

A Challenge to Orthodoxy in Psychology: Thomas Sowell and Social Justice

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Abstract

Psychologists address social-justice problems in their research and applied work, and their scholarly efforts have been influenced by assumptions, constructs, and hypotheses from the political left. Recently, some psychologists have called for increased intellectual and political diversity in psychology, particularly as such diversity may lead to improved problem-solving. As an attempt to increase intellectual diversity in psychology, we review here the scholarship of Thomas Sowell. His work represents a rich source of hypotheses for psychologists' future research. We focus on his views on the importance of freedom; the extent to which reforms can reduce freedom; the importance of free markets to human flourishing; the role of free markets in producing costs for discrimination; the way spontaneously ordered systems can contain knowledge that can be overlooked in reforms; and the importance of culture and cultural capital. We will also discuss Sowell's more thoroughgoing economic analyses of problems and solutions and his analyses of contingencies operating on politicians and reformers, as well as his views on conflicts in fundamental visions about human nature and the pivotal role of improvements in minority education.

Keywords

social justice, discrimination, prejudice, Thomas Sowell, capitalism, conservatism, adversarial collaborations

Psychologists have sought to understand and remediate social problems through theory generation, empirical research, and ethical prescriptions (APA, 2017; Sue, 2010; Vasquez, 2012). These scholarly activities are often conducted under the rubric of “social justice” because justice is fundamental morally but also because these problems are involved in social outcomes that psychologists value (e.g., decreasing the burdens of discrimination, eradicating poverty, improving educational attainment, and improving physical and mental health; Vasquez, 2012). These social problems affect many individuals but in particular members of minority groups that have experienced, and continue to experience, prejudice and unjust discrimination. Psychologists, like most citizens, desire that all individuals, no matter their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or disability status, are treated fairly both by other individuals and by key social institutions such as the education, health, economic, and legal systems.

Although social justice is a controversial construct (Allen, 2020; Ambrosch, 2019; Novak et al., 2015), alleviating social ills is widely regarded as inherently good. However, psychologists' efforts to address social-justice problems have been criticized as being dominated by a restricted set of ideological viewpoints (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Redding & Cobb, 2022; Redding, 2001). The political left's approach to understanding these social problems has been to characterize these social problems as largely the result of various forms of prejudice, oppression, and discrimination institutionalized in nearly all facets of society, including psychological science (Roberts et al., 2020; Vasquez, 2012). In this view, progress in solving these problems depends upon understanding and ending

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such prejudicial attitudes and practices. Thus, constructs like systemic racism, white privilege, colonialism, implicit bias, microaggressions, heteronormativity, intersectionality, and the like have been developed and employed as explanatory entities and intervention targets (O'Donohue, 2023).

Thomas Sowell opposes this view. Sowell is a Black American who, at the time of this writing, is 93 years old, holds a doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago, and has recently retired from his position as the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow on Public Policy at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Sowell has written 40 books on diverse topics related to economics, social justice, race/ethnicity, affirmative action, charter schools, late-talking children, history, and social policy. Although he was formally trained as an economist, this label alone is too narrow. He brings a variety of intellectual disciplines, including history, sociology, law, public policy, and even geography, to his multidisciplinary analyses of social problems and remedial efforts.

Sowell has questioned how much progress has been made using the current approach, and some psychologists have joined him. For example, Tetlock and Mitchell (2009) critiqued psychologists' ability to accurately measure the construct of implicit bias, its intellectual coherence, and the extent to which attempts to modify it have succeeded. Similarly, Lilienfeld (2017) has criticized the construct of microaggressions on the grounds of inadequate operationalization, alleging, among other problems, that the theory fails to allow scientific investigation into whether this construct can be adequately measured. Finally, Huey et al. (2023), in a review of culturally tailored psychotherapy, questioned whether such tailoring reliability results in improved outcomes for minority populations.

Currently, there is little viewpoint diversity in psychology; thus, the concern is that psychologists' theories and empirical efforts have shown little deviation from what has become an ideological orthodoxy (Buss & von Hippel, 2018; Crawford & Jussim, 2018; Duarte et al., 2015; Frisby, 2018; Haidt & Jussim, 2016). However, this lack of political diversity has not always been the case. Duarte et al. (2015) identified this historic trend:

Psychology professors were as likely to report voting Republican as Democrat in presidential contests in the 1920s. From the 1930s through 1960, they were more likely to report voting for Democrats, but substantial minorities voted for Wilkie, Eisenhower, and (in 1960) Nixon. By 2006, however, the ratio of Democrats to Republicans had climbed to more than 11:1 (Gross & Simmons, 2007; Rothman et al., 2005). (p. 3)

Recent surveys have shown that 90% or more of social and personality psychologists and other psychologists identify politically as liberal (Duarte et al., 2015; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Lambert, 2018). Langbert et al. (2016) found that almost half of the psychology departments at the top 40 universities did not have any Republicans within their departments. More recently, Langbert and Stevens (2020) reported that at the four most highly ranked public and private institutions in all 50 states, psychology faculty were characterized by a Democrat to Republican ratio of 11.5 to 1. Duarte et al. (2015) argued that this skew in political viewpoints might result in psychologists' concentrating on topics that validate the liberal progress narrative and avoiding scholarly work that is critical of this narrative. One troubling implication is that this lack of viewpoint diversity can restrict the range of problem definitions and hypothesized solutions, as well as the design and interpretation of research.

Another concern is that such a restricted range of political views may alienate a significant portion of the consumers of psychologists' reform efforts, as there is a greater balance of liberals and conservatives in the general American population, including in all minority groups (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2021). Currently, according to a recent Gallup poll, the largest group of voters in the U.S. identify as independent, with political party preference evenly split: 45% of American adults identify as Republican or Republican-leaning independents, whereas 44% identify as Democrat or Democrat-leaning independents (Jones, 2023). The Pew Forum found that 40% of registered Democratic voters are non-White, compared to 17% of registered Republicans. Among Latino voters in the 2022 midterm elections, the split was narrower, with 60% of Latino voters backing Democratic candidates and 39% backing Republican candidates (Pew Research Center, 2023, para. 8). These proportions are far less skewed than what is found among psychologists. The goal should not be to replace one political orthodoxy with another but rather to promote a broader, more representative range of perspectives so that a more comprehensive range of stakeholders is considered. Then psychologists' research efforts can more completely and fairly reveal the strengths and weaknesses of these opposing views.

