Tesis Doctoral – PhD Thesis

Programa de Doctorado en Psicología

RELACIÓN ENTRE LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA Y LA ANSIEDAD POR EL ESTATUS

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECONOMIC INEQUALILTY AND STATUS ANXIETY

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A mio padre

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Overview

Economic inequality is one of the most pressing issues of our times. Although it is not a new issue, the accumulation of resources by elites across the globe has been exacerbating the gap between the haves and the have-nots during the last decades (Alvaredo et al., 2017; Piketty, 2014). Economic inequality is comparable to a lethal pandemic, which deteriorates population's health and life expectancy along the entire social ladder once it exceeds a threshold (approximately 0.3 points in the Gini Index; Kondo et al., 2009). Nowadays, more than two thirds of world countries exceed this threshold[1]. A large share of the negative effects of economic inequality on individuals' health and wellbeing have been attributed to status anxiety (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). This phenomenon has been defined as a constant concern people experience about their socioeconomic status and about not meeting society's standard of success (De Botton, 2004). On the one hand, materialistic values are enhanced in unequal societies (Walasek & Brown, 2019). On the other hand, humans are highly vigilant about any threat toward their social esteem (Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2004). Hence, when socioeconomic status become highly relevant for their social esteem a competitive climate could be generated, which potentially could rise status anxiety and, in turn, chronically activate stress reactions.

Some evidence supports the status anxiety hypothesis. However, the evidence so far has been based on indirect indicators of status anxiety or related variables (e.g., status seeking). Moreover, the mechanisms involved in the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety have not been explored. The main goal of this doctoral thesis is to analyze the influence of economic inequality on status anxiety, and to explore the psychological processes involved. To that end, a direct measure of status anxiety was adapted and validated in the Spanish context, and both a consolidated and a new experimental paradigm were employed to manipulate economic inequality and test its effect on status anxiety.

The current dissertation includes seven chapters. The theoretical part of the thesis consists of three chapters. In Chapter 1, a literature review of the effects of

[1] World Bank, retrieved from https://databank.worldbank.org/

economic inequality on health and wellbeing are summarized. Moreover, a review of the psychological effects of economic inequality is presented, and their relationship with four dominance systems is discussed, namely, discrimination, exploitation, social distance, and hierarchization. In Chapter 2, the hierarchization of societies based on material resources is presented as the main mechanism involved in generating status anxiety in highly unequal societies. Furthermore, status anxiety is defined and distinguished from other related phenomena. As well, the main antecedents and consequences of status anxiety are presented. Then, in Chapter 3, some problems in the literature on economic inequality and status anxiety are defined, and the different research questions and specific objectives of the empirical part of the dissertation are summarized. Concretely, the problem detected were: a) the need to use direct indicators in the research on status anxiety and economic inequality, b) that the evidence so far is not sufficient to establish a causal effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, c) the absence of research on the role of perceived social context in the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, and d)) the absence of research on the role of individual mobility in the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety.

The empirical part of the thesis consists of three chapters. In Chapter 4, the adaptation and evidence of validity of the Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale is presented. To that end, an exploratory and a confirmatory study were conducted, where the psychometric properties of the scale were analyzed, as well as the relationship of the new scale with other relevant measures. Moreover, an experimental study was conducted, to test whether the new measure was sensible to detect the effect of the experimental manipulation of socioeconomic status on it. The measure showed good reliability and was found to be positively related with relative deprivation, social comparison tendency, and perceived inequality. In addition, participants assigned to a low (vs. high) socioeconomic status condition reported higher status anxiety.

In Chapter 5 the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety was examined, as well as the role of perceived contextual status anxiety and competitiveness. This chapter is composed of a cross-sectional study and an experimental study. Participants exposed to a high (vs. low) unequal scenario perceived

others in their social context to be more worried about their socioeconomic status. Moreover, evidence was found of indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on individuals' status anxiety, through perceived contextual status anxiety and competitiveness.

In Chapter 6, the causal effect of economic inequality and status anxiety was tested in a social context relevant to participants. Moreover, in this chapter the role of expected upward and downward mobility were investigated. Concretely, two experimental studies were conducted, where students were exposed to bogus information about the distribution of incomes among their fellow graduates. Perceived economic inequality was found to decrease both expected upward and downward mobility, with opposite indirect effects on status anxiety. That is, in the high (vs. low) inequality condition lower expected upward mobility increased status anxiety. On the other hand, in the same high (vs. low) inequality condition lower expected downward mobility suppressed the effect on status anxiety.

Finally, in Chapter 7, the results obtained are synthesized and discussed according to each of the proposed research questions. Also in this chapter, the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this thesis are discussed, as well as some limitations and future directions in the research on economic inequality and status anxiety.

Overall, the evidence collected in this thesis does not support the hypothesis that perceiving higher economic inequality directly increases status anxiety. However, the results presented in the empirical chapters support the notion that economic inequality creates a competitive climate based on socioeconomic status, and that living in unequal contexts indeed exhorts an indirect effect on individuals' status anxiety, through higher perceived contextual status anxiety and competitiveness, and lesser chances to ascend the social ladder. Furthermore, the results of the current research also suggest that people living in highly unequal societies are also reassured by perceiving they have lower chances of descending the social ladder. Ultimately, we could speculate that palliative mechanisms could enact the protection of individuals from higher status anxiety when they perceive higher economic inequality in the short term. However, economic inequality could still threaten individuals' health and

wellbeing through higher status anxiety in the long term, as they are immersed in constant competition for their socioeconomic status.

As the empirical chapters of this thesis were written for being published in peer-reviewed journals, some concepts of the theoretical framework, as well as the research questions and hypotheses are repeated along the sections of the thesis. In the theoretical section of the dissertation the research questions and the concepts presented in each empirical chapter were integrated in a general framework. Open science practices were endorsed throughout this thesis. Preregistration records, study materials, data and supplementary analyses are provided for all empirical chapters and are publicly available in the links provided in the empirical chapters.

Finally, following the guidelines of the international doctorate program at the University of Granada, some chapters of this dissertation are written in English, while others are written in both English and Spanish.

Resumen

La desigualdad económica supone uno de los problemas más acuciantes de nuestro tiempo. Aunque no sea un fenómeno reciente, la acumulación de recursos por parte de grupos reducidos de personas por todo el mundo ha exacerbado la distancia entre ricos y pobres en las últimas décadas (Alvaredo et al., 2017; Picketty, 2014). Los efectos de la desigualdad económica son comparables a los de una pandemia letal que deteriora la salud y la expectativa de vida de las personas a lo largo de toda la escalera social, una vez rebasado cierto umbral (aproximadamente 0.3 puntos en el Índice Gini; Kondo et al., 2009). Actualmente, más de dos terceras partes de los países del mundo superan este umbral[1].

Una buena parte de los efectos negativos de la desigualdad económica sobre la salud y el bienestar de las personas han sido atribuidos a la ansiedad por el estatus (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). Este fenómeno ha sido definido como la preocupación constante que las personas sienten por no alcanzar los estándares de éxito de la sociedad (De Botton, 2004). Por un lado, en sociedades más desiguales las personas comparten en mayor medida valores materialistas (Walasek & Brown, 2019). Por otro lado, el ser humano es altamente sensible a cualquier amenaza hacia su estatus social (Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2004). Por tanto, cuando el estatus socioeconómico adquiere una gran relevancia para el estatus social de las personas, esto puede dar lugar a un clima competitivo, que podría aumentar la ansiedad por el estatus, y en última instancia activar constantemente reacciones de estrés.

Algunas evidencias apoyan la hipótesis de la ansiedad por el estatus. Sin embargo, hasta ahora estas evidencias han sido basadas en indicadores indirectos de la ansiedad por el estatus, o de variables relacionadas (e.g., búsqueda de estatus). Además, los procesos implicados en el efecto de la desigualdad económica sobre la ansiedad por el estatus no han sido aún explorados. El principal objetivo de esta tesis doctoral es analizar la relación entre la desigualdad económica y la ansiedad por el estatus, así como explorar los procesos psicológicos implicados. Con ese fin, se ha adaptado y validado en el contexto español una medida directa de ansiedad por el

[1] World Bank, Recuperado desde https://databank.worldbank.org/

estatus, y se ha empleado un paradigma experimental consolidado, así como un paradigma experimental novedoso para manipular la desigualdad económica percibida y poner a prueba su efecto sobre la ansiedad por el estatus.

La presente tesis doctoral está compuesta por siete capítulos. La sección teórica de la tesis consta de tres capítulos. En el Capítulo 1, se resume una revisión de la literatura sobre los efectos de la desigualdad económica sobre la salud y el bienestar. Además, se presenta una revisión de los efectos psicológicos de la desigualdad económica, y se trata su relación con cuatro sistemas de dominación social. Estos son la discriminación, explotación, distanciamiento social y la jerarquización. En el Capítulo 2, se presenta una revisión de la investigación sobre la jerarquización de las sociedades en base a los recursos materiales como el principal mecanismo implicado en el incremento de la ansiedad por el estatus en sociedades altamente desiguales. Asimismo, se define la ansiedad por el estatus y se distingue este constructo de otros fenómenos relacionados. También, se presentan los principales antecedentes y consecuencias de la ansiedad por el estatus. A continuación, en el Capítulo 3 se definen algunos problemas encontrados en la investigación sobre la desigualdad económica y la ansiedad por el estatus, y se resumen las diversas preguntas de investigación y los objetivos específicos que guían la sección empírica de esta tesis.

En concreto, los problemas detectados en la revisión de la investigación en relación a la ansiedad por el estatus fueron: a) la necesidad de usar indicadores directos en la investigación sobre la ansiedad por el estatus y la desigualdad económica, b) la evidencia reunida hasta ahora no es suficiente para establecer una relación causal entre la desigualdad económica y la ansiedad por el estatus, c) la ausencia de investigaciones sobre el rol del contexto social percibido en el efecto de la desigualdad económica sobre la ansiedad por el estatus, y d) la ausencia de investigaciones sobre el rol de la movilidad individual en el efecto de la desigualdad económica sobre la ansiedad por el estatus.

La sección empírica de la tesis consta de 3 capítulos. En el Capítulo 4 se presenta la adaptación y evidencias de validez de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus. Para ello, se llevó a cabo un estudio exploratorio y un estudio confirmatorio, en los que se analizaron las propiedades psicométricas de la escala, así como las relaciones de esta nueva medida con otras variables relevantes. Además, se

llevó a cabo un estudio experimental para examinar si la nueva medida es apropiada para detectar efectos de la manipulación experimental del estatus socioeconómico. El instrumento mostró una buena fiabilidad y se encontró que éste se relacionaba positivamente con privación relativa, tendencia a la comparación social, y desigualdad percibida. Asimismo, las/os participantes asignadas/os a una condición de estatus socioeconómico bajo (vs. alto) mostraron puntuaciones más elevadas en ansiedad por el estatus.

En el Capítulo 5 se examinó la relación entre la desigualdad económica y la ansiedad por el estatus, así como el rol de la percepción de ansiedad por el estatus en el contexto social y de la competitividad percibida. Este capítulo está compuesto por un estudio no experimental y un estudio experimental. Las/os participantes expuestas/os a un escenario de alta (vs. baja) desigualdad percibieron que las demás personas en ese contexto social se preocupaban en mayor medida por su estatus socioeconómico. Además, se encontraron evidencias de efectos indirectos de la desigualdad económica percibida sobre la ansiedad por el estatus de las/os participantes, a través de una mayor ansiedad por el estatus y de una mayor competitividad percibidas en el contexto social.

En el Capítulo 6, se examinó la relación causal entre la desigualdad económica y la ansiedad por el estatus en contexto social relevante para las/os participantes. Además, en este capítulo se exploró el rol de las expectativas de movilidad ascendente y descendente. En concreto, se llevaron a cabo dos estudios experimentales, en los que se mostró a estudiantes universitarias/os información ficticia sobre la distribución de ingresos entre las/os egresadas/os de su universidad. Se encontró que la desigualdad económica percibida redujo tanto las expectativas de movilidad ascendente como descendente, llevando a efectos indirectos opuestos sobre la ansiedad por el estatus. Más en concreto, se encontró que en la condición de alta (vs. baja) desigualdad la reducción en las expectativas de movilidad ascendente llevó a un incremento en la ansiedad por el estatus. Por otro lado, en la misma condición de alta (vs. baja) desigualdad la reducción en las expectativas de movilidad descendente llevó a un efecto supresor sobre la ansiedad por el estatus.

Por último, en el Capítulo 7 se sintetizan y analizan los resultados de acuerdo con cada uno de los problemas propuestos y de las preguntas de investigación. En este

capítulo, además, se analizan las principales contribuciones teóricas y las implicaciones prácticas de esta tesis, así como algunas limitaciones y direcciones futuras en la investigación sobre desigualdad económica y ansiedad por el estatus.

En términos generales, las evidencias reunidas en esta tesis no apoyan la hipótesis de que percibir una mayor desigualdad económica aumenta directamente la ansiedad por el estatus. Sin embargo, los resultados presentados en los capítulos empíricos indican que la desigualdad económica crea un clima de competitividad basada en el estatus socioeconómico, y que vivir en contextos desiguales ejerce un efecto indirecto sobre la ansiedad por el estatus, a través de una mayor competitividad y ansiedad por estatus percibidas en el contexto social, y a través de menores expectativas de ascender en la escalera social. Por otro lado, los resultados de esta investigación sugieren que las personas que viven en contextos desiguales se sienten tranquilizadas por el hecho de percibir que tienen menos posibilidades de descender en la escalera social. En síntesis, suponemos que cuando las personas perciben mayor desigualdad económica, un mecanismo paliativo podría protegerlas de experimentar mayor ansiedad por el estatus en el corto plazo. Sin embargo, la desigualdad económica sumerge a las personas en una constante competición por su estatus socioeconómico, y por tanto podría aún suponer una amenaza para su salud y bienestar por medio de una mayor ansiedad por el estatus.

Teniendo en cuenta que los capítulos empíricos de esta tesis han sido redactados para su publicación como artículos en revistas científicas, algunos conceptos del marco teórico, así como las preguntas de investigación e hipótesis se encuentran repetidos en algunos apartados. En la sección teórica de esta tesis doctoral las preguntas de investigación, así como los conceptos presentados en cada capítulo empíricos han sido integrados en un marco teórico general. A lo largo de esta tesis se han adoptado prácticas de ciencia abierta. Los pre-registros, materiales, bases de datos y análisis suplementarios de los estudios son públicamente accesibles en los enlaces contenidos en cada capítulo empírico.

Finalmente, siguiendo las directrices del programa internacional de doctorado de la Universidad de Granada, algunos capítulos de esta tesis se encuentran escritos en inglés, mientras otros se encuentran escritos tanto en español como en inglés.

Economic Inequality: A Feature of Current Societies

Chapter 1

Although there has been a considerable growth of the average income per capita around the world in the last four decades[1], only a small part of it was of benefit to most of the population, while a large share of it ended in a few hands (Alvaredo et al., 2017). The last data available show that the bottom half of the world population received only a half part of the income growth captured by the top 1%, and that income inequality increased almost everywhere, although at different speeds, in the same period (Alvaredo, 2018).

In 2000 the United Nations declared the Millennium Development Goals, a compendium of the most important and urgent goals for humanity that would be supposed to guide the policies of all the subscribing countries (UN General Assembly, 2000). Among these goals, ending poverty in all its forms was included. However, reducing inequalities was still not considered as a different goal. Importantly, in 2015 reducing inequalities within and among countries was included as one of the 17 goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations (UN General Assembly, 2015). In this way, most of the countries in the United Nations recognized the relevance of reducing economic inequalities as an urgent mission and as a different goal than eradicating poverty.

On this matter, even if poverty still represent one of the most compelling challenges of our times, inequality has profound consequences in society that go far beyond the effects of the material conditions of those who are in poverty. Not only the accumulation of wealth and income by a small part of citizens contribute to an increased disparity of power that jeopardize our democracies, but it also prevents most countries production and trade systems to be efficient and to guarantee economic growth. Furthermore, it contributes to maintain and increase unsustainable exploitation and degradation of human, social and natural resources (United Nations, 2020, Stiglitz, 2012). Nevertheless, there is still an open debate about the effects of economic inequality on societies (e.g., Kelley & Evans, 2017) and a large variability in

[1] World Bank, retrieved from https://databank.worldbank.org/

the amount of inequality that people would consider as acceptable (García-Sánchez et al., 2019).

Economic inequality (EI) refers to a distribution of resources which benefits some individuals at the expense of others (Therborn, 2013). It could refer to both wealth and income inequality, but it is usually indicated by the latter, due to data availability and comparability[2]. Income inequality in turn, is usually captured by the country-level Gini index, a global indicator calculated on the asymmetries in the allocation of incomes along the entire distribution, ranged from 0 (representing absolute equality, where all the individuals hold the same income) to 1 (representing absolute inequality, where one individual capture all the income, and all the other individuals receive no income). However, other indicators of EI have been used, as they are more sensible to where the most part of the variation income occurs (e.g., in the low-end of the distribution or the high-end of the distribution), and research on EI also considers other measures of the distribution of resources (e.g., wealth inequality), as well as focus in different geographic units of analysis (e.g., counties or neighbourhood; Jachimowicz et al., 2020).

