








ARTICLE

Why do people object to economic inequality?

The role of distributive justice and social harmony concerns as predictors of support for redistribution and collective action

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Abstract

People may perceive economic inequality through moral lens, focusing on the unfair distribution of resources, or as a threat to their personal and social environment. This research examines how justice- and threat-based concerns shape reactions to economic inequality. In Study 1 ($N = 358$), we identify elements of inequality perceived as unjust or threatening and explore how these are organized into meaningful clusters using network analysis. We identified four overarching concerns: distributive justice, social harmony, inequality of opportunities and economic threats. Distributive justice and social harmony concerns were the most prominent, associated with perceptions of injustice and threat, respectively. Study 2 ($N = 260$) showed that distributive justice (but not social harmony) concerns were positively associated with collective action and support for redistribution. In Study 3 ($N = 1536$), perceived economic inequality was positively related to both concerns, but only distributive justice concerns consistently mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for measures to reduce inequality. In Study 4 ($N = 214$) exposure to distributive justice concerns, compared to social harmony and control conditions, increased support for taxing the rich and assisting the poor. Results suggest that framing economic inequality as a justice issue effectively promotes social change.

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KEYWORDS

collective action, economic inequality, inequality of opportunities, justice, redistribution, social harmony, threat

INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality remains one of the main challenges of our times (Ahmed et al., 2022; Milanovic, 2016; Piketty, 2014). Despite its pernicious political, economic and societal effects (Jetten, Peters, et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2017), the relationship between perceived economic inequality and demand for more equality is not straightforward. On the one hand, perceived economic inequality in everyday life has been shown to reduce inequality tolerance and predict more favourable attitudes towards redistribution (García-Castro et al., 2020). On the other hand, research indicates that the more economic inequality people perceive in society, the higher the degree of inequality they consider ideal or desirable (Castillo, 2011; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017; Trump, 2018; Willis et al., 2015).

People must not only be aware of, but also concerned about, economic inequality to demand greater equality (Starmans et al., 2017; Wiwad et al., 2019). We argue that understanding the reasons behind people's concerns about economic inequality is crucial for comprehending their reactions to it. However, to our knowledge, no prior studies have systematically explored and assessed the specific elements of economic inequality that individuals find objectionable. Sometimes, people may object to economic inequality due to moral reasons related to the unjust distribution of resources and opportunities. At other times, they may object to economic inequality for instrumental reasons related to the threats that such inequality poses to their social and personal environments (Schmidt & Juijn, 2024; Starck et al., 2021). In the present research, we first identify specific elements of economic inequality that individuals perceive as unjust or threatening and explore how these elements are interconnected and organized into meaningful clusters, reflecting latent concerns about economic inequality. Second, we examine the implications of these concerns for social change.

Economic inequality is unfair: Moral arguments against inequality

Social psychological literature has long emphasized perceptions of injustice as one of the main reasons for objections to social inequalities (Klandermans, 1997; Mummendey et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The recognition that one's group is unfairly treated or disadvantaged in comparison to other groups (Crosby, 1976; Runciman, 1966) and the emotions of anger and outrage stemming from such a recognition (Petkanopoulou et al., 2021; van Zomeren et al., 2004) were consistently found to predict collective action against inequality.

In the context of economic inequality, appraisals of economic unfairness, rather than perceived inequality itself, have been found to better explain people's aversion towards unequal distribution of resources (Starmans et al., 2017). Similarly, the emergence of recent social movements has been attributed to the perceived illegitimacy of the growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (Jetten et al., 2020). Moreover, exposure to rising economic inequality has been shown to increase support for equity policies by raising awareness of the unfair societal structure and inequality of opportunities (García-Castro et al., 2020; Kim & Lee, 2018; McCall et al., 2017).

Judgements about the fairness or unfairness of economic inequality are informed by principles of equity, need and equality (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). Adherence to the need and equality principles, which emphasize assistance to those in need and equal outcomes for all, respectively, has been linked with support for social protection and redistribution policies (Alcañiz-Colomer et al., 2024; Van Hootegeem et al., 2020). Also, perceiving the need to reduce economic inequality as a moral obligation

rooted in core beliefs about right and wrong predicted increased support for redistribution (Scatolon & Paladino, 2023).

The motivational strength of justice concerns has also been highlighted in the economics literature. Numerous experimental studies have demonstrated that individuals, driven by moral and social motives, may opt for equitable allocations, punish unequal distributors and free-riders, and alter others' earnings in order to reduce inequality, even at a personal cost (Dawes et al., 2007; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Lois & Riedl, 2022; Lopes, 2008). Furthermore, a genuine concern for justice, expressed as sensitivity to observing others being treated unfairly and adherence to justice principles (Schmitt et al., 1995, 2005) has been associated with more egalitarian economic decisions (Dalbert & Umlauf, 2009; Fetschenhauer & Huang, 2004).

All the above suggests that people may perceive economic inequality through a moral lens and oppose it due to the unfair allocation of burdens, benefits, and outcomes, including resources, opportunities, rights, and political power (Bal & van den Bos, 2022; Solt, 2008; Starck et al., 2021; Trump, 2018). However, people may also perceive economic inequality as personally threatening or as a threat to society as a whole (Schmidt & Juijn, 2024). In the next section, we analyse the personal and societal consequences of economic inequality that may trigger perceptions of threat and prompt instrumental arguments against economic inequality.

Economic inequality is threatening: Instrumental arguments against inequality

Economic inequality is related to increased economic worries and status anxiety (Melita et al., 2021; Roth et al., 2017), feelings of relative deprivation among the less wealthy (Jetten, Mols, & Steffens, 2021; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Jetten, et al., 2019), and 'fear of falling' among the wealthy (Jetten et al., 2017). Although perceptions of economic threat may sometimes lead to collective problem-focused reactions (e.g., collective demand for redistribution), at other times people may justify the social and economic system in order to alleviate the threat (Fritsche & Jugert, 2017).

At a societal level, wealth disparities are associated with increased criminality (d'Hombres et al., 2012), civic dishonesty (Du et al., 2021), reduced trust and cooperation (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017), and perceptions of chaos and anomie (Sprong et al., 2019). Moreover, in highly unequal societies, people infer that the normative climate of the society is competitive (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2023). Economic inequality was also suggested to impact intergroup relations by making wealth categories more salient, triggering intergroup comparisons (Jetten, Peters, et al., 2021), and eroding identification with superordinate identities (Petkanopoulou et al., 2018). Thus, economic inequality increases 'us' versus 'them' dynamics that might lead to conflict, social unrest and polarization (Jetten et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2021).

It is therefore evident that economic inequality threatens social cohesion and harmony. An intriguing question is: How do people respond to these threats? Previous literature on social inequalities highlights that people's orientation towards social harmony promotes social cohesion but, at the same time, undermines social change by making disadvantaged group members less sensitive to inequality and less willing to act against it (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019; Saguy et al., 2009). Moreover, instrumental arguments in favour of equality are less effective than moral ones in combating racial inequality (Starck et al., 2021).