An alternative approach is to encourage psychologists to rid themselves of their political viewpoints, as these can be considered biases. The goal then would be to produce an objective psychologist who simply has political preferences, or who manages to keep those preferences somehow bracketed in their intellectual efforts. Philosophers of science have argued that such objectivity is not possible. For example, the

prominent philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper (1982) argued that science is a problem-solving endeavor. According to Popper, the hypotheses and theories associated with these problem-solving attempts can emanate from any source—intuitions, speculations, and even broad metaphysical ideas. Popper (1982) stated:

I wish to draw attention to the fact that in almost every phase of the development of science, we are under the sway of metaphysical, that is, untestable ideas; ideas which not only determine what problems of explanation we shall choose to attack but also what kinds of answers we shall consider as fitting or satisfactory or acceptable, and as improvements of, or advances on, earlier answers. . . . I call these research programmes “metaphysical” also because they result from general views of the structure of the world and, at the same time, from general views of the problem situation in physical cosmology. I call them “research programmes” because they incorporate, together with a view of the most pressing problems, a general idea of what a satisfactory solution of these problems would look like. (pp. 161–162)

As we shall see, Popper’s construct of metaphysical research programs shares much common ground with Sowell’s construct of ideological visions.

Thus, for politically liberal and conservative psychologists, core beliefs concerning ideal political arrangements may influence scientific efforts. This may be unavoidable, but another concern is whether these political commitments can be protected from falsification during empirical testing. Philosophers of science have pointed out that when potentially contradictory data are found in scientific research, minor auxiliary hypotheses can be blamed for the prediction failure rather than these central beliefs (the *Dubem-Quine thesis*; Lakatos, 1978; Quine & Ullian, 1978). Kahneman (2011) has proposed using *adversarial collaboration*, in which intellectual opponents jointly design, execute, and interpret research in these controversial domains. These designs provide the most rigorous testing of the merits and problems of competing beliefs, at least partly because they can decrease the likelihood that favored hypotheses may be protected from falsifying data.

The Views of Thomas Sowell

However, a first step for any scholarly work that aims to understand the relative merits of these opposing views would require some accurate and detailed

understanding of these opposing views. This could be difficult in psychology because there are so few psychologists who hold heterodox political views. Examining the scholarly work of influential scholars such as Thomas Sowell—scholars who have both critiqued the views of the political left and presented alternative analyses of social-justice problems—could then be particularly instructive. We believe that there are several reasons for psychologists to pay attention to the scholarly work of Thomas Sowell. First, many social-justice problems that psychologists address have clear economic dimensions—poverty, crime, and access to quality education are clear examples. Therefore, it is reasonable to include an economic perspective when attempting to remediate these social problems. Second, the question then becomes why Sowell should specifically be examined, as opposed to other economists. We are not calling for the work of other economists to be ignored, but to describe their views as well would be beyond the scope of this article. Sowell should be studied because he has published scholarly examinations from an opposing intellectual viewpoint of many social problems that concern psychologists, such as poverty, racism, school reforms, and the implications of culture. He also writes in an accessible way, and, as this article will show, his work can be a rich source of empirical hypotheses for psychologists in their social-justice efforts, particularly in adversarial collaborations. Like most scholars, many of his ideas are influenced by others, particularly libertarian economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Keith Arrow, and Gary Becker. The work of these economists, among others, also can be examined for fruitful hypotheses. Third, we agree that increasing intellectual diversity by examining a more comprehensive set of ideas can improve psychologists’ problem-solving efforts in this domain (Feyerabend, 1993; Redding, 2001). And fourth, Sowell’s ideas have at least *prima facie* merit. Although to date the case for these views within the psychological literature is not compelling, this is partly due to the lack of scholarly and empirical attention by psychologists, which in turn is likely due to ideological biases. This article presents the argument that Sowell’s major contentions should receive increased consideration by psychologists in their scholarly efforts to resolve social problems.

To date, psychologists have given little attention to Sowell’s body of intellectual work. A PsycInfo search (conducted in May 2022) using the keywords “Sowell Thomas” revealed only six citations in psychology journals, most of which were book reviews. Only one empirical study (conducted by sociologists, not psychologists) tested his ideas (Lee et al., 2010). Interestingly, this study supported Sowell’s contention, described in his book *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (Sowell, 2005),

that southern Blacks were influenced by the White Scotch-Irish “cracker culture” of the slave-holding American South rather than by cultural patterns traceable to Africa. The influence of this white cracker culture led to the emergence of what Sowell calls a “black redneck” phenomenon that, in turn, contributed to high homicide and substance-abuse rates among Blacks (Sowell, 2005).

A few caveats: Sowell’s views are positioned at the nexus of classical liberal/libertarian/conservative sociopolitical thought. As we shall see, he, like all libertarians, highly values freedom, particularly free-market economies. Sowell is not conservative in the populist sense (as characterized by such exemplars as Donald Trump) but rather in the classical liberal tradition of Edmund Burke and Friedrich Hayek. He does not wish to conserve problematic social practices or government programs that are harmful, ineffective, or over-involved in the lives and liberties of citizens. In 2001, Sowell stated:

It is hard to think of anyone who is, or has been, a black conservative, in the full sense of the word “conservative” . . . Most of those who are called black conservatives are certainly not interested in preserving the status quo. That status quo includes welfare, failing schools, quotas, and separatism that most black conservatives deplore and attack. Still less are they seeking to return to a *status quo ante*, such as the Jim Crow era. (p. 22)

Many of Sowell’s positions, admittedly, might shock some readers (such as the value of bourgeois habits, like hard work and self-control for overcoming poverty), and some may see his praise of the success of certain cultural groups as overvaluing what have been called “model minorities.” However, Sowell argues that these dismissals are ill-conceived and that there is compelling evidence for his positions based on his analyses of factors responsible for the different economic outcomes among cultural groups. Thus, Sowell’s claims ought not to be taken as salvos in the culture wars but, at a minimum, as empirical hypotheses in the social sciences that Sowell argues no social scientist should ignore. What follows are seven of his major claims that are relevant to psychologists’ work on social justice.

Freedom matters and can be unwisely diminished in putatively ameliorative reforms

Freedom is unlikely to be lost all at once and openly. It is far more likely to be eroded away, bit by bit, amid glittering promises and expressions of noble ideals. (Sowell, 1999, p. 184)

For Sowell, individual freedom is a political priority and an essential feature of a just society. Sowell (2009) maintains that a proper conception of social justice must emphasize that individuals are free to make their own decisions about how to conduct their lives as long as these decisions do not violate the rights or freedom of others. He suggests that the alternative to being free to pursue one’s interests is to have desired options forbidden by others who are pursuing their interests and values. This censorship of choice involves the unjustified use of coercion and can result in negative psychological, social, and economic outcomes for the coerced individual. Sowell (2008) also argues that respecting personal liberty is not only a moral matter but also an epistemic one: Usually, individuals are in the best epistemic position to make their own decisions, because they typically have the best knowledge of pertinent factors, such as relevant local circumstances; personal needs, desires, and interests; their productive capabilities; and the trade-offs between these.

