anti-capitalist

activism. Consideration of alternatives to a market economy, and what that might mean for individual and community health and welfare, is certainly rare in psychology. Joravsky (2000) notes that the significance of Marxist views for psychology is seldom discussed in Western forums. Thus, for example, in a very relevant book titled "The High Price of Materialism" (Kasser, 2002), there is no citation for socialism in the index.

There are exceptions to the normative lack of interest by U.S. psychologists in alternative economic and political structures. Arfken (2013), in discussing social justice, asks us to recognize its relationship to equality, which, he argues, "can only become a reality when the structures and institutions that separate the rich from the poor lose their force" (p. 475). This, he argues further, is unlikely to occur in a market economy since capitalism is geared toward the accumulation of resources by the few who control the means of production. Another exception to the lack of interest in socialism is found in concerns raised by some in the Skinnerian behavior analysis community. Rakos (1989) raises questions about the extent to which socialism and capitalism are "compatible with the principles governing human behavior" (p. 23). His analysis compares the potency of moral incentives, presented by socialism, with the material incentives present in capitalism, as controlling stimuli in the "maintenance of productive work and social behavior" (p. 25).

Other notable efforts to consider the relevance of economic systems for psychology are those by Martin-Baro (1996) in his proposals for a liberation

psychology, and the more recent analytical contributions of critical psychology (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Fundamental to critical theory analyses are inquiries about the role of social structures and processes in maintaining inequities, as well as a commitment to studying strategies for change (McDowell & Fang, 2007). Critical psychologists focus specifically on issues of social justice, human welfare, context, and diversity. They challenge accepted propositions and interpretations of behavioral phenomena, and examine the political and social implications of psychological research, theories, and practice. Central to this agenda is the recognition that “power and interests affect our human experience” (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002, p. 5). This stands in contrast to the more usual focus in mainstream psychology on individuals as separate from their economic and socio-political contexts. The final section of this paper presents recommendations for new research directions informed by such arguments.

### **Economic Inequality**

Many readers are familiar with much of the relevant data, but they provide a necessary context for the arguments that follow. Documentation of the current inequality crisis in the United States is prevalent in our media and journals. Yet, as the situation becomes increasingly bleak, we may need to keep re-examining and re-emphasizing the drastic effects of inequality on middle-class and low-income persons and families, and to suggest new questions and research directions.

International data (cf., Leonhardt & Quealy, 2014) indicate that middle-class incomes are now higher in Canada than in the U.S., and that the poor in much of Europe earn more than the poor in the U.S. At the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile of income distribution, families in Canada and the Scandinavian countries make significantly more than U.S. families. The U.S. has fallen behind not only in income but also in literacy and numerical skills - younger persons (between 16 and 24) rank close to the bottom among rich countries. Similar data [come](#) from an international study of “livability” within 132 countries that show the U.S. in 16<sup>th</sup> place (cf. Kristof, 2014). The U.S. ranks 70<sup>th</sup> in health, 39<sup>th</sup> in basic education, and 31<sup>st</sup> in personal safety. In contrast, when increase in the percentage of income within the richest one percent is examined, the U.S. ranks first (Kripke, 2014).

A comparison of two neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland illustrates [these statistics and](#) what they mean for family health and welfare. In the affluent neighborhood of Greater Roland Park, where the median annual household income is \$90,000, life expectancy is 83 years; a few miles away in Upton/Druid Heights, where the median income is \$13,000, life expectancy is 63 years (DC by the Numbers, 2013).

In the United States, poverty is currently 15 percent nationally, and 22 percent for children. While the poor can buy a variety of [inexpensive](#) “stuff” at bargain and discount prices, they cannot afford many of the crucial services required to get out of poverty, such as child care and education (Lowrey, 2014).



It has become increasingly difficult for families to move out of poverty and for workers to leave low-wage jobs, despite the fact that, among such workers, 41 percent have had some college (Greenhouse, 2014). The average age of workers earning the minimum wage is 35, with one-third older than 40; 27 percent are parents (Bernstein, 2014).

