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# What Is Social Justice? Implications for Psychology

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Given widespread interest and commitment among psychologists to promote social justice, this article takes up the question "What is social justice?" and critically examines the efforts of psychologists in its pursuit. Contemporary challenges to defining social justice are discussed as well as problems resulting from an absence of consensus regarding its meaning. It is argued that social justice only can be understood in light of its particular history. A brief historical overview of social justice is provided. This history supplies the grounds for a critical treatment of conceptions of social justice and psychological initiatives. Fraser's framework for social justice is presented as a theoretical guide for psychologists that can be defended in light of a "best account."

***Public Significance Statement***
This article investigates what social justice means and how it pertains to psychology.

*Keywords:* social justice, liberalism, neoliberalism, inequality, welfare

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There is much enthusiasm for social justice in psychology, as evidenced by increasing references to the term in psychological literature (Figure 1). However, "What is social justice?" proves surprisingly hard to answer, even for those who consider it a centerpiece of their work. The ambiguity of "social justice" has been a source of poignant criticism (Hayek, 1976), leading some to conclude, "the term may have emotive force, but no real meaning beyond that" (Miller, 1999, p. ix). Our aim is to attempt a modest contribution to explaining some of the difficulties with the meaning of "social justice" and application of the term in psychology. To this end, we explore contemporary challenges to defining social justice and problems resulting from an absence of consensus regarding its meaning. We argue that any such exploration and explanation of social justice is best conducted in light of its particular history. A brief historical overview of social justice in English-speaking Western democratic countries is provided, followed by a critical treatment of the meaning of social justice and efforts by psychologists in pursuit of its aims. We conclude by offering Fraser's framework for social justice as a theoretical guide for psychologists that can be defended in light of a "best account" (MacIntyre, 1988).

## The Confusion of Social Justice

Talk of social justice seems to be on everyone's lips these days. Once limited largely to left-leaning government parties, social workers, and labor unions, the appetite for social justice has spread to educators (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2008; Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2011), health care pro-

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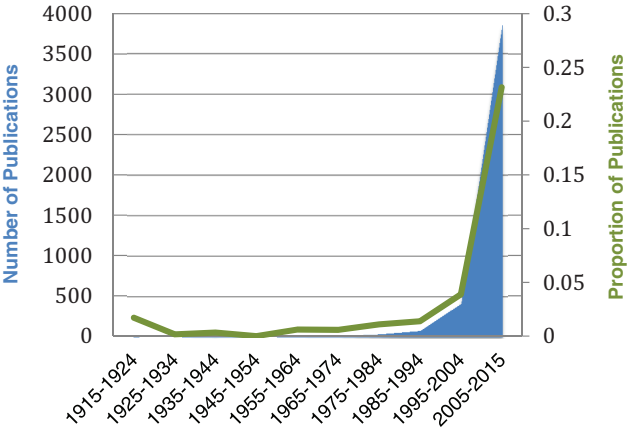


*Figure 1.* Social justice publications on *PsycINFO*. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

viders (Canadian Nurses Association, 2009; Hixon, Yamada, Farmer, & Maskarinec, 2013; Patel, 2015), faith communities, the media (Jeske, 2013; Media Alliance, n.d.; The Toronto Star, n.d.), and even businesses, through the widespread notion of corporate responsibility (Schneider, 2014). Social justice is now an international crusade, and at the behest of the United Nations in 2007, February 20th was declared the "World Day of Social Justice."

Interest in social justice is increasing exponentially in psychology. A search of the *PsycINFO* database reveals dramatic rise in the number and proportion of publications listing "social justice" as a subject (Figure 1). Psychological journals (e.g., *The Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*) and journal special issues (e.g., *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, January 2009; *Journal of Social Issues*, June 2015; *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, February 2014) are devoted to establishing a psychology of social justice. Many university psychology departments have initiated social justice labs (e.g., George Mason University, New York University, Seattle University, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, University of California Los Angeles, University of Maryland) or name social justice explicitly in their mission statements (e.g., Impression Formation Social Neuroscience Lab at the University of Chicago, The Infant and Child Mental Health Lab at York University, Intergroup Relations and Social Justice Lab at Simon Fraser University). There have been repeated calls from psychologists, including Melba Vasquez, a past president of American Psychological Association (APA), for those working in the discipline to direct their attention to issues of social justice. In her 2011 presidential address, Vasquez claimed, "Psychologists' research has led to remarkable strides forward in social justice" (as cited in Munsey, 2011, para. 1) and called for APA to "continue its longstanding commitment to social justice" (Munsey, 2011, para. 6).

Although many psychologists proclaim social justice as central to their disciplinary and professional mission, it is not at all clear what psychologists mean by "social justice" and how they contribute to its aims. The concept of social justice has received little critical treatment by psychologists. Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) noted, "community psychologists have been satisfied to operationalize one or another extant conception of social justice in their work without giving the concept of social justice itself a great deal of explicit scholarly consideration" (p. 486). It would appear not much has changed in intervening years. According to Munger, MacLeod, and Loomis (2016),

> Despite the prevalence of the term social justice, however, it remains largely undertheorized. In publications in the English language, we have not come across a community psychology book or article that presents

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> historical, contemporary, and critical perspectives of social justice . . . social justice remains insufficiently defined, operationalized, and critically examined in community psychology. (p. 172)

These quotations are not intended as a "drive-by criticism" of community psychology. Community psychologists perhaps have done more to examine social justice than any other psychological subdisciplinary group. Rather, what these remarks are meant to convey is a general absence of historical and critical analysis of social justice by psychologists. Indeed, even in a recent special issue on social justice in the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, a journal in which one might expect to find careful analysis and definition of concepts, this lack of specificity was noted by the editors:

> There is, however, what appears to be a glaring absence: What remains mostly unarticulated in each of these contributions is a positive delineation of the meanings of social justice. We are left to discern what this might be in the implied motives or ends of our contributors' particular arguments and empirical demonstrations. (Arfken & Yen, 2014, p. 11)

Confusion about the meaning of social justice is not a problem unique to psychology. As Novak (2000) noted, "whole books and treatises have been written about social justice without ever offering a definition of it. It is allowed to float in the air as if everyone will recognize an instance of it when it arises" (p. 1). This is partly due to a tendency to use the term in vague and opaque ways. But there is another problem. There currently are multiple and conflicting interpretations of social justice in circulation. For example, social justice can mean equal access to basic liberties and the fair distribution of goods and opportunities (as per Rawls, 1971, 2001). It can mean recognition of difference and elimination of oppression across institutions, including the family (as per Young, 1990). Social justice can mean achievement of a threshold level of fundamental human capabilities, the development of which is necessary for the exercise of agency (as per Nussbaum, 2011). Or, social justice can be conceived as opportunity to participate equally in social and political life (as per Fraser, 2009). Even historic foes of social justice, such as proponents of classical liberalism, now have a version of social justice that fits with free enterprise and a limited state. For example, according to Anderson (2017b), social justice depends on state actions that "make markets work better and work for more people by empowering more people to be market actors—empower more people to take control of their own lives and flourish" (para. 26). What these varied conceptions demonstrate is that the confusion is not just the result of insufficient specificity or a lack of theorizing. A further problem is that there is no consensus regarding the best way of defining social justice.

Conceptual pluralism is not necessarily problematic. But, in the case of social justice, the confusion it provokes can have practical and sociopolitical consequences. Historically, the term contributed a discursive space in which individuals could "talk back to the state, to make claims as citizens who had been actively denied its promise of social justice, and to mandate the state to regulate and ameliorate structural assaults on individual and collective well-being" (Brodie, 2007, p. 99). If the term has no clear meaning and force, this discursive space is lost. As well, it is very difficult to know how to evaluate social justice projects absent agreement over meaning of the term. This issue recently has been highlighted in psychology. Leong, Pickren, and Vasquez (2017) observed that the effectiveness of social justice initiatives in the APA is uncertain, at best, and recommended that all future efforts incorporate an evaluative component in their plan. However, evaluation depends on clarity of purpose that, in turn, depends on a clear understanding of key concepts, such as social justice. Without clarity as to the meaning of social justice, we are no further ahead.

Finally, although there has been an increase in social justice rhetoric over the past few decades, this rise has been accompanied by declining substantive political support for social justice, historically understood to be operationalized by state-sponsored social welfare initiatives that correct for inequities produced by capitalism (Brodie, 2007; Schneider, 2014; United Nations, 2006). A treatise on international social justice commissioned by a United Nations subcommittee in 2006 identified a worldwide dwindling of political commitment in aid of social justice policies and practices.

The decline of political commitment to social justice programs has been consequential for many individuals. Income inequality has increased over the past 30 years and currently is at

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a level not seen since 1928 (Desilver, 2013); employment security has decreased (Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010); anxiety and depression have reached epidemic proportions (Henderson & Zimbardo, 2008, shyness and technology section, para. 5); homelessness in the United States and Canada has been declared a national emergency (Hwang, 2010; Murray, 2016); and the abolishment of state affordable housing policies has meant that young people in many major North American metropolitan centers will be unable to own a home (Kershaw & Minh, 2016). "Precarity," the condition of living without security or predictability in necessities of life, including employment and housing, has become a reality for many in the past 30 years, with both material and psychological consequences (Bourdieu, 1997/1998). Those whose participation in the market is attenuated for any number of reasons (e.g., children, caregivers, adults with limited employability, those who live in urban areas mired in poverty or in rural areas with few employment options) have suffered the worst consequences of the withdrawal of state support for social welfare programs and policies (Fraser & Bedford, 2008; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Smith, 2010; Wacquant, 2008).

In sum, confusion over the meaning of social justice has implications for psychologists interested in pursuing this aim, but also has broader political, social, and economic consequences. It is difficult to defend programs, policies, and political agendas founded on a commitment to social justice when the meaning of the term is uncertain.

## The Need for a Normative Conception of Social Justice

In light of these problems, there have been calls for a normative conception of social justice that can warrant varied initiatives pursued in its name (Arfken, 2012; Fraser, 2009; Nussbaum, 1992, 2011). However, given the multiple ways social justice currently is conceptualized, how can consensus be achieved? Justice is embedded in particular traditions of thought and practice, and there is no neutral or objective standard independent of tradition against which to gauge our conceptions or evaluations (MacIntyre, 1988). Within the liberal tradition of thinking, the predominant tradition in Western contexts at this point in history, the options available appear to be "relativism" or "perspectivism" (MacIntyre, 1988), both of which license a proliferation of conceptions of social justice, in turn, promoting even more conceptual confusion.

An approach to this dilemma, according to MacIntyre (1977, 1988), is to be found by taking seriously the contextual and historical embeddedness of social justice. MacIntyre's counsel is that we should not seek a timeless, definitive conception of justice. Rather, our aim should be a "best account" that explains the phenomenon in light of its unique historical development, having reached this point in time, in a particular context, and that is able to address contemporary challenges that confound other accounts. A best account should be able to "narrate how the argument has gone so far" (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 8), and resolve problems that render other explanations incoherent or unworkable. Therefore, we are best placed to answer the question "What is social justice?" by examining the concept as it has been formulated variously over the course of history. Not only will an understanding of the emergence and development of social justice help explain its current polysemy, it is also the basis on which a best account of social justice can be defended.