It seems reasonable that psychologists should understand how their consumers and stakeholders view freedom and allow these values to inform the design of reforms, particularly regarding what outcomes are desired. For example, a recent poll of 4,000 Americans, including 1,000 college students, indicated that most Americans value freedom and hold views similar to Sowell’s on that point. Participants were asked to rate the importance of various aspects of American society. The results indicated that participants rated them as follows: freedom of speech (99%), freedom of assembly (97%), freedom to petition the government (97%), freedom from unreasonable searches (94%), freedom of the press (94%), and freedom of religion (94%; Knight Foundation–Ipsos, 2021). However, some important racial differences emerged. Only 61% of Blacks indicated that the First Amendment protects “people like you,” whereas 81% of Hispanic Americans, 85% of Asian Americans, and 89% of White Americans reported they agree (O’Donohue & Fisher, 2022). Sowell points out that the eligibility criteria for the U.S. government’s War on Poverty programs placed restrictions on household occupancy (functionally disincentivizing marriage) and fathers living with their children. When the War on Poverty began in 1964, 7% of children in the U.S. were born to single mothers; by 2021, the percentage had increased to 40% (National Center for Health Statistics, 2023). As a final example, President Obama’s health-care reform mandated that all adults buy insurance, with significant financial penalties for those who did not (Conover, 2012). This reform resulted in a loss of choice in how citizens could spend some of their money, and critics argued that this was a regressive mandate in that poorer, healthier youth (a demographic

with a higher percentage of minorities) lost their freedom to forgo health insurance because their premiums were needed to subsidize the health-care costs of more affluent, older Americans.

Sowell suggests that there is a need to weigh whether the expected outcome and, more importantly, the actual result obtained are greater than the amount of freedom lost as a result of the reform. When social-justice reforms—which always reflect some groups' values—are imposed upon others, “freedom as the general preservation of options gives way to the imposition of one group's preferred option” (Sowell, 1980, p. 331). Thus, future psychological research should be more attentive to identifying any losses of freedom and attempt to minimize these, or at least contain arguments that justify this trade-off (e.g., Cheek et al., 2022).

Market economies are essential to human freedom and flourishing

In short, while capitalism has a visible cost—profit that does not exist under socialism, socialism has an invisible cost—efficiency—that gets weeded out by losses and bankruptcy in capitalism. The fact that more goods are available more cheaply in a capitalist economy implies that profit is less costly than inefficiency. Put differently, profit is a price paid for efficiency. (Sowell, 2015, p. 75)

For Sowell (2011b), market economies have several advantages over the alternatives. However, psychologists generally either have held quite negative views of market economies (Biglan, 2020; Flynn, 2021; Gunderson, 2021) or neglected to consider their positive features:

1. Capitalism has lifted more people out of poverty than any other economic system, and it has enriched billions of individuals from many nations and cultural groups;
2. Market economies maximize freedom because they allow individuals to decide what they buy and sell, at what price, from whom, and to whom;
3. In market economies, exchanges occur only when both parties believe they are better off after the transaction;
4. Capitalism incentivizes the seller to satisfy the potential customer—for instance, by producing goods and services that consumers demand at prices consumers find attractive and at a quality that they find acceptable;
5. Unfettered pricing in a market economy allows the market to be efficient, as higher prices signal more scarcity, causing fewer goods or services to be purchased (given some demand elasticity);
6. Compared to prices set in a command economy, prices in a market economy contain more information about supply and demand, and this results in a more efficient use of scarce resources than can be attained by the knowledge of any group of human price-setters, no matter how large, intelligent, or informed;
7. Competition in market economies incentivizes efficiency and innovation, because when a competitor in the marketplace is more efficient or innovative and markets a higher-quality or better product at a lower price, competitors will lose market share and face being replaced by the higher-performing competitor (Schumpeter, 1950, labeled this process “creative destruction”);
8. Market economies also promote opportunity (although there will be barriers to entry in some markets, all, in principle, can have equal opportunity to enter the market);
9. Market economies attract talent and capital, particularly to enterprises in high demand because of their higher profits and wages (Sowell points out that a major motivation for immigration is access to the advantages of free markets);
10. Capitalism creates wealth that can exceed needs, which in turn allows access to the capital necessary for investment in innovation and business expansion and, thus, job creation;
11. The increased wealth that is generated by a capitalist economy allows more needs to be met and more important goods to be produced, such as better health care, increased research, better quality education, and philanthropy; and
12. As we will see in more detail later, market economies penalize discrimination; there will be costs to any buyer or supplier who wishes to discriminate in market transactions, putting the discriminating firm at a competitive disadvantage.

Admittedly, Sowell's contentions regarding the benefits of capitalism for social justice are controversial, given long-standing political debates about the relative justice of economic systems. However, some data support his contentions. For example, according to the *Economic Freedom of the World Report* (Gwartney et al., 2020), within the top quartile of the most economically free countries, only 1.8% of the population lived in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, in the countries in the lowest quartile of economic freedom, 27.2% lived in extreme poverty. The mean per capita income in the most economically free countries was \$44,198, compared to only \$5,754 in the least economically free countries. In the top quartile of economic freedom, the mean income of the poorest 10% was \$12,293, compared to

\$1,558 in the bottom quartile. Furthermore, in the countries in the top quartile of economic freedom, life expectancy was 80.3 years compared to 65.6 years in the least economically free countries.

Sowell's contention that capitalism improves the financial circumstances of the poor is also supported by economic data from countries that have shifted from socialist/command economies to market-based economies. Admittedly in these cases income inequality also increases. Lazear (2020) argued that focusing on this increase in income inequality is misleading for understanding the impact of market-based economies on the poor because absolute income level provides a better measure of the economic impact of market reforms on poverty. Lazear (2020) describes China during the past 20 years as an example: Income inequality increased dramatically, but the average income of the poorest segment of the population increased fivefold as the country shifted to a market-based economy. India is another case in point in that the income of the lowest decile doubled as the country implemented market reforms, and the number of Indian billionaires also increased (Lazear, 2020).

Psychologists studying happiness and well-being, such as Diener et al. (1999), have found that economic deprivation, or the fear of it, imposes various psychological costs, including anxiety, stress, pessimism, neuroticism, and loss of self-esteem. Gehring (2013) reported results from 86 countries between 1990 and 2005 and found that overall economic freedom positively affects subjective well-being. The data also revealed that the subjective well-being of those in poorer, developing countries profited more from increases in economic freedom, particularly from reducing the regulatory burden. Finally, the data indicated that societies that are more tolerant and have positive attitudes toward the market economy enjoyed greater subjective well-being. Similarly, Spruk and Kešeljević (2016) examined a sample of 136 countries and, after controlling for several possible confounding factors such as income, unemployment rate, social capital, health and life satisfaction, inequality, religion, and crime, found that a higher level of economic freedom led to greater subjective well-being. Indeed, research within psychology supports increasing global rates of self-reported happiness (e.g., Inglehart et al., 2008).