Wages and benefits for most U. S. workers have been generally shrinking, resulting in people “working harder than ever, but still getting nowhere” (Reich, 2013). In reflecting upon this state of affairs, Blow (2014), like others, concludes: “Imbalance is built into a capitalist economy.” Thus, in 2012 the top one percent in the U.S. “took home 22 percent of the nation’s income; the top 0.1 percent, 11 percent” (Stiglitz, 2013). Stiglitz attributes the upswing in U.S. inequality to policies that decrease taxes for the rich and reduce financial sector regulations, and to underinvestment in health, education, and infrastructure. Others include, among the chief causes of today’s high level of inequality, the decline of unions with the consequent effect of “declining bargaining power of the American worker” (Carpenter, 2014, p. 23).

A recurrent problem is unemployment. This produces stresses and hardships in the form of loss of income but additionally, and significantly, is the associated loss of access to benefits and reductions in positive feelings about oneself. Belle and Bullock (2011) have summarized the major issues unemployment raises for psychologists and report the most recent relevant empirical findings. Unemployment, they note, is most likely to occur among low-

wage workers and persons of color, who also have fewer resources to help mitigate the loss of a job. “Job loss”, they conclude (p. 2) “is associated with elevated rates of mental and physical health problems, increases in mortality rates...detrimental changes in family relationships... [and] low subjective well-being.” Persons unemployed for more than six months – the long-term unemployed - experience a serious reduction in the number of interviews they are offered, with some employers explicitly indicating in job postings that unemployed applicants need not apply (cf. Downing, 2014). In addition to loss of status and loss of income, job loss also means loss of benefits, prime among them being employer-offered health insurance.

The consequences of inequality, supported by empirical research, are remarkably wide, varied, and multi-faceted. Data from many countries strongly support the conclusion that materialistic values are associated with low wellbeing (Kasser, 2002). Bezrucha (2014, p. 4) notes that “the factor most responsible for the relatively poor health in the United States is the vast and rising inequality in wealth and income that we not only tolerate, but resist changing.” He cites a 2013 U.S. Institute of Medicine report that links economic inequality to social disadvantages in diverse areas of life including infant mortality and insufficient support for parenting. With regard to education, in the United States “whether a student graduates [from college] or not seems to depend almost entirely on just one factor – how much money his or her parents make” (Tough, 2014, p. 28). Ability, as indicated by standardized test scores, is far less related to this

educational outcome than parental income. With respect to crime, across countries, a correlation of .57 is found between the homicide rate and the degree of income inequality (Raine, 2013).

Research summarized by Underwood (2014), from many parts of the world, documents the link between low status, inadequate access to resources, and poor health. Poor outcomes for patients with infectious diseases, for example, are attributed to lack of access to effective care and treatment (Farmer, 1999). A World Health Organization survey in 8 developed countries found a significant correlation between mental illness and income inequality and other markers of social disadvantage such as low education and unemployment (Pickett, 2006). A conclusion from another international report is that “People in more egalitarian societies live longer, experience less violence, have lower rates of obesity and teen pregnancy, are less likely to use illicit drugs and enjoy better mental health than their counterparts in countries with a wide divide between the rich and poor” (Weir, 2013, p. 39). [Wilkinson and Pickett \(2009\) analyzed World Bank data on the 23 richest countries and concluded that if the U.S. reduced its income inequality to the average of Japan, Finland, Sweden and Norway, the result would be drastic decreases in mental illness, obesity, and prison populations.](#)

### **Capitalism and Socialism**

[Mounting evidence supports the conclusion](#) that inequality is a correlate of a capitalist economy - in which the pursuit of profit is the dominant objective.