## A Brief History of Social Justice

An exhaustive historical review of social justice is beyond the scope of this article. The term has had widespread appeal and been adopted across international boundaries and opposing ideologies (e.g., social justice is invoked by Marxists, Catholics, secular humanists, and neoliberals). For the sake of brevity, we focus only on emergence of the term in English-speaking Western democracies, with full acknowledgment that this omits significant historical events (e.g., the promotion of social justice within the United Nations by the Soviet Union, United Nations, 2006). The development of social justice in the West is intertwined with the development of liberalism. Liberalism is not immune to criticism, and there are certain disadvantages to viewing social justice through a liberal lens (not least, the challenge this tradition presents to the defense of social justice, as discussed previously). However, what we hope to elucidate are complexities of thought within the liberal tradition that bear on interpreting social justice. Social justice emerged at a point

in history where liberalism emphasized the common good alongside individual freedom. Recovery of this layer of liberal thought might helpfully counteract the present tendency to consider individual liberty to be in opposition to state intervention and regulation.

## Beginnings

The term "social justice" entered the English language in the 19th century, most often as a synonym of distributive justice. One of the first usages is attributed to John Stuart Mill. In a passage from *Utilitarianism*, Mill (1863) made passing reference to social justice in connection with distributive justice:

> society should treat equally well all who have deserved equally well *of it* – that is, who have deserved equally well *period*. This is the highest abstract standard of social and distributive justice. All institutions and the efforts of all virtuous citizens should be made to converge on this standard as far as possible. (p. 42, italics in original)

Although the term received only brief mention by Mill, and it would take another 50 years for it to become part of political parlance, some ideas conveyed in this passage are prescient of the way social justice came to be popularly understood in the 20th century. For example, equality in the treatment of individuals by society and the applicability of the standard of social justice to both individuals and institutions are alluded to in Mill's writing and were later to become core features of social justice (Fleischacker, 2004). These ideas, however, do not have their origin with Mill. To understand their roots, we must look farther back in history.

In the 18th century, social inequality that previously would have been considered unproblematic or, if a problem, one that was best addressed by acts of charity, came to be seen as an intolerable state of affairs requiring drastic action, even revolution. Numerous Enlightenment figures, including John Locke, Voltaire, J. J. Rousseau, Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, Antoine-Nicolas Condorcet, and Gracchus Babeuf, promoted this shift. They argued for various forms of equality and reinterpreted poverty as a circumstance that could befall anyone, and not as an outcome of sin, bad character, or bad choices (Fleischacker, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Raphael, 2001). Together, these thinkers laid the groundwork for considering inequality as an egregious form of injustice that was at least partly the fault of social and political structures. In so doing, they linked economic and social inequality to the morally laden discourse of justice, as exemplified in the following passage from Paine's (1795/1999), *Agrarian Justice*:

> It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for. The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it. The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together. . . . There are, in every country, some magnificent charities, established by individuals. It is, however, but little that any individual can do, when the whole extent of the misery to be relieved is considered. He may give all that he has, and that all will relieve but little. It is only by organizing civilization upon such principles as to act like a system of pullies, that the whole weight of misery can be removed. . . . it is justice, and not charity, that is the principle of the plan. In all great cases it is necessary to have a principle more universally active than charity; and, with respect to justice, it ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not. Considering then, the plan on the ground of justice, it ought to be the act of the whole, growing spontaneously out of the principles of the revolution, and the reputation of it ought to be national and not individual. (pp. 15–16)

The 18th-century American and French revolutions provided impetus to reimagine institutions, hierarchies, laws, and conventions that previously had seemed immutable. Reformist thinkers, such as Wollstonecraft, Condorcet, Paine, and others collectively proposed radical institutional changes intended to reduce social and economic inequality and increase political representation (Paine, 1795/1999; Williams, 2004; Wollstonecraft, 1792/2009). Although many of these structural changes were not implemented, the overarching tradition of thought that informed the economic and political structures of Western democracies did change. Liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom, limited and accountable government, and belief in individual rationality became the dominant orientation to sociopolitical and economic life (Freeden, 2015; MacIntyre, 1988).

## A New Way of Thinking About Freedom

Social and economic disparity continued into the 19th century. Following the revolutions, the primary threats to individual freedom were considered to be arbitrary state power and feudal

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economic structure. Representative government and free market capitalism were implemented as solutions. These political and economic changes provided enhanced opportunities for some. However, many still suffered. By mid-19th century, the deleterious effects of industrialization, urbanization, and other excesses of classical liberalism were becoming apparent. Poverty was widespread, and class disparities were increasing, as Marx and Engels (1848/2010) observed. Communism presented one alternative; socialism another (see Marx & Engels, 1848/2010, for a discussion of the differences between communism and socialism). However, both seemingly required a compromise of individual freedom, an ideal with a firm hold on the modern social imaginary (Taylor, 2004). Even the most reform-minded politicians were reluctant to support increased state interference for fear of treading on individual freedoms.