The advantages of market economies, including free markets blended with socialist ideas (as in many Scandinavian countries), are rarely described in the social-justice literature in psychology. Steven Pinker (2015), who is perhaps an exception, has argued that if one examines the past several centuries, the frequency and severity of wars are on the decline partly because of what Schneider and Gleditsch (2010)

called "the theory of the capitalist peace." According to this theory,

When buying things is cheaper than stealing them, people don't steal them. Also, if other people are more valuable to you alive than dead, you are less likely to kill them. You don't kill your customers or your lenders, so the arrival of the infrastructure of trade and commerce reduces some of the sheer exploitative incentives of conquest. (Pinker, 2015, para. 5)

Sowell's analysis suggests that the emphasis on social-justice reforms, including those advanced by psychologists, should not be so negative about or neglectful of free markets. For example, in one particularly glib characterization, the capitalist system is described as responsible for exploiting minority groups (Golash-Boza et al., 2019). Instead, the emphasis should be on how free markets allow all the opportunity to improve their financial situations, provided the requisite skills are learned (see the last major view described here on the importance of improving educational opportunities for those in poverty). Sowell provides examples of groups that have been discriminated against, such as the Japanese, Chinese, East Indians, and Jewish immigrants, who have then risen from extreme poverty to financial success by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by capitalistic systems. He cautions against viewing any group as monolithic, presenting data indicating that recent Caribbean and African Black immigrants have risen faster economically in the United States than native-born African Americans (and poor Whites; Hellman, 2020) because they have understood what is required and are more likely to have the skills to take advantage of these opportunities.

Future research in psychology may test social-justice interventions that highlight the advantages of free markets and teach the requisite skills to benefit from them. Researchers can identify the relative impact of the requisite skills and how best to teach these in varied contexts, such as in the family, schools, social service organizations, workplaces, and prison settings. It may also be beneficial to explore interventions aimed at increasing financial literacy and wealth creation. Other research can examine how various groups, such as certain immigrant groups, come to possess these relatively quickly (see Sowell's notion of cultural capital below).

In the conflict of visions, the constrained vision is more accurate and useful than the unconstrained, utopian vision

Visions may be moral, political, economic, religious, or social . . . [W]e sacrifice for our visions

and sometimes, if need be, face ruin rather than betray them . . . We will do almost anything for our visions, except think about them. (Sowell, 1987, p. 8)

Social-justice research involves deeply held beliefs about how the social and political world ought to be (Jost & Andrews, 2012). These beliefs, in turn, lead to the adoption of particular political ideologies. The core of Sowell's thesis is that political views of how the world works are rooted in general visions (either conscious or unconscious) about human nature and social processes. The *unconstrained vision* articulated first by William Godwin (1793) holds that human nature motivates individuals to place others' interests and needs ahead of personal ones. In this vision, humans can be convinced to do what is right simply because it is right. In short, the unconstrained vision sees humans as capable of continual improvement in a journey toward moral perfection.

In contrast, the *constrained vision* holds that humankind is morally flawed and each person is driven by selfish motives and interests. Therefore, the best scenario is to maximize the possibilities otherwise limited by self-interested individuals, and prosocial behavior requires incentivization. Sowell has stated:

Social decisions are deliberately made by surrogates on explicitly rationalistic grounds, for the common good, in the unconstrained vision. Social decisions evolve systemically from the interactions of individual discretion, exercised for individual benefit, in the constrained vision—serving the common good only as an unintended consequence. . . . (Sowell, 1987, p. 98)

Thus, in the constrained vision, decision-making primarily resides with the individuals entering into agreements with one another and then cooperating to execute these agreements to achieve mutually beneficial ends (note the parallel with a free-market economy). However, in the unconstrained vision, decisions are made by those experts thought to possess the most knowledge or wisdom, and these decisions are enforced for the good of the entire society. As Davenport (2000) put it, "The constrained view begins with the individual and ends with society. In contrast, the unconstrained view begins with society and ends with the individual" (p. 4).

Sowell (1995) has argued that the unconstrained vision has often motivated reforms that harmed instead of helped. He challenges the notion that Black economic and social progress is attributable to these progressive government reforms. Consistent with the constrained view, Sowell (1995) argues that "the economic advancement of blacks, both absolutely and

relative to whites. . . was due to the individual efforts of millions of black people trying to better their own lives" (p. 77). He suggests that the government policies created perverse incentives in welfare systems that ultimately harmed Black nuclear families. Similarly, educational reforms impeded Black progress by removing control of education from Black parents, instead assigning it to predominantly White government bureaucrats and teachers' unions.

Presently, little research incorporates Sowell's concept of conflict of visions in psychology. Future research can compare the relative effectiveness of reforms based on appeals to increasing moral virtue or decreasing prejudicial attitudes of others versus reforms based on appeals to increasing relevant skills to better pursue rational self-interest.

There is essential knowledge in tradition and institutions like free markets that are often neglected in reform proposals

For the anointed, traditions are likely to be seen as the dead hand of the past, relics of a less enlightened age, and not as the distilled experience of millions who faced similar human vicissitudes before. (Sowell, 1995)

Sowell (2011b) is conservative in arguing that key societal institutions have evolved over multiple generations and thus embody knowledge, wisdom, and efficiencies that can be overlooked and even destroyed in reform efforts. Sowell (1999) has suggested that those promoting any reform effort should be humble, and cautious not to disrupt what Hayek (1979, p. 33) called "spontaneously evolved order." Sowell presents the example of spontaneous order in natural languages. A set of experts has not designed a language. Instead, language "arises out of groupings, accidents, experiences, and historical borrowings and corruptions of other languages," and its "richness, complexity, and subtleties . . . have arisen systemically, from the experiences and interactions of millions of ordinary human beings, not from a top-down 'plan' formulated by some elite" (Sowell, 1995, p. 115). Any effort to reform a language (such as Esperanto) fails to account for the numerous ways that naturally evolved language has become adapted to varied and complex needs of human communication.