EI not only is the uneven distribution of resources in benefit of some individuals and at the expense of others. EI is also characterized by creating and maintaining hierarchical differences among individuals (Therbon, 2012). Some scholars signaled that EI is one of the outcomes of capitalism and it is maintained by it (Piketty, 2014). From this point of view, one of capitalism's main outcomes is the dominance of some groups of individuals over others, based on the private property rights and the maximization of benefits and rents as its main principle (Agenjo-Calderón, 2021; Piketty, 2014). This dominance system discriminates, excludes, and exploits dominated

[2] Income inequality also differ from wealth inequality as it is more time-sensitive, that is, although the uneven concentration of wealth tend is relatively stable across generations, income inequality could more easily vary across generation, even though income inequality also tends to maintain or increase in time. On the other hand, wealth inequality entails both inequality of outcomes and opportunities, as greater wealth grant access to higher income, while income inequality is more strictly definable as inequality of outcomes (Picketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012).

groups to maintain the benefits and privileges for the dominant groups, while it enlarges the distances among the dominants and the dominated (i.e., social classes) and promotes differences in how individuals are valued in the society on the basis of their position in the social ladder (Therbon, 2012).

One of the most important features of the domination system underlying capitalism is the false premise that the system is fair and promotes equal opportunities as it is based on private property rights and freedom to enterprise and trade (Mijs, 2019). However, far for granting equal opportunities, this dominance system serves to the purpose of maintaining the privileges of those who inherit higher resources (i.e., maintaining EI) and exploiting those who have less in order to accumulate greater wealth (i.e., increasing EI; Stiglitz, 2012). The more unequal a society is, the more ossified are its social classes, as the families' socioeconomic background predict to a higher extent people occupational, health and educational outcomes (OECD, 2018).

The Economic Inequality Pandemic

The excessively uneven distribution of resources in most of modern societies is comparable to a degenerative social illness, which debilitates the psychological defenses of its inhabitants by increasing emotional distress and leading to damaging coping strategies (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009a; 2017). Just like an illness disrupt the physiological condition of a living organism, when EI exceed a bearable threshold, it disrupts societies and show up in serious symptoms as the ones above mentioned (i.e., unpaired health, fragile democracies, resources exploitation, inefficient and unsustainable growth, and increased mortality; Kondo et al., 2009; Kondo et al., 2012; Lynch, et al., 1998; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2004; United Nations, 2020; Stiglitz, 2012). What's more, once it exceeds a bearable threshold EI is comparable to an illness of the entire society, as it not only damages its most vulnerable part, but it concerns and harms the entire society, and all the individuals who are part of it (Subramanian & Kawachi, 2006; Wilinson & Pickett, 2009). Furthermore, similarly to what happens with degenerative illnesses, to the extent that EI increases, it damages the social fabric and ties (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020; Stiglitz, 2012), as well as the capacity for societies to detect and react to the excess of inequality,

due to increased tolerance toward it (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). Just like a pandemic, this degenerative social illness is spreading on a global scale (Alvaredo, 2018). This is why the United Nations called to reduce economic inequalities as a matter of urgency (UN General Assembly, 2015).

The epidemiology of EI, which study its effects on health and life expectancy, has been largely influenced by the seminal work conducted by Michael Marmot on the Whitehall Study and the Whitehall Study II (Marmot, 2004a). These studies provided longitudinal data on mortality and multiple health outcomes and health-related behaviours (e.g., smoking or drinking) using two large panels of British Civil Servants. Importantly, the participants were all working at the same industry but distributed among different occupational categories. In these studies, social class, as indicated by participants' occupational category, predicted mortality and health outcomes and health-related behaviours, indicating that the position one occupies on the social ladder could be literally lethal. Other studies followed and demonstrated that other indicators of social class, such as the income level of the neighbourhood, could predict life expectancy (e.g., Marmot, 2010). In addition, these and further studies, with different markers of socioeconomic status, including household incomes, demonstrated that the relationship between social class and the aforementioned outcomes is not driven by poverty or material deprivation, but it comes to describe a "social gradient", indicating that any further step down the social ladder shortens life, deteriorates health and increases unhealthy behaviours to some extent along all the social ladder (Marmot, 2004a; OECD, 2018).

Nevertheless, it has been argued that beyond the social gradient effect described by Marmot (2004a), EI exhorts its damaging effects along the entire social ladder (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Typically, research on the damaging effects of EI has been focusing on individual-level variables, like self-rated health, but also on country-level outcomes, like life expectancy (Neckerman & Torche, 2007). Indeed, EI has been related to a large variety of negative consequences for all the individuals along the social ladder, beyond the position they occupy. EI is related with poorer general physical and mental health, but also with higher rates of obesity, drug abuse and

crimes, among other social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; 2017; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; for different results see also Sommet et al., 2018).

Economic Inequality and Health

In the context of these line of research on the epidemiology of EI, the latter has been found to directly increase the risk of mental illness: Among European countries, for instance, EI has been found to exert a strong effect on individuals' depressive symptoms (Van Deurzen et al., 2015). Beyond the European context, an extensive meta-analysis with a large set of studies revealed that higher EI is consistently related to depressive symptoms among all individuals, regardless of their income (Ribeiro et al., 2017)[3]. On the other hand, although mixed results have been found on the relationship between EI and anxiety symptoms in adults (e.g., Chiavegatto Filho et al., 2013; Pabayo et al., 2015), in adolescents samples, country-level time-variation in income inequality predicted individual-level time-variation in symptom of anxiety, and country-level differences in income inequality predicted, in turn, individual differences in both psychological and somatic symptoms (Dierckens et al., 2020; Vilhjalmsdottir et al., 2019). Also, more unequal countries have been found to have higher rates of psychotic symptoms among general population (Johnson et al., 2015). More generally, differences in income inequality among European countries are associated with lower self-reported mental well-being by their citizens (Layte, 2012).

Furthermore, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies around the globe demonstrate that living in highly unequal contexts lead people to worse self-rated health (Kondo et al., 2009). As well, not only research on EI provides evidence about its effects in individuals psychological wellbeing, but also it demonstrates that living in more unequal societies could literally be lethal (Kondo et al., 2009). For instance, among US citizens those who live in more unequal states, are exposed to higher risk of suffering a heart attack or dying because of a coronary heart disease, even once the

[3] Although the size of the effect of EI on depressive symptoms is relatively small, it still implies a considerable impact, as it the effect involves the entire population among unequal societies (Ribeiro et al., 2017).

effects of income, race and education are accounted for (Kennedy et al., 1996; Pabayo et al., 2015).

Economic Inequality and Subjective Wellbeing

Altogether, the growing body of research on the epidemiology of EI depicts unequal societies as hostile social contexts (Du et al., 2019; Payne, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; 2017). This could be the reason of the so called Easterlin paradox, which describes consistent findings across many societies of a curvilinear relationship between economic growth and wellbeing, that is, increases in GDP for those countries below average are related with increases in reported life satisfaction and happiness by their citizens, but no changes or decreases in the same variables for those above average GDP (Easterlin et al., 2010). This phenomenon is conceived as a paradox because citizens in richer countries are happier and more satisfied on average, and because it defines the common representations by economic textbooks of the human being as *homo economicus*, a rational self-oriented and self-interested individual, who constantly pursue to maximize its outcomes, and get satisfied according to the amount of valued goods obtained (Gintis, 2000; Henrich et al., 2001; Levitt & List, 2008). In contrast, economic growth increases individuals' wellbeing only on early stages of development, but once basic needs are met, EI is found to be determinant to the average levels of happiness and life satisfaction; that is, the more unequal a country becomes, the less its citizens are happy and satisfied with their lives, and the less economic growth (as indicated by countries' GDP) accounts for their wellbeing (Oishi & Kesebir, 2015; Oishi, et al., 2011). As well, those who live in more unequal countries among the richer ones report lower levels of wellbeing (Delhey & Drgalov, 2014; Yu & Wang, 2017; for different results see also Kelley & Evans, 2017).

Economic Inequality and Maladaptive Coping Strategies

People try to cope with this negative environment in multiple ways, and this includes harmful coping strategies (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). In more unequal countries, child bullying occurs more often (Elgar et al., 2013), and higher prevalence of consumption of alcohol and drunkenness at very early ages is found among adolescents, which is known to be a predictor of alcohol abuse and

alcoholism in adult life (DeWit et al., 2000; Elgar et al., 2005). More generally there is converging evidence that drug consumption is higher in more unequal countries (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). Moreover, EI is associated with higher calories intake, mostly by increased consumption of high calorie food, and higher rates of obesity (Classen et al., 2019), and a higher tendency to risk-taking behaviours, which derives in higher rates of gambling and crimes (Bol et al., 2014, Payne, 2017).

Indeed, studies around the world indicate that many countries have exceeded a threshold beyond which EI is lethal: for each 0.05 unit increase in the Gini index above the 0.3 threshold, the risk of premature mortality (i.e., deaths occurring before the average age of death) increases on average an 8% (Kondo et al., 2009). This means that EI is killing millions of people each year, and is at least equally lethal than lung cancer, diabetes, motor-vehicle accidents, HIV, suicides, and homicides all together (Lynch et al., 1998).

Who is Affected by the Inequality Pollution?

It has been argued that the contextual effect of EI could not be disentangled from the compositional one (also called absolute income effect; Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2004). That is, in unequal countries a higher share of the population is materially deprived. In turn, material deprivation negatively impacts individuals' health and wellbeing (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). Therefore, the mean levels of health and wellbeing in these countries are decreased. This means that the effects of EI in many studies could be due to higher poverty in more unequal countries (i.e., IE exhorts a compositional effect). However, the studies cited above typically control for individual and collective material resources by accounting for individual indicators of socioeconomic status (e.g., income, or educational attainment) and countries' GDP. Moreover, although individuals' socioeconomic status has indeed a huge impact on health and wellbeing (e.g., Marmot, 2004a), EI modifies the social context in which individuals live, and exhorts long lasting effects along the whole social ladder (i.e., it exhorts a contextual effect), that could be detected many years later (Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2004; 2006).

On the other hand, EI also could exhort a mechanical effect. That is, inequality worsens the impact of socioeconomic status on the individuals' outcomes by enlarging the distances and differences among social classes (Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020). The contextual effect should be differentiated from the mechanical effect of EI (also called relative income effect; Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). The two phenomena are not mutually exclusive, and evidence is found about both kinds of effects (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). For instance, while the contextual effect decreases the average levels of happiness among individuals in more unequal countries, the mechanical effect increases the differences among them in the same outcome (Van de Werfhost & Salverda, 2012).

Indeed, those who live in highly unequal countries but are among the most advantaged are in a better position than those who are left behind to protect themselves against the toxic effects of inequality. The former can access to better private services, healthier food and lifestyles, live segregated in highly wealthy neighborhoods and protect themselves and their properties with high fences and sophisticated security and surveillance systems (Mijs & Roe, 2021). Still, they suffer the consequences of EI as their life expectancy is lower, and they report lower general wellbeing than their affluent counterparts or people living in more equal countries. This general contextual effect has been compared to the effect of air pollution: even if you can not see it, are not worried about it, do not contribute to produce it, or try your best not to breathe it, nobody can escape from its effects (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014).

Perceived Economic Inequality

Even if inequality is in the air and contaminate societies along the whole social ladder, the way it exhorts its negative effects is not by getting into our lungs, but it affects us by activating psychological processes (Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020). When simulating the contextual effects of EI in experimental social networks, the visibility of EI has been found to be determinant for those effects to appear (Nishi et al., 2015). In other words, EI must be perceived to exhort an overall effect on societies and at the individual level. Moreover, subjective perceptions about inequality are not a perfect reflection of objective inequalities and have been found to exhort independent effects

on social outcomes that are over and above the latter (Janmaat, 2013). Research on EI has been traditionally handicapped by a vague or heterogeneous definition of inequality and by not considering how people perceive it (García-Castro et al., 2020; Jachimowicz et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020). Hence, not only EI must be perceived to exhort psychological effects (Nishi et al., 2015); the way people perceive, appraise, and make a sense of it also determine its effects (Easterbrook, 2021; Phillips et al., 2020).

Economic Inequality Dimensions: Outcomes versus Opportunities

EI could refer to both inequality of opportunities and inequality of outcomes (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). The former refers to the actual distribution of resources in any given society and the magnitude of the dispersion or gap of resources among the individuals in that society, whereas the latter refers both to how the given society get to the point of the actual distribution of resources—how any individual could get to his/her position in the distribution—and to the capacity of any individual to modify his/her actual outcomes (Janmaat, 2013). Although they are related to each other, they concern different dimensions of inequality and could exhort different roles when referring to its psychological effects (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). While inequality of outcomes has been argued to exhort a galvanizing effect (e.g., by increasing working hours; Bowles & Park, 2005), inequality of opportunity exhorts discouraging and frustrating effects (e.g., it reduces subjective wellbeing; Schneider, 2012). Moreover, people usually do not perceive EI and its dimensions as they are, but they are sensible to motivational and cognitive biases, and tend to interpret and represent it in terms of its causes and its potential personal, interpersonal, and societal consequences (Phillips et al., 2020). Importantly, people are motivated to think the world is just as it should be, thus, they tend to adjust their normative beliefs to their perception about both inequality of outcomes and opportunities, that is, they tend to justify actual levels of inequality and to think that everybody get what they deserve (Janmaat, 2013; Jost, et al., 2004).

As discussed above, in practical terms, outcomes and opportunities are often related in most societies and, unless steps are taken to avoid them, they reinforce each other, maintaining and exacerbating the distance between rugs along the social ladder

(OECD, 2018). However, people are generally motivated to believe that the social system where they live is just and the distribution of resources is fair (Jost et al., 2004). Thus, dominant and dominated social classes in highly unequal societies share popular narratives that emphasize the role of individual efforts and talent in the outcomes each obtain in those societies (Knowles & Lowery, 2011; Heiserman &Simpson, 2017; Mijs, 2019). The incongruence between meritocratic beliefs and reduced real opportunities for those who are not among the most advantaged in highly unequal societies create an expectation trap, in which they get frustrated and can only blame themselves for not reaching unrealistic achievement standards.

Cues and Social Representations of Economic Inequality

Not only lay beliefs about EI are composed by multiple dimensions, but inequality perceptions result from interlinked, iterative components. Philips and colleagues (2020) maintain that accessing to different cues about surrounding societal inequality could exhort different effects on individuals: While gazing the houses or cars of one's neighbours would presumably lead to perceive high similarities in economic segregated societies, the elevated standard of living and consumption represented on medias and popular cultural goods (e.g., movies or fiction series) would lead to perceive higher distances between social classes in those same societies. Furthermore, paying attention to and being mindful of inequality's cues could be unconsciously conditioned by one's actual socioeconomic status and his/her trajectory, as well as by political ideologies. Importantly, multiple motivations could influence how people perceive and make sense of EI, from self-serving material interests and avoiding incongruences with moral principles, or protecting against social threats, to ingroup favouritism and maintaining worldviews on just world, status quo invariance, or appealing for hierarchies.

Besides, the way people represent and understand EI could be dramatically different from how researchers usually define it (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). Measurements, as well as experimental manipulations of EI could present multiple empirical problems, as they often presuppose an elevate level of numeric literacy in studies where participants could not even have notions of statistics (Heiserman &

Simpson, 2021). Researchers adopting diverse measurements or experimental methods could reach divergent findings on the same topics, suggesting that the way people represent EI in their minds could be multidimensional, culturally influenced, and depend on cognitive and contextual cues (Eriksson & Simpson, 2012; Mijs & Hoy, 2021; Schneider, 2012).

Which Level of Analysis?

Furthermore, perceived EI could refer to a range of societal and geographical unit of analysis, each one associated with different outcomes, from worldwide inequalities between countries (e.g., Petkanopoulou et al., 2018), to local reference groups (e.g., Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). On this matter, some findings suggest that perceptions of local levels of EI, such as within-cities' or within-neighbourhood's inequality could exhort stronger psychological effects than more general country-level perceptions of inequality (e.g., Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Sommet et al., 2018).

One possible reason for this could be derived from the psychological mechanisms involved in social sampling, which derives from the availability heuristic bias: When individuals consciously or unconsciously build a representation of the distribution of a given phenomenon or dimension in a population, they usually rely on the available information from their direct experiences and social circles (Galesic et al., 2012). According to this, people usually infer the levels of EI in the societies where they live from their surrounding social environment, overestimating the prevalence of others with similar resources as the people living close to them (Dawtry et al., 2015). On this matter, EI among participants' direct contacts has been found to predict attitudes toward EI beyond general perceived EI in their society (García-Castro et al., 2019).

Moreover, social comparison has been suggested to play an important role in the way people make sense of EI and its influence in their lives (Osborne et al., 2019). As people usually compare themselves with those who are more similar and closer to themselves (Festinger, 1954), not only local perceived inequality influences individuals, but also perceived inequality among relevant reference groups, but not necessarily close ones, could affect them (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016; Senik, 2009).

Which Part of the Distribution?

Finally, as the distribution of resources could take multiple shapes, inequality perceptions could vary according to which part of the distribution is in the focus, and how much individuals are aware of the skewness of the distribution (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). For instance, perceived EI could refer not only to the gap between those at the bottom and at the top of the distribution, but to the gap between the bottom and the middle, the middle and the top, or even could be the result of a synthesis of all of them. Focusing on the bottom part of the distribution could increase or decrease perceived distances toward those who are left behind, thus activating or defueling the last place aversion, that is, a tendency to worry about ending at the bottom of the hierarchy (Kuziemko et al., 2014). However, research in the field of social comparison suggests that people are generally motivated to engage in upward comparisons more often than downward comparisons, as an adaptive mechanism to improve their performance in relevant domains (Martin, 2000). In turn, focusing on the upper part of the distribution of resources could lead to higher concerns with one's position in the social ladder and higher competition to outperform others who are perceived to be just above oneself (García et al., 2013).