Overview

We aim to investigate how justice- and threat-based concerns regarding economic inequality—associated with moral and instrumental arguments, respectively—shape people's reactions to economic

inequality. We expect that justice-based concerns will predict a stronger demand for equality compared to threat-based concerns.

In Study 1, we asked participants what makes economic inequality unfair or threatening at a personal and societal level. We conducted content analysis to code and summarize participants' responses, followed by a network analysis to identify patterns of associations among the codes. This approach allowed us to uncover the underlying structure of people's concerns about economic inequality. In Study 2, we measured the main concerns identified in Study 1 and explored their associations with attitudes towards redistribution and intentions to engage in collective action against inequality. In Study 3, we used survey data to examine the mediating role of distributive justice and social harmony concerns in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and attitudes towards redistribution and collective action intentions. Finally, Study 4 is a pre-registered experiment in which we tested the causal effect of these two concerns on people's opposition to economic inequality.

Study 1 and Study 2 were conducted in Greece, Study 3 in Spain, and Study 4 in the UK. Greece and Spain were severely affected by the economic crisis, which brought the gap between the haves and the have-nots to the forefront of public discourse, becoming a central issue of social movements such as the movements of the squares of 2011 (Andriopoulou et al., 2018; Castañeda, 2012). Additionally, the UK is among the OECD countries with the highest Gini index (0.35; OECD, 2021).

In all studies, participants provided informed consent and were debriefed after completing the studies. Studies 1, 2 and 4 were approved by the ethical committee of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Greece). Study 3 was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Granada (Spain).¹

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we manipulated the salience of justice versus threat to test how these different frames of economic inequality affect people's reactions to it. However, this manipulation was ineffective in altering participants' perceptions of justice and threat (for details, see Section S2). Consequently, we analysed participants' responses using a bottom-up qualitative approach, combining content and network analysis techniques. We aimed to explore the specific elements of economic inequality that people are more likely to perceive as unfair or threatening, as well as how those elements are articulated in a meaningful way. We refer to these elements using the term 'concern', as it encompasses both justice considerations and perceived threats.

Method

Participants and data corpus

The sample consisted of 358 Greek citizens ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.91$ years, $SD = 14.89$; 232 women, 118 men, 1 other, and 7 unreported) contacted online through email and social media using a snowballing method. Participants' demographic information is presented in Section S2. Data collection took place in two waves, in May–June 2021 and in October 2021. All participants were presented with a brief definition of economic inequality as the gap between the poorest and the richest social strata of society. In the first wave, half of the participants were asked to list the reasons why economic inequality is unfair, while the other half listed the reasons why economic inequality is threatening. In the second wave, we tried to differentiate between inequality concerns at a personal and societal

¹Some additional measures were included in the reported studies but are not the focus of this manuscript. All measures included in each study are presented in Section S1. Results using additional measures are presented in Section S2.

level. Half of the participants listed the reasons why economic inequality is threatening for them personally and the other half why economic inequality is threatening for the Greek society as a whole. We obtained 358 responses.

Analytical approach

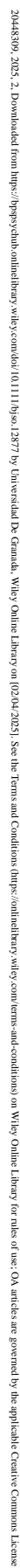
To explore the content and structure of people's concerns related to economic inequality, we used a data-centric and inductive approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative perspectives of content analysis (Schreier et al., 2019). Specifically, we used methods and procedures of the Grounded Theory (i.e. Grounded Theory 'lite') (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This approach is deemed appropriate when the goal is to gain a preliminary understanding of a topic rather than developing a formal theory (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). We first developed a detailed system of codes and encoded our data using ATLAS.ti software (web v. 22). We then used network analysis techniques supported by Gephi v. 0.9.5 software to identify and visualize the pattern of associations among these codes (Aznar-Crespo et al., 2024; García-Sánchez et al., 2018; García-Sánchez, García-Castro, et al., 2022). The network comprises a number of points (nodes) that are connected by links (edges). In our study, nodes correspond to the different codes, and edges correspond to co-occurrences of codes in the same response. The network is based on the co-occurrence matrix (i.e., a list with each combination of two codes and the number of responses in which they co-occur) and it is visualized with a graph comprising several clusters. Each cluster in this analysis represents a pattern of co-occurrences among certain codes (see also Sánchez-Rodríguez, Moreno-Bella, & García-Sánchez, 2023). Therefore, the network summarizes information about code relationships, which we interpret as indicators of latent concerns about economic inequality.

Coding

Coding was performed by three members of the research team in an interactive and iterative procedure (i.e., team-based approach to coding; Cascio et al., 2019). Our coding unit was each participant's response, which might include single or multiple phrases. Each response could be assigned multiple codes based on the topics expressed in it (see Table S1 for examples of coding).

The main researcher established a primary scheme of codes (Campbell et al., 2013). Two other members of the research team coded a small part of the data and then met to discuss and compare the codes they had applied and the new codes they identified. The coding framework was updated and refined as it was applied to additional parts of the data. Multiple subsequent coding cycles were performed until team members reached consensus that no new codes were emerging. During this process, clear definitions of codes and categories were provided to promote understanding and consistency among the team. Any doubts or disagreements were discussed within the team (Becker, Moser, et al., 2019). Given that we did not have a pre-defined coding framework, we relied on intercoder consensus rather than interrater reliability (for a similar approach see Cascio et al., 2019).

We came up with a coding framework consisting of 132 codes. We used axial coding to group codes into 13 categories depending on their conceptual closeness (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These categories were established to facilitate the coding process but were not utilized in the network analysis. The coding framework is presented in Table S2. The final coding framework was applied to the 209 responses pertaining to the threat/unfairness frames (Wave 1). We subsequently applied the same coding framework to the 149 responses of the personal/collective frames (Wave 2). No modifications were made to the coding framework because in Wave 1, we reached saturation, and our categorical framework was inclusive enough to cover topics mentioned in both waves. We combined responses from the two waves and performed subsequent analyses on this unified corpus.



Results and discussion

Types of people's concerns about economic inequality

We found four clusters of concerns about economic inequality. The two largest clusters comprised 35.88% (light green) and 31.3% (light purple) of the nodes, respectively. The two remaining clusters

²Graph density is computed as the ratio between the edges present in a graph and the maximum number of edges that the graph could have.

were composed of 15.56% (light orange) and 15.27% (light blue) of the nodes. The most central nodes for each cluster are presented in Figure 2. Based on the nodes belonging to each cluster, their centrality, and the patterns of association among them, we identified four overarching concerns of inequality: ‘distributive justice,’ ‘social harmony,’ ‘inequality of opportunities’ and ‘economic threat’. Representative quotes for each cluster are presented in Section S2.

Distributive justice

Cluster 1 contains most of the codes. The contrast between ‘the haves’ and ‘the haves not’ is a main topic in this cluster, as illustrated by the presence and the interconnections between the nodes of *poverty* and *wealth concentration*, *poor* and *rich*, *people/the many* and *elite/the few*. Furthermore, this cluster contains references to inequality of power, class-based exploitation, and the differential representation of the poor and the rich in politics and in state institutions. Finally, this cluster contains the nodes related to criteria that should determine a fair distribution of resources (e.g., see nodes: equity principle, equality principle, outcomes based on contribution/effort/skill). Although less central, these nodes jointly reflect a common concern about the lack of meritocracy and the violation of justice principles. In sum, this cluster comprises people's concerns about the unfair distribution of economic resources, power and authority.