John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hill Green were instrumental in resolving the apparent dilemma regarding political intervention and individual freedom. Both were liberals and staunch advocates of personal liberty. However, they also were reformists deeply concerned with the plight of the poor and working classes and supported progressive state interventions and regulations benefitting these groups. Mill and Green argued that the actions of the state were not necessarily opposed to individual freedom. In some areas, such as education, labor regulations, and public health, state intervention provided conditions in which greater individual freedom could be secured. For Green, freedom was not just the absence of constraint. It was an inherent human potentiality that only could be brought to fruition by one's embeddedness in a supportive community. The common goods of a liberal society were provision of conditions enabling each individual to develop capacities necessary for freedom (and here both Mill and Green considered education to be key) and political and economic conditions making the exercise of such freedom possible (with limitations, the discernment and addressing of which was an ongoing task for every society to work out). Thus, freedom depended on one's committed participation in a society and was not something to be achieved independently and in opposition to the state. Legislation was not necessarily opposed to individual freedom. Laws could, and should, be used to sustain it (Green, 1881/1911; Mill, 1859/2001, 1873/2003).

The works of Mill and Green offered a vision that reconciled two ideals—individual freedom and state intervention—that previously had been deemed antithetical by liberals and, in so doing, changed the political landscape. Now state action and human freedom could be viewed as "forces working in the same direction" (Wempe, 2004, p. 227), a shift that was influential in the development of a new strand in liberal thought (called New Liberalism in Britain and Social Liberalism in North America) that emphasized sociability and the general interest alongside liberal principles of individual freedom, rationality, progress, and limited and accountable government (Freeden, 2015). This new liberal faction changed the role of the state. Now government was to be interventionist in creating the conditions necessary for individual freedom. This was its ethical imperative.

The state's moral responsibility to eradicate injustice and inequality came to be known as "social justice," owing largely to the theorizing of L. T. Hobhouse, a philosopher and New Liberal politician. In his book, *The Elements of Social Justice*, Hobhouse (1922) grappled with the question of how individual happiness and liberty could be advanced without the dissolution of a cohesive social order. The achievement of this type of social order required three types of state action: first, support for education that would help individuals become self-determining; second, legislation to promote conditions of material equality that were necessary for freedom in interactions between individuals; and third, developing and enforcing a system of individual rights. Hobhouse argued that rights should be understood as originating in the social order. The tendency to consider rights as before society, as in the doctrine of "natural rights," he alleged, contributed to an unhealthy individualism in society. However, in spite of this critique, Hobhouse was a staunch advocate of a system of rights, arguing that rights were necessary for the achievement of individual freedom, the underlying common good of liberal society. The harmony between individual and collective interests that would follow state interventions (as described previously) was social justice. The effect of transposing a political vision into the language of justice was not lost

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on Hobhouse (1922), who wrote, "Justice is a name to which every knee will bow" (p. 104).

## Institutionalization of Social Justice

In the wake of the horrors of World War I, the economic collapse of 1929, and the ensuing depression, social justice emerged in the 1930s as a viable remedy for social and political conditions and was popularized widely. For example, Pope Pius XI (1931) extolled the virtues of social justice in his encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*. Pius called on state institutions to be accountable to the aim of social justice and play a role in correcting economic injustices wrought by the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism:

> it is most necessary that economic life be again subjected to and governed by a true and effective directing principle. . . . Loftier and nobler principles—social justice and social charity—must, therefore, be sought . . . Hence, the institutions themselves of peoples and, particularly those of all social life, ought to be penetrated with this justice, and it is most necessary that it be truly effective, that is, establish a juridical and social order which will, as it were, give form and shape to all economic life. (para. 88)

Pius's declarations gave social justice moral credence and helped establish it as a central tenet of Catholic theology, an influence that migrated to other faith communities.

The election of politicians sympathetic to the vision of New/Social Liberalism further popularized the idea of social justice. For example, in a campaign speech in 1932, F. D. Roosevelt contrasted social justice with trickle-down economics and laissez-faire capitalism. Unlike the latter, Roosevelt explained, social justice was a "theory" that was progressive, compassionate, aligned with science, and supported by religious leaders. The overall aim of social justice was to help people and communities become self-sufficient without requiring those communities that had suffered the most to be tasked with the overwhelming burden of helping the disenfranchised. Roosevelt ended his speech with a call to the American people to choose social justice, a call etched in stone in the FDR memorial in Washington, DC:

> And so, in these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must and shall choose the path of social justice—the only path that will lead us to a permanent bettering of our civilization, the path that our children must tread and their children must tread, the path of faith, the path of hope and the path of love toward our fellow man. (Roosevelt, 1932, para. 44)

Social justice was institutionalized in many Western democratic countries following World War II. Guided by Keynesian economics, states regulated the market and industry, played an active role in the management and dissemination of social goods through the welfare state, and promised citizens equality, social security, and a certain level of material provision. In this period, social justice was conceived primarily as an issue of fair distribution, with a focus on the redistribution of basic goods and opportunities to correct for the excesses, and reduce the risks, of capitalism.

This conception of social justice is reflected in Rawls's (1971) publication A Theory of Justice. Rawls's view is based on two principles: First, that all individuals should have equal access to basic liberties (e.g., freedom of thought, liberty of conscience, political representation) and, second, differences in the distribution of basic goods only are permitted if they are to the benefit of the least advantaged citizens (Rawls, 2001). These principles were interpreted by Rawls to supply the greatest justice for all and garner the broadest appeal given divergent and competing doctrines (as one expects to find in a multicultural democracy). Rawls claimed that these principles are those most likely to be chosen by rational and fair-minded individuals based on the results of a thought experiment. Individuals would choose principles of distribution from behind a "veil of ignorance," a veil that would mask any and all determining features and characteristics of individuals to themselves, putting them in what Rawls called "the original position." In this position, individuals would be motivated to choose the principles fairest to all and not just those that would benefit themselves or their loved ones, Rawls reasoned.