On this matter, the most part of economic disparities are noticeable at the top of the distribution. Around the globe, societies are plagued by small elites of individuals accumulating a large share of resources, while most of the population have relatively limited access to them (Milanovic, 2016; Stiglitz, 2012). Although the perceptions about the gap between the most advantaged and the rest of the society are often inaccurate (see Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014), high normative lifestyle and cultural standards could be imposed by the most affluent groups to the rest of the society, enlarging the distances between them and the rest of groups in the society, which are lead to feel inadequate and to strive to keep up with those standards (Delhey et al., 2017).

The Social and Psychological Burden of Economic Inequality

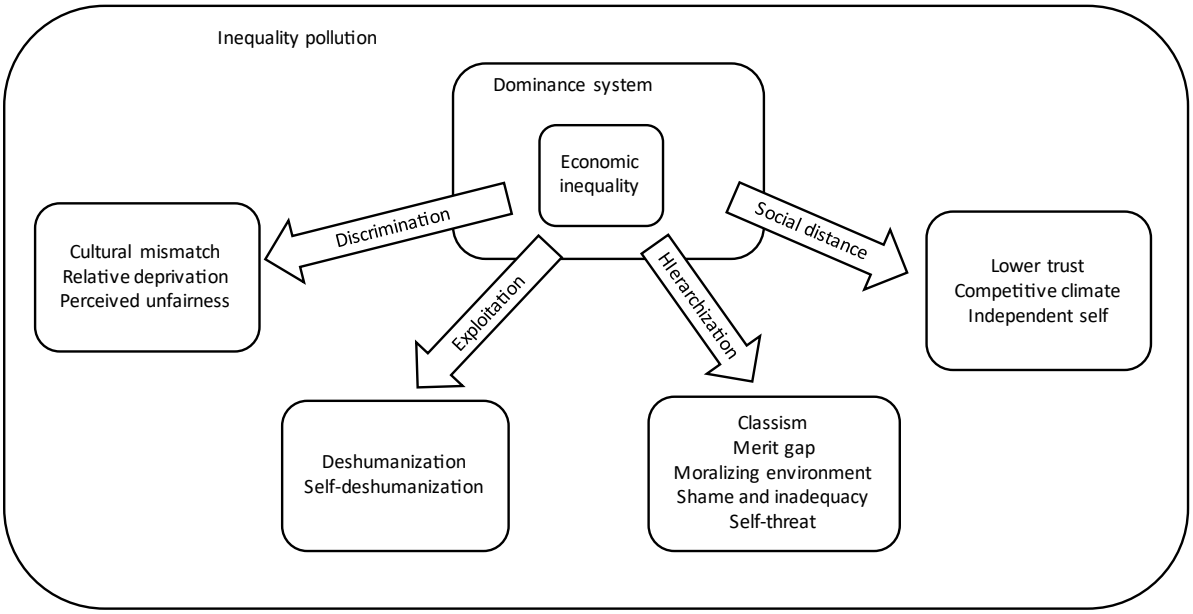
It has been argued that, at least upon some specific circumstances, EI could exhort positive psychological effects. The hope factor hypothesis posits that, at least under some circumstances, when facing EI, the example of the well-offs could inspire

optimism in those who are in a less favourable position (Kelley & Evans, 2017). Some evidence supports this hypothesis (Cheung, 2015); however, the optimism effect has been found to work only in early stages of economic growth (Cheung, 2015; Ray, 2010), and could open the way to frustration when inequality persists, and economic growth starts stagnating (Hirschman & Rothschild, 1973). Other authors argument that when EI is too high, people could perceive the society to be ossified and the distance between the rungs of the social ladder to be so large that they lose hope for a better position and are demotivated to strive for a better position (Paskov et al., 2017).

At the beginning of this chapter, it has been mentioned that several mechanisms of social dominance generate and maintain EI. Some of them are the systematic discrimination, exploitation, and social distancing from those who are disadvantaged in the social hierarchies by the most advantaged groups, and the hierarchization of the whole society according to individuals' material resources (Lott, 2002; Therborn, 2013). Each one of these mechanisms are associated with specific social and psychological effects of EI, which contribute to the maintenance of the dominance system (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Social and Psychological Burden of Economic Inequality



Discrimination

First, EI creates and is maintained by discrimination and social exclusion. In unequal societies individuals tend to be divided to a higher extent in social classes on the basis of their socioeconomic background, and those who pertain to lower social classes are denied an equal access to the same resources as their upper classes counterparts in a variety of core areas, such as child care, transportation, or healthcare, and face systematic institutional discrimination, as they are often not included in the mainstream political discourse (Lott, 2012). Also, institutional discrimination manifests in the multiple obstacles faced by lower classes to access to quality education, housing, and legal assistance (Lott, 2002).

Sometimes, discrimination occurs in more subtle ways: For instance, organizations and institutions could favor those individuals that hold the attributes typically shared by those among the dominant groups. Individuals with different socioeconomic backgrounds are socialized in different cultural selves and those from lower social classes experience a mismatch between their cultural selves and the dominant cultural norms in higher education and professional workplaces (Stephens et al., 2018). That is, during their life course working class individuals acquire a more

interdependent self (e.g., they rely more on others and express fewer individual preferences) than middle and upper class individuals, while the latter acquire a more independent self (e.g., they stand out from others and develop and express their own interests), but in schools and workplaces cultural norms favoring independent selves are dominant, especially at higher level of education and professional specialization, thus discouraging and hindering access to better opportunities for those who are low on socioeconomic status (Stephens et al., 2014).

The discrimination and lack of integration suffered by those who are left behind in unequal societies leave a mark on them. In the context of higher education, for instance, the lack of integration is related to poorer outcomes and poorer mental health in working class students (Rubin et al., 2019). Ultimately, discrimination and social exclusion could lead those who are in the lower part of the social ladder to frustration, to feeling personally deprived and to lower self-esteem (Osborne et al., 2019). Moreover, pertaining to a lower social class in highly unequal societies could lead to perceive that oneself is being treated unfairly, and this, in turn, have a negative impact on mental and physical functioning, as well as subjective wellbeing (De Vogli et al., 2007; Oishi et al., 2011).

Exploitation

Second, inequality is perpetuated through the exploitation of those who are below the dominant groups in the social ladder (Therborn, 2013). Although most modern societies left behind blatant and extreme forms of exploitation (e.g., slavery or serfdom), more subtle forms of exploitation are yet practiced and contribute to increase and maintain inequalities (Therborn, 2013). For instance, the financialization of modern economies—the increase of financial activity influence and relevance in country's economies—accompanied by work's precarization, the commercialization of fraudulent financial products, and the manipulation of stock values, contribute to expropriate resources from a large part of the population in benefit of the elites (Gonçalves & Costa, 2020, Stiglitz, 2012).

The economic dynamics of exploitation of those who have less by those who own more resources contribute to generate social dynamics and psychological

processes which sustain inequalities. People in lower social classes are instrumentalized and objectified by people in higher social classes as the latter benefit from the former labor but the former are not considered worthy of the same privileges and benefits as the latter (Jordan et al., 2020). Those who are in a better position usually consider those with low socioeconomic status to be less human than themselves: Concretely, they tend to associate more animal-like and less human-distinctive characteristics to low-socioeconomic status individuals, thus contributing to justify inequalities and exploitation of the less advantaged groups (Capozza et al., 2012; Sáinz et al., 2020). Importantly, the tendency to animalize those who are low on socioeconomic status becomes a cultural norm reproduced through mass media in some societies, and the working class is usually demonized with extreme stereotypes and mockery (Jones, 2011; Vázquez & Lois, 2020). Consequently, people generally consider low socioeconomic status groups to be more like animals, independently of their own position in the social ladder (Sáinz et al., 2019). In turn, people low on socioeconomic status perceive they are dehumanized by others, and this leads them to experience lower subjective psychological wellbeing (Sáinz et al., 2021). Furthermore, in modern societies, the works of people low on socioeconomic status are often mainly composed of repetitive, fragmented, and other-directed tasks. This, in turn, leads them to internalize the objectifying views of themselves as non-human instruments, which have no own mental states nor personal ability to make free and conscious choices (Baldissari et al., 2017).

Social Distance

Third, social distance is enlarged as EI gets wider. Inequalities erode social cohesion, as people trust less each other in general, cooperate less for common goods in societies, and prefer to maintain fewer social ties, while they strongly identify themselves with highly segregated social classes (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). Furthermore, people in more unequal countries trust politicians less, participate less and show less political interest and engagement (Van de Werfhost & Salverda, 2012). As the disparities increase, social conflict also augments and societies are disrupted by higher rates of violence (Elgar & Aitken, 2011; Elgar et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2004). This climate of violence, social conflict and social disruption in turn, leads those who live in more

unequal societies to face a harsh and threatening environment and to lower levels of subjective wellbeing (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Elgar et al., 2009).

EI also enlarges social distance in more subtle and pervasive ways. On the one hand, unequal societies create a competitive normative climate in which most people are perceived to care less for others and the community, but to be more concerned with personal achievements, and to be generally more individualist and less collectivist, thus leading little space for cooperation (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sommet et al., 2019). On the other hand, this competitive climate affects the way individuals relate with each other and view themselves; when faced with higher income inequality individuals consider themselves as more independent and separate from others, less embedded with the community, are more self-oriented, show less cooperative behavior, and are more aggressive toward the wealthiest (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019).

Hierarchization

Fourth, EI promotes differences in how individuals are valued in the society – and value themselves – and promotes material resources as the main dimension determining their value and their position in society (Walasek & Brown, 2019; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). In turn, a strong hierarchization of societies contribute to maintain inequalities: Those who have higher socioeconomic status tend to justify the economic system, consider the distribution of resources as fair, and show more prejudice against poor and working-class people (Jordan et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017). The tendency to justify the economic system, in turn, has been found to be associated to lower support for social welfare and redistributive policies to the extent that low status people are blamed for their situation (Colbow et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017).

In more unequal countries, low status people are object of ambivalent attitudes, as they tend to be perceived more warm (e.g., they are perceived to be sociable), than competent (e.g., they are perceived to be impulsive), that is, they have a role in the society (e.g., to socialize and support their local football team), but this role is a

subordinate one (e.g., they are not qualified to make important decisions about the community; Durante et al., 2013). This ambivalence constitutes the basis of an ambivalent classism which paternalizes those who are left behind and extends to other low socioeconomic status groups such as "lower class" or "working class", contributing to justify existing inequalities (Durante et al., 2017; Jordan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the system of inequality-justifying beliefs regarding those who are in a better or in a worse position, their role and their contribution in the society creates a social climate in which the position one occupies in society is taken as a signal of his /her worth and people are blamed or praised for their socioeconomic status: The higher the income gap in a given society, the greater the merit gap perceived between those who are at the top and bottom percentile of income (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017). Thus, occupying a low rank in the social ladder is a source of shame and inadequacy in more unequal societies, and implicate being an object of scorn (Bosma et al., 2015; Vázquez & Lois, 2020).

In more unequal countries experiences of classism are related with depression, anxiety, stress, lower levels of wellbeing and self-esteem and to the feeling of being looked down on by others (Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Thompson & Subich, 2013). However, the hierarchization of unequal societies upon materialistic values not only threatens and concerns those who are among the disadvantaged but makes everyone feel less wealthy (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Jetten et al., 2019), and inferior to those who are above him/herself and sinks the whole society in a constant competition for a better position (De Botton, 2004).

Conclusion

The rise of EI in the last decades had and still have elevated social costs: once it exceeds the approximate threshold of 0.3 Gini Index, EI could deteriorate general population's health and life expectancy to the extent that it is least equally lethal than lung cancer, diabetes, motor-vehicle accidents, HIV, suicides, and homicides all together (Kondo et al., 2009; Lynch et., 1998). More than two third of world countries

exceed this threshold[4]: This means that EI is more lethal than any contemporary pandemic, and literally kills millions of people every year.

The effects of EI on people's health and wellbeing have been theorized to be contextual, that is, similarly to how air pollution deteriorates the health of all those who live in a contaminated geographic area, EI deteriorates societies' functioning and the living conditions and social relationship of all those who live in unequal contexts. Moreover, EI is maintained and based on discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, social distancing, and scorn to those who have fewer material resources. These multiple dominance systems are interrelated and pervade every aspect of the human life, as they are subject to the capitalist outlook, which consider social relations as commodities' exchanges under the laws of supply and demand in a free market and produce deep psychological effects. Concretely, the hierarchization of the whole society contributes to maintain and justify EI, while it produces a competitive climate based on material resources.

In the next Chapter it will be discussed how the hierarchization of unequal societies based on individuals' material resources produce a rush for socioeconomic status, which constantly threatens individuals' sense of self-worth in others' eyes. Ultimately, this phenomenon—which has been called status anxiety—is related with many of the negative impacts EI exhorts on health and wellbeing.

[4] World Bank, retrieved from https://databank.worldbank.org/

Status Anxiety

Chapter 2

The Status Syndrome

It has been previously mentioned how the seminal work from Marmot (2004a) described a social gradient in health, that is, each further step down the socioeconomic ladder is associated with poorer health. Why those who already met all their basic economic needs would suffer from poorer health than those just above them in the social ladder? The author refers to this phenomenon as the 'status syndrome': Economic inequalities create and maintain hierarchies in societies based on socioeconomic status, and at each rung of the ladder, people feel inferior to those who are above. This motivates people to keep up with those at the top of the distribution for not feeling inferior (Frank, 2007). In turn, this arouses an expenditure cascade that leads all individuals along the social ladder to struggle and compete for a consumerist lifestyle they consider it would protect them from being looked down by others (Levine et al., 2010).

Moreover, those who are in a good position could suffer from the anticipation of status loss, when they perceive that losing status is a possibility (Scheepers et al., 2009). On the other hand, the wider the perceived gap in the social esteem of those who are at the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy, the higher would be the costs of descending in the social ladder. The maintenance of the dominance systems could have its costs, at least when the social hierarchies are perceived to be unstable, as the well-off must spend resources and energies to maintain their position (Frank, 2007; Wang et al., 2019). Just as alpha male baboons must fight with those who defies them if they want to maintain their status, affluent families must ensure an elitist education for their children, consume non-conventional goods, and actively increase their social and cultural capital if they want to differentiate themselves from the majority below them in the social ladder. Ultimately, social hierarchies are threatening and stressful to a higher or lower extent for all individuals along the social ladder (Sapolsky, 2005).

Wilkinson & Pickett (2009b) argued that economic inequality (EI) causes health and social problems because it enlarges disparities and distances between individuals who own relatively fewer or greater resources. This would lead people to experience a constant concern for their socioeconomic status, which chronically stress them, a

phenomenon they called status anxiety. In the next sections it will be discussed how the hierarchization of unequal societies triggers a syndrome of status anxiety.

Status as a Fundamental Human Motive

How the hierarchization of societies due to EI leads to increased concerns about one's socioeconomic status? How does it ultimately impact health and wellbeing?

Occupying a relatively low position or trying to maintain an elevate one in a given hierarchy is highly threatening and stressful for humans and animals (Sapolsky, 2005). The desire for status is a fundamental human motive, and it is common in many other mammals (Anderson et al., 2015). However, in modern western societies, this motive may get detrimental and dysfunctional for people and societies (Prinstein, 2017). The dynamics of social hierarchies activate chronic stress responses, which are harmful for individuals' health and wellbeing, as they activate neuroendocrine and neural adaptations, which could be adaptive during an acute physical stressor, such as an attack by a dominant individual, but are maladaptive and deleterious in the long term (Sapolsky, 2005). In a group of baboons, a chronic psychological stressor could be the constant proximity to a rival in the social hierarchy. In humans, it could be a bullying classmate, or the exposure to constant reminders of the (apparent) economic success of similar others, such as advertisements, cultural products, or social networks, depicting unrealistic standards of living and consumption. Thus, modern western societies are characterized by a constant exposure to stressful reminders and signals of one's own and others' social rank (Kraus et al., 2017).

Status indicates one's rank in a social hierarchy and has been generally defined as the respect and admiration others profess to an individual, based on his/her worth and contribution to others (Anderson et al., 2015). Ironically, those who are afforded a high status may be perceived to elevate the status of those who adulate and stick to them; an attribution which promotes snobbery, that is, a positive attitude toward high-status individuals and a negative one toward low-status individuals (De Botton, 2004; Fiske, 2011).

Status also has some peculiarities: It is relational, context-specific, and relative (Prinstein, 2017). First, status is awarded by others in a reference group, as they

recognize everyone's position in each hierarchy. For instance, to know students' status in a classroom a researcher could ask to any student to indicate which classmate they like the most and then rank the students based on the frequency they are named. Thus, status is derived from one's social esteem, that is, one's worth in others' eyes. Second, although often related, status in a reference group is not necessary dependent on status in other reference groups. For instance, a virtuous guitarist could have a high status among people who like heavy metal music, but low status in a meeting of mycology amateurs. Finally, status is not absolute, because it requires the comparison with others in the reference group, as it indicates individuals' rank in a hierarchy.