Capitalism denotes a system in which the means of production are privately owned, and in which economic decisions are made by the owners rather than by society, governments, or workers (Brennan, 2013; [Domhoff, 2013](#); Schweikart, 2011). Capitalism is generally defined as a system of both private property and the relatively free market exchanges of products, resources, and services (Wolff, 2013). It denotes “an economic system in which the country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit” (New Oxford Dictionary, 2005-2011). Within this system, economic power determines the allocation of resources (Wright, 2010).

Olson (2013) argues that capitalism creates artificial scarcity by the rules it enforces and that it attempts to justify these rules. With profit as the guiding objective, exploitation becomes a major feature of capitalism. Ratner (2014) notes that exploitation is rationalized as being associated with “freedom, agency, and choice” (p. 195). The dominant form of capitalism, labeled “selfish capitalism” by Oliver (2007), includes evaluations of success largely on the basis of financial return, the privatization of production and services, minimal regulations, and “the conviction that consumption and market choices can meet human needs” (p. 426). Schweikart (2011), in a critique of capitalism and an exploration of structural alternatives, argues that capitalism brings inequality, economic crises, and wars.

Moerk (1997, p. 59) contends that capitalist values emphasize competition “and success at all costs”, thus encouraging both individual and structural

violence. Structural violence will be experienced by those whose social status prevents full access to society's resources and to "the fruits of scientific and social progress." This, Olson (2013, p. 38) argues, is a consequence of the inequality "embedded in the capitalist...system's imperative of profit seeking." He argues further that capitalism not only creates such a state of affairs but also "a culture to explain and justify it." Illustrative of structural violence is the uneven way in which the justice system deals with persons at different positions within the economic structure. Taibbi (2014) presents data that reinforce conclusions about the close relationship between unequal justice system outcomes and inequalities in wealth. Such disparities are found in police procedures and in the perception, definition, prosecution and defense of crimes, with negative and aversive consequences for the poor affecting life, personal liberty, families and communities.

A dramatic example of the consequences of structural bias comes from an investigation of the extraordinary influence of affluent citizens on U.S. socioeconomic policies. Gilens and Page (2014) studied 1,779 policy issues on which opinions were surveyed between 1981 and 2002. They found little or no impact on government policies on these issues from average citizens, but substantial influence from elites and groups representing business interests. Their conclusion: "policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans" (p. 24).

Many writers (e.g. Brennan, 2013) equate capitalism with democracy and posit socialism as the antithesis of both, but capitalism and socialism refer to economic, not political, systems. The definition of socialism in the New Oxford American Dictionary (2005-2011) is that it is “a theory of social organization that advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole.” While generally associated with Marxism, socialism is a broader concept that preceded Marx (Lacerda, 2014), having been proposed in the 1830s by French Utopian Socialists.

In a socialist economy, the means of production are socially owned and the goal is for “all people to have equal access to the necessary social and material means to live flourishing lives” and “equal access to the political means to participate in decisions that affect their lives” (Wright, p. 368f). The focus here is not on the ways such a state of affairs is produced or maintained but on its generally agreed upon objectives. Thus, according to Wright and others, social and political justice is associated with socialism. LeBlanc (2014) contends that a socialist system provides for economic democracy, since economic structures and resources are controlled by ordinary people.

Rakos (1989, p. 25) posits that, in the ideal socialist society, priority is given to the general interest over those of individuals or small groups. “A central tenet of socialism is the primacy of moral incentives as substitutes for material ones as controlling stimuli in the development and maintenance of productive work and social behavior.” Marx is said to have envisioned the primary goal of

socialism to be the realization of human potential (Birnbaum, 1996); [and Bronner \(2001, p. 148\) maintains that “the ethical impulse of the socialist undertaking \[is\]...the protest against injustice.”](#)

Cohen (2009) argues that ideal socialism is a system characterized by two major principles – egalitarianism and community. The first principle is focused on justice through the removal of obstacles to opportunity so that major resources are available not just to people of privilege. “When socialist equality of opportunity prevails, differences of outcome reflect nothing but differences in taste and choice, not differences in natural and social capacities and powers” (p. 18). The second principle - community – requires that people care about and care for one another and practice communal reciprocity; “The socialist aspiration is to extend community and justice to the whole of our economic life” (p. 80f.). According to Lacerda (2014), common among various discussions of socialism are arguments against capitalism and individualism, a focus on equality and on the relationship between theory and practical and political issues. Another common and significant component of a socialist vision is that of workers who have time to grow and enjoy their lives (Schweikart, 2011).

