

---

# A Social Justice Agenda

---

Vickie M. Mays

*University of California, Los Angeles*

---

**T**he moral imperative offered to psychology by both Jackson (2000, this issue) and Strickland (2000, this issue) is to move into this new century leaving not one single person behind. No one should have their future, their health, or their well-being compromised for reasons of class, gender, national origin, physical and psychological abilities, religion, or sexual orientation, or as a result of unfair distribution of resources. Both authors exhort psychologists to work diligently to ensure the brightest future for all.

In 1999, the American Psychological Association (APA) embraced issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and multiculturalism. This focus was historic in its scope and resulted in rich contributions to the field. The presidency of Richard Suinn, the first Asian American president of APA, which coincided with the terms of five division presidents drawn from persons of color (D. W. Sue, Bingham, Porché-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999), became an organizing force that concentrated the association's ability to address questions of diversity, difference, and inequality (D. W. Sue et al., 1999). This was most evident at two meetings: the January 1999 National Multicultural Conference and Summit (NMCS) and APA's 107th annual convention in August 1999. At the APA convention, many psychologists participated in an opening ceremony of cultural sharing, highlighted by the interconnectedness of the participants despite their many differences. The Reverend Jesse Jackson spoke eloquently at the ceremony about the inequalities in U.S. society and the social problems they generate: increased violence, a sense of hopelessness, deteriorating physical and mental health, and reductions in health care, social services, and the quality and amount of educational resources.

The tools of psychology in the next century ought to address Strickland's and Jackson's concerns about those who are different. The tools should possess not only internal validity but external validity (S. Sue, 1999), or they will fail to address the inclusive social justice agenda that Jackson (2000), Strickland (2000), and the participants in the NMCS (D. W. Sue et al., 1999) see as APA's moral imperative in this next century. Psychology, as a discipline, needs also to ensure that its approaches to promoting psychological well-being and preventing mental disorders are culturally valid and available, delivered competently, and affordable to all who need them (Ziglio, Levin, & Bertinato, 1999). We can learn from the field of public health, which advocates prevention at a community or population level to eliminate or significantly reduce morbidity (Albee, 1998a, 1998b). Effective prevention will help individuals find ways of building their individual capacity, but achieving good mental health at an individual level is often beyond the control of individuals.

We enter the new millennium with the United States

enjoying a sustained period of extraordinary wealth. This wealth offers both unthought-of possibilities and dangers. On the one hand, we now possess the resources to address difficulties that can only be solved by investment in our common social future. On the other hand, growing economic inequalities threaten our very social cohesion (Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan, Pamuk, Lynch, Cohen, & Balfour, 1996; Wallace, 1996; Wilkinson, 1996; Wolff, 1995) and have presented the public with apparently senseless crimes where children kill children, where police kill the mentally ill, and where many die from preventable illness because they were the last to get health care. At the same meeting where the Reverend Jackson spoke, Strickland (2000), in her Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest Award address, issued a summons for psychologists to rise to the challenge issued at an APA meeting over 30 years ago by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (1968) and renewed by Jackson (2000). If psychology is to show society the path to greater equality among its members, psychologists must demonstrate that psychology's methods and procedures can embrace diversity. Whereas King worried primarily about gaps in equality between races, Jackson (2000) and Strickland (2000) presented a broader agenda in which they implored social scientists to understand that the behaviors they seek to study, modify, and eliminate are related to gaps resulting from poverty, inequality, and inequity (Kawachi, Wilkinson, & Kennedy, 1999; Mays & Cochran, 1994, 1998; Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, 1996; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). These behaviors are inextricably linked to wealth, economics, education, governmental policies, and even the professional policies of psychology.

Psychology must not focus itself solely on the mental health of individuals when the nation is trying to understand the senseless torture and death of people hated because of their gender, race, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation. Psychologists must not look merely to individual behavior to grasp why a 12-year-old girl becomes pregnant intentionally, an 11-year-old shoots another child, or police sodomize a man in custody, or to understand ethnic cleansings. Strickland (2000) observed that the future of psychology requires psychologists to be willing to articulate, teach, and develop a body of science informed by social justice. Psychologists must not be afraid to teach, engage in clinical practice, and develop public policy

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Vickie M. Mays, University of California, 1283 Franz Hall, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563. Electronic mail may be sent to [mays@ucla.edu](mailto:mays@ucla.edu).



**Vickie M.  
Mays**

and research about racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other divisive perspectives that enable people to treat those who are different from themselves fairly and competently. Our progress as a discipline, as a nation, and as global citizens depends on our ability to include everyone in the future—to be fair to all, not just to some.

#### REFERENCES

- Albee, G. W. (1998a). Fifty years of clinical psychology: Selling our soul to the devil. *Applied and Preventive Psychology, 7*, 189–194.
- Albee, G. W. (1998b). The politics of primary prevention. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 19*, 117–127.
- Jackson, J. (2000). What ought psychology to do? *American Psychologist, 55*, 328–330.
- Kaplan, G. A. (1996). People and places: Contrasting perspectives on

- the association between social class and health. *International Journal of Health Services, 26*, 507–519.
- Kaplan, G. A., Pamuk, E. R., Lynch, J. W., Cohen, R. D., & Balfour, J. L. (1996). Inequality in income and mortality in the United States: Analysis of mortality and potential pathways. *British Medical Journal, 312*, 999–1003.
- Kawachi, I., Wilkinson, R. G., & Kennedy, B. (1999). Introduction. In I. Kawachi, B. P. Kennedy, & R. G. Wilkinson (Eds.), *The society and population health reader: Income inequality and health* (pp. xi–xxxiv). New York: New Press.
- King, M. L., Jr. (1968). The role of the behavioral scientist in the Civil Rights movement. *American Psychologist, 23*, 180–186.
- Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (1994). Depressive distress among homosexually active African American men and women. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 151*, 524–529.
- Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (1998). Racial discrimination and health outcomes in African Americans [CD-ROM]. *Proceedings of the 27th Public Health Conference on Records and Statistics and the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics 47th Annual Symposium*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Mays, V. M., Coleman, L. M., & Jackson, J. S. (1996). Perceived race-based discrimination, employment status, and job stress in a national sample of Black women: Implications for health outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 1*, 319–329.
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997, August 15). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science, 277*, 918–924.
- Strickland, B. R. (2000). Misassumptions, misadventures, and the misuse of psychology. *American Psychologist, 55*, 331–338.
- Sue, D. W., Bingham, R. P., Porché-Burke, L., & Vasquez, M. (1999). The diversification of psychology: A multicultural revolution. *American Psychologist, 54*, 1061–1069.
- Sue, S. (1999). Science, ethnicity, and bias: Where have we gone wrong? *American Psychologist, 54*, 1070–1077.
- Wallace, R. (1996). Inner-city decay and the health of the nation. *Current Issues in Public Health, 2*, 26–28.
- Wilkinson, R. G. (1996). *Unhealthy societies: The afflictions of inequality*. London: Routledge.
- Wolff, E. N. (1995). *Top heavy: A study of the increasing inequality of wealth in America*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Ziglio, E., Levin, L. S., & Bertinato, L. (1999). Social and economic determinants of health: Implications for promoting the health of the public. In D. Harrison & E. Ziglio (Eds.), *Social determinants of health: Implications for the health professions* (Forums in Experimental and Clinical Medicine, Suppl. 4). Retrieved February 17, 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.acmed.net/hpi/documenti/index.htm>