Similarly, for Sowell (1999), a complex society and its progress are only possible because numerous social arrangements transmit and coordinate knowledge from a tremendous variety of experiences of past generations. Sowell suggests that "the social experience of the many, as embodied in behavior, sentiments, and habits," are often derived from "traditions which evolve from

the day-to-day experiences of millions in each generation” (p. 42). Congruent with the Burkean tradition of conservatism (rather than the conservative populism of recent years), Sowell suggests that there is knowledge in cultural traditions, such as the valuing of the nuclear family and multigenerational families, that is based on the “multiplicity of experience too complex for explicit articulation” and that has been “distilled over the generations in cultural processes and traits so deeply embedded as to be virtually unconscious reflexes” (p. 41). Sowell (1999) is concerned that reforms of these institutions can be problematic because the understanding that a proposed reform is better than an evolved social institution should be based on knowledge that is “staggering and superhuman” (p. 13).

Therefore, Sowell (1999, 2011a) harbors significant doubts regarding social engineering because he has little faith that any set of decision makers could effectively cope with the enormous epistemic complexities of designing a superior system—for example, the kind of command economy found in socialism. Sowell also recognizes that every reform will involve costs (trade-offs with freedom, as noted previously) and unintended effects.

At a minimum, psychologists ought to attempt to understand how past contingencies have shaped certain cultural practices and attempt to modify these in ways that retain the useful knowledge contained in them. Sowell’s analysis also suggests that reforms be studied for their actual outcomes, including the possibility of unintentional ones. Legitimate questions can be raised concerning psychologists’ reform efforts in the areas of multicultural education (Frisby, 2013), cultural tailoring of psychotherapy (Huey et al., 2023), increase of trigger warnings (Bellet et al., 2020), and implicit bias training (Tetlock & Mitchell, 2009), especially regarding the extent to which outcomes have been carefully assessed.

Culture matters in understanding group disparities

All too often, there is an implicit assumption that the cause of some disparity is located where the statistics on that disparity were collected. . . . [T]hat approach ignores the very possibility that what happened to people before they reached an employer—or a college admissions office or a crime scene—may have had a “disparate impact” on the kinds of people they became and the kinds of skills, values, habits, and limitations they bring with them to the places where statistics are later collected. (Sowell, 2019, pp. 157–158)

Two polarized narratives dominate discussions about group disparities in outcomes: one that emphasizes biology and genetics, and another that emphasizes nurture in which outcomes are seen as being determined by contingent group and personal experiences like discrimination (Kerwick, 2011). In recent years, mainstream psychology overwhelmingly promotes a narrative that attributes group disparities to nurture, and more specifically, the experiences of prejudice and discrimination, when considering societal problems (Adams & Miller, 2021; Lugo-Candelas et al., 2021; Payne & Hannay, 2021). This narrative assumes the invincible fallacy—that outcomes for various groups would be identical without biased treatment (Sowell, 2019). Sowell is critical of both narratives, arguing that many morally neutral, internal, and external causes shape culture, such as demographic and geographic variables. Sowell asserts that such group disparities are the rule rather than the exception.

For example, Sowell (2019) reports that the mean age of Mexican Americans is two decades lower than that of Japanese Americans (consistent with U.S. Census Bureau, 2016, data). When a majority of a group’s population has a longer work history than another group, their mean income level will generally be higher. Although genetic factors such as intelligence might partially explain individual success, Sowell (2019) argues that other cultural or demographic factors, such as marriage rates, birth order and sibling status, charter school attendance, number of books in the home, and parents’ verbal skills (also supported by Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006) also influence outcomes. Intelligence is an essential ingredient for success in many contexts (Deary et al., 2007; Mackintosh, 2011; Sternberg et al., 2001), but Sowell (2019) cites the considerable divergence in achievement across the top 1% in intelligence to make the case that it is not the sole cause for increased attainment.

Sowell acknowledges a wide-ranging set of intra-group and intergroup cultural values that influence societal development, from values and practices relating to marriage and education to environmental factors (e.g., varying access to navigable waterways to allow trade, Smith, 2021; differences in the availability of large mammals for food and labor, Diamond, 1997). He concluded, first, that outcome disparities are common because groups, when left to their own devices, do not distribute themselves evenly across causal dimensions (Gore, 2022; Pyzde, 1995; see also Schmitt et al., 2017 for the association between egalitarian cultures and continuing sex differences). Psychologists are undoubtedly familiar with normal distributions; however, Pareto distributions are also surprisingly common (i.e.,

although there are many causes for some outcome, often a small subset of the causes account for the most of the variance). Pareto distributions occur not only in the natural environment—one example would be tornado prevalence by region—but also in many areas of human traits and behavior (see Gore, 2022; see also Gupta & Shrivastava, 2023, for the application of the Pareto principle in behavioral finance). Further, for this reason, every group disparity need not be seen as evidence of some negative process, such as prejudice. Last, differences in cultural capital matter in group attainment, so groups' cultural-capital qualities will create group differences. For Sowell, cultural capital may be considered the array of skills, values, habits, and traditions a given culture embraces.

For example, Sowell argues that Japanese immigrants in the United States, Brazil, and Australia all achieved similar economic and social outcomes despite the variations in adopted countries, and each group's unique cultural capital best accounts for this. He also argues that immigrants from cities often rose faster economically in their adopted countries than immigrants from rural settings, as those in cities often had cultural capital related to handling money, succeeding at working for others, and valuing education, which were not prevalent among those from rural areas. He suggests that an essential part of the legacy of slavery, beyond antiliteracy practices, was that ex-slaves were generally from rural, not urban, environments.

This runs contrary to the usual practice of psychologists relying on constructs like implicit bias and systemic racism to understand group differences. These constructs seem to imply that this adverse treatment is either the sole or primary explanation for differences among cultural groups. Such explanations can mislead and also malign others by reinforcing in-group/out-group categorization when other more morally neutral explanations for disparate outcomes exist (Lilienfeld, 2017; Redding & Satel, 2022; Satel, 2021; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017).

Sowell's analysis also points to different interventions than what are traditionally employed by psychologists. For example, psychologists would target the differences in cultural capital responsible for the various outcomes instead of targeting implicit bias. Sowell points to many historical examples in which reliance on these kinds of divisive constructs, perhaps exacerbated by hostile attribution bias, defined by psychological literature (Tuente et al., 2019), led to intergroup animosity, explicit conflicts, and even persecution, such as what happened to Jews in Nazi Germany or the genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda.

Instead, Sowell suggests identifying and modeling the cultural values of successful cultural groups. Sowell

also rejects the denigration of these traits for their mere association with successful groups (the construct of "fear of acting white," Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Durkee et al., 2019; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). The Brookings Institute (Sawhill & Rodrigue, 2018) examined data from the 2013 March Current Population Survey and found that three behaviors were critical for preventing poverty: (a) graduating from high school, (b) waiting to marry until after the age of 21 (and not having children until after being married), and (c) having a full-time job. Individuals who achieved all three had just a 2% chance of being in poverty and a 74% chance of being middle class. Those who violated all three had a 76% chance of being in poverty and only a 7% chance of being in the middle class. The relationships between these norms and poverty levels applied to all racial and ethnic groups. However, deviation from these rules was more common for certain racial groups. Thus, groups with the cultural capital to value and promote these norms will experience low poverty rates. Psychologists who study cultural capital and productive cultural practices are best positioned to design successful programs that will meaningfully assist members of groups who fail to display these behaviors.