There have been times and places in the United States when socialism was not a frightening concept. Scholars of the American Jewish urban community (Dolber, 2011; Michels, 2005) have noted that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, until about the end of the first World War, anti-capitalist sentiments were common among working-class immigrants. Leftist political discussions were frequent, and

there was a popular Yiddish socialist newspaper published in New York City, as well as a socialist radio station. “Every day (weather permitting) one could hear socialism preached on street corners and in parks” (Michels, p. 89). At that time, it was with pride that the words of Albert Einstein were repeated: “socialism” he said “is humanity’s attempt to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development” (cf. Cohen, 2009, p. 82). Later, Rev. Martin Luther King expressed his belief that only with a modified form of socialism could real equality be achieved (cf. Conner & Smith, 2014).

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a Gallup national telephone poll found that “Socialism is not a completely negative term in today’s America” (Newport, 2010, p. 5). Bill De Blasio, the current mayor of New York City, won his race by a huge majority despite the “socialist” label given him by opponents; and Pope Francis described capitalism as a new tyranny (cf. Connor & Smith, 2014). In November of 2013, Kshama Sawant, an economics professor and self-described socialist, won a seat on Seattle’s City Council. His election made national headlines. Other “out” socialists were previously “elected to city councils, mayoralities and even seats in Congress” (Nichols, 2013, p. 4). A dispassionate appraisal of American social history finds the influence of socialist ideology on such major advances as labor unions, social security, Medicare, welfare benefits, and progressive taxes (Erlanger, 2012). As this paper [was](#) being written a self-described socialist, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, [was](#)



attracting enormous crowds nation wide as he campaigned for the Democratic Party nomination for U.S. president.

### **Research Questions**

Can psychologists extend the boundaries of what we study, and raise new questions, by including attention to aspects of our economic system as a necessary context for understanding behavior? My aim in this paper is to suggest that the answer is clearly yes. What follows are suggested areas and directions for new or expanded research.

### **Beliefs About Socialism**

One might suppose that when economic inequality rises, as is the case today, attitudes toward some form of wealth redistribution (a hallmark of socialism) become more positive. But Edsall (2013) reports that, in U.S. history, support for redistribution is the exceptional response. He cites a 2008 study that found the normative response to be an increase in conservatism. He also cites a 2011 Pew Research Center poll among a large sample of voters that found that capitalism was favorably viewed by 50 percent of responders while socialism was negatively viewed by 60 percent, with Black and Hispanic respondents giving more positive responses to socialism than others. An earlier Gallup poll conducted in 2010 through telephone interviews with a representative sample of U.S. adults (Newport, 2013) reported a positive view of socialism by just 36 percent overall and a positive view of capitalism by 61 percent. “Small business”,

“free enterprise”, and “entrepreneurs” were said to promote a positive image by 95, 86, and 84 percent of responders, respectively.

It is instructive to turn to the mainstream literature in psychology to see how capitalism and socialism are framed and discussed. In the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, for example, Triandis (2000) compares collectivist with individualistic oriented societies and tells the reader that it is in the latter that “child rearing emphasizes exploration, creativity, and achievement” (p. 178). Jost, a major contributor to the psychological literature on political ideology, views such ideology in terms of a set of beliefs and values (a schema) about how society should be arranged. This belief system is said to be shared with others and to organize and motivate political behavior (Jost, 2006). Among the functions of this ideology is justifying the awareness of injustice and inequality and maintaining support for the status quo (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Yet, in an important book about political belief systems by Jost and his colleagues (Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009), socialism does not appear in the index of subjects.