Humans are equipped with a highly vigilant social self-preservation system: A monitoring mechanism evolved from a system of vigilance and defensive responses to physical threats (Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2004). The self-preservation system constantly monitors the social environment for threats to individuals' social esteem and activates the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical axis in response to social threats (Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2004; Sapolsky, 2005). As commented above, status is a relative attribute and is dependent on how others evaluate oneself. Thus, status-driven motivation renders individuals highly sensitive to others' perception of their own's worth as indicated by their ranking position in hierarchies. Accordingly, Dickerson, & Kemeny (2004) argued that any cue of social evaluation regarding important aspects of the self-identity could potentially be interpreted as threats to one's social status and activate the social self-preservation system. Indeed, the authors found that among laboratory-induced psychological stressors, those involving threats to one's social esteem, which is based on others' perceptions of one's worth, elicit the highest cortisol response, indicating that facing any threat to social status is a highly stressful experience for humans.

Moreover, status influence self-esteem. As status is derived by the social esteem (i.e., one's prestige or worth as perceived by others in a reference group), to the extent that the attributes status is derived from, and the reference group are relevant to an individual, his/her self-esteem (i.e., his/her feeling of self-worth) will be affected by his/her status (Anderson et al., 2015). For instance, it has been found that to the extent

that students have a high perceived status among their peers, they tend to report higher self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2015, Prinstein, 2017).

Status, Socioeconomic Status and Social Class

Contrary to other animals, humans belong to multiple hierarchies and could have different rank depending on which hierarchy is taken into consideration (Sapolsky, 2005). However, the evidence examined in the previous sections indicates that, among the multiple places one occupies in other social hierarchies, people are highly sensitive to signals of socioeconomic status, which plays a relevant role in triggering self-evaluative threats and dominance-oriented reactions (Anderson et al., 2015; Kraus et al., 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017).

Socioeconomic status indicates the position of an individual on a social hierarchy, based on his/her material resources. It is usually defined by an individual's wealth and income, his/her occupational prestige, his/her education, and his/her wealth, relative to others in their community, their country, or their reference group (Adler et al., 1994; Anderson et al., 2015; DiMaggio, 2012). Thus, socioeconomic status is a multidimensional attribute, composed by interrelated dimensions of social dominance. Concretely, the privileges of the dominant groups in the socioeconomic hierarchy are maintained by the accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital, and by exhorting symbolic violence toward those who are below them in the hierarchy (DiMaggio, 2012).

People usually know if they have a high or low socioeconomic status, as they are able to almost instantaneously recognize and evaluate cues of the position that, themselves and others, occupy in the social ladder (Kraus et al., 2013; 2017). Moreover, signals of each one's position permeate their daily lives (Anderson et al., 2015; DiMaggio, 2012; Walasek & Brown, 2019). Research on the psychological effects of socioeconomic status traditionally turns to subjective socioeconomic status as the focal predictor of numerous outcomes, such as perceived stress, lack of control, health, and wellbeing, beyond and above objective measures of socioeconomic status (Adler et al., 2000; Tan et al., 2020).

Subjective socioeconomic status has also been overlapped with subjective social class or social class identification in the literature (e.g., Tan et al., 2020). The latter has been usually measured by people's identification with fixed ranked social categories, such as low, middle, and high class, and has proven to be a decent predictor of socioeconomic status outcomes, comparable to other measures of subjective socioeconomic status (e.g., Kim & Park, 2015; Tan et al., 2020). However, while socioeconomic status is conceived as a continuous variable (e.g., Adler et al., 2000), social classes typically describe ranked categories or social groups (Di Maggio, 2012). Moreover, social classes have been conceptualized not only as cultural environments which model and socialize individuals' social identities and relational scripts, but they also describe ranked categories with different access and control over resources, and the experience of contrasting levels of valuable goods vis-à-vis others (DiMaggio, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014; Kraus et al., 2011; 2013).

In this work, unless otherwise specified, the terms socioeconomic status and social class are used interchangeably, as they are determined by the same material conditions, and both are broadly defined as the rank one occupies in the social ladder. Although differences in socioeconomic status not necessarily derive in a social categorization process, to the extent that EI is more pronounced, distances among the rungs of the social ladder enlarge; as such, individuals with different socioeconomic background are socialized in distinct cultural contexts, and signs of socioeconomic status become more readily recognizable (Kraus et al., 2013; Walasek & Brown, 2019; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; 2017). Thus, ultimately, in highly unequal societies, socioeconomic status acquires relevance as an attribute differentiating social classes as social categories, with clear boundaries that define different entities (Turner et al., 1987).

To the extent that material resources and obtaining economic success are valued in a given society, socioeconomic status becomes a relevant source of status for individuals (Anderson et al., 2015). Indeed, socioeconomic status has been consistently found to be a relevant dimension of social esteem in many contexts, and to exhort a considerable impact on wellbeing. For instance, those with higher local socioeconomic status, as indicated by relative income in specific geographic areas, consistently report

higher life satisfaction and happiness across countries. However, in more unequal countries, socioeconomic status could acquire further relevance for one's perceived social esteem. In highly unequal countries, not only people attribute a higher importance to their status but also, they feel to a higher extent that others are looking down on them because of their socioeconomic status (Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013). In societies affected by high EI, there are many cues and reminders of the opulence and the unreachable standard of living of the most advantaged, which suppose potential threat to socioeconomic status, and constantly triggers the social self-preservation system, thence turning into a source of chronic stress.

Economic Inequality and Materialism

People vary in their tendency to consider possessions and their acquisition as central in their lives, to consider them essential to their satisfaction and wellbeing, and to define their own and other's success based on wealth (i.e., they show different levels of materialism, Richins y Dawson, 1992). The accumulation of wealth and material possessions has been found to be a universal cultural value in modern societies (Schwartz et al., 2012). However, cultural values are not static among societies, but evolving responses as a collective form of adaptation to the challenges and threats of dynamic material and social environments, which are disseminated through shared meanings and repeated engagement in common practices and embedded to a higher or lower extent in individuals' automatic responses and self-identities (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011).

As societies transitioned from hunting and gathering activities to farming and pastoralism, social relationship changed. While foragers obtained better fit in their societies by sharing resources and needs with others and did not need to accumulate wealth nor invest their efforts and resources for delayed returns, farmers lives became highly conditioned by the dynamics of investments, debts, and credits, because they rely highly on the pass of time and seasons to satisfy their needs (Suzman, 2020, p.190). Thus, as the accumulation of resources were meaningless in gatherers' societies but provided a better position and high benefits in farmers' societies, the transition to farm-

based economies has been considered one of the origins of materialism (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017).

The first societies, organized in cities in the Mesopotamian area, structured their social relationships in hierarchies and social classes, with those belonging to higher social classes enjoying more privileges, more resources and better lives than those who belonged to lower classes. For those who did not inherit a high social class, the only mean to get a better position was to accumulate wealth (Suzman, 2020, p.232). Those who accumulated wealth typically owned the means to dominate the vast majority of individuals who had no other resources than their labor force.

It was not until after the first industrial revolution and the increase in workers' salaries during the nineteenth century when a working class emerged for the first time, with the sufficient resources to consume other goods besides those who were essential for living. Since then, lower classes strained to obtain a better status in societies by emulating those who were better off, while upper classes tried to differentiate their appearance, tastes, and lifestyles from those of the lower classes to maintain the social distance within the hierarchies, thence their privileges (Suzman, 2020, p.242). It is also during the nineteenth century when the term *snobbery* begun to popularize, as a mean to satirically criticize the endless (sometimes ridiculous) efforts of the aristocracy to differentiate themselves from lower social classes, with strict codes of conduct, extremely sophisticated and uncomfortable clothes, and heavy, expansive, expensive wigs (Thackeray, 1848). Later, the term would make itself popular describing a negative attitude toward those who have lower (socioeconomic) status (de Botton, 2004).

In the present, EI has been found to be associated with higher rates of consumption emulation, and greater efforts to accumulate material resources (Bowles & Park, 2005). Moreover, in a study comparing states in the US, those with higher income inequality have been found to be characterized by a higher interest in positional goods— things consumed to show wealth and economic success —, as indicated by Google searches (Walasek & Brown, 2015). However, it has been argued that the cultural and ideological context of the United States, characterized by high meritocratic beliefs, could produce specific patterns not generalizable to other countries, and some evidence support this idea (Rözer et al., 2021). The reasons for the different results

regarding the relationship between EI and materialism could be multiple, but one plausible explanation is that when perceived inequality is too high, admiring economic success and putting a greater worth on wealth could be threatening, thence people show less interest in material values as a self-preservation mechanism (Paskov et al., 2017).

We have previously argued that income, wealth and socioeconomic success acquire higher importance in more unequal societies at the expense of other values, such as humbleness or social responsibility (Walasek & Brown, 2019). The authors of this hypothesis named it as the material rank hypothesis, and maintain that as the disparities among the rungs in the socioeconomic ladder enlarge, the position one occupies in it is more visible to others and less easily dissimulated, thus socioeconomic status becomes one of the most explicit dimensions of social comparisons (*Ibid*.). While in more equal societies the boundaries between social classes are blurred, unequal societies are highly hierarchized on materialistic values, and increase the salience of socioeconomic status, as the boundaries among social classes become more defined.

Individuals who show higher materialistic orientation are less generous and more easily influenced by others, but also more prone to unhealthy and risky behaviors, evaluate themselves more negatively, experience more loneliness, and are less satisfied with their lives (Dittmar et al., 2014; Goldsmith & Clark, 2012; Kim et al., 2017; Pieters, 2013). Following the material rank hypothesis, EI could orient individuals' motivation, attention and behavior to a chronic concern for their socioeconomic status, as they are socialized in a materialistic culture and assimilate materialistic aspirations to their self-identity (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). As discussed above, in contexts of high EI the consequences of occupying a relatively low position in the social hierarchy are more salient and threatening than in more relatively equal contexts, thus, to avoid being left behind or losing one's position could involve a variety of aversive consequences in a large range of situations. The concerns for socioeconomic status are generalized across many contexts and aspects of life in highly unequal society, and they become a general principle to avoid negative experiences. This generalizability and utility across many social contexts for the pursue of basic needs and values (e.g., social esteem), could

convert the concerns for socioeconomic status in an ultimate value, that is, a general principle that defines people's highest priorities (Rigoli, 2020).

Moreover, the context of EI could favor the dissemination, learning and generalization of economic success as an ultimate value by the imposition of cultural and social norms by the dominant groups in societies. On this matter, attributing a great significance to success based on competing for a higher material rank and climbing the social hierarchy serves the purpose of justifying the privileges of advantaged groups, and could contribute to impose standards of socioeconomic success that are out of the reach of the most as a dominant social norm, thus further contributing to arouse anxiety for maintaining or increasing an unrealistic high socioeconomic status, which by the way, would always turn out to be too low for the most, compared to the aforementioned standards.

Status Anxiety

The hierarchization of unequal societies based on material resources has been posited to lead societies and individuals to status anxiety (De Botton, 2004). More concretely, status anxiety describes worries about not reaching the standards of success in society, being stuck in one's social standing or losing status (De Botton, 2004). Although most definitions of status anxiety refer to concerns with status, instead of socioeconomic status, the allusion to the influence of societies' standard of success links status anxiety to materialism and to the centrality of the rush for socioeconomic status in the ethos of unequal societies. Theorizations about status anxiety derives from the early formulation by Thorstein Veblen (1934) of the emulation effect, which describes how at every rung of the social ladder people try to emulate those who are just above them, in order to struggle to keep up with their social standing and avoiding being left behind.

On this matter, the definition of the status anxiety phenomenon relies on the premises of the Prospect Theory, which states that anticipated losses are highly aversive and guide decisions in many uncertain situations (Khaneman & Tversky, 1979). The application of this perspective to status anxiety is supported by some evidence. On the one hand, when anticipating the possibility of having a worse status, individuals

belonging to high status groups were found to show higher physiological activation than those who pertained to low status groups, indicating a stress reaction to social threat (Scheepers et al., 2009). On the other hand, the anticipation of not achieving a higher socioeconomic status could be as much aversive as anticipating status losses, as it would implicate failure to fulfill one's expectations regarding socioeconomic status. Such failure could be anticipated by people as they use societies' perceived standards and others' socioeconomic status as an anchor. Moreover, beliefs about the possibility of increasing one's socioeconomic status and its perceived uncertainty could contribute to status anxiety (De Botton, 2004). Again, this could happen because normative success expectations could work as anchoring and adjustment heuristics for people's estimations about which socioeconomic status they should aspire to (Kahneman y Tversky, 1979; Tversky y Kahneman, 1974).

Despite its comparative nature, status anxiety should not be confused with envy. While the former describes concerns directed toward socioeconomic status, the latter is a general emotional reaction to upward comparison which stems from the desire for whatever others' achievement or possession, when a person lacks it (Van de Ven et al., 2009). As such, envy would fade when the other's achievement is obtained or when the other loses his/her achievement or possession. Thus, if people envy the socioeconomic status of those who are above in the social hierarchy, the emotion will disappear once the same socioeconomic status is reached, or once the others lose their socioeconomic status. On the contrary, status anxiety pervades all rungs of the social ladder, and is maintained independently of the position one occupies, as long as economic inequalities are maintained. Moreover, envy could be activated regardless of the disparities between the invidious and the envied persons and is not predicted to increase proportionally to these disparities (Van de Ven et al., 2009). On the contrary, status anxiety is predicted to increase as the material gaps among individuals enlarges (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; 2017). Finally, while envy is directed toward an individual or a group of individuals (i.e., it is an interpersonal or intergroup emotional reaction), status anxiety not only concerns interpersonal or intergroup dynamics, and not only requires upward comparisons to arise, but it is a system-based reaction, that is, it

describes a specific reaction to the material conditions and the social system which surround individuals (Solak et al., 2012).

Status anxiety should neither be confounded with relative deprivation. As mentioned above, status anxiety stems from the unbalance between one's achievements and his/her expectations regarding socioeconomic status (De Botton, 2004). Typically, these expectations are derived from meritocratic beliefs (Knowles, & Lowery, 2012). Thus, in unequal societies, which are pervaded by system-justifying beliefs, even those who are at the bottom of the social ladder are led to think they got what they deserve (Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Relative deprivation, instead, is an appraisal of having less or being unfairly deprived of attributes, achievements, or possessions which an individual perceives he/she deserves (Smith et al., 2012). While the typical emotional reactions that go with relative deprivation are anger and resentment, status anxiety is accompanied by agitation, anxiety, frustration, and an inferiority complex (De Botton, 2004; Delhey et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2012).

Two accounts linking EI to health and wellbeing respectively appeal to relative deprivation and status anxiety, namely the relative income hypothesis and the contextual effect hypothesis (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). In Chapter 1 it has been discussed how EI could exhort a toxic effect on the whole society, by contaminating social values and social interactions, as it boosts the hierarchization of all individuals according to their economic success. This implicates that status anxiety has a central role in accounting for the effects of EI on health and wellbeing. However, the relative income hypothesis and the contextual effect are not mutually exclusive of each other; rather, status anxiety and relative deprivation could influence each other, as the social ladder becomes steeper and the distance among its rungs becomes vertiginous.

Status Anxiety and Status Seeking

Finally, status seeking is one of the phenomena more strictly related to status anxiety. In the literature, status anxiety is often confounded with status seeking (e.g., Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al., 2021; Paskov et al., 2017). Both are based on the importance that individuals put on their socioeconomic status. However, status anxiety is triggered by the threat of anticipating a failure in the accomplishment of societies'

standard of success and by the fear of being left behind (De Botton, 2004; Frank, 2007). On the contrary, status seeking is more specifically described as a drive to increase one's socioeconomic status and to emulate those who are above oneself in the social ladder, which derives in snobbish attitudes (Fiske, 2011, Veblen, 1934). Although the relationship and differences between status anxiety and status seeking have not been explicitly treated in the literature, it would be reasonable to consider them as two faces of the same coin: As socioeconomic status becomes salient and gain importance for individuals, EI moves societies to a status competition rush, while it sinks people in a constant concern and inferiority complex about their socioeconomic status. Moreover, status seeking related behaviors of some people (e.g., material possessions show-off and snobbery) could increase other people's status anxiety, by increasing perceived competitiveness and classism. Status seeking could lead people to higher classism, as people try to differentiate themselves from those below them and to boost their status (De Botton, 2004; Fiske 2011). Experience with classism, in turn, could lead those who are snubbed to feel inferior and to feel they are looked down on because of their socioeconomic status, which has been considered a manifestation of status anxiety (Layte & Whelan, 2014; Thompson & Subich, 2013).

Approach and Avoidance Motivations, Status Seeking and Status Anxiety

As socioeconomic status becomes an important dimension of comparison and competition for those who are exposed to high levels of EI, it could drive distinctive motivational orientations. Social psychologists have made efforts to define individuals' motivations and to explain which roles they play in the way individuals interact with their social context. Two fundamental motivational systems have been distinguished: Approach and avoidance (Gable & Strachman, 2008). While approach motivations are guided by the appetite for desired end-states, avoidance motivations are guided by the aversion of undesired end-states. Each motivational system has been respectively related with a behavioural activation system, describing a conditioning system that activates behaviour in response to (either positive or negative) reinforcement cues, and a behavioural inhibition system, that inhibits behaviour in response to (either positive or negative) punishment cues. The two systems are rooted in separate neuroanatomic

networks and are associated with distinctive emotional responses (Gable & Strachman, 2008).