Social harmony

Cluster 2 is the second largest cluster, and it is related to the pernicious societal consequences of economic inequality. Violence and conflict are important topics of this cluster, as illustrated by the nodes of *social unrest/conflict* and *criminality*, as well as by the presence of nodes such as *social cohesion*, *antagonism/rivalry*, and *anger/rage/outrage*. The central position of the node *social unrest/conflict* in this cluster indicates that conflict is often discussed in relation to other social problems, such as cultural and educational decline, prejudice, and social exclusion. In sum, this cluster reflects people's concerns about the consequences of economic inequality for social harmony and cohesion.

Inequality of opportunities

Cluster 3 comprises nodes that are related to restricted or unequal access to basic goods, education and health care, as well as nodes about poor living conditions and limited opportunities for a better life, especially for young generations. In sum, this cluster reflects people's concerns about inequality of opportunities in terms of quality of life, access to basic goods, and possibilities for personal advancement (see also nodes: development of personality, career development and social mobility).

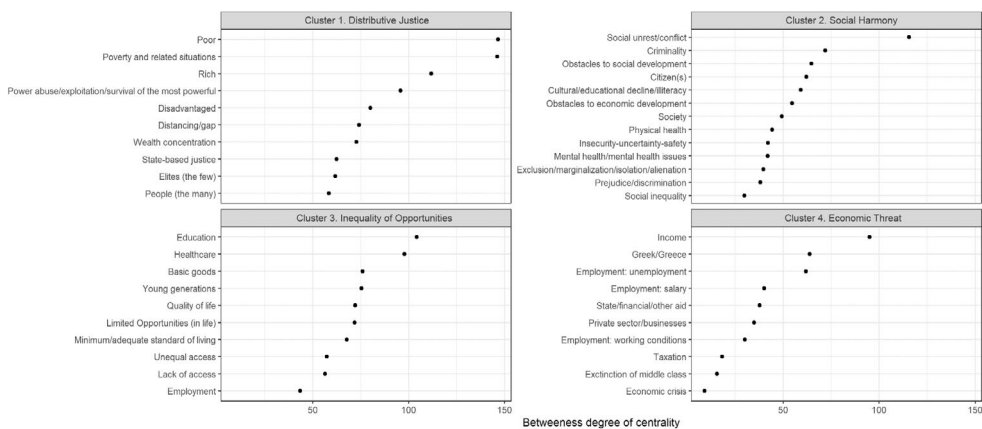


FIGURE 2 Betweenness centrality degree of the nodes that pertain to each cluster. We depicted the 10 nodes with the highest betweenness centrality degree values.

Economic threat

Cluster 4 is the smallest cluster of the network. This cluster groups nodes related to the negative consequences of economic inequality on people's personal economic conditions (e.g., unemployment, working conditions, salary, income) but also on the country's economy (e.g., see nodes: economic crisis, private sector business, public sector, extinction of middle class). In sum, this cluster reflects people's concerns that economic inequality may trigger an economic crisis as well as their concerns about economic threats affecting Greek citizens, especially those belonging to the middle class.

Correlations among the clusters and frames of economic inequality

We also explored whether the different frames affected the prevalence of concerns pertaining to a specific cluster. To quantify the relevance of each cluster, for each participant we constructed four indexes by summing the instances in which they mentioned codes belonging to each cluster. Specifically, the presence of a code in a participant's response is coded as 1, while its absence is coded as 0. For example, if a participant's response includes three codes from Cluster 1 and six codes from Cluster 2, the participant would score 3 for Cluster 1 and 6 for Cluster 2. We then conducted correlations between these indexes and the different inequality frames.³ Responses in the threat frame were more likely to include codes grouped in the social harmony cluster ($r = .45, p < .001$). In contrast, responses in the injustice frame were more likely to contain codes from the distributive justice cluster ($r = -.19, p < .01$), indicating that concerns related to the unequal distribution of economic resources and power are rooted in moral and justice motives. Additionally, responses in the collective frame were more likely to include codes from the clusters of distributive justice ($r = .29, p < .001$) and social harmony ($r = .41, p < .001$), suggesting that these two clusters primarily represent collective concerns. Conversely, concerns related to the inequality of opportunities were frequently mentioned by participants prompted to view inequality as a personal threat; $r = -.33, p < .001$ (see also Table S4).

In Study 1, we adopt a bottom-up approach to identify the elements of economic inequality that individuals perceive as unfair or threatening. Furthermore, we investigated how these elements are organized into distinct clusters of meaning. We identified four clusters, encompassing concerns related to distributive justice, social harmony, inequality of opportunities, and economic threats. While the codes used to encode our data are descriptive, capturing information provided by participants, the interconnectedness and clustering of these codes can be interpreted as reflecting latent, overarching concerns. A caveat of Study 1 is its exploratory nature, with the coding process and cluster interpretation relying on researchers' subjective views and expert knowledge. Still, this analysis is key to providing preliminary evidence to inform future research on people's concerns about economic inequality. In subsequent studies, we examine whether these concerns predict opposition to economic inequality.

STUDY 2

Participants were first exposed to four vignettes designed to manipulate the four overarching concerns identified in Study 1 (see Section S1). According to the results of Study 1, concerns related to the unequal distribution of resources and power (distributive justice concerns) are more likely to emerge when economic inequality is perceived as a matter of justice. Building on the literature emphasizing the unequivocal role of justice and moral motives in opposition to inequalities, we hypothesized that participants exposed to the vignette of distributive justice (vs. the other three vignettes)

³In Wave 1, the unfairness frame was coded as 0 and the threat frame was coded as 1. In Wave 2, the personal frame was coded as 0 and the collective frame as 1.

would report (a) greater support for taxing the rich and (b) stronger intentions to engage in collective action against economic inequality (<https://osf.io/vh82w>). To evaluate the effectiveness of the manipulation, all participants responded to four items that assessed these different types of concerns. Since this manipulation proved ineffective (see Section S2; Table S5), we treated the data as correlational.⁴ By doing so, we aimed to provide preliminary evidence for the relationship between people's different concerns and their responses to economic inequality. The type of vignette to which participants were exposed was dummy-coded and included as a covariate in all the analyses of Study 2. In line with our initial preregistered hypothesis, we expected that distributive justice concern would be a better predictor of support for redistribution focused on taxing the rich and collective action intentions.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited online through email and social media using a snowballing method. The link was also distributed among students through the University's online learning platform. Eighty-nine people did not respond to all the measures included in the study, and they were excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 268 participants (180 women, 80 men, 2 other, 6 undisclosed) aged between 18 to 72 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.82$; $SD = 11.74$).

Measures

All responses were collected using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Totally disagree/not at all/Not at all important*, 7 = *Totally agree/very much/Extremely important*) unless stated otherwise.