Rawls's account attracted much attention and proved extremely influential, so much so that Nozick (1974) proclaimed, "Political philosophers must now either work within Rawls' theory or explain why not" (p. 183). One reason for the import of Rawls's view was its familiarity. The principles he articulated were those that had been implicitly guiding institutionalized social justice practices for decades (Fleischacker, 2004).

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Interestingly, what the term *social justice* was not used to describe in midcentury America, was brewing movements addressed at racial and gender injustice. For example, we can find no evidence that Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, or Betty Friedan, early leaders of the civil rights movement, the Black power movement, and the feminist movement, respectively, appealed to the concept of social justice either to describe or justify their actions or to gather support for their causes (Friedan, 1963; King, 1957, 1963, 1964, 1968; Malcolm X, 1964). The lack of reference to social justice by these leaders may be surprising to contemporary readers who, like us, have come to see these movements as epitomizing social justice. However, what this absence reveals is how the meaning and application of mid-20th century social justice has evolved. At that point in history, the "Keynesian–Westphalian" framework oriented interpretations of social justice (Fraser, 2009). As a result, social justice was viewed as the just distribution of material goods and power among eligible persons in a nation state. Conceived in this fashion, social justice was invoked to elucidate injustices experienced by members of some groups. However, there were entire segments of the population whose injustices remained invisible.

## A Turning Point for Social Justice

The 1970s was a turning point for social justice. As the limitations of the Keynesian–Westphalian framework became increasingly apparent, the normative concept of social justice was contested. The principles Rawls described and practices based on them were challenged, leading to a host of alternative conceptions of social justice (Hooks, 1981; Nozick, 1974; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Okin, 1989; Sen, 2009; Walzer, 1983; Young, 1990). A reoccurring critique of Rawls's account was that his view was too narrow in scope. Many, such as Young (1990), objected that the dominant distributive paradigm of social justice excluded nonmaterial goods, such as recognition of difference and characteristics of institutionally imposed processes and functions (e.g., dynamics within the family), perpetrating injustice and inequality. A fair distribution of material goods is important. But, just as important, Young argued, is the politics of recognition and identity.

As Fraser (2000) recounted, "[i]n the seventies and eighties, struggles for the 'recognition of difference' seemed charged with emancipatory promise. . . . [which, it was anticipated, would] bring a richer, lateral dimension to battles over the redistribution of wealth and power" (p. 107). By the end of the century, claims of injustice were framed increasingly in terms of recognition. Making recognition a feature of social justice had some positive effects. For one, widening the concept enabled a broader spectrum of society to appeal to social justice in seeking redress for injustices they experienced. As well, increased focus on issues of identity and recognition made justice movements cognizant of voices that were being passed over within their own ranks (Thompson, 2002).

However, the emphasis on recognition was not entirely positive. The importance given to recognition and identity displaced concern over economic disparities and diverted attention from the erosion of social welfare programs and policies and growing inequality that occurred in the same period (Fraser, 2000; McNay, 2008). The postwar version of social justice needed to be amended to account for previously unrecognized variants of injustice. However, the effect of broadening the term's application has been loss of a normative conception of social justice (Fraser, 2009). Social justice is now a highly complex concept the meaning of which is being disputed on multiple fronts. Debated are the goods of social justice (e.g., material goods, recognition, representation), the individuals and groups to whom social justice is owed (e.g., individuals who are citizens of a nation state, all human beings, cultural groups, the family unit, any social group requiring distinct membership), and how and by whom decisions regarding distribution and meaning are to be made. This welter of issues has presented difficulty in adjudicating claims of social justice. For instance, how does one weigh the claims of cultural and religious freedom against those of gender discrimination, or economic inequality against cultural misrecognition?

A second occurrence, also with its beginnings in the 1970s, has had a profound effect on social justice: the rise of neoliberalism. Fundamental to neoliberal ideology is a radically free market in which competition is unrestricted, free trade achieved by the dismantling of tariffs and elimination of capital control, diminished state re-

sponsibility over areas of social welfare, and the privatization of public assets and human services. As neoliberal ideology has ascended, corporate interests have flourished, and state-provided services, such as education, health care, and social assistance increasingly have been subject to funding cuts and often are outsourced to private corporations (Brodie, 2007; Schneider, 2014).

The ideological transformation that occurred during the 1970s, as neoliberal ideology replaced Keynesian-inspired social liberalism as the dominant political paradigm in Western democracies, was the result of coalescing forces. Academics reframed human freedom as the absence of state restraint and interference (Friedman, 1962/2002; Hayek, 1976; Nozick, 1974), and corporate lobbyists popularized this idea through media briefs and articles (Smith, 2014). Shifting the climate of opinion toward neoliberalism by "capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state" (Harvey, 2005, p. 42) worked to "pave the way for the election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States" (Friedman, 1962/2002, p. vii). Reagan's and Thatcher's policies were key in the ensuing neoliberalization of Western democratic nations and other states.

The entrenchment of neoliberalism through the 1980s and 1990s, the result of increasingly aligned priorities of large transnational corporations, elected state governments, and Bretton Woods organizations, had a devastating effect on the social welfare systems of many countries that had been built up under the auspices of social justice. Taxation policies were revised to implement "trickle down economics," state regulations that limited the power of capital were revoked, and government programs aimed at the redistribution of wealth and influence, such as those concerned with education, health care, childcare, and welfare, were marketized and privatized, if not eliminated (Brodie, 2007; Harvey, 2005).