Those who perceive more EI in the context where they live have been found to also perceive it to be highly competitive, and this, in turn, leads them to increased levels of both economic approach and avoidance goals (Sommet et al., 2017). Thus, on one hand EI could exhort a stimulating effect, and orient people to make efforts on behalf of their socioeconomic status, while on the other hand it could exhort a vigilance effect, and orient people to strain to avoid threats to their socioeconomic status. In their analysis of the psychological consequences of EI, Wilkinson and Pickett (2017) signalled that in more unequal context individuals are highly sensible to socioeconomic status, and this, in turn, could activate two kinds of responses; one triggers feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and could eventually lead to lower self-esteem and depression; the other triggers narcissism and self-enhancement. The literature on status anxiety has been using interchangeably the terms "status seeking" and "status anxiety" referring to the same construct and described it both in terms of appetite for desired socioeconomic status and aversion for undesired socioeconomic status. In this chapter we define both variables in a different way.

Status Seeking as an Approach-motivation Driven Reaction

EI activates a dominance orientation system that boosts desire for status and lead to status seeking behaviours (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). For instance, those who live in more unequal countries tend to believe they possess more desirable characteristics than others. This self-enhancement bias has been considered as an indicator of an appetite for status because of EI (Laughnan et al., 2001). In the same vein, opposing evidence has been found about the relationship between income inequality among European countries and individuals' search for respect, admiration, and recognition from other people (Paskov et al., 2013; 2017). These findings suggest that EI could exhort a stimulating effect on status seeking, but also a discouraging effect on the latter when there is too much of it. – both approach-motivation driven emotional reactions. Despite the lack of consistency in cross-sectional studies, experimental evidence supports the notion that perceived EI increases status seeking.

On this matter, experimental participants envisioning their lives in more unequal societies referred it would be more relevant to them to be respected by others, admired for what they did, successful, recognized for their achievements, and able to show their abilities in such societies (compared to those who envisioned their lives in more equal societies; Blake & Brooks, 2019).

Status Anxiety as an Avoidance-motivation Driven Reaction

Similarly, those who live in more unequal countries report to a higher extent they feel undervalued and that others look down at them because of their job situation or income, indicating that they feel threaten by their current socioeconomic status (i.e., they experience status anxiety; Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014). Moreover, cultural differences between the haves and the have-nots could work as cues of socioeconomic differences, triggering socioeconomic status comparisons and status anxiety: The extent to which those who have different income and educational attainment display different cultural consumptions has been found to mediate the relationship between EI and the feeling of being discriminated because of one's socioeconomic status (Delhey et al., 2017). Although they have not been consistently related to status anxiety, experiences and anticipations of changes in socioeconomic status, as well as socioeconomic status comparisons could be threatening, and have been related with political preferences and personal wellbeing (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016; Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Destin et al., 2017; Mutz, 2018). In the same vein, in experimental settings it has been found that when facing the possibility of status loss or getting stacked in a low status, people show physiological stress reactions, indicating they feel threatened by status-competition outcomes (Scheepers et al., 2009); similarly, in observational studies, being the target of classism has been found to be related with higher depression, anxiety, stress, lower psychological wellbeing and lower self-esteem (Thompson & Subich, 2013).

All the above being considered, there are good reasons to differentiate status seeking and status anxiety as two separate constructs, tapping on approach and avoidance motivations, respectively. It would be possible to desire a high socioeconomic status, but not being worried about it, or to feel anxious about one own

socioeconomic status, but not have ambition to increase it (Alba et al., 2014). Status seeking as an approach-motivation driven reaction and status anxiety as an avoidance-motivation driven reaction could have separate and unique consequences.

Status Seeking Outcomes

Status seeking as an appetite for socioeconomic status in unequal contexts has been associated with the Veblen effect, that is, an effect of EI driven by the emulation of those who are at the top through consumption of positional goods (Bowles & Park, 2005). This effect implicates that when facing EI, people would be motivated to compete for socioeconomic status, and attribute greater value to positional goods, as they perceive the latter would help them to emulate those who are better off, and thus differentiate themselves from the average consumer and increase their socioeconomic status (Veblen, 1934). In turn, in order to be able to afford more exclusive and positional goods, those who live in more unequal contexts would make greater effort in order to obtain higher incomes (Bowles & Park, 2005). Also, the appetite for socioeconomic status in unequal contexts has been associated with the tunnel effect (also called the hope factor, Kelley & Evans 2017): When trapped in traffic jam (a very annoying situation), car drivers start to feel better as they glance the neighbouring lane starts moving (Hirshman & Rothschild, 1973). Similarly, when facing EI, the example of the well-offs has been posited to inspire optimism in those who are in a less favourable position, at least in social contexts at early stages of economic growth (Ray, 2010). However, when economic growth enters later stages and start stagnating, increasing inequality would lead those left behind to frustration, just as car drivers in a traffic jam when only the neighbouring lane continues moving and they stand still (Hirshman & Rothschild, 1973)

Some evidence supports the hope factor hypothesis: Among those who live in rural China, for instance (thus experiencing sustained general economic growth), county-level EI was associated with higher life satisfaction, and higher general optimism about the future mediated this effect (Cheung, 2016). Moreover, EI has been found to be associated with higher reported wellbeing in poor nations (Kelley y Evans, 2017).

On the other hand, the increased appetite for socioeconomic status due to perceived EI have been related with relevant behavioural outcomes such as self-objectification among women, search for positional goods, borrowing and risk-taking (Banuri & Nguyen, 2020; Blake & Brooks, 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Walasek & Brown, 2015). In line with these findings, status seeking due to higher EI has been found to be related with unethical behaviours and longer working hours, which could contribute to unpaired productivity, increased stress, reduced wellbeing, and worse health (Bratanova et al., 2019).

Status Anxiety Outcomes

Status anxiety, in turn, is related with emotional distress and unpaired health and wellbeing. For instance, physiological stress reactions to the possibility of status loss or getting stacked in a low status could deteriorate physical health (Scheepers et al., 2009). Furthermore, experiencing uncertainty about one own socioeconomic status has been related to lower self-esteem and life satisfaction (Destin et al., 2017), while feeling marginalized by others because of oneself socioeconomic status (which has been traditionally considered as an indicator of status anxiety) has been found to predict poorer health outcomes, negative emotions, shame, social anxiety, lower self-esteem, and smoking (Simons et al., 2017). Importantly on this matter, feeling scorned because of one's socioeconomic status has been found to mediate the relationship between EI and unpaired mental health and lower subjective wellbeing (Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte 2012). In organizational contexts, status anxiety has been found to predict lower job satisfaction (Keshabyan & Day, 2020).

In addition to the effects on mood, health and wellbeing, status anxiety could exhort other important effects on personal and social functioning. When facing the threat of status loss (versus the opportunity of status gain) in experimental settings, people show less creativity, are more narrow-focused, and allocate more resources to preserve their status in detriment of their own group interest (Diguid & Goncalo, 2015; Pettit et al., 2010). This could be indicating that status anxiety contributes to hinder collective effort towards reducing inequalities among groups (e.g., the 99% versus the finance elites) for the sake of individual strive for socioeconomic status. Status anxiety

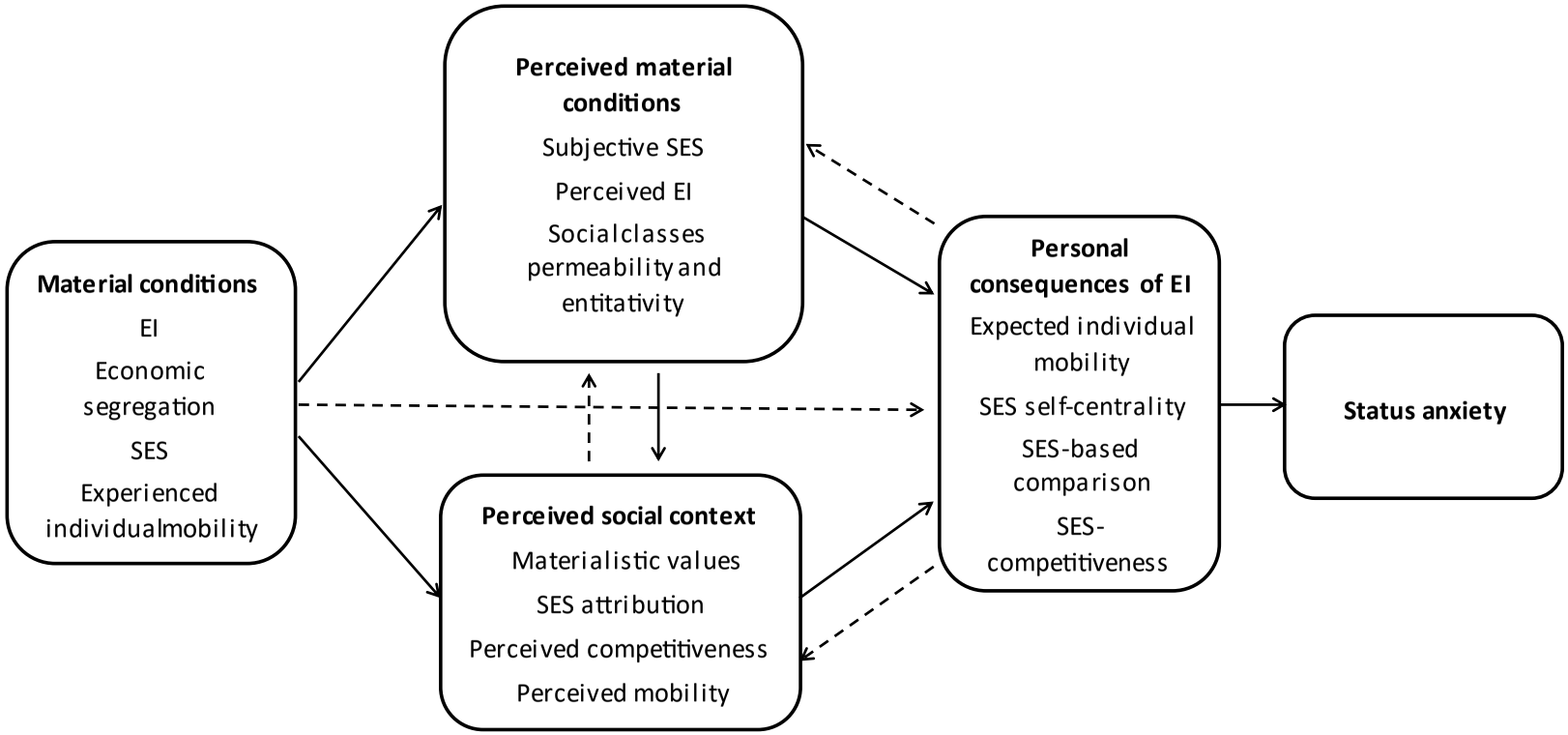
could also hinder educational achievements and wellbeing: When facing mobility at the university (a social context where competition for socioeconomic status is highly salient), students adopt avoidance performance strategies, associated with negative academic and personal outcomes, such as procrastination, perception of threat, surface learning, low feedback seeking, and compliant forms of conflict regulation (Jury et al., 2018).

Causes of Status Anxiety

How does EI get under the skin and makes people anxious about their socioeconomic status? In Chapter 1 it has been proposed that EI is produced and maintained through multiple dominance systems which feedback into each other and contaminate societies. The hierarchization of societies provokes a competition for status that constantly threatens all the individuals along the social ladder, and the rise of materialism turns socioeconomic status into the yardstick of one's worth and social esteem. Moreover, the way people perceive, appraise, and make sense of EI play a decisive role on how it impacts their lives. Thus, on the one hand, the way an individual perceived and appraises the objective material conditions in the context he/she inhabits determine how he/she react to the position he/she occupies in the social ladder. On the other hand, the way the material conditions and the dominance systems that operates to maintain and produce inequalities influence the way he/she perceives his/her social context and makes sense of inequalities (i.e., his/her perceived social context). In turn, the way individuals make sense of inequalities and perceive their social environment further contributes to his/her concerns about socioeconomic status (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Causes of Status Anxiety



Note. SES = Socioeconomic Status; EI = Economic Inequality

Relative Deprivation

As hierarchization is common in unequal societies and socioeconomic status determines an individual's worth and social esteem, the position one occupies in the social ladder could increase his/her status anxiety. Lower rungs in the economic hierarchy are associated with feelings of inferiority and being looked down on by others (Layte & Whelan, 2014). Moreover, these feelings of inferiority could generalize to the whole society, as EI gets higher (maybe except for a few individuals at the very top of the economic distributions). As mentioned above, subjective perceptions of socioeconomic status exhort larger effects beyond those of objective socioeconomic status (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; Tan et al., 2020).

Could EI influence the way socioeconomic status is perceived and appraised? Some evidence indeed points to this direction. A large national-scale study in New Zealand for instance, revealed that those who lived in more unequal neighborhoods perceived to a higher extent that they earned less than other people in their country, and felt more frustrated by that, relative to those who lived in more equal neighborhoods, even after accounting for their objective income (Osborne et al., 2015). That means that on average, people with the same income (even the wealthy ones) would feel more relatively deprived in more unequal neighborhoods. Moreover, this in turn led them to report lower self-esteem. In the same vein, a study on a large cross-country survey revealed that Europeans living in more unequal countries reported lower subjective socioeconomic status, independently of their objective rank on the social ladder (as indicated by their educational level, income, and employment status), and this, in turn, led them to report lower life satisfaction (Schneider, 2019).

The contextual effect of EI on relative deprivation has been confirmed by experimental studies. On the one hand, when resources distribution was manipulated in gambling tasks, participants in a relatively more unequal scenario considered they would need higher gains to be satisfied, and this led them to higher risk taking (Payne et al., 2017). On the other hand, when participants were induced to imagine their life in the middle class of a fictitious society, they felt more relatively deprived in a condition of high inequality than in a condition of low inequality, even if their standard of living

were maintained constant (Sánchez- Rodríguez, Jetten et al., 2019). Thus, not only EI directly increases concerns about socioeconomic status, but also, it makes everyone feel deprived. EI further threatens individuals by generally increasing the feeling of not counting too much in others' eyes and of being scorned down by them because of one's socioeconomic status (Layte & Whelan, 2014).

Classism

As mentioned in the previous sections, to scorn down at those who are below in social standing is a common reaction to EI and the class divides it promotes, and it is a dominance mechanism to maintain the hierarchization of societies (Fiske, 2011). Low socioeconomic status is associated with stereotypes of incompetence and those who are considered inferior because of their socioeconomic status are usually paternalized and dehumanized by the rest of the society (Capozza et al., 2012; Durante et al., 2013; Jordan et al., 2020). This generalized sense of inferiority is internalized by those who are in disadvantaged groups or perceive their social standing to be too low, as the position one occupies in the social ladder is attributed to dispositional causes and associated with merit and effort (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017; Sáinz et al., 2021).

As EI promotes an endless competition for socioeconomic along the whole social ladder, to snub those who are perceived to be of a lower social standing could be a generalized strategy among individuals at every rung of the social ladder to differentiate themselves from those below them, and to compete, to maintain or enhance their socioeconomic status (De Botton, 2004; Veblen, 1934). Consequently, in unequal societies, at every step up the social hierarchy, people feel inferior to some part of the society, as they perceive that those who are just above them are looking down on them because of their socioeconomic status (Layte & Whelan, 2014). Furthermore, those who experience explicit forms of classism are led to feel more insecure, anxious, and have lower self-esteem (Thompson & Subich, 2013).

Classism could be considered as the expression of a conflict between social classes. It has been discussed in the previous sections that the more the societies are hierarchized because of EI, the more socioeconomic status becomes a salient

dimension in social interactions. As individuals from different socioeconomic status backgrounds get more segregated and live in more differentiate cultural environments, social classes become more salient social categories, with more evident boundaries, which classify people depending on their socioeconomic status (Fiske, 2011, Stephens et al., 2014). As social classes become salient and social groups and their boundaries more defined, presumably the hierarchization of society would derive in higher social conflict among these hierarchized groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Capitalism, Neoliberalism and the expectations trap

Capitalism describes the organization of the production systems by the principle of market economy based on private property and the accumulation of the means of production (Piketty, 2014). As in modern times the return of capital, and thus its accumulation, are disproportionally higher than the economic growth, an increasing unbalance appeared between the social utility (i.e., the return to the rest of society) of the economic activity of those who accumulate wealth and their benefits (*Ibid*.). As mentioned in the previous sections, this produces a dominance system based on the accumulation of resources in a few hands that it is maintained via the discrimination and exploitation of large parts of the population, through the hierarchization of societies and the erosion of social ties (Therborn, 2013).

As the ultimate purpose of modern capitalism is the accumulation of capital, and the quest for the efficiency of the production system is intended to be beyond the reach of any ethic concerns, the economic dominance system it promotes implicates the financialization of any facet of life, including affective relations, care needs and activities and communal life (Agenjo-Calderón, 2021). Financialization means that these daily life aspects are perceived and considered as commodities, that is, goods that are subject to the economic law of supply and demand, in a free market system, and people simultaneously assume both roles of consumers and producers of these commodities (*Ibid.*). Thence, in modern times capitalism pervades any aspect of human life and relations and exhorts a great influence on social functioning.