Concerns related to economic inequality

We used four single-item measures to assess four different types of concerns. The items were based on a central topic from each one of the four clusters identified in Study 1. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate how important they considered each one of the following concerns: Economic inequality '...causes inequality of power and authority' (distributive justice), '...increases violence in society and causes social unrest' (social harmony), '... leads to unequal opportunities in education, employment, and personal development' (inequality of opportunities), '... threatens middle-class with extinction' (economic threat).

Support for redistribution

We assessed two different facets of redistribution (Bechtel et al., 2018; García-Sánchez, Castillo, et al., 2022): (a) Taxing the rich: 'The government should impose higher taxes on people with the highest income', 'There is a great need to redistribute wealth from those who have more to those who have less', 'The government should impose taxes on large inheritances' ($\alpha = .71$) and (b) Assisting the poor: 'The government should spend more money on subsidies for the poor', 'The government should financially aid the poor' ($rho = .76$, $p < .001$).

Collective action intentions

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would be willing to engage in the following two actions: 'Participate in demonstrations to demand the reduction of economic inequality in Greece'

⁴Although this manipulation caused some effects on participants' reported concerns, most of those effects were weak and not in the expected direction. Moreover, our manipulation did not affect any of the dependent variables of interest.

TABLE 1 Means, SDs and Pearson's correlations between all the variables of interest (Study 2).

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Distributive justice	5.80	1.47										
2. Social harmony	5.90	1.23	0.430***									
3. Inequality of opportunities	6.22	1.20	0.444***	0.479**								
4. Economic threat	5.36	1.52	0.339***	0.503***	0.332***							
5. Taxing the rich	5.03	1.39	0.365***	0.205**	0.358***	0.155*						
6. Assisting the poor	5.57	1.45	0.228***	0.168**	0.192**	0.113	0.357***					
7. Collective action	4.66	1.92	0.282***	0.174**	0.279***	0.184**	0.518***	0.338***				
8. SES	5.71	1.39	0.055	−0.017	0.017	0.099	0.047	0.032	−0.077			
9. Political orientation	4.16	1.64	−0.261***	−0.100	−0.272***	0.019	−0.365***	−0.243***	−0.421***	0.218***		
10. Gender			−0.016	0.075	0.042	−0.037	−0.119	0.077	−0.027	0.038	0.014	
11. Age	35.82	11.74	−0.016	0.025	−0.054	0.114	0.211**	−0.017	−0.009	0.255***	0.186**	0.020

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Hierarchical regression analysis: Concerns related to economic inequality as predictors of collective action intentions, support for redistribution focused on taxing the rich, and support for redistribution focused on assisting the poor.

Predictors	Collective action			Taxing the rich			Assisting the poor		
	B	β	95% CI	B	β	95% CI	B	β	95% CI
Step 1									
Gender	-.08	-.02	[-0.56, 0.39]	-.39*	-.13	[-0.72, -0.06]	.23	.07	[-0.15, 0.61]
Age	.01	.06	[-0.01, 0.03]	.03***	.28	[0.02, 0.05]	<-.01	<-.01	[-0.02, 0.01]
SES	<-.01	<-.01	[-0.18, 0.16]	.07	.07	[-0.04, 0.19]	.12	.11	[-0.01, 0.25]
Political orientation	-.51***	-.42	[-0.65, -0.37]	-.37***	-.43	[-0.45, -0.27]	-.24***	-.27	[-0.35, -0.13]
Step 2									
	$\Delta R^2 = .07; \Delta F = 6.10***$			$\Delta R^2 = .11; \Delta F = 10.60***$			$\Delta R^2 = .04; \Delta F = 2.43*$		
Gender	-.05	-.01	[-0.51, 0.41]	-.40*	-.13	[-0.71, -0.09]	.23	.07	[-0.15, 0.60]
Age	<.01	.05	[-0.01, 0.03]	.03***	.28	[0.02, 0.05]	<-.01	-.02	[-0.02, 0.01]
SES	-.07	-.05	[-0.23, 0.10]	.02	.02	[-0.09, 0.13]	.09	.09	[-0.04, 0.23]
Political orientation	-.43***	-.36	[-0.57, -0.29]	-.28***	-.32	[-0.37, -0.18]	-.20**	-.22	[-0.31, -0.08]
Distributive Justice	.20*	.15	[0.02, 0.37]	.19**	.20	[0.08, 0.31]	.12	.12	[-0.02, 0.27]
Social harmony	-.03	-.02	[-0.25, 0.20]	<-.01	<-.01	[-0.15, 0.14]	.06	.05	[-0.12, 0.24]
Inequality of opportunities	.13	.08	[-0.09, 0.35]	.25**	.21	[0.10, 0.39]	.06	.05	[-0.12, 0.24]
Economic threat	.20*	.16	[0.04, 0.37]	.01	.02	[-0.10, 0.13]	.03	.03	[-0.11, 0.17]
R ² (model 1)	.19			.25			.09		
R ² (model 2)	.26			.36			.12		
F (model 1)	8.06***			11.49***			3.29**		
F (model 2)	7.77***			12.30***			3.03**		

Note: We also controlled for the type of vignette to which participants were exposed as dummy-coded variables. The effects of the dummies are presented in Section S2 (Table S6a). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

and 'Become a member of groups or/ and participate in movements to actively press for the reduction of economic inequality' ($r_{ho} = .76, p < .001$).

Covariates

We assessed participants' subjective socioeconomic status (S-SES) using a 10-point scale (Adler et al., 2000) and their political orientation (1 = *extreme left*; 10 = *extreme right*). Participants also indicated their age and gender.

Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations and Pearson's correlations between all the variables of interest are presented in Table 1.⁵

Concerns related to economic inequality predicting collective action intentions and support for policies

Three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted using as criterion variables: (a) collective action, (b) taxing the rich and (c) assisting the poor. In all models, participants' S-SES, gender (0 = men, 1 = women), age and political orientation were inserted as control variables in step 1. The four types of concerns were introduced in Step 2. Results are presented in Table 2. Degrees of freedom vary due to missing values.

Study 2 provided preliminary evidence that not all concerns related to economic inequality consistently predict opposition to economic inequality. Concerns about the unequal distribution of power and authority (i.e., distributive justice concerns) were associated with both collective action intentions and support for redistribution policies focused on taxing the rich. Importantly, social harmony concerns were not associated with any of those reactions against economic inequality. Concerns about inequality of opportunities were positively correlated with support for taxation of the rich but not with collective action intentions. Lastly, concerns related to economic threats faced by the middle class were positively correlated with collective action intention but not with support for taxation of the rich. Notably, support for taxing the rich and support for providing assistance to the poor were not highly correlated, suggesting that these policies correspond to distinct facets of redistribution and that support for these policies may be underlined by different factors (Bechtel et al., 2018; García-Sánchez, Castillo, et al., 2022). Our results revealed that assisting the poor was not associated with any of the four types of concerns. Instead, support for these policies was linked to a left-wing political ideology.