An economic understanding is critical for a comprehensive understanding of social justice

What the welfare system and other kinds of government programs are doing is paying people to fail. Insofar as they fail, they receive the money. Insofar as they succeed, even to a moderate extent, the money is taken away. (Sowell, as cited in Riley, 2021)

A pithy way to capture the essence of economics is, as described earlier, that people respond to incentives. Behavioral psychologists agree with an emphasis on this principle. Operant conditioning (with the reinforcer or punisher functioning as the incentive or disincentive) has been explained in economic terms in a developing field known as *behavioral economics* (Rachlin, 1995).

Governments can manage incentives to promote certain behaviors. For example, tobacco consumption in Europe has decreased by approximately 5% for every 10% increase in the price of cigarettes (Gallus et al., 2006). Hartmann et al. (2021) found that adding financial incentives to traditional cognitive behavioral therapy produced a greater reduction in alcoholism and interpersonal violence against Indian women than cognitive behavior therapy alone.

Sowell focuses on two things: the unwise neglect of understanding the actual incentives in reform programs (and, therefore, the risk that incentives can be misaligned so as not to produce the intended outcomes) and (b) the necessity of what he (2014) calls “two-stage thinking” to accurately analyze the effects of some proposed intervention. One example of Sowell’s two-stage thinking can be found by examining the complex incentives and disincentives involved in rent control. Rent-control laws limit the price landlords can charge for housing, often because housing can be unaffordable to many. First-stage thinking would suggest that imposing rent controls—lowering housing prices—would be entirely salutary. However, second-stage thinking identifies the fuller range of incentives and disincentives for a more comprehensive set of actors. With rent control, landlords have less incentive to maintain their property, given higher demand (as well as less capital, given lower rents). Also, when the price is artificially low, there is excess demand, and thus landlords do not face the same incentives to maintain their properties to attract demand. Similarly, developers have fewer incentives to build new housing to meet future demands because of these mandated lower prices. Given the competition for capital and talent, lower housing prices produce incentives for pursuing other properties with higher investment returns. Further, lower prices no longer motivate efficient use—for example, a renter may respond to the lower cost by using the property as a weekend home. Finally, there may be increased incentives for consumers to be less than honest to qualify for rent-controlled housing. Sowell analyzed rent control in New York City and found that all these effects occurred because of the unaccounted-for incentives revealed by second-stage thinking.

Sowell (2014) makes other valuable economic points: Government programs are usually monopolies; this lack of competition suppresses incentives for innovation, quality, and the need to please consumers, and opportunity costs are always operative (i.e., costs are always associated with forgone alternatives). Psychologists might find it advantageous to engage in interdisciplinary research programs and include economists and behavioral economists in their efforts to improve awareness of all incentives and disincentives via second-stage analyses.

Market economies make discrimination costly

The more highly competitive the market for labor and the employer’s products, the higher the cost paid for discrimination and consequently the less leeway the employer has for indulging his

prejudices without risking his own profits and ultimately the financial survival of the business. On the other hand, enterprises not subject to the full stress of a competitive market—monopolies, non-profit enterprises, government agencies—have a greater leeway. (Sowell, 2011a, p. 77)

The roles of incentives and disincentives in the shaping and maintenance of behavior are fundamental to theoretical accounts within the behavioral tradition in psychology (Skinner, 1969) and well-established in thousands of empirical analyses (see, in particular, *Journal of Experimental Analysis of Behavior* and *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*). Sowell argues that market economies make racial or gender discrimination costly. Drawing from the work of fellow economists Arrow (1973), Becker (1971), and Phelps (1972), Sowell (2019) distinguishes three types of discrimination that more comprehensively portray the range of factors influencing decision-making:

Discrimination IA: The “ideal, and more costly, variation is seeking and paying the cost for information that would permit judging each individual as an individual, regardless of the group from which that individual comes” (p. 33).

Discrimination IB: Where cost precludes individual assessment, “individuals may be judged by empirical evidence on the group they are a part of” (p. 33; see also Arrow, 1998).

Discrimination II: This involves “treating people negatively, based on arbitrary aversions or animosities to individuals of a particular race or sex” (p. 30).

Though Sowell acknowledges occasions in which Discrimination II, such as racial-segregation laws, is the cause for group differences in outcomes, he contends that when reformers describe disparate group outcomes and attribute these outcomes to discrimination, they often mistakenly consider only Discrimination II.

Many employers, when unable to utilize data to make Discrimination IA decisions (e.g., background checks, which are shown to increase Black employment rates), rely on Discrimination IB decisions as a proxy. This is not because of any particular prejudice but rather reliance upon stereotypes. However, some stereotypes can be accurate, especially until individuating information becomes available (Jussim et al., 2016). Considering these nuances, Sowell (2019) asserts that “[m]isdiagnosing the basis for discrimination produces more than a difference in words. It can produce policies less likely to achieve their goals or even policies that make matters worse,” as in the case of laws preventing the use of background checks (p. 34).

Some laws that have a disparate impact on groups can affect the costs associated with Discrimination II. Higher wage rates resulting from minimum-wage laws increase the number of job applicants and decrease the ratio of hired workers to applicants. This “reduces the cost of refusing to hire qualified job applicants from particular groups, so long as the number of qualified applicants refused employment is not greater than the number of surplus qualified applicants” (Sowell, 2019, p. 53). Therefore, enacting minimum-wage laws can interfere with more efficient market supply-demand processes, allowing employers to discriminate because of an overabundance of candidates. To support this claim, Sowell (2019) outlines the effect of minimum-wage laws on adolescent unemployment, particularly its more significant negative impact on Black males (as supported by Neumark & Wascher, 2007). Unfortunately, the American Psychological Association (APA) is unquestioningly in favor of minimum-wage policies, perhaps because it aligns with left-of-center policy positions (APA, 2017; Silander & Taescavage, 2023; Weir, 2016).

Discrimination II results in considerable costs for employers. Employers reduce the range of candidates they consider when discriminating, increasing their operating costs as they fail to hire the best candidates. Meritocratic employers will outcompete employers engaged in Discrimination II. Sowell (2011b, 2019) provides examples of Discrimination II’s costs, from failure to hire black athletes and entertainers to the Polish government’s refusal to employ Jewish physicians during World Wars I and II.