During the decade of 1980s, western societies' debates and studies on economy became largely dominated by an orthodox school of thought (Navarro, 1998). Some of

the principal assumptions of this framework were that 1) the accumulation of capital is necessary for economic growth as it allows private initiative to invest in efficient production systems, 2) redistributive policies and welfare are negative for economic growth as they hinder private initiative, 3) labor market, as any other market, regulate themself and tend to the most efficient equilibrium, thus it should not be intervened by state, 4) goods, services, and financial capital should be allowed to circulate without any restriction internationally, as they tend to distribute efficiently and equitably following laws of supply and demand. Since they become hegemonic in western societies, these assumptions still influence worldviews and beliefs regarding societies' functioning and relations of production, partly due to the global influence of the United States (*Ibid.*)

In modern societies this system of beliefs takes the form of neoliberalism, an ideology promoting political economic practices oriented toward reducing the institutional regulations and interventions to the minimum, and that is based on the core principle that the best way to promote human wellbeing is to guarantee its freedom of trade and entrepreneurship in a free and unlimited market based on the private property rights (Harvey, 2007). Thus, neoliberalism legitimizes capitalism without any kind of limitation as the dominant social system and stand for further deregulations of the free market at any level of the societies (Graeber, 2011). Although culturally variant, some core beliefs of this worldview are shared and assumed by most societies around the globe: Markets are efficient and equitable, as they tend to equilibrium; individuals are autonomous, rational, self-oriented and mainly motivated by economic purposes; competition is natural, desirable, and necessary to motivate market and production efficiency (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Coburn, 2000).

These beliefs are easily accepted and shared in societies, as they meet some psychological needs. EI is uneasy, as it threatens with activating a dissonance between what one considers just and the social system in which he/she accept to participate. To reduce this dissonance, individuals make efforts to justify the current social system, explaining economic differences in terms of procedural justice and differences in terms of merit and competence among those who have less and those who have more (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2003). These narratives have a palliative

effect and buffer the negative impact of EI on subjective wellbeing (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). One of the core tenets of neoliberalism is the promotion of freedom and fair distribution of outcomes, and its main premise is that in modern societies discrimination of social groups does not longer exist, but all individuals have similar opportunities to succeed if they are allowed to play the game of free market economy without any restriction (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015). In negating any difference among social groups, neoliberalism pretends societies to be color-blind, gender-blind and class-blind. However, the notion of free market conceals an insidious trap: The existing status and power unbalance among groups and individuals previous to any exchange of goods and services biases this social system in favor of dominant groups. Thus, the intended freedom of all individuals to participate and benefits from the market system is merely illusory and contributes to justify and legitimize economic exploitation and the accumulation of resources, as it is assumed in the dominant economic, social, and political discourse (Stiglitz, 2012).

Furthermore, to perceive that EI benefits, or to daydream that it could benefit oneself at some point, because he/she will reach an advantaged position, helps at tolerating inequality and being happy despite high level of inequality (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). Thence, people are motivated to think that they could improve their social standing thanks to their capacities and efforts, that is, they are motivated to maintain an internal locus of control in what refers to their socioeconomic status, or to think they already have a good position, by overestimating their socioeconomic status (Castillo et al., 2013; Savani & Rattan, 2012).

Ultimately, capitalism and the commodification of every aspect of life, jointly with the EI they produce and maintain, are the origin of status anxiety, but neoliberalism is its fuel. In the previous sections it has been described how inhabitants of unequal societies derive their sense of self-worth from their socioeconomic status (i.e., socioeconomic status self-centrality), and are constantly avoiding a feeling of inferiority, by immersing in a non-ending rush for a better position in the social hierarchy. As socioeconomic status becomes a fundamental dimension for one's self-worth, his/her material success would determine his/her self-esteem and wellbeing. However, the extent to which people are satisfied with their achievements is also

inversely proportional to their ambitions (De Botton, 2004). By extension, their perceived self-worth in others' eyes is determined by lay expectations about socioeconomic status dynamics (i.e., meritocratic beliefs). Consequently, perceived social esteem in highly unequal societies could be determined by the following equation:

$$Social\ esteem = \frac{Socioeconomic\ status}{Expectations}$$

As neoliberalism and its cultural products, such as the "rags to riches" and the "American dream" myths, boundless inflate the expectations dividend and condemn people to infinite aspirations, it does not matter how successful one could be in his/her quest for socioeconomic status, nor how much he/she succeed to differentiate him/herself from those who consider inferiors in the social hierarchy and emulate those who consider of a higher social standing. As long as EI persists and neoliberalism spurs individuals to an endless rush for a higher rung in the social ladder, people will be constantly threatened by the fear of failure and condemned to feel that others are looking down at them because of their socioeconomic status (De Botton, 2004).

Perceived mobility

As commented above, capitalism and the EI it creates and maintains trap individuals between: a) a false promise of equal opportunities in a social system where they are pretended to get what they deserve, and thus are valued for what they get (Heiserman &Simpson, 2017; Mijs, 2019), and b) an objective social system based on unequal opportunities, privileges, discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation (Therbon, 2012). This scenario leads individuals to blame themselves for not matching the unrealistic expectations of high social mobility promised by capitalism, and to frustration (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). This dynamic if mismatch between societies' expectations and individuals' material achievements not only regards their actual socioeconomic status, but also their trajectories and the future positions they anticipate they will achieve in the social ladder, as people usually derive a sense of where they stand in the social ladder from their past (i.e., their narrative of where they

came from), present, and future (their anticipation and understanding of their evolving socioeconomic status; Destin et al., 2017).

On that note, the more unequal, the more ossified societies are (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). Thus, not only the dividend of the equation represented is inflated in more unequal societies, but also the numerator is depressed, contributing to threaten people's social esteem and to trigger status anxiety. Economic, educational and health inequalities are interconnected and influence each other in vicious circles that contribute to reproduce inequalities on each dimension (Neckerman & Torche, 2007).

However, as in the case of EI, the way social mobility affects people depends on how they perceive it. Perceived social mobility has been proposed to be a multidimensional construct, and each dimension could have different implications for status anxiety. For instance, distinctions could be made between intragenerational (i.e., changes in socioeconomic status during one's lifetime) and intergenerational mobility (i.e., changes across generations; Davidai & Wienk, 2021). Also, social mobility beliefs could refer both to personal and societal mobility. The first describes beliefs about one's chances to change his/her own socioeconomic status, and could be informed by one's own past experiences of social mobility, generalized locus of control, and social sampling among close others, while the latter describes beliefs about general chances to move up or down the socioeconomic hierarchy people have in a society, and could be informed by general shared beliefs about how societies works, as the ones described in the previous section, and disseminated by media and cultural products (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Day & Fiske, 2019). On this matter, although people could infer the former from the latter and both are related to each other, the two could exhort opposite effects on status anxiety. From the equation presented above, it could be derived that personal mobility beliefs could operate as an anticipation of success, thus dampening status anxiety, while societal mobility beliefs could signal to individuals the expectations in their social environment, and the reference to size themselves and their anticipated success, thus fueling status anxiety.

Importantly, not only mobility beliefs are derived from shared cultural assumptions and ideologies, as those of meritocratic myths and neoliberalism, but also, they are influenced by one's own socioeconomic status, perceived discrimination, and

perceived societal levels of EI (Davidai & Wienk, 2021). On this matter, although system-justifying ideologies produce an optimistic bias on estimated chances of mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015), both observational and experimental studies demonstrated that perceived EI influences mobility beliefs. When individuals perceived wealth distribution to be more unequal or were induced to perceive a high unequal distribution of wealth in the United States, participants consistently estimated that the bottom twenty percent of the population had lesser chances to move to a higher position and estimated themselves to have lesser chances to move to higher positions in the wealth distribution (Davidai, 2018).

However, inequality not only influence mobility beliefs about people's chances of climbing up the social ladder, but also about their chances to fall down. In observational and experimental studies similar to those above mentioned, Browman and colleagues (2021) found that when perceiving the wealth distribution in the United States to be highly unequal, participants perceived that both upward and downward mobility were less likely to happen, that is, those at the bottom and the middle of the distribution were perceived to have lesser chances to climb up the social ladder, but also, those at the top and the middle of the distribution were perceived to be exposed to lesser threat of losing their social standing. Thus, given that a vast part of the population tends to identify themselves as middle class across countries (Evans & Kelley, 2004), in more unequal countries people could get more anxious as they feel they are stuck in their position, but they could also feel reassured by thinking they will not lose their position, compared to those who are left behind.

Competition and Comparison

Although social comparison is a cognitive process common to every human being (Prinstein, 2017), people vary in their tendency to compare themselves with others (Buunk et al., 2005). Those who show a higher tendency toward social comparison, also are more likely to be vulnerable to the consequences of comparisons, as they are more easily influenced by their social environment, and generally report lower levels of wellbeing (Buunk y Gibbons, 2007; Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016).

Contextual and situational factors, such as EI and one's socioeconomic status, could lead to differences in comparison tendency and competition. People tend to compete in domains they consider relevant to the self. Thus, EI could increase the tendency to compare and compete for socioeconomic status as materialistic values increase and individuals' worth and competence are judged based on their socioeconomic status. What is more, the more unequal societies are, the higher the advantages of occupying a higher position and the disadvantages of occupying a lower position are. In addition, as commented above, in more unequal societies socioeconomic status cues are more accessible and less ambiguous, thus socioeconomic status get a dominant role among other dimensions of social comparison (Walasek & Brown, 2019).

Comparison tendency and competitive attitudes and behaviors are intrinsically related to each other, as they are both driven by comparison concerns—a basic motive to improve one's performance in a relevant domain and to outperform others by achieving or maintaining a superior position (García et al., 2013). Concretely, the tendency to compare one's own socioeconomic status with others could be increased by the climate of competition for socioeconomic status promoted by EI. Based on these comparisons people define and evaluate their own position in the social hierarchy, and when comparisons are produced in highly unequal contexts, this tendency could lead to status anxiety (Delhey et al., 2017; Wilkinson y Pickett, 2009b).

Some evidence indicates that EI contributes to generate a competitive mindset that fuel status anxiety (Takata, 2003). People could share to a higher or lower degree the assumption at the basis of neoliberal ideologies, that one person's gain is possible only at the expense of the gain of other persons (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015). This competitive mindset, in turn, could increase socioeconomic status competition (García et al., 2013; Różycka-Tran et al., 2015; Takata, 2003).

Indeed, some evidence point at social comparison as one of the processes related with status anxiety. For instance, in a study with a large survey in the United States it was found that the importance people attach to compare their income with the one of others had a negative impact on their happiness and life satisfaction, beyond their own actual income (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). Moreover, it has been found

that the comparison tendency is related to the extent people consider that obtaining a high socioeconomic status and economic success are important for them, and both comparison tendency and competitiveness have been found to be related with status display (i.e., tendency to show-off one's socioeconomic status) and status seeking (Alba et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017).

As commented above, EI enlarges social distances and erodes social ties. Moreover, it contributes to fuel competition for socioeconomic status, thence to increase status anxiety, by creating a competitive climate. Indeed, both observational and experimental studies provide evidence that EI leads individuals to perceive that their social environment is highly competitive, that they are competing and being compared with others and to behave in more competitive ways (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sommet et al., 2019). Ultimately, comparison concerns and competitiveness are powerful triggers of self-evaluative threat (García et al., 2013). Hence, when they are activated relative to socioeconomic status, as it is the case for those who live in highly unequal societies, they fuel status anxiety.

Consequences of Status Anxiety

Most of the negative impact of EI on health and wellbeing described in the first sections have been attributed to status anxiety (Wilkinson &Pickett, 2009b; Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Paskov, 2013). The main mechanisms implied in these negative consequences are the stress reaction to the self-evaluative threat triggered by status anxiety, and the way people cope with it. Moreover, different psychological effects directly or indirectly related to health and wellbeing have been considered as manifestations and consequences of status anxiety. At least three kinds of psychological reactions could be distinguished as consequences of status anxiety, depending on the level of analysis: Reactions toward the system, other-oriented reactions, and self-directed reactions (see Solak et al., 2012).

First, individuals could feel threatened by the whole society, and distance themselves from others, as they are immersed in a competitive climate. This, in turn, could further contribute to exacerbate the distancing mechanism of the dominance system, that creates an individualistic cultural climate and a generalized independent

mindset (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). Also, it has been found that EI leads individuals to perceive others are more agentic, instrumental, competent, and self-oriented, than communal, expressive, sociable, and social-oriented (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019). Moreover, across countries in five contents, EI has been found to lead to a sort of Gotham City effect, that is, like in the famous comic book of Batman, societies are perceived to be dysfunctional, chaotic, and lacking moral values, and people seek for a strong leader who can make some order, even if this means to damage democratic functioning and legality (Sprong et al., 2019). These results were replicated in experimental settings by the same authors, and imply that EI favors authoritarian regimes, as they obtain more and more support by population.

Second, individuals could react to status anxiety directly competing and comparing themselves with others, as described in the previous section. Although it has been clarified that status anxiety is distinguishable from envy, the tendency to compare their economic achievements with those who are in a better position could lead people to envy and resentment against the latter. Furthermore, it has already commented in the previous sections that when social class divides become more prominent, people tend to scorn down those who are perceived to have a worse position, to differentiate themselves and maintain a relatively higher social standing (Fiske, 2011). These interpersonal reactions further contribute to enlarge the social distances on the one hand, and to discriminate and exclude disadvantaged groups on the other hand, thus further reinforcing the dominance system. Furthermore, although relative deprivation could be considered as an antecedent of status anxiety, a feedback effect from the latter to the former could be also plausible. The constant concern about the position one occupies in the social ladder could lead to seek for social context and cultural products of higher social standing, as well as to pay more attention to signals of high standings and compare frequently oneself with those who are in a higher social position. This, in turn, could increase people's chances to expose themselves to unfavorable comparisons and feel relatively deprived (Paskov et al., 2013).

Third, status anxiety could also influence one's appraisal of his/her own trajectory in the social hierarchy, and reaction to his/her own socioeconomic status. Not

only relative deprivation could stem from unfavorable comparison with others, but also it could stem from a negative assessment of one's trajectory, as he/she feel that his/her actual or future position is inferior to what he/she expected given his/her previous trajectory (Verme, 2009). A constant concern for maintaining or improving one's socioeconomic status could lead to constant frustration and dissatisfaction with his/her economic trajectory. Also, status anxiety could derive in constant insecurity about one's worth in others' eyes. As individuals partly construe their self-esteem based on their perceived social esteem, and socioeconomic status is an important dimension of social esteem in unequal societies (Twenge & Campbell, 2002), status anxiety could lower their self-esteem. Moreover, in addition to those caused by chronic stress and reduced self-esteem, status anxiety could have other psychological consequences further threatening individuals' mental health. For instance, the expectations trap described above confront people in unequal societies with the inescapable problem of concealing the expectations of upward mobility driven by the culture of capitalism and the reduced opportunities of ossified societies. Consequently, individuals blame themselves and get more frustrated for their position in the society. Ultimately this constant frustration could lead them to develop a sort of learned helplessness, exposing them to higher risk of depression (Burns & Seligman, 1991).

Conclusion

When the economic resources of an individual grant to him/her higher privileges and are considered as signals of one's worth and merit, societies get more and more materialistic, and individuals consider socioeconomic status and material success as one of the most important dimensions in their lives. Moreover, the erosion of social ties and the competitive climate generated by EI contribute to generate an obsession for comparing one's position with those of others, and to constantly worry about the possibility of status loss or getting stuck one's position. Ultimately, people in more unequal societies are concerned about their socioeconomic status, as they struggle to demonstrate they deserve the same treatment reserved for those who are above them in the social ladder, and to differentiate themselves from those below.

On the other hand, to evaluate which would be considered an acceptable socioeconomic status for themselves, individuals usually compare their socioeconomic status with a social standard. The perceived social standard in turn, is informed by what they think others expect from them, that is, the socioeconomic status they are expected to achieve. Others' expectations cues could come from their past socioeconomic trajectory (i.e., where they came from, and what they already achieved in the past), but also from the vicarious experiences of their close social environment (e.g., their family, friends, or workmates). More importantly, others' expectations cues could come from other salient examples of socioeconomic trajectories in their larger social environment (e.g., a reference model, public figures, or fictions and myths in media and cultural products). Advantaged groups and individuals are overrepresented in mainstream media and cultural productions, which disseminate common social representations of social class dynamics which reinforce and justify the dominance systems, such as the myth of the American dream. This could contribute to fill up the social imaginary with standard of economic success which are unrealistic for the most, thus increasing perceived threat by not achieving or maintaining an acceptable socioeconomic status.

In the end, the constant concern about one's socioeconomic status people experience in more unequal social contexts chronically activate a defensive vigilance system against threats that could harm individuals. As self-evaluative threats are among the most powerful stressors for human beings, the threat to social esteem entailed by underperform socioeconomic expectations produces a chronic stress response with could be at the basis of the negative impact of EI on health and wellbeing. Also, status anxiety hinders self-esteem and pave the road to depression: People living in unequal contexts feel constantly humiliated, as they perceive others are looking down on them because of their socioeconomic status, they feel inferior and frustrated because of their socioeconomic status. Some try to cope with this competitive climate by consuming more expensive products, with the expectation of obtaining higher status in others' eyes, even if it means to get deep in debt (Banuri & Nguyen, 2020; Walasek & Brown, 2015). Others try to obtain higher resources by exposing themselves to higher risks, or cope with chronic stress with dysfunctional strategies, such as drug

consumption or high calories intake (Classen et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017).