Elsewhere in our literature, we find socialism grouped together with ideologies considered to be extreme - such as nationalism and religious fundamentalism (Kay & Eibach, 2013). Such ideologies are posited to be a response to crises. The authors suggest that economic crises can give rise to support for left-wing movements that promote redistribution of wealth and greater financial regulations, using as an example the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. They note the increased support in the U.S., during the depression

years of the early 1930s, for socialist parties, socialist newspapers, and labor unions, citing this to illustrate the rise of ideological extremism. Thus, socialism is framed and identified as an extreme ideology. The authors further suggest that ideologies “such as state socialism should tend to be endorsed more strongly by individuals whose belief in personal control and religious faith are chronically low” (p. 580).

In the United States, the “S” word has been used by conservative politicians and groups in descriptions and discussions of President Barack Obama. Political opponents have described (accused) President Obama as favoring “redistribution” of wealth. This idea and the word itself are meant to be toxic. In 2008, Sen. McCain, his opponent in the presidential race, referred to Mr. Obama as the “redistributor in chief” while his running mate Sarah Palin often said that Mr. Obama wanted to “spread the wealth” (Leibovich, 2009). Leading conservative voices attacked the Affordable Care Act, championed by the President, as “very much about redistribution” – a word considered to be loaded with negative connotations (Harwood, 2013). Being labeled a socialist - in favor of redistribution – may also imply that you are an atheist and in favor of “revolution, violence, and dictatorship” (Wolff, 2013). An important research question is how commonly such connotations are evoked, and how they affect the potency and magnitude of the socialist label.

In rallies across the country, some have carried signs that openly call President [Obama](#) a Socialist. A journalist reported that, in a jeering crowd in

Philadelphia prior to passage of the Affordable Care Act, one sign read “Welcome to the United States Socialist Republic” (Smerconish, 2013). It is not just at right-wing political rallies that such [assertions](#) have been paraded. On a TV show, “The Steve Malzberg Show”, [U.S. Senator](#) Rand Paul is reported to have said that President [Obama](#) is turning the country into a “socialist nightmare” (Newsmax, 2014). And in responding to an interviewer’s question (Wong, 2013), Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, said he believed the Obama administration to be socialist: “whether it’s education policy or whether it’s healthcare policy, that is, on its face, socialism.” Similarly, Senator Jim DeMint called the president “the world’s best salesman of socialism.” Former New York Governor Giuliani, in responding to feedback on his criticism of President Obama, said it was not racist to suggest that the President did not love America. What he was highlighting, he said, were the president’s beliefs in socialism or anti-colonialism (cf. Haberman & Confessore, 2015). These attempts to stigmatize President [Obama](#) are reminiscent of attacks against President Franklin Roosevelt. When he put forth a proposed economic bill of rights in 1944 (Birnbaum, 1996), [President Roosevelt](#) was referred to by opponents as “comrade” (Leibovich, 2009).

On the website <obamaism.blogspot.com> are links to Obama’s alleged ties to socialism, Marxism, and communism; 25 “Obama Fact Finding Blogs and Websites” are listed. Among other material is a poster that shows the President in front of a hammer and sickle flag that flies above the sign “United Socialist States of America.” There is also a graphic of two stick figures – the one in red

has a raised gun pointed to the head of the blue figure that is carrying a sack of money (\$). Another website <socialists.com> brings [readers](#) to other links and an array of t-shirts for sale with [negative messages about the president and his policies \(e.g. Obamacare\)](#) (cf. Flegenheimer, 2012).

[Labeling](#) President Obama with the “S” word illustrates the widely understood aversive and frightening connotations of the words and concepts “socialism” and “socialist” when describing ideas, proposed policies, and persons. We can empirically examine these connotations, their distribution among various social groups, and their relationship, for example, to other beliefs, attitudes, values, and to political party affiliation. How do those in the U.S. for whom the term socialism elicits a strong negative response respond to such social programs as social security, Medicare, and the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare)? Do the negative narratives about socialism in the U.S. have their beginnings in middle school or high school classes, earlier or later, and how are they reinforced by media or other institutions?