Sowell points out that Discrimination II thrives in situations insulated from free-market forces (e.g., universities, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations). In these settings, the cost of discrimination is displaced because those making hiring decisions are not spending their own money but rather funds supplied by third parties, such as taxpayers and donors, a notion supported by current research in behavioral economics (Vlaev et al., 2017). For example, Sowell describes how 300 Black research chemists were employed in private companies before World War II. In contrast, only three Black PhDs from any academic discipline were employed within White universities (Winston, 1971).

Future research may involve designing experimental studies to test Sowell’s discrimination model while synthesizing extant psychological research into implicit bias. Researchers could explore under what additional conditions Discrimination II (vs. Discrimination IA or IB) may most likely occur and how to further enhance the economic disincentives for discriminatory behavior.

Understanding the full range of interests of politicians and other social reformers is essential

If politicians stopped meddling with things they don’t understand, there would be a more drastic reduction in the size of government than anyone in either party advocates. (Sowell, 2010, p. 335)

Psychologists, when pursuing social-justice reforms, can advocate for new laws or changes to existing laws. In describing the contingencies controlling the behavior of politicians, Sowell (2010) has observed that politicians, like other individuals, are often self-interested, in part because of the nature of holding elected office: “No one will really understand politics until they understand that politicians are not trying to solve our problems. They are trying to solve their own problems—of which getting elected and re-elected are No. 1 and No. 2. Whatever is No. 3 is far behind” (p. 77). Consistent with this perspective is research suggesting that politicians tend to placate their constituents (Lyons, 1999) and that it would be strategic for politicians to engage in behaviors contrary to personal self-interest to enhance perceived trustworthiness (Combs & Keller, 2010). Other reports indicate the ways in which politicians advance bills that benefit themselves financially (e.g., Muldowney, 2018).

The potential prioritization of reelection over responsible and effective governance is also reflected in what Sowell describes as the “seductive language” of politicians: “Many of the cant words of politics are simply evasions of reality” (2011b, p. 73). Sowell provides examples of significant discrepancies between the language some politicians employ in describing their personal or political party’s vision or putative concern for others (i.e., the pieties of “compassion,” p. 138) and the consequences (particularly the unintended consequences) for the proposed beneficiaries of the policies.

What follows are examples of what Sowell (2018) characterizes as the “political rhetoric camouflaging” of actual outcomes.

Politicians and other reformers’ “dependence on dependency.”

Sowell’s valuing of personal freedom is reflected in his numerous critiques of government interventions that ultimately restrict the freedoms of others by promoting dependency. “Helping those who have been struck by unforeseeable misfortunes is fundamentally different from making dependency a way of life. Although the big word on the left is ‘compassion,’ the big agenda on the left is dependency. The more people

are dependent on government handouts, the more votes the left can depend on for an ever-expanding welfare state” (Sowell, 2012, para. 9–10).

Sowell would suggest that any reformers, including psychologists, must be more cognizant of contingencies operating on themselves—particularly their own “dependence on dependency”—to ensure their efforts do not persist on the basis of any personal advantages gained from their efforts. He is concerned when “the advantaged have benefited in the name of the disadvantaged” (Sowell, 2009, p. 119), asserting:

Obviously, a lot of anti-poverty money is going to people who are not poor. There are whole classes of people who live off the poor—or rather, off the vast sums of money that are poured out from the public treasury and private philanthropy, in hopes of helping the poor. Those who intercept the money intended for the poor have been aptly called “poverty pimps.” The poor are a commodity to these people, who include not only local politicians, community activists and small-time hustlers, but also people with impressive titles and academic credentials, who likewise milk the larger society, in the name of the poor. At the top of the food chain, as it were, are Ivy League professors who rake in big-time research grants to support themselves and their cronies while they are studying, romanticizing or otherwise exploiting the poor. (Sowell, 2001, para. 2–4)

The “diversity” fraud. Sowell (2016) analyzes the history of unintended negative consequences of race-based college admissions to promote diversity as experienced by some minority groups (particularly Jewish Americans and Asian Americans):

It is common, at colleges and universities across the country, for the test scores of Asian American students who have been admitted to a given college to be higher than the test scores of whites or of blacks or Hispanics. That may not seem strange, since that is true of test scores in general. But, at any given institution, applying the same standards to all, the test scores of students at a particular institution would tend to be similar. More Asian Americans would be admitted to higher ranked colleges and universities, however, if the same standards were applied to all. In short, something very much like the quota limits that were applied to Jews in the past are now being applied to Asian Americans—and, once again, are being justified by diversity. (para. 7–8)

Sowell and others observe that among the harmful consequences of admitting individuals under lower standards is the higher risk of failure (Maranto, 2022; Sander & Taylor, 2012). Further, there is evidence that race-based practices often result in the opposite outcome from those that the reformer intended. Maranto (2022) observes:

Ironically, race-based admissions at schools like Harvard solidify white privilege, decimating Asian Americans by 40 to 50% while leaving white enrollments nearly intact. As the National Association of Scholars documented in its recent amicus curiae brief in the Harvard and North Carolina cases, Harvard admissions staff systematically lowered the personality ratings of Asian applicants they had never met, actions fitting textbook definitions of prejudice. Such progressive practices in these admissions departments have since resulted in lawsuits on the basis of racial discrimination and have been elevated to and ruled on by the Supreme Court (Liptak & Hartocollis, 2022).

Thus, if psychologists are to be effective at working with politicians and other social reformers and crafting improved policies, they should better understand these individuals’ actual priorities and guard against some of the moral hazards associated with them. In addition, psychologists need to protect against their possible dependence on dependency in which their social-justice concerns produce problematic gains for themselves, from virtue signaling to financial benefits.

Reforming education for minorities is an essential component of increasing social justice

The educational success of these charter schools undermines theories of genetic determinism, claims of cultural bias in the tests, assertions that racial “integration” is necessary for Blacks to reach educational parity, and presumptions that income differences are among the “root causes” of educational differences. This last claim has been used for decades to absolve traditional public schools of any responsibility for educational failures in low-income minority communities. (Sowell, 2020, p. 118)

Sowell’s (2020) recent book, *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*, underscores the importance of appealing to a careful analysis of outcome data when arguing about what is best for reforming Black education. Historians typically credit progress in counteracting substandard

education for Black children to the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional—rooted in the central argument that equal protection under the law was being denied to Black Americans (UPI Archives, 1954). In contrast, Sowell argues that data showing that integrating Black students with White students produced superior outcomes never existed (Arter, 2013; Sowell, 1986).