Despite the rise of neoliberal ideology over the past 4 decades and, with it, the steady undermining of welfarist programs and policies, the term "social justice" continues to have widespread appeal (Chazan & Madokoro, 2012). In fact, 40 years after Hayek's (1976) blistering attack on social justice, in which he wrote, "the greatest service I can still render to my fellow men would be that I could make the speakers and writers among them thoroughly ashamed ever again to employ the term 'social justice'" (p. 97), there is now a distinct neoliberal version of social justice. Given a neoliberal twist, social justice becomes an individual virtue enacted through choice and facilitated by a market that proliferates the choices one can make. In this view, social justice is "responsible" action by individuals in caring for themselves and their families and private acts of charity to address the consequences of poverty. The role of the state is to create markets, extending market rationality to services previously under state control and not considered commodifiable (e.g., education, health care; Anderson, 2017a, 2017b; Burke, 2011; Messmore, 2010a, 2010b; Novak, 2009; Novak & Adams, 2015). As Brodie (2007) describes neoliberal social justice,

> brackets out the influence of structure and systemic barriers to citizen equality and social justice, revolving, instead, around the primacy of individual choices and open systems that empower people to make their own choices about how they will live their own lives. (p. 103)

The multiple ways social justice has been conceptualized over the past 40 years and, particularly, the diversity of views that have emerged in the past decade, have made it a "cultural keyword" (Williams, 1985), that is to say, a term the meaning of which is contested as part of a larger political debate. Although social justice has roots in the tradition of social liberalism and originally was used to provide justification for state regulations and interventions central to this liberal ideology, the term has transcended its origins and is now at the nexus of a struggle among different political factions. As Fraser and Gordon (1994) describe, "[k]eywords typically carry unspoken assumptions and connotations that can powerfully influence the discourses they permeate—in part by constituting a body of doxa, or taken-for-granted commonsense belief that escapes critical scrutiny" (p. 310). This is the case with "social justice," a term that is freighted with political implications and, as a keyword, is used in a variety of conflicting ways to legitimate and promote the ideologies it has been appropriated to serve.

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## Social Justice: A "Best Account"

Recognizing social justice's status as a "cultural keyword" (Williams, 1985) helps makes sense of its multiple meanings and rising popularity. However, this awareness does not help establish the term's critical purchase, nor does it help psychologists (or others) understand how their actions might fit with aspirations of social justice. As discussed earlier, a potential solution to these problems is to identify a best account of social justice (MacIntyre, 1988). There is no reason to assume or require stasis in the conceptualization of a phenomenon such as social justice and, indeed, the multiple theories developed in the past few decades have helped move interpretations of the concept past limitations of the Keynesian–Westphalian framework (Fraser, 2009). However, not all current views of social justice are equally capable of (a) explaining the historicity of the concept and making sense of shifts in meaning that have transpired or (b) resolving contemporary challenges (e.g., How can the complexity of social justice be recognized without the dissolution of normativity? How can social justice be used to combat growing global injustices?).

In light of these two criteria for rendering a best account of social justice, some conceptualizations can be discounted. First, the history of social justice points to the necessity of understanding its complex and multifaceted nature. Therefore, any accounts of social justice that are overly narrow (e.g., attending only to the redistribution of material goods or to identity politics) cannot adequately represent the concept. Second, some accounts deviate so far from historical origins and meanings as to demand a different term. For example, neoliberal notions of social justice are antithetical to ideas that originally inspired the term and endowed it with meaning for most of the 20th century. Concepts can be reinterpreted over time. However, in this case, such a severe break with historical meaning is more likely opportunistic coopting of the term than a shift legitimately warranted by judicious conceptual analysis. Third, globalization has resulted in new problems of social justice. For example, conceptions of social justice as an issue to be resolved only among citizens of a nation state are not well placed to recognize or redress global injustices, such as those committed by transnational corporations. If social justice is to continue to be a relevant concept, it must be applicable to injustices that transcend national boundaries.

## Psychology and Social Justice

Psychological theories, research, and interventions align more readily with some conceptualizations of social justice than others. For example, the focus on identity in psychology favors conceptions of social justice that emphasize identity politics (i.e., accounts of social justice that make recognition the central good on which all other goods are contingent). Recognition is an important issue for social justice. But it is not the only issue and, arguably, not the most important issue (Fraser, 2009). As Arfken (2013) has alleged, when psychological theories frame social justice primarily as an issue of identity, the inherent inequities of a capitalist economic order are obscured.

Further, and perhaps even more problematic, is the susceptibility of psychologists to become complicit with the neoliberal version of social justice. Neoliberalism and mainstream psychology share a tendency to cast social and political issues as individual problems. Psychological explanations often have diverted attention from social, political, and cultural injustices and, in so doing, at least deflected, if not prevented, individuals from political participation (Pfister, 1999). For instance, the suffering of women by their subjugation was explained as hysteria, racial discrimination was disguised by attributing a lack of intelligence to individuals of particular races, homosexuality was classified as mental illness, families of non-Western cultures were characterized as "enmeshed," and the effect of child poverty on academic achievement is blamed on a lack of self-regulation, self-efficacy, or self-esteem of individual students. Psychologists' endorsement of social justice may not only disguise the social and political sources of many mental health problems, but also, further bolster the neoliberal ideal of individuals as self-responsible, competitive, enterprising, risk-seeking, adaptable individuals, who bear sole responsibility for their circumstances, who do not require or even eschew government support, and whose freedom is manifested by their capacity for choice (Sugarman, 2015).