In this study, the measurement of concerns was based on a single item. Moreover, although in Study 1 the cluster of distributive justice emerged from the co-occurrence of different topics (contrast between the haves and the have nots, unequal distribution of power and violation of justice principles), the item used in Study 2 was representative only of the second topic. In Study 3, we aimed to replicate our findings regarding the relative capacity of distributive justice concerns to predict opposition to economic inequality, using an improved measure of concerns.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we investigated the mediating role of distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and opposition to economic inequality, through collective action and support for redistribution policies. We chose to focus on these two

⁵Given that political orientation was correlated with many of our main variables, this variable was introduced as an additional covariate in all our analyses. For analyses without this covariate see Table S6b.

concerns for the following reasons. As revealed in Study 1, both are collective in nature. However, distributive justice concerns are associated with perceptions of unfairness, while social harmony concerns are linked to perceptions of threat. Furthermore, these two concerns correspond to the distinction between non-instrumental or moral arguments against economic inequality and instrumental arguments, which focus on the consequences of economic inequality for societal wellbeing (Schmidt & Juijn, 2024; Starck et al., 2021). In line with our general hypothesis and the results of Study 2, we expect that distributive justice concerns (and not social harmony concerns) would mediate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and demand for more equality.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 1536 Spanish citizens (790 women) aged between 18 and 94 years ($M = 48.41$, $SD = 17.21$). We used a convenience sample from an online panel survey company (Netquest). The sample was stratified by quotas reflecting the sociodemographic composition of the Spanish society in terms of biological sex, age, income and region of residence, according to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics. Respondents who failed more than one of the three attention checks were a priori excluded from the data analyses.

Measures

Perceived economic inequality

We used the following two items: ‘To what extent do you think that the distribution of resources in Spain is equal’ (reversed code) and ‘To what extent do you think that the distribution of resources in Spain is unequal’ ($rho = .61$, $p < .001$).

Concerns related to economic inequality

Two items assessed distributive justice concerns: In general terms, I am worried about economic inequality because ‘some people and groups are in a disadvantaged position in comparison with other people or groups’ and ‘economic inequality violates fundamental principles of justice’ ($rho = .64$, $p < .001$). Two additional items assessed social harmony concerns: ‘economic inequality jeopardises social harmony’ and ‘economic inequality generates conflict between social classes’ ($rho = .74$, $p < .001$).

Collective action intentions

We used the same items as in Study 2 and two additional ones: ‘Boycott events or products that sustain economic inequality,’ ‘Take a stand against economic inequality publicly’ ($\alpha = .87$).

Support for redistribution

We again assessed two different facets of support for redistribution. Taxing the rich was assessed through the items used in Study 2 and 3 additional items (e.g. ‘The government should place an upper limit on the amount of money one can make’) ($\alpha = .82$). Assisting the poor was measured through three items (e.g. ‘The government should spend more money on subsidies for the poor’; García-Sánchez, Castillo, et al., 2022; $\alpha = .72$).

Covariates

Same as in Study 2.

TABLE 3 Means, SDs and Pearson's correlations between all the variables of interest (Study 3).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Perceived economic inequality	5.48	1.16									
2. Social Harmony concerns	5.62	1.25	0.341**								
3. Distributive Justice concerns	5.60	1.31	0.415**	0.739***							
4. Collective action	4.21	1.64	0.221**	0.321***	0.427***						
5. Taxing the Rich	4.72	1.36	0.310***	0.412***	0.549***	0.477***					
6. Assisting the Poor	5.23	1.31	0.250**	0.401***	0.488***	0.407***	0.692***				
7. SES	5.16	1.56	−0.149**	−0.094***	−0.116***	−0.072**	−0.148***	−0.153***			
8. Political orientation	4.17	2.67	−0.208**	−0.273***	−0.357***	−0.370***	−0.506***	−0.337***	0.086**		
9. Age	48.4	17.21	0.010	0.066*	0.087**	−0.027	0.076**	0.095***	0.108***	0.106***	
10. Gender	—	—	0.013	0.033	0.079**	0.019	−0.011	0.047	−0.073**	−0.086**	−0.342***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

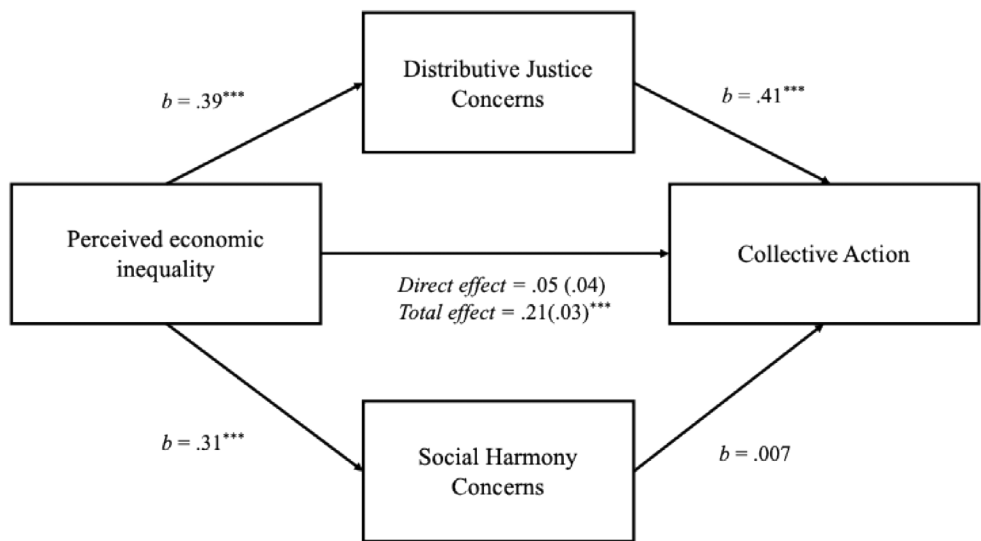


FIGURE 3 Mediation analysis: Distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns as mediators between the perception of economic inequality and collective action against inequality. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations and Pearson's correlations between the key variables are presented in Table 3.

Mediation analyses

To examine the mediating role of the two types of concerns in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and the outcome variables of interest, we conducted three mediation analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). These analyses were performed with the Process macro for SPSS (Model 4) using bias-corrected bootstrapping for 5000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2013). Age, gender, SES and political orientation were included as covariates.⁶

Indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on collective action

When both mediators were simultaneously added to the first mediation model, the only significant indirect effect was that of distributive justice concerns, $IE = 0.16$, (0.02), [0.1211, 0.2057] (see Figure 3). Social harmony concerns did not mediate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and willingness to engage in collective action against inequality; $IE = 0.002$ (0.01), [-0.0255, 0.0302].

Indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution focused on taxing the rich

A second mediation model revealed a significant indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on taxing the rich through distributive justice concerns, $IE = 0.16$ (0.02), [0.1198, 0.1948] (see Figure 4). The indirect path through social harmony concerns was not significant; $IE = -0.0004$ (0.01), [-0.0224, 0.0208].

⁶For exploratory purposes we also conducted three moderated mediation analyses (Process macro for SPSS; Model 8) with political orientation as moderator of both the direct and indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on each one of the three outcome variables (see Section S2).