In the aftermath of the Brown decision, school communities dealt with massive social unrest caused by forced school busing (Wolters, 1992, 2008), the earmarking of large amounts of federal funding for early childhood Head Start programs (Zigler & Muenchow, 1994; Zigler & Styfco, 2010), and renewed interest in school-reform efforts (Jackson, 2009). A growing body of educational research has demonstrated that academic achievement varied as a function of student and home characteristics, rather than school or teacher characteristics or the amount of money spent on the school (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972).

As referenced earlier, scholars tended to polarize into two ideological groups: (a) those who claim that mean IQ differences between racial groups, as well as deficiencies in the homes of students from poor Black communities, adequately explain decreased educational achievement of Black students (Herrnstein & Murray, 1986), and (b) those who claim that racial discrimination in the larger society, racial bias in teachers, cultural bias in standardized testing, and a Europeanized curriculum were the best explanations for observed group disparities in educational achievement. Sowell rejects these explanations for educational problems in Black communities (Sowell, 1983).

Sowell examined archival data from historically exceptional Black schools, both public and private, to attempt to identify the variables responsible for the rise and fall of these exceptional schools. Sowell found that the attitudes and practices of exceptional teachers, administrators, and policies within exceptional Black schools—coupled with a more traditional approach to education emphasizing disciplinary measures for rule violations and a concentration on traditional subjects like reading and math, rather than less-traditional topics such as multiculturalism—resulted in significant improvements in educational outcomes (Sowell, 1986).

The prominent educational researcher Caroline Hoxby (2003) tested Sowell's recommendations and others to increase school choice for Black parents by examining three school-choice reforms: vouchers in Milwaukee, and charter schools in Michigan and Arizona. Contrary to the claim that the so-called cherry-picking of charter schools would cause harm to regular public schools, she found that regular public schools improved their outcomes in each case when exposed

to competition from these programs. In an earlier study of charter schools in New York City, where children were randomly chosen to be in a charter school, Hoxby et al. (2009) found that “on average, a student who attended a charter school from kindergarten through eighth would close about 86% of the ‘Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap’ in math and 66% of the achievement gap in English” (p. viii). Moreover, these researchers found that a charter high school student is approximately 7% more likely to earn a Regents diploma by age 20 for each year they spend in that school. In addition, these researchers found that the following school policies were associated with a charter school's ability to produce superior effects on achievement: an extended school year; more class time devoted to English during each school day; a small rewards, minor penalties disciplinary policy; teacher pay based partially on performance (as opposed to a traditional pay scale based strictly on seniority and credentials); and a mission statement that emphasizes academic performance, as opposed to other peripheral goals.

Sowell also views teachers' unions as a significant problem—because they advocate for the interests of teachers and only secondarily, if at all, for those of students. Moreover, he perceives teachers' unions as a significant impediment that has thwarted genuine educational reform and improvements for minority students, from the great difficulty in firing incompetent teachers to hindering innovation and improvements accomplished by charter schools. He also notes that the teachers' unions are associated with only one political party and have enormously influenced that party (Sowell, 1993, 2000).

Future psychological research in education might attempt to answer additional questions related to the effects of school choice on academic achievement in Black and other minority communities. Longitudinal studies of differences in degrees and earned incomes would be essential to presenting a fuller picture of outcomes, as would the measurement of possible differences in crime rates and mental health issues. Research examining differences in the sense of autonomy and freedom (both parent and child), happiness, academic engagement, age of first pregnancy, and substance-abuse rates would also provide a fuller picture. Again, this may be best accomplished in adversarial collaborations, given the controversial nature of these subjects.

Conclusions

Psychologists are rightly concerned with the scientific understanding of social problems such as discrimination and prejudice and the adverse effects of these on

educational attainment, employment status, poverty, and mental health. However, a proper understanding of these social problems ought not be illegitimately constrained by the preferred political ideology of most psychologists, because such a constraint permits the examination of a constricted range of constructs, problems, and interpretations; it affects the reporting of research and consequently the solutions proposed.

In this article, we have reviewed the work of Thomas Sowell, who argues that in any reform proposal, psychologists should consider the importance of freedom and not infringe, unwisely or unknowingly, on the liberties of those affected by any proposed reform. Further, he maintains that free markets increase human flourishing by being the most effective means of eradicating poverty and its resultant problems; that the constrained vision is more accurate and valuable than the utopian vision; that there can be essential knowledge in tradition and the markets that ought not be ignored in reform proposals; that differences in cultural capital matter in understanding group disparities; that an understanding of both economics and two-stage economic analyses is necessary for social justice; that free markets can make discrimination costly; that understanding the full range of social reformers' interests is crucial; and that reforming minority education is a critical component of increasing social justice because of the central importance of education to a variety of social and economic outcomes. These views are generally novel emphases, because to date they rarely, if ever, appear in psychologists' research and reform proposals. Thus, although prejudice and discrimination exist within our modern societies and are appropriate targets for change by psychologists, Sowell (1983) raises basic questions regarding whether it is necessary or sufficient to target these problematic attitudes and behaviors to achieve improved social outcomes.

Sowell's proposals are in even starker contrast to a trend demonstrated in several recent articles in psychology (Fine, 2012; Grzanka & Cole, 2021; Roberts et al., 2020), which failed again to consider more diverse sets of possible hypotheses relating to social-justice problems. These authors argue that psychologists' prior commitment to left-leaning political views has not been sufficiently radical. These authors claim that a more extreme leftist political stance can correct psychology's failure to remediate social problems. For example, Grzanka and Cole (2021) call for a "transformational disruption" (p. 6) of scientific norms to combat "epistemic exclusion" (p. 9) by emphasizing research methodologies like "vulnerable listening" (p. 10). Roberts et al. (2020) claim that all authors of scientific papers in psychology must include "positionality statements" (p. 1308), in which authors disclose their races, gender

identities, and sexual orientations (but not their political affiliations). These authors even call for the radical transformation of the notion of psychological science itself, as they claim psychologists' traditional conception of normative science contains a variety of biases, such as white supremacy, systemic racism, and minority exclusion.

Thus, we also caution against the censorship of scientific studies when the data from such studies do not support the narrative of the left; future studies of Sowell's ideas could face this fate. For example, a published study (Johnson et al., 2020; Savolainen, 2023) that found that White officers were no more likely to shoot Blacks or Hispanics than Black officers was retracted, not because of typical issues (perhaps mistakes in data coding or statistical analysis) but because the findings became politically fraught. Therefore, special care must be taken so that any positive results based on Sowell's works are not suppressed or the authors mistreated because their findings are inconsistent with orthodox political commitments. The goal is not to promote research according to a singular political ideology but to fairly examine a larger set of empirical hypotheses. Social-justice problems that are rightly of concern to psychologists are undoubtedly complex. Interdisciplinary research that is influenced by scholars such as Sowell in the context of adversarial collaborations may be required to best understand and remediate these issues.

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