Neoliberal ideology is based on an image of persons as autonomous actors, capable of

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choosing rationally in ways that will achieve their self-chosen ends. It has become axiomatic that more choice equals more personal freedom and difficult to fathom how our choices can be determined by anything other than our own self-initiated desires and deliberations (Sugarman, 2015). Many of the life choices we now are compelled to make are the consequence of reduced government services that transfers the burden of risk from the state to individuals. There has always been an element of risk and uncertainty in human affairs. However, in the climate of neoliberalism, risk and uncertainty have become so much a part of daily life that there is little to distinguish those who pursue risk intentionally from the rest of us as we ruminate over perils of personal health costs, care and education of our children, security of employment and income—given erosion of worker protections and downward pressure on wages—, achievability of retirement, and the looming of old age.

Taken together, the emphasis on choice, demand that citizens be self-reliant, increased risk, and expectation that we be adept at forecasting it, stigmatizes failure as self-failure for which one is him- or herself solely culpable. If an individual fails to plan appropriately or access the right service at the right time and, as a result, ends up without adequate health coverage, funds for his or her child's college education, life or disability insurance, or is destitute in old age, he or her has no one to blame but him- or herself. However, individuals' predicaments cannot simply be chalked up to a failing of individual choice and often have to do with access to opportunities, how opportunities are made available, the capacity to take advantage of opportunities offered, and a host of factors regarding personal histories and the vicissitudes of lives. Neoliberalism forces individuals to look for individual solutions to what are arguably social problems (Brodie, 2007). And, individuals have gone along with this, for the most part, because neoliberalism, with the help of psychology, has transformed the self-understanding of citizens to suit its agenda: The neoliberal person is an autonomous, rational, enterprising, goal-directed chooser who is responsible for his or her own successes and failures (Sugarman, 2015). As people have come to understand themselves in this way, neoliberalism seems unproblematic and common sense.

It is difficult to dispute that the individualization of social and political problems and the conflation of freedom with choice have benefitted psychologists and psychological associations. Psychology is embedded in the market economy (Teo, 2009). Psychologists are those deemed expert in the treatment of individual psychological problems. The more problems framed in terms of the individual, the more psychological services needed. Consequently, there may be little professional or economic incentive for psychologists to conceptualize personal difficulties other than in terms of the individual. Psychologists have been highly successful in expanding their market base as the jurisdiction of their authority has widened steadily. There has been tremendous growth in the number diagnoses for which psychological services are required (Mayes & Horwitz, 2005). With the introduction of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, in American Psychiatric Association, 2013, lowered diagnostic thresholds, and the addition of new "subthreshold" disorders have so loosened the criteria for diagnoses it is said that 46.4% of the U.S. population will have a diagnosable mental illness during their lifetimes (Rosenberg, 2013). Not only does expansion of diagnoses represent financial gain for those currently delivering psychological services, but psychology also stands to profit from the training of increasing numbers of helping professionals who will be required to meet the demand for services and by developing new technologies of treatment.

However, psychologists have not limited themselves to the treatment of mental ailments and have ventured significantly into the enhancement of normal functioning. Positive psychology, dubbed "the science of happiness," has arisen to become a multibillion dollar field of research and intervention, commanding attention both within and outside of psychology (Binkley, 2013). Positive psychology is well matched to the neoliberal agenda. As its progenitors Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated their aim, this "new science of strength and resilience" will help us acquire the skills to become better "decision makers with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious . . . stronger and more productive" (p. 8). If social justice is being reenvisioned through neoliberalism as largely a

matter of adding to the number of service choices available to consumers, positive psychologists are well primed to step in and help people develop the requisite skills to make strategic choices and take care of themselves in a world that has become increasingly choice laden and fraught with risk.

## Fraser's Framework of Social Justice

In light of the foregoing, how should psychologists comprehend social justice? Fraser's framework for social justice, outlined in her 2009 book, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, meets the criteria of a best account by building on the historical legacy of social justice to address some of its contemporary conceptual challenges. Among the contemporary challenges Fraser detects is that "as public debates about justice proliferate, they increasingly lack the structured character of normal discourse" (p. 49). There is no agreement as to whom social justice claims apply (e.g., groups, communities, individuals), how social justice claims should be addressed (e.g., within a territorial state or by a transnational institution), or the scope of social justice claims (e.g., economics, culture, and/or politics). The absence of a coherent framework makes it difficult to resolve competing social justice claims. Further, as Fraser asserts, attending to injustices only on domestic fronts fails to address oppressive and exploitative transgressions perpetrated by transnational structures and organizations. Fraser's framework is intended to restore normativity to social justice discourse without diminishing the reach of its application and to extend the relevance of social justice to global contexts.

Fraser (2009) argues that to address these issues, the entire frame of social justice needs to be transformed. Thus, she proposes three principles that together provide answers to what she discerns as fundamental questions: "*What* is the good of social justice?" (principle of participational parity), "*Who* is owed social justice?" (all-affected principle), and "*How* are we to make decisions related to all aspects of social justice?" (all-subjected principle).

According to Fraser (2009), the overarching good of social justice is the ability to participate equally in social and political life. She recognizes that injustices can occur in different areas (e.g., redistribution, recognition, representation). However, for the sake of normativity, Fraser submits that all injustices be considered violations of a single principle that she terms *the principle of participatory parity*. As Fraser describes, this principle "overarches the three dimensions and serves to make them commensurable" (p. 60). Thus, all claims of social injustice are evaluated in terms of their effect on a person's ability to participate socially and politically on equal grounds with their peers. The effects of institutional structures can be assessed based on this principle.