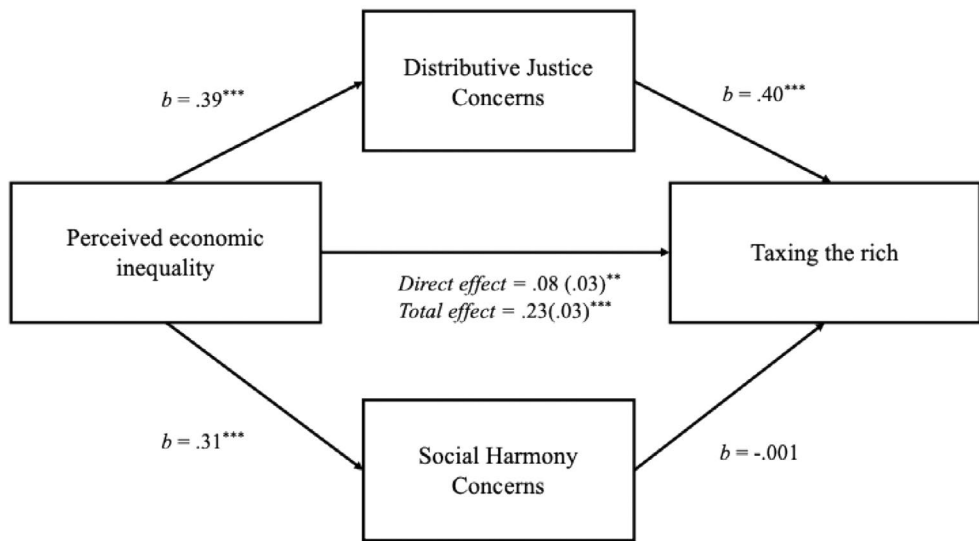


FIGURE 4 Mediation analysis: Distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns as mediators between the perception of economic inequality and taxing the rich. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution focused on assisting the poor

Both types of concerns were found to mediate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and providing assistance to the poor ($IE = 0.13$, (0.02), [0.0861, 0.1639] and $IE = 0.03$, (0.01), [0.0039, 0.0524], for distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns respectively) (see Figure 5). Yet a comparison of the two indirect effects (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008) revealed that the first was greater in magnitude, $b = .10$ (.03), [.1521, .0416].

In sum, the results of Study 3 showed that the greater perceived economic inequality is, the more concerned people are about both distributive justice and social harmony. However, only distributive justice concerns are linked to people's collective action intentions and support for redistribution policies focused on taxing the rich. Although social harmony concerns mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for policies focused on assisting the poor, this effect was weaker than the one through distributive justice concerns. One caveat of this study is the strong correlation we found between distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns, suggesting that these dimensions may overlap empirically.⁷ However, the different patterns of correlations with our variables of interest support the theoretical distinction between these two types of concerns. Furthermore, an instrument designed to measure concerns about economic inequality also shows that justice and social harmony concerns load consistently in distinct factors and exhibit different associations with outcome variables (Petkanopoulou et al., 2024).

Notably, additional exploratory analyses revealed that economic inequality was directly linked with collective action only for left-wing individuals and not for right-wing individuals. However, the indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on collective action and support for redistribution mediated by distributive justice concerns were stronger for right-wing individuals (see Section S2). This suggests that for right-wing individuals, concerns about economic inequality are more contingent on their perceptions about the current level of economic inequality. Consequently, correcting misperceptions of economic inequality could be particularly important among right-wing individuals.

⁷Multicollinearity was not a concern. The tolerance values >0.30 and VIF values <3.00.

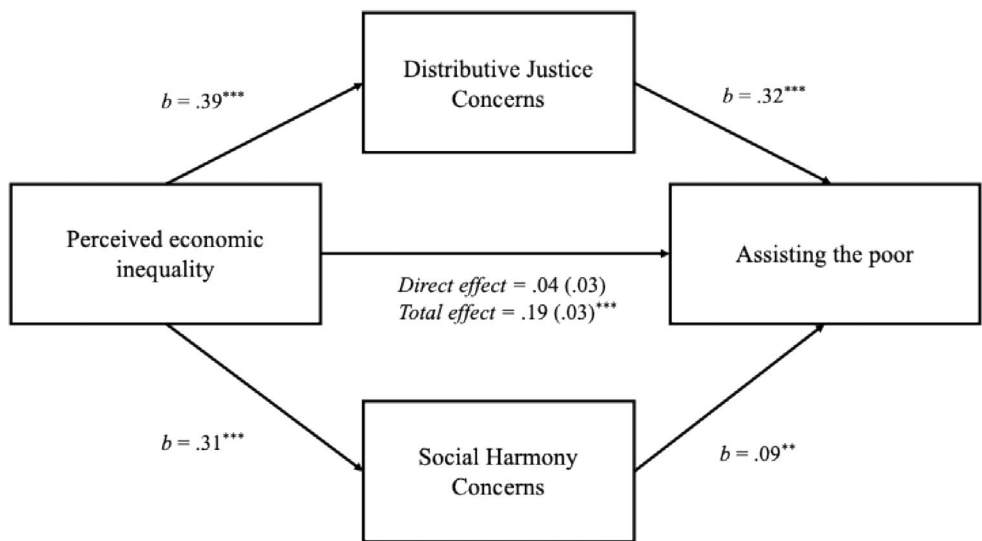


FIGURE 5 Mediation analysis: Distributive justice concerns and social harmony concerns as mediators between perceptions of economic inequality and assisting the poor. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

STUDY 4

In Study 4, we manipulated distributive justice and social harmony concerns. We also included a control condition in which both concerns were low despite high economic inequality. We hypothesized that distributive justice concerns (vs. social harmony concerns and control conditions) would increase support for redistribution and collective action intentions. The study design, hypotheses and analysis strategy plan of this study were preregistered (<https://osf.io/6z3gx>).

Method

Participants

An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 software indicated that we needed 228 participants to detect a medium effect size in a one-way ANOVA (80% power and α corrected for multiple testing = 0.01). We initially recruited 235 UK prolific workers. Twenty-one people were excluded from analyses as they failed the attention check question. The final sample consisted of 214 participants (94 men and 120 women) aged between 18 and 76 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.17$; $SD = 13.08$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: Distributive justice concerns versus Social harmony concerns versus Control.

Experimental manipulation

We manipulated distributive justice and social harmony concerns by exposing participants to two different vignettes. Both vignettes described a hypothetical country with high economic inequality. Participants were asked to imagine they lived in such a country. Participants in the distributive justice concerns condition read that *the major consequence of economic inequality in this country is that basic principles of justice are violated*. Participants in the social harmony concerns condition read that *the major consequence of economic inequality in this country is the threat to social harmony and peace*.

In both conditions, participants were presented with some details concerning these two types of concerns, and they were also asked to observe a figure showing that this country scores extremely low (in comparison to the world average) either in the justice or the harmony index, depending on the condition. Participants in the control condition were asked to imagine living in a country with high economic inequality. However, despite economic inequality, basic principles of justice are respected, and there is harmony and peace. After reading the vignettes, participants were asked to provide three keywords regarding the vignette to maximize their attention and the vignette's effect (stimuli are presented in Section S1, Study 4). This manipulation was inspired by previously used manipulations that effectively altered perceptions of and attitudes towards economic inequality by asking participants to imagine themselves in hypothetical contexts (Cheng et al., 2024; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, et al., 2019).

Measures

Participants were asked to answer the following measures, having in mind the country described in the vignette.

Self-reported concerns

Two questions were included to check the effectiveness of the manipulation: To what extent do you think that citizens of this country are concerned that: 'Economic inequality violates fundamental principles of justice' and 'Economic inequality jeopardizes social harmony'?

Support for redistribution

Again, support for redistribution was assessed using two subscales: (a) For taxing the rich we used the three items used in Study 2 and an additional one, 'The government should place an upper limit on the amount of money one can make' ($\alpha = .76$). (b) Assisting the poor was assessed using two items (e.g. 'The government should take measures to reduce poverty'; $\rho = 0.72$, $p < .001$).

Collective action intentions

We included the two items used in Study 2 ($\rho = .86$, $p < .001$).

Attitudes towards inequality

We included three items from the support for inequality scale (Wiwad et al., 2019): 'The negative consequences of economic inequality in this country have been largely exaggerated', 'Economic inequality is causing many of this country's problems' and 'I would be very disturbed by the extent of economic inequality' ($\alpha = .77$).

Finally, participants answered the same measures of subjective socioeconomic status, political orientation, and demographics as in Studies 2 and 3.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

We performed a 3 (Type of concern: Distributive Justice, Social Harmony, Control; between factor) \times 2 (Self-reported concern: Justice, Social Harmony; within factor) mixed ANOVA. This analysis revealed a significant Type of concern \times Self-reported concern effect $F(2, 211) = 10.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$. Simple effect analyses were then conducted to examine the effect of type of concern on self-reported justice and social harmony concerns. The simple main effect of the type of concern on participants' self-reported justice concerns was significant, $F(2, 211) = 25.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$.

All pairwise comparisons were significant ($p < .001$). Participants exposed to the distributive justice concerns vignette ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 0.99$) were found to be more concerned about justice than participants exposed to the social harmony vignette ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.28$) and the control group ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.64$).

The simple main effect of type of concern on participants' self-reported harmony concerns was significant too, $F(2, 211) = 46.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.31$. Pairwise comparisons showed that participants in distributive justice concerns ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 0.90$) and social harmony concerns conditions ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.02$) considered that citizens of the hypothetical country would be more concerned about social harmony than the control group ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.44$); $p < .001$ for both comparisons. However, mean scores in the two experimental conditions were similar ($p = .886$).

To gain additional insight into the pattern of the two-way interaction, we also compared self-reported justice and social harmony concerns within the three experimental conditions. Importantly, participants exposed to the social harmony vignette reported being more concerned about social harmony than justice, $F(1, 211) = 32.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$. Participants in the other two conditions reported being concerned about social harmony and justice to a similar extent, $F(1, 211) = 0.04$, $p = .84$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$, and $F(1, 211) = 0.00$, $p = 1.00$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$, for the distributive justice and control condition respectively.

We then conducted a series of ANOVAs on our main dependent variables. See Table 4 for means and SDs of all dependent variables per condition.

Support for redistribution

Taxing the rich

As expected, the type of concern affected support for redistribution policies focused on taxing the rich, $F(2, 211) = 7.31$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Participants in the distributive justice concerns condition reported greater support for taxation of the rich than participants in the social harmony concerns condition ($p = .008$) and control condition ($p < .001$). Support for taxation of the rich was similar for participants in the social harmony concerns condition and participants in the control condition ($p = .301$).

Assisting the poor

Support for redistribution policies focused on assisting the poor was also affected by our manipulation, $F(2, 211) = 6.44$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. Participants in the distributive justice concerns condition reported stronger support for policies that target the poor compared to both the social harmony concerns condition ($p = .027$) and the control condition ($p < .001$). Participants in the social harmony concerns condition and the control condition showed similar levels of support for this type of policy ($p = .181$).

TABLE 4 Means, standard deviations, and one-way analyses of variance in all study variables by vignette (justice concerns, harmony concerns, control).

Dependent variables	Distributive justice concerns		Social harmony concerns		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Taxing the rich	5.36 _a	1.15	4.84 _b	1.16	4.64 _b	1.17
Assisting the poor	6.50 _a	0.78	6.19 _b	0.79	6.01 _b	0.92
Collective action	4.81 _a	1.64	4.53 _a	1.78	3.91 _b	1.81
Attitudes towards equality	5.96 _a	0.79	5.69 _a	0.81	4.83 _b	0.96

Note: Means with different subscripts differ significantly across rows.

Collective action participation

Differences in participants' collective action intentions were also observed, $F(2, 211) = 4.86, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$. Participants in the distributive justice concerns condition displayed higher collective action intentions compared to those in the control group ($p = .003$). Additionally, participants in the social harmony concerns condition showed greater collective action intentions than the control group ($p = .038$). Contrary to our hypothesis, participants reported similar collective action intentions in both experimental conditions ($p = .334$).

Attitudes towards equality

The effect of the type of concerns on attitudes towards equality was also significant, $F(2, 211) = 33.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.24$. Participants in the distributive justice concerns condition were more supportive of equality compared to the control group ($p < .001$) and the same was true for participants in the social harmony concerns condition (compared to the control condition; $p < .001$). Also, participants in the distributive justice concerns condition tended to be more supportive of equality than participants in the social harmony concerns condition ($p = .055$).

In Study 4, we provided causal evidence for the effects of distributive justice and social harmony concerns on opposition to economic inequality. Exposure to both types of concerns (compared to a no concerns control condition) increased positive attitudes towards equality and collective action intentions. In line with our hypothesis, only distributive justice concerns increased support for taxing the rich and assisting the poor. Notably, in the distributive justice condition, participants also reported being worried about social harmony. Robustness tests indicate that the observed effects are similar when controlling for participants' self-reported harmony concerns (See Section S2).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research constitutes the first systematic attempt to examine the content and structure of concerns about economic inequality and to test how these concerns shape reactions to inequality. Overall, our findings highlight the crucial role of moral concerns related to distributive justice in motivating social change. In contrast, instrumental concerns related to threats to social harmony may not necessarily motivate people to challenge the status quo. Therefore, individuals must not only be concerned about economic inequality; their concerns should be rooted in justice motives rather than perceived threats to effectively support actions and policies to reduce inequality.

In Study 1, content and network analysis provided a systematic representation of participants' justice- and threat-based concerns related to economic inequality. We identified four overarching concerns: distributive justice, social harmony, inequality of opportunities and economic threats. Distributive justice and social harmony were collective concerns associated with perceptions of unfairness and threat, respectively. In Study 2, we found that being concerned about the unequal distribution of power—one of the main topics within the distributive justice cluster of concerns—was associated with collective action intentions and support for redistribution policies, while social harmony concerns were not. Study 3 demonstrated that distributive justice concerns mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for all types of action and policies aiming at reducing economic inequality. In contrast, social harmony concerns only mediated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for economic assistance to the poor. However, this indirect effect was weaker than the one through distributive justice concerns. Study 4 showed that exposure to distributive justice concerns (compared to social harmony concerns and control conditions) increased support for equality and redistribution.

Our research builds on the existing literature regarding the role of justice motives in promoting social change. Previous studies have examined justice concerns in general terms. For example, general perceptions of illegitimacy (Klandermans, 1997; Runciman, 1966; Van Zomeren, 2013), readiness to perceive

injustice (Dalbert & Umlauf, 2009; Fetschenhauer & Huang, 2004; Schmitt et al., 1995), and moral convictions to reduce inequality (Franks & Scherr, 2018; Scatolon & Paladino, 2023) have been found to predict mobilization against economic inequality and support for egalitarian resource allocation. Our research extends these findings by focusing on the specific justice-based concerns that arise when people perceive economic inequality. The contrast between the advantaged and disadvantaged, the unequal distribution of economic resources and power, and the violation of justice principles were common concerns, especially when people were prompted to reflect on the unfair aspects of economic inequality.

Over the last decade, a growing body of literature has highlighted the negative consequences of economic inequality for social cohesion (Jetten, Peters, et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2017). Our findings reveal that laypeople are not only aware of but also concerned about the societal implications of economic inequality. Conflict escalation and social unrest emerged as some of the most frequent concerns, particularly when people were prompted to view economic inequality as a threat to society as a whole. These arguments against economic inequality have been characterized as instrumental since what is at stake is social harmony and cohesion and not justice and equality per se.

It has been suggested that instrumental arguments against economic inequality could potentially mobilize people, especially those who do not start with egalitarian premises (Schmidt & Juijn, 2024). Our findings offered limited support for this idea. Although in Study 3, social harmony concerns were positively associated with assisting the poor, this effect was inconsistent across studies. Moreover, social harmony concerns were not associated with support for redistribution through taxing the rich. This aligns with the idea that giving to the poor does not always go hand in hand with taking from the rich (Bechtel et al., 2018). In such cases, assistance to the poor may stem from paternalistic motives rather than a desire to address structural inequalities (Becker, Ksenofontov, et al., 2019).

Existing social psychological literature suggests that harmony-based emotions (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019) and positive intergroup contact (Saguy et al., 2009) may reduce people's desire to address inequalities. In our studies, we did not observe such 'ironic' effects of social harmony concerns. However, the null effects of social harmony concerns on nearly all indicators of opposition to economic inequality support the idea that a sole focus on harmony may promote social cohesion but not social change. Furthermore, our results align with previous research, showing that instrumental arguments are less effective than moral ones in reducing social inequalities (Starck et al., 2021).

It is noteworthy that in Study 4, both experimental conditions caused similar levels of social harmony concerns. Also, although in the social harmony condition participants reported being more concerned about social harmony than distributive justice, in the distributive justice condition, participants reported similar levels of both concerns. This apparent failure to distinguish between these two concerns might be inevitable. To put it differently, when people recognize that justice is violated, they inevitably think that social harmony is also in jeopardy. By contrast, shifting the attention to the negative consequences of economic inequality for social harmony does not necessarily raise awareness about injustice.

Our findings provide novel insights into the literature on inequality framing (Bank, 2017; Bruckmüller et al., 2017; Dietze & Craig, 2021). Framing economic inequality as a matter of justice is a more effective way to make people less tolerant of it. This finding has important practical and political implications. It highlights how people who fight against economic inequality could frame news related to economic inequality to increase support for redistribution.

While our main focus was on distributive justice and social harmony concerns, we also found preliminary evidence for the effects of the two other overarching concerns revealed in Study 1. In Study 2, concerns about economic inequality creating unequal opportunities in education, employment, and personal development were correlated with support for redistribution through taxing the rich, but not with collective action intentions. These concerns may align more with individual rather than social goals (Van Prooijen, 2013), making collective reactions less likely. Supporting this idea, in Study 1, concerns about inequality of opportunities were more frequent when participants viewed economic inequality as a personal rather than a collective threat.

Also, perceptions of economic inequality threatening the middle class were correlated with collective action intentions but not with support for redistribution. This partially supports the idea that economic

threats can trigger problem-focused responses to inequality (Fritzsche & Jugert, 2017). However, while middle-class extinction was among the topics in the economic threat cluster, it was not the most prominent. Additionally, participants may have perceived middle-class extinction as both an economic and symbolic ingroup threat (Wohl et al., 2010). Therefore, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Economic inequality is a pervasive reality in most countries (Milanovic, 2016; Piketty, 2014) and we expect the concerns identified in Study 1 to be relevant across contexts. Indeed, our findings share similarities with those of previous qualitative research on perceptions of economic inequality in other contexts (e.g., García-Sánchez et al., 2018, 2022; Irwin, 2018; Soler-Martínez et al., 2023). However, the specific content and prevalence of those concerns can be influenced by socioeconomic and cultural factors. For instance, in countries less affected by economic crises, issues like unemployment and salary cuts may be less prominent. Cross-cultural variations in people's justice- and threat-based concerns triggered by economic inequality represent a promising direction for future research.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. First, in Study 1, we only focused on justice and threat considerations, overlooking other concerns that may mobilize people against economic inequality. Future qualitative studies could explore how people evaluate economic inequality using more general prompts that enable the identification of additional dimensions. Second, social harmony and distributive justice concerns were highly correlated in Study 2, indicating a significant overlap between the two dimensions. This overlap makes it challenging to account for one dimension without considering the other, even though they are conceptually different.

Furthermore, distributive justice concerns were not consistently operationalized across studies. In Study 2, distributive justice concerns were measured as concerns related to the unequal distribution of power that accompanies economic inequality, whereas in Study 3, they were measured as concerns about the fact that economic inequality places some people in a disadvantaged position in comparison with others and violates fundamental principles of justice. The common thread that connects these different operationalizations of distributive justice concerns is the emphasis on the unfair distribution of resources (either economic or power) and the fact that they are rooted in people's moral standards. Importantly, these different operationalizations correspond to central and highly interconnected topics that emerged from our participants' own words. Despite their differences, these indicators are part of the same latent concern about distributive justice. Future research could further explore the underlying latent structure of people's concerns about economic inequality and develop instruments to comprehensively assess its different dimensions.

In conclusion, we demonstrated that people are concerned about economic inequality for multiple reasons. Among the most important ones are justice-based concerns focused on the unfairness of economic and power disparities and threat-based concerns focused on the negative consequences of economic inequality for social harmony. As far as our results showed, framing economic inequality as a matter of justice is the most effective way to promote demand for more equality.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Katerina Petkanopoulou: Conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; methodology; investigation; writing – original draft; project administration; writing – review and editing; supervision.
Artemis-Margarita Griva: Conceptualization; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft.
Efraín García-Sánchez: Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.
Filyra Vlastou-Dimopoulou: Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; writing – original draft.
Konstantinos-Christos Daoultzis: Investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing.
Guillermo B. Willis: Conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; writing – review and editing.
Rosa Rodríguez-Bailón: Conceptualization; methodology; funding acquisition; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings are openly available in Open Science Framework at: <https://osf.io/kc7mx/>. The qualitative data of study 1 (original data in Greek) are available on request from the corresponding author. These data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The present paper is part of a research project that received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Greece). Study 3 was also approved by the Ethics committee of the University of Granada (Spain). The research was conducted in compliance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

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