If EI is the pathogenic agent in this lethal pandemic, status anxiety is the syndrome it causes, which show up with the symptoms described above. To eradicate this pandemic, it is necessary to reduce economic inequalities. However, it is necessary to understand how, and under which circumstances, EI fuels status anxiety, and what role the latter plays in reinforcing the dominance systems which contribute to maintain EI. A research program on the relationship between EI and status anxiety is yet fledgling, and the present dissertation thesis aim for contributing to its development.

Motivation, research questions and aims

Chapter 3

As the literature on economic inequality grows, more evidence about its deleterious effects on societies and individuals is provided (e.g., Blake & Brooks, 2019; Classen et al., 2019; Dierckens et al., 2020; Du et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2020; Sprong et al., 2019). Moreover, although steps are taken to contain and tackle it, economic inequality tend to perpetuate itself and get more extreme (Banuri & Nguyen, 2020; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Mijs, 2021). However, still little is known about how economic inequality damages societies and harms individuals.

As the worth of individuals is determined to a higher extent by their socioeconomic status in highly unequal societies, the hierarchization of societies based on the economic resources generates status anxiety. This have been proposed as the main factor to explain the deleterious effects of economic inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). Status anxiety could be especially relevant in providing an explanation about the effects on health and wellbeing, as it could directly involve a chronic stress response given by the activation of the social self-preservation system (Disckerson & Kemeny, 2004). Economic inequality could entail a chronic exposure to a threatening environment to the social self, due to the hierarchization of society, which constantly activate the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical axis, with negative effects on people's health and wellbeing (Sapolsky, 2005).

Considerable advances have been achieved in the knowledge and comprehension of how economic inequality contributes to create a normative climate responsible for enlarging social distances and eroding social ties (del Fresno-Díaz et al., 2021; Moreno-Bella et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; 2019b; 2020). Instead, still little have been investigated on how people get sick from economic inequality. Some research findings indeed support the status anxiety hypothesis, but this literature have two main problems.

First, they are mainly based on indirect indicators of status anxiety (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Delhey et al., 2017; Du et al, 2021; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Loughnan et al., 2011; Paskov et al., 2013; 2017); for instance, large scale international studies included a single item measuring feeling of inferiority in others' eyes because of one's socioeconomic status, which has been used as a proxy of status anxiety (e.g., Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014). On this matter, not only the

use of single-item measure has been criticized because of its reduced reliability (Fisher et al., 2016), but also, it could be capturing a psychological effect related to status anxiety, but not necessary measuring it. Feeling inferior because of one's socioeconomic status could be not necessarily derived from status anxiety. Indeed, it has been found that in more unequal countries people feel that others look down at them because of their job situation or income (Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014), but this could be indicating that people accurately perceive others are discriminating them because of their socioeconomic status, rather than a higher concern for their socioeconomic status. In other words, unequal societies could be more classist, and this turn into individuals at each rung of the social ladder treating those below them as they were inferior. There's no doubt that feeling treated as if one is inferior entails a big threat to one's social esteem, thus feeling looked down on because of one's socioeconomic status could fuel status anxiety (De Botton, 2004). Moreover, status anxiety could increase individuals' attention and responsiveness to negative cues of others' snobbish attitudes. However, these experiences of being victim of prejudice or discrimination because of one's socioeconomic status should be distinguished from the experience of status anxiety.

Second, the research on indicators of status anxiety is based on cross-sectional studies. These studies do not permit to establish a causal relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety (Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Delhey et al., 2017; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014). Other studies which employed experimental designs included measures of materialism and desire for status as indicators of status anxiety (e.g., Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al, 2021). However, as it has been discussed in Chapter 2, conclusions about the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety should not be derived from these studies, as they could be capturing another psychological effect of the competitive climate derived from economic inequality, namely status seeking, which should be distinguished from status anxiety. Therefore, in order to systematically investigate the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety, direct valid and reliable measures of status anxiety need to be employed, and experimental studies are needed for establishing a causal relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety.

Furthermore, as introduced in the first chapter of the current dissertation, economic inequality could be perceived and appraised in different ways, thus exhorting different effects, depending on individual' differences and their social and cultural environment. On that matter, among Western countries, the English-speaking ones (i.e., United States and United Kingdom) differ from other societies in that they are organized under relatively highly neoliberal principles, with little welfare protection and a high reliance on the privatization of services (e.g., health services, education; Janmaat, 2014). It has been argued that these differences shape the extent to which people tolerate inequalities and embrace meritocratic beliefs about how their societies work. For instance, as the countries' welfare systems are oriented at meeting basic needs (vs. reducing inequality or increasing equal opportunities), they could contribute to shape stereotypes and negative attitudes toward unemployed and welfare recipients (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2016; Janmaat, 2014). Hence, countries with relatively weak welfare regimes and highly neoliberal political orientations could be a special breeding ground for status anxiety. The consequences of economic inequality could be exacerbated in these societies, not only because those who fall down the social ladder count on lesser social protection, but also because of the hierarchization based on economic resources could be worsened in these societies, as the advantaged ones are praised for their economic success and the disadvantaged are blamed for their failure, thus contributing to shape a climate of competition for socioeconomic status. Therefore, it would be relevant for the research in the field to count on valid and reliable measures that could allow studying the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety in other cultural contexts than those of the aforementioned English-speaking countries to facilitate the generalizability of their results.

On the other hand, as other mechanisms have been proposed to explain the link between economic inequality and the social burdens it entails, the role of status anxiety in the effects of economic inequality should be distinguished from those of other constructs, and the relationship between status anxiety and the other psychological reactions to economic inequality should be cleared up. For instance, economic inequality has been posited to lead individuals to feel relatively deprived, as most of them compare their economic situation and lifestyles with the well off and the elites,

(Osborne et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Jetten, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). In turn, relative deprivation could harm physical and mental health, as well as subjective wellbeing, and increase risk-taking behaviors aimed at maximizing one's chances to keep up with the Joneses (Osborne et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2017). The relative deprivation hypothesis is not in conflict with the status anxiety one, but both could concur in producing the economic inequality deleterious effects, as it has been exposed in the second chapter. However, the effects of economic inequality on status anxiety should be distinguished from those on relative deprivation, to have a clear test of the status anxiety hypothesis.

Moreover, although both derive from the same theoretical background, the status anxiety hypothesis should be distinguished from the status syndrome hypothesis (Layte et al., 2019; Marmot, 2004a). Whereas the status anxiety hypothesis predicts that as economic inequality grows, all individuals in the society tend to worry about their socioeconomic status, the status syndrome hypothesis predicts that unequal contexts produce a social gradient, leading individuals to higher concerns about their socioeconomic status the lower they are in the hierarchy. Indeed, both hypotheses are supported by indirect evidence (Layte & Whelan, 2014). However, to test the direct contextual effects of economic inequality on status anxiety, this should be disentangled from the effects of the material resources one could access and the position one occupies in the social ladder.

Finally, although status anxiety theory became popular with the publication of "The Spirit Level" by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009b), with few exceptions, still little has been investigated on the mechanisms involved in the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety (e.g., Delhey et al., 2017). In the first chapter it has been argued how the way economic inequality is perceived affects the kind of psychological effects it can cause on individuals, and ultimately how it impacts on their health and wellbeing. In the second chapter, some plausible psychological processes involved in the status anxiety effect have been presented. Therefore, a fruitful research program on the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety should include among its aims to investigate under which circumstances, and through which mechanisms economic inequality is linked to status anxiety.

Concretely, a competitive climate promoted by economic inequality based on socioeconomic status may be needed for triggering status anxiety (De Botton, 2004; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sommet et al., 2019). As unequal societies get more materialistic, socioeconomic status become a more relevant dimension of comparison among their inhabitants (Walasek & Brown, 2019). However, not only unequal societies turn more materialistic, but socioeconomic-status-based comparisons could increase and become more threatening as individuals' comparisons concerns are raised by the social context (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016; García et al., 2013). A climate of higher perceived competitiveness for socioeconomic status could lead individuals to further attribute higher value to increase or maintain their socioeconomic status on the one hand, and to perceive their social contexts as zero-sum situations in which those who give up the struggle for keeping up with the materialistic rush are left behind and suffer the consequences of counting less in others' eyes.

Moreover, in the second chapter it has been discussed how status anxiety could stir up from the mismatch between shared expectations regarding socioeconomic status dynamics (i.e., meritocratic beliefs) and one's perceived chances of maintaining or improving his/her own socioeconomic status. This mismatch, or its mere anticipation, entail a threat to the social self-preservation system, as it is perceived as a failure to achieve those attributes that are convened to be needed to obtain or maintain social esteem, namely economic success and an ascending trajectory in the social ladder. Perceptions of economic inequality have been found to influence perceived chances individuals have to achieve a higher or lower social standing than their actual ones (Browman et al., 2021; Davidai, 2018). Therefore, perceived social mobility could play a relevant role in the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety.

Research Questions and Aims of the Current Research

The main goal of this dissertation is to analyze the influence of economic inequality on status anxiety. Furthermore, as this thesis aims to provide an empirical analysis of a real-world phenomenon, which is posited to affect people's daily-life in virtually any kind of modern industrialized societies, the research presented in the

following chapters is based on two assumptions regarding the nature of the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety. First, similarly to what happens with other structural factors, economic inequality must be perceived by individuals in order to trigger their status anxiety (see Nishi et al., 2015). Second, the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety is posited to be incremental in the real-world context or in contexts which are like real-world societies. That means that in natural scenarios or in studies using designs with mundane realism, every grade of increment of economic inequality will also increase status anxiety. This excludes scenarios of absolute economic inequality or economic equality, as in both cases no hierarchies could be established among individuals on the basis of their material resources. In these extreme cases socioeconomic status would not even be a meaningful notion, hardly understandable by most people, and to be concerned about one's socioeconomic status would be meaningless.

Finally, as a summary, and after reviewing the research done so far looking at the influence of economic inequality on status anxiety, in Table 1 we present four general problems we identified in the research on economic inequality and status anxiety, the main research questions that remain to be investigated, the specific aims of this thesis, and the hypotheses we tested.

Table 1

Research issues, questions, aims and hypotheses of the current dissertation

Issue	Aims	Research questions	Hypotheses
1. No direct indicators in the research on SA and economic inequality.	To adapt and validate a reliable measure of SA to the Spanish population.	Is the Spanish version of the SA Scale a reliable and valid instrument to measure SA?	The items of the Spanish version of the SA Scale will adequately represent the construct of SA.
			The Spanish version of the SA Scale will present an unifactorial structure and satisfactory indices of reliability.
	To provide evidence of the independent effects of economic inequality and socioeconomic status on SA.	Is SA related to perceived economic inequality in the Spanish society?	Perceived economic inequality will be positively related to SA in the Spanish context.
		Does economic inequality exhort an effect on SA, beyond socioeconomic status?	Scores of the Spanish version of the SA Scale will be positively related to theoretically relevant construct (i.e., relative deprivation, status-seeking consumption, tendency comparison, public self-consciousness)
		Does socioeconomic status exhort a (negative) effect on SA beyond economic inequality?	Higher socioeconomic status will be associated with lower SA.
			The effects of perceived economic inequality and socioeconomic status on SA will be independent from each other.

Issue	Aims	Research questions	Hypotheses
2. Not enough evidence of the causal effect of economic inequality on SA.	To develop and validate an effective experimental paradigm to manipulate perceived economic inequality in ecological scenarios.	Does higher economic inequality increase SA?	Those who are exposed to high economic inequality (vs. low economic inequality) will report higher levels of SA.
	To obtain evidence from both observational and experimental studies about the causal effect of economic inequality on SA.		
3. The way others are perceived to react to economic inequality and its role in the effect of economic inequality on SA have not been investigated.	To provide evidence about the mediating role of perceived contextual competitiveness and SA in the effect of economic inequality on SA.	Does perceived contextual competitiveness mediate the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA?	Perceived contextual competitiveness will mediate the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA.
		Does perceived contextual SA mediate the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA?	Perceived contextual SA will mediate the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA.
4. The role of expected individual mobility in the relationship between economic inequality and SA has not been investigated.	To provide evidence about the mediating role of expected individual mobility in the effect of economic inequality on SA.	Which role does expected individual mobility play in the effect of economic inequality on SA?	Reduced expected individual upward mobility will mediate the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA.
	To differentiate the role of upward and downward expected individual mobility in the effect of economic inequality on SA.	Does expected upward individual mobility play a differentiate role than expected downward individual mobility in the effect of economic inequality on SA?	Reduced expected individual downward mobility will suppress the effect of economic inequality on individuals' SA.

Note. SA = Status Anxiety

Versión Española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus

Capítulo 4

Versión Española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus

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Resumen

En este trabajo se presenta la adaptación y las evidencias de validez de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus. Esta medida evalúa la tendencia de las personas a preocuparse por su posición socioeconómica. En dos estudios correlacionales, de corte exploratorio (N = 270) y confirmatorio (N = 258), el instrumento mostró una buena fiabiliad, además de una estructura unifactorial y correlaciones positivas con privación relativa, tendencia a la comparación social, y percepción de desigualdad. Además, en un tercer estudio experimental (N = 140), se encontró que en la condición de bajo estatus socioeconómico los/as participantes experimentaron mayor ansiedad por el estatus. En suma, estos estudios sugieren que la Versión Española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus puede ser utilizada en población española.

Palabras claves: ansiedad por el estatus; estatus socioeconómico; desigualdad; privación relativa.

Los habitantes de la ciudad española con menor renta per cápita (i.e. Sanlúcar de Barrameda) viven de media 5 años menos que los habitantes de la ciudad con mayor renta per cápita (i.e. Pozuelo de Alarcón; INE, 2019). Esta diferencia no se debe solo a las condiciones materiales de vida, ya que más allá de sus ingresos, el estatus socioeconómico de una persona determina su salud y esperanza de vida (Marmot, 2004a). Dado que las sociedades actuales son cada vez más desiguales y jeraquizadas (Piketty, 2014), las diferencias socioeconómicas se han vuelto cada vez más importantes (Wilkinson y Pickett, 2009b). En contextos altamente jerarquizados (i.e., en jerarquías de humanos y de primates no humanos), ocupar posiciones de bajo estatus incluso puede inducir cambios metabólicos y del sistema inmunológico que incrementan el riesgo de enfermedades crónicas, como la diabetes y las enfermedades cardiacas (De Vogli, Ferrie, Chandala, Kivimäki y Marmot, 2006; Marmot, 2004b).

Los seres humanos, al igual que otros mamíferos, atienden a las jerarquías sociales y a la posición de los individuos dentro de ellas. Por ejemplo, se ha encontrado que las personas son capaces de identificar rápidamente el estatus socioeconómico de otros desconocidos con muy poca información sobre ellos (Kraus, Park y Tan, 2017). El deseo de mantener el estatus en una jerarquía o alcanzar un estatus superior es una motivación que puede considerarse parte de nuestra herencia evolutiva (Anderson, Hildreth, y Howland, 2015). No obstante, en la actualidad las diferencias económicas han convertido el deseo de estatus en una preocupación constante (De Botton, 2004), capaz de causar reacciones de estrés e interferir en la vida de las personas (Gruenewald, Kemeny y Aziz, 2006).

La experiencia de ansiedad por el estatus (AE) lleva a las personas de cualquier posición social a preocuparse constantemente por no alcanzar los estándares de éxito de la sociedad, por quedarse estancadas en su posición social, o por perder su estatus (De Botton, 2004; Paskov, Gërxhani y van de Werfhorst, 2013). La AE puede provocar conductas más egoístas, menos solidarias (Paskov et al. 2013), y discriminatorias hacia quienes ocupan los últimos peldaños de la escala social *(*De Botton, 2004*;* Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett*, 2004).* En estudios internacionales con frecuencia se ha utilizado una medida muy general basada en un solo ítem para medir la experiencia de AE (i.e. "Some people look down on me because of my job situation or income"; Delhey y Dragalov, 2014; Layte y Whelan, 2014). Sin embargo, el uso de un solo ítem para medir constructos psicológicos complejos ha sido criticado por presentar limitaciones en cuanto a la aplicabilidad de los criterios de validez de contenido y las dificultades para demostrar su fiabilidad (Fisher, Matthews y Gibbons, 2016). Recientemente, Day y Fiske (2016) desarrollaron en inglés una breve Escala de AE

capaz de medir este constructo, de la que obtuvieron buenos indicadores de fiabilidad y validez. En este trabajo presentamos distintas evidencias de validez y fiabilidad de este instrumento en castellano.

Ansiedad por el Estatus

Las personas experimentan respuestas de estrés ante la posibilidad de perder estatus (Scheepers, Ellemers y Sintemaartensdijk, 2009) o de no alcanzar los estándares de éxito socioeconómico en su entorno (De Botton, 2004). La preocupación por el propio estatus lleva a las personas a reaccionar negativamente cuando perciben que están siendo evaluadas y que por lo tanto la imagen de sí mismas podría verse amenazada (Gruenewald, Kemeny y Aziz, 2006). En la práctica clínica, la preocupación por el estatus socioeconómico del que uno/a disfruta ha sido propuesta como origen de algunos trastornos emocionales, bajo rendimiento o fracaso escolar, académico o laboral (Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston y Pickett, 2004). La relación negativa entre la AE y la salud mental pone de manifiesto la importancia de evaluar ésta como potencial factor de riesgo para la salud mental y la necesidad de disponer de instrumentos de medida adecuados para ello (Layte, 2012).