The all-affected principle is used to determine who is due social justice and who is eligible to make a claim of injustice. As Fraser (2009) explains

> The all-affected principle holds that all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it. On this view, what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is not geographical proximity, but their coimbrication in a common structural or institution interaction, thereby shaping their respective life possibilities in patterns of advantage and disadvantage. (p. 24)

Globalization means that we can no longer assume that citizenship is a proxy for those affected. Rather than basing social justice on citizenship, those who are owed justice are those affected by institutional structures. For example, the actions of a transnational corporation might adversely affect individuals across several countries. If this is the case, all of those affected, irrespective of their nationality, ought to be able to claim injustice and equally seek redress.

If social justice is no longer conceived as a matter to be resolved among citizens of a nation state, how are claims to be addressed? Historically, the opinion of the public has been instrumental in the enforcement of social justice. Representative government grants power to elected or appointed officials who are accountable to public opinion. But who gets to be part of "the public?" To date, what is meant by "the public," has "tacitly assumed the frame of a bounded political community with its own territorial state" (Fraser, 2009, p. 77). However, political systems with this premise cannot address injustices that transcend national borders. Transnational institutions have gained power through their expanded global reach. At the

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same time, the power of the public sphere to mobilize politically has been diminished as a result of globalization. If social justice is to continue to function as a concept that provides individuals and social groups with the warrant to hold powerful institutions to account, the parameters of the "public" need to be transformed. Fraser (2009) proposes the all-subjected principle as a solution:

> the all-subjected principle holds that what turns a collection of people into fellow members of a public is not shared citizenship, or coimbrication in a causal matrix, but rather their joint subjection to a structure of governance that set the ground rules for their interaction. For any given problem, accordingly, the relevant public should match the reach of the governance structure that regulates the relevant swath of social interaction. Where such structures transgress the borders of states, the corresponding public spheres must be transnational. Failing that, the opinion that they generate cannot be considered legitimate. (p. 96)

However, a reconfigured public sphere is only part of the solution. This principle also requires reimagining governance structures that can gather, empower, and enforce public opinion across national boundaries. An appropriately expanded public sphere requires, in Fraser's words, "new transnational public powers, which can be made accountable to new democratic transnational circuits of public opinion" (p. 99).

## Implications for Psychology

In light of the principle of participational parity, the key question for psychologists pursuing social justice becomes: How does psychological theorizing, research, or interventions help create social, cultural, political, and economic arrangements that permit individuals to participate on an equal level with their peers? The all-affected and all-subjected principles can be used to guide and assess psychological advocacy efforts. Disciplinary and professional psychology is highly influential in contemporary society. Psychologists, by virtue of the power they hold, can join their voices with others to become part of and bolster the public sphere to which individuals and organizations must be held to account, not only for national, but also, international concerns.

Fraser's (2009) framework emphasizes structural factors that permit equal participation, countering the pervasive tendency of psychologists to "individualize" and "psychologize" problems and issues that are sociopolitical or economic in origin. A widespread error in psychology is that failing to recognize the constitutive force of our sociopolitical and economic institutions has led to fixing features of persons to human nature rather than to the institutions within which they become persons (Sugarman, 2014). This error perpetuates the interpretation of social justice in individual terms, aligning psychologists with the neoliberal agenda. Nevertheless, there is potential for psychologists to contribute to understanding and advancing social justice by identifying the effects of inequalities on the psychology of individuals' actions, experience, and development. Social inequalities constitute individual differences, even at the most elemental subjective and embodied levels (Bourdieu, 1988). The effects of sociopolitical institutions on the psychology of individuals typically are not addressed by political philosophies, including Fraser's (2009). However, to connect individuals' experiences to broader structural configurations, psychologists must recognize the significance of history, politics, economics, society, and culture for individual psychological life. Further, psychologists must be wary of individualizing and psychologizing sociopolitical and economic issues, and limiting their advocacy narrowly to promoting increased access to psychological services (Arfken, 2013). As Arfken argues if psychologists are to serve the interests of social justice, they cannot take their responsibility simply as helping individuals manage their anxiety in an unjust economic order. Psychological services that merely help individuals adjust to circumstances of poverty and inequality, without doing anything to change these conditions, is a disservice to social justice. It perpetuates the role of psychologists as "architects of adjustment" who preserve and protect the status quo, rather than as advocates for sociopolitical reform (Walsh-Bowers, 2007).

## Conclusion

History should give pause to psychologists who claim social justice as their mission. Social justice has become a "cultural keyword" and, consequently, whether psychologists realize it or not, invoking the term thrusts them and the discipline into a wider debate about human freedom, individual and collective responsibility,

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and the role of the state. The history of social justice displays its origins in efforts to conceive individual freedom in light of social concerns and commitments that owe not just to oneself, but also to the community and society of which one is part. As mentioned, it is by recovering this original liberal impulse to place individual freedom in the context of the common good that social justice might be appropriately conceived. However, the term now is used in a multitude of ways, some of which run counter to this legacy. Thus, psychologists aspiring to work for social justice should be judicious in their use of the term and cognizant of the political consequences they are promoting (even inadvertently). Psychologists are best placed to evaluate claims of social justice and the effects of their efforts when they understand the history of the concept and the proliferation of views that have resulted from this history. We have suggested Fraser's framework as a guide for psychologists interested in pursuing social justice. We hope our gesture in this direction might contribute to furthering critical discussion of psychologists' participation in social justice.

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