### **Systemic Bases of Economic and Social Inequality**

[Data from](#) social science broadly, and psychology in particular, [provide evidence about the](#) costs imposed on personal, family and community health and welfare by serious and widespread economic inequality. Many of these negative consequences have been referenced earlier in this paper. It has been proposed by some that we must consider the role played by structural factors

within a society, but rarely is this accompanied by a questioning of the economic system in which such consequences occur.

There are exceptions. For example, Ratner (2014) argues that while capitalism "is virtually never mentioned by psychologists" (p. 195), it is essential for us to study it since it has been a dominant world cultural system for centuries. Bullock and Limbert (2009, p. 224) suggest that our discipline must challenge society's dominant values. These are values associated with a commitment to capitalism. They ask: "Should people come before profits? Should equality be valued over personal gain? What price do we pay for individualism?" They note that income inequality, with its widespread and diverse effects on wellbeing, is regarded by some scholars "as a form of 'social pollution' that affects well-being across the class spectrum" by producing stresses associated with individualism and strident competition. Olson (2013) argues that capitalist societies are deficient in empathy, considered by him an essential component of the human character, and a requirement for human happiness.

Among some new research directions is investigation, among diverse social groups, of perceptions, or beliefs about the links between economic inequality, or economic hardship, and the status quo economic system. We can seek to identify, among those who perceive a direct or indirect link, and those who do not, how persons cope with inequality and what, if any personal and/or group solutions they have considered. There will be differences among those with different degrees of "acceptance" of inequality. It may be that such

differences will be related to education, geography, gender, and/or other factors.

[For example, one study \(Davidai & Gilovich, 2014\) found that a sample of low income people differed from wealthier people in believing that there was more upward mobility in the U.S., suggesting, perhaps, a desire to retain some hope in the face of adversity.](#) Another line of investigation might focus on people's

perceptions of value differences between hypothetically presented socialist and capitalist societies. To which society will be attributed such values, for example, as independence, security, creativity, cooperation, competition, democracy, respect for diversity?

### **Social Class**

Teo (2009) argues that mainstream psychology, embedded in the market economy, does not challenge the status quo, thereby reinforcing it, and supporting the interests of persons and groups who are more powerful. To this argument, Walsh and Gokani (2014) add the related observation that psychologists tend to have narrow political visions as a function of our general position of socioeconomic privilege. Does our social class position influence our research, theory, and applications? They cite as an example the fact that until recently "there has been a virtual taboo in psychology against naming and researching social-class privilege" (p. 45). Bullock and Reppond (in press, p. 6) concluded that while disparities in social class "are readily visible in daily life...in the U.S., social class tends to take a back seat to other identities." This conclusion is supported by reviews of relevant literature (e.g., Lott, 2012).

Psychology has also largely failed to recognize the role of labor unions in contributing to the health and welfare of workers and their families (Lott, 2014).

Psychology's research agenda is currently being enriched and expanded by studies of social class (see Lott & Bullock, 2007). A recent example is the work of Piff (2014) whose clever investigations are designed to test the general hypothesis that "Social class uniquely shapes people's patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions" (p. 34). In a series of studies, Piff found that more affluent persons: exhibited greater selfishness in an economic game; engaged in game behavior that was self-serving and unethical; scored higher on scales of psychological entitlement; and exhibited narcissistic behavior. Arfken (in press) argues that cognitive processes are affected by one's socioeconomic class position and experiences, and that there is a connection between political economy and psychological processes. He urges that the study of marginalized groups address the economic inequalities and challenges that support that marginalization (Arfken, 2012, 2013).