Cuando se analizan los efectos psicosociales de la desigualdad económica, la AE también es un constructo muy utilizado. De hecho, desde varios modelos teóricos se ha planteado que algunas consecuencias negativas de vivir en una sociedad más desigual (e.g. mayor frecuencia de conductas de riesgo, aumento del endeudamiento, aumento de la competitividad y reducción del bienestar subjetivo) se deben, en parte, a la AE generada en estos contextos (Buttrick y Oishi, 2017; Loughnan et al., 2011; Paskov et al., 2013; Wilkinson y Pickett, 2009b; 2017). En la misma línea, en estudios utilizando encuestas internacionales se ha encontrado que la AE explica la relación negativa entre la desigualdad económica y diversos indicadores de bienestar y de salud (Delhey y Dragalov, 2013; Layte, 2012).

Asimismo, es importante establecer que la AE es un constructo diferente a otros utilizados en la literatura. Por ejemplo, aunque describe una tendencia de las personas a preocuparse y percibir algunas situaciones como amenazantes, difiere de la ansiedad-rasgo (Balsamo et al., 2013), debido a que a diferencia con ésta última, su objeto de preocupación es más específico que el de la ansiedad-rasgo. En el caso de la ansiedad por el estatus la preocupación se centra en el estatus socioeconómico, esto es una reacción a la organización social que estructura la sociedad en el que la persona vive (Solak, Jost, Sümer y Clore, 2012). Difiere además de otros constructos relacionados, como el materialismo (Richins y Dawson, 1992), la búsqueda de estatus (Paskov et al, 2017) o la preocupación por el estatus (Kaufman,

1957), ya que no hace referencia al sistema de valores de las personas (i.e. en qué medida las personas consideran el éxito económico como un valor importante para ellas), sino más bien de la sociedad en general en la que los individuos viven (de Botton, 2004).

Alderson y Katz-Gerro (2016) encontraron que la importancia atribuida por las personas a comparar sus ingresos con los de los demás afecta negativamente a su bienestar subjetivo más allá de sus ingresos. Esta tendencia a la comparación social podría ser mayor entre quienes atribuyen mayor importancia al éxito económico (Kim, Callan, Gheorghiu y Matthews, 2017), al estatus y a la búsqueda del mismo (Alba, McIlwain, Wheeler y Jones, 2014). En estudios previos se ha encontrado que la AE lleva a las personas a realizar constantemente comparaciones con quienes disfrutan de un mejor estatus socioeconómico, aumentando así las probabilidades de experimentar privación relativa (Paskov et al., 2013). Además, se ha encontrado que en sociedades desiguales se produce un mayor consumo de bienes con el objeto de señalar estatus, debido a una mayor preocupación de las personas por su propia posición en la jerarquía social (Walasek y Brown, 2015). En último lugar, las personas con elevados niveles de auto-conciencia pública, es decir preocupadas por la imagen propia ante los demás, se caracterizan por ser altamente vigilantes hacia la valoración de los otros (Scheier y Carver, 1985). El estatus socioeconómico es un atributo otorgado por los demás (Prinstein, 2017), a menudo asociado con una valoración de la persona (de Botton, 2004; Paskov et al., 2017), por lo que la la auto-conciencia pública y la AE podrían estar relacionadas.

Desarrollo de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus

Con el propósito de disponer de una versión traducida, adaptada y con evidencias de validez de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus en el contexto español, se realizaron dos estudios con muestras independientes. Anteriormente, los ítems en inglés originales de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus (Day y Fiske, 1996) fueron sometidos a un proceso de traducción inversa y a un juicio de expertos en su versión española (Delgado-Rico, Carretero-Dios & Ruch, 2012; Hambleton, 2005). La escala resultante, compuesta de cinco ítems, fue administrada a una muestra con el fin de explorar sus características psicométricas y su estructura factorial. En el segundo estudio se confirmó su estructura factorial administrando la escala a otra muestra independiente de población general. También se obtuvieron evidencias de fiabilidad y validez de la escala en ambos estudios. Por último, se llevó a cabo un tercer estudio experimental con el fin de aportar evidencias acerca de la relación causal entre el estatus socioeconómico y la AE.

Estudio 1

Con el fin de analizar las propiedades psicométricas y explorar la estructura factorial de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus se realizó un primer estudio, en el que además se obtuvo por primera vez evidencia de la validez convergente de la escala, al analizar su relación esperada con otras medidas. En concreto, se examinó si: los/as participantes que experimentan mayor AE reportan a su vez mayor/es a) privación relativa (Hipótesis 1); b) niveles de búsqueda de estatus (Hipótesis 2); c) tendencia a la comparación (Hipótesis 3) y d) auto-conciencia pública (Hipótesis 4).

Además, por su posible relevancia en relación con el constructo de AE, en el primer estudio se exploraron las relaciones de la AE con la desigualdad económica percibida, tolerancia hacia la desigualdad económica y estatus socioeconómico, así como se incluyeron otras medidas con fines exploratorios. Todas las medidas que se incluyeron en el cuestionario, los análisis y los resultados exploratorios están disponibles en OSF (https://osf.io/7v2wf/).

Método

Los ítems de la Escala original de Ansiedad por el Estatus fueron sometidos a traducción inversa y las discrepancias entre las dos versiones en inglés fueron analizadas y resueltas manteniendo el criterio de la máxima fidelidad semántica respecto a la versión original de la escala (Hambleton, 2005). Posteriormente la versión española de los ítems fue sometida a un juicio de expertos (Delgado-Rico, Carretero-Dios y Ruch, 2012). Así, cinco investigadores/as psicólogos/as sociales evaluaron cada ítem de la escala en las dimensiones de representatividad, comprensión, ambigüedad y concisión. Los/as jueces evaluaron todos los ítems en estas dimensiones utilizando una escala Likert de 4 niveles. En el juicio de expertos el orden de los ítems fue aleatorizado y se incluyó un ítem extraído de la versión española de la Escala de Sensación de Poder General (Willis, Carretero-Dios, Rodríguez-Bailón, y Petkanopoulou, 2016), con el fin de comprobar la validez discriminatoria del juicio de expertos en relación a la dimensión de representatividad del constructo. Este ítem obtuvo un Índice de Validez de Contenido (IVC) = 0 (Índice de acuerdo inter-jueces Kappa = 1) indicando que los/as expertos/as discriminaron adecuadamente la representatividad de los ítems. La escala mostró valores de representatividad adecuados (IVC = .88 e Índice de acuerdo inter-jueces Kappa = .76). Considerando las observaciones de los jueces se aportaron modificaciones mínimas a cuatro de los cinco ítems con el fin de mejorar la comprensión y reducir la ambigüedad de los mismos. En el Anexo 1 se presenta la versión final de la escala.

Participantes

En el primer estudio participaron 276 personas (55% mujeres, 34% hombres, 11% no indicaron su sexo) de edad comprendida entre los 18 y los 76 años (*M*=30.74 *DT*=14.22). Los datos de 6 de estas personas fueron excluidos de los análisis por no ser de nacionalidad española. El 35.8% de las/os participantes pertenecían al primer cuartil en la distribución de Ingresos Medios por Unidad de Consumo en el Hogar (IMUCH) de la población española[1] (menos de 1.426 € al mes en un hogar de 2 adultas/os y un/a menor de 14 años), mientras el 29% pertenecen al segundo cuartil (entre 1.426 € y 2.218 €), el 20.7% al tercer cuartil (entre 2.218 € y 3.248 €) y el 14.5% al último cuartil (más de 3.248 € al mes). El 30.1% de las/os participantes no indicaron los ingresos percibidos en el hogar.

Instrumentos

Versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus. Las/os participantes contestaron a cinco ítems en una escala del 1 (completamente en desacuerdo) al 7 (completamente de acuerdo). Se muestran los items de la escala en el Apéndice 1.

Privación Relativa. Se empleó un único ítem ("En los últimos cinco años, ¿cómo dirías que has estado económicamente en comparación a otras personas como tú?"), con escala de respuesta de 5 puntos (1, "mucho mejor", 5, "mucho peor"). Este ítem mide privación relativa individual (Pettigrew y Meertens, 1995; Vanneman y Pettigrew, 1972).

Búsqueda de Estatus. Se utilizó la Escala de Consumo Estatutario (Kilsheimer, 1993). Incluye 5 ítems (e.g. "compraría un producto porque me dá estatus"), y utiliza una escala de respuesta tipo Likert del 1 (totalmente en desacuerdo) a 5 (totalmente de acuerdo). La fiabilidad de la escala fue adecuada (α = .75), no obstante, las respuestas de los participantes se agruparon en el extremo inferior de la escala (*M* = 1.64 *DT* = .74).

Comparación Social. Se utilizó la INCOM-E (Buunk, Belmont, Peiró, Zurriaga & Gibbons, 2005). Una escala compuesta por 11 ítems que miden la tendencia de las personas a compararse con los demás (e.g. "A menudo, me comparo con otros respecto a lo que he conseguido en la vida"), con formato de respuesta tipo Likert del 1 ("totalmente en

[1] El IMUCH es un indicador estándar de ingresos que permite comparaciones con otros países de la UE. Es resultante de la fórmula U=I/[1+(0,5*a)+(0,3*m)]. Donde U= IMUCH, I= ingresos totales del hogar, a=número de adultos adicionales además del participante en el hogar, y m= número de menores de 14 años en el hogar.

desacuerdo") a 5 ("totalmente de acuerdo"). La fiabilidad de la escala fue adecuada (α = .82; *M* = 2.96 *DT* = .72).

Auto-conciencia Pública. Se utilizó la sub-escala de auto-conciencia pública de la Escala de Auto-conciencia, adaptada y validada en población española (López-Bonilla y López-Bonilla, 2010; Scheier y Carver, 1985). Dicha sub-escala se compone de 7 ítems (e.g. "Me intereso por lo que los demás piensen de mí"). Utiliza una escala de respuesta tipo Likert del 1 ("totalmente en desacuerdo") a 5 ("totalmente de acuerdo"). La fiabilidad de la escala fue adecuada (α = .78; *M* = 3.44 *DT* = .76).

Estatus Socioeconómico Subjetivo (SSS por sus siglas en inglés). Se utilizó la Escala de MacArthur (Adler, 2001). Los participantes indicaron en una escala entre el 1 y el 10 dónde se situaban en comparación con el resto de la sociedad española en el momento presente, teniendo en cuenta sus recursos, dinero, educación y trabajo.

Estatus Socioeconómico Objetivo (SES por sus siglas en inglés). Se calculó para cada participante el decil de ingresos correspondiente en función del IMUCH según datos de Eurostat (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database).

Desigualdad Percibida. Se utilizaron dos ítems para preguntar a los/las participantes por la percepción general de desigualdad económica: "¿En qué medida piensas que respecto a la distribución de recursos económicos la sociedad española en la actualidad es desigual (igualitaria)?". La media de ambos fue utilizada como indicador de desigualdad económica percibida (r =.45, p < .001).

Tolerancia hacia la Desigualdad. Se empleó un ítem, tradicionalmente utilizado en estudios previos (García-Sánchez et al., 2019) e incluido en la *International Social Survey* ("Las diferencias de ingresos en España son demasiado grandes").

Procedimiento

Se realizó una encuesta por muestreo incidental en la estación de autobuses de una capital de una provincia andaluza (España). Cada participante, tras leer y aceptar un documento de consentimiento informado, contestó individualmente, de forma anónima y confidencial a los ítems del cuestionario empleando aproximadamente 15 minutos. Además de las medidas descritas, el cuestionario contenía algunas escalas no relacionadas con este estudio (disponibles en https://osf.io/7v2wf/). Todos los estudios incluidos en este artículo fueron aprobados por el comité de ética de la universidad de filiación de las/os autoras/es principales.

Resultados

Los ítems mostraron índices de discriminación (indicados por la correlación del ítem con el total corregido) comprendidos entre .60 y .81, y buena capacidad para recoger las variaciones de los participantes en el constructo medido ($DT_{todos\ los\ ítems} > 1$). La media de la escala fue cercana al punto medio ($M = 4.19$; $DT = 1.55$).

El resultado de la prueba de esfericidad de Bartlett ($\chi^2 = 599.18$; $p < .001$) y el índice KMO (.84) indicaron la idoneidad de la matriz de correlaciones para el análisis factorial exploratorio de la escala mediante extracción de componentes principales.

El análisis factorial exploratorio arrojó un único factor con autovalor superior a 1, que explica el 65% de la varianza. Las saturaciones de los ítems en este factor oscilaron entre .74 y .89.

La escala mostró una buena consistencia interna ($\alpha = .86$), y como se puede observar en la Tabla 1, mostró evidencias de validez convergente al relacionarse con todas las variables hipotetizadas. Solamente no se relacionó con la búsqueda de estatus medida a través del consumo estatutario. Esto pudo deberse a que las puntuaciones en esta escala fueron extremadamente bajas ($M = 1.65$; $DT = .74$), posiblemente debido a la deseabilidad social, y por tanto se pudo producir un efecto "suelo" en sus puntuaciones.

Tabla 1

Descriptivos y correlaciones entre las variables medidas en el Estudio 1 y la AE

	M	DT	AE	95% CI
AE	4.19	1.55		
Privación relativa	3.09	.97	.27**	[.15, .37]
Comparación social	2.96	.72	.21*	[.09, .32]
Auto-conciencia pública	3.44	.76	.23**	[.11, .34]
Búsqueda de estatus	1.65	.74	.09	[-.03, .20]

Nota: *$p < .01$; **$p < .001$

Análisis Exploratorios

La AE resultó positivamente relacionada con la percepción de desigualdad (r = .32; p < .001, 95% CI [.21, .42]) y con intolerancia hacia la misma ("las diferencias de ingresos en España son demasiado grandes"; *r* = .22; *p* < .001, 95% CI [.11, .33]), y negativamente con el SSS (*r* = -.38; *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.49, -.28]) y el SES (*r* = -.27; *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.39, -.13]), siendo las personas de bajo estatus quienes experimentan mayor AE.

Discusión

En el presente estudio se obtuvo evidencia de la estructura unifactorial de la escala. Así mismo se encontró que la escala presenta una fiabilidad adecuada. Se obtuvo además evidencia de validez convergente de la escala al relacionarse positivamente esta última con los constructos de privación relativa, comparación social y auto-conciencia pública. También se encontró, en distintos análisis exploratorios, que se relacionó de forma negativa con el estatus socioeconómico y de forma positiva con la percepción y la (in)tolerancia hacia la desigualdad. La Versión Española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus aporta por tanto un instrumento con buenos índices de fiabilidad. Además muestra relaciones con constructos relevantes para el estudio de las causas y consecuencias de la AE.

Estudio 2

Siguiendo el mismo procedimiento que en el Estudio 1, se llevó a cabo un segundo estudio con el objetivo de confirmar la estructura unifactorial de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus y aportar más evidencias de su validez. En el Estudio 1, de forma exploratoria, se encontró que la AE se relacionó positivamente con la desigualdad percibida y negativamente con el estatus socioeconómico. Este resultado puede deberse a que la desigualdad económica aumenta la distancia social entre quienes ocupan distintas posiciones en la jerarquía social (Wilkinson y Pickett, 2009b), lo que lleva a los individuos a preocuparse por la posición social que ocupan y la que desean alcanzar. La AE podría explicar en parte algunos de los efectos psicosociales de la desigualdad económica (Paskov et al., 2013), por lo que nos propusimos replicar estos resultados en el Estudio 2. Predecimos por lo tanto que: a) La AE se relacionaría positivamente con la desigualdad percibida (Hipótesis 5),y b) negativamente con el estatus social subjetivo (SSS) y el estatus socioeconómico objetivo, indicado por el decil de ingresos (SES) (Hipótesis 6a y 6b).

En el segundo estudio además, nos propusimos replicar el resultado obtenido en el Estudio 1 en relación a la Hipótesis 1, esto es, que la AE se asocia positivamente a la privación relativa.

En este segundo estudio se incluyeron medidas de otros constructos teóricamente relacionados con la AE con fines exploratorios así como otras medidas no incluidas en este estudio. Estas medidas, los análisis y los resultados exploratorios están disponibles en OSF (https://osf.io/jbdhq/).

Método

Participantes

Participaron 269 personas (53% mujeres, 33% hombres, 14% no indicaron el sexo) de edad comprendida entre 18 y 73 años (*M*=30.88, *DT*=13.93). El 38.5% pertenecen al primer cuartil de ingresos, el 25.1% al segundo cuartil, el 17.6% al tercer cuartil y el 18.7% al último cuartil. El 30.5% de las/os participantes no indicaron los ingresos percibidos en el hogar.

Los datos de 11 de estas personas fueron excluidos de los análisis al no ser de nacionalidad española.

Instrumentos

Al igual que en el Estudio 1, en este segundo estudio se incluyó la Versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus y las mismas medidas de privación relativa, de desigualdad percibida, de SSS, y SES previamente utilizadas.

Resultados

Puesto que la definición teórica del constructo implica una estructura unidimensional de la escala y que el análisis factorial exploratorio en