### **Social Justice and Social Change**

Our research agenda might well profit from explorations in depth of what different groups of people mean when discussing such concepts as *social justice*. Empirical studies utilizing tools like the semantic differential, and qualitative interviews, could help us to understand the parameters of a social justice perspective. What is included in this broad concept? And how do people in different social categories respond emotionally to injustice? Are such questions



asked in our social psychology classes? Are they relevant to the problems that are brought to school psychologists and clinical practitioners – to mental health workers? Can the personal experience of injustice be beneficially related to the experiences of others, and to an understanding of society's role in producing it?

Does social justice include the concept of non-*exploitation*? As suggested by Nussbaum (2008), a strand of philosophical thought holds "that it is profoundly wrong to subordinate the ends of some individuals to those of others...[which] is at the core of what exploitation is" (p. 222). If exploitation is a primary feature of capitalism, a system that provides a broad context for human behavior, what are the consequences for social relationships? Lacerda (2014) notes that a socialist agenda posits that by overcoming the exploitation of labor, alienation will subside or disappear. For Martin-Baro (1994), an important objective of psychology was to help persons and groups achieve de-alienation by gaining a critical understanding of themselves within the reality of their socio-economic-political situations. How widely within our discipline is such an objective accepted?

Parker (2007) argues that psychology "functions in the service of capitalism" (p. 202) by individualizing political phenomena. He illustrates this by proposing that psychologists tend to shift the analysis of exploitation from its social historical context "to individual choices and experiences...This", he argues, "is good news for those who prefer psychological remedies to social change....Plenty of people are alienated but say they are happy, and drug companies are then happy to step in and cheer them up" (p. 48). Arfken and Yen

(2014) remind us of our discipline's complicity in supporting a racist agenda in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its exclusion of women from theory and serious focus until the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus reinforcing oppressive social practices.

Viewing capitalism, or the current status quo, in a broad context may lead to multiple questions regarding its influence on all our institutions – family, education, law, etc. For example, in a book about the influence of inequality on the American family, Carbone and Cahn (2014) discuss wide-ranging effects of the economy on marriage and the expectations that women and men have of each other. This suggests a large number of new research questions that can be addressed empirically. How are economic circumstances, positions, and probabilities related to individual identities and interactions?

Can psychologists contribute to a discussion of the variables or factors involved in working for *social change*? The status quo is recognized as being extraordinarily difficult to change (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Weir, 2013). Such a discussion might require a consideration of the discipline's values and objectives. It would also provide a significant forum for the combining of data from research in social, personality, and community psychology and insights from educational and clinical practice. From the ample literature on beliefs about poverty (see Bullock, Williams, & Limbert, 2003; Hunt & Bullock, in press) we can predict, for example, that those who subscribe to structural explanations would be [more](#) likely to favor wealth redistribution policies than those who believe that poverty is a function of individual characteristics. How do the media in the United

States portray social change agents and their efforts? How much media attention is paid to the many projects that are successfully building and maintaining worker cooperatives (cf. Alperovitz, 2015)?

Psychology can contribute to the achievement of a just society and can promote responsible social change through the work we do - investigation of relevant factors; broad communication of empirically sound and verifiable relationships; and wide application of our findings. To this end, multiple methodologies should be employed. There is no necessary incompatibility in social science between values and empiricism. All that is required of scientific objectivity is verifiability – that methods, data, and conclusions be repeatable and open to further investigation.

Martin-Baro (1994, p. 46) raised the question of “whether psychological knowledge will be placed in the service of constructing a society where the welfare of the few (and)...the fulfillment of some does not require that others be deprived.” In considering this question, the psychological and social correlates of capitalism and socialism, as economic and cultural systems, merit discussion and evaluation. As do the beliefs and attitudes they evoke. Of theoretical and practical significance is exploration of how these relate to behaviors geared toward social change. Leonhardt (2014) argues that inequality is a *choice*, not an inevitability. Psychology can provide important and useful answers to the question of what factors influence such a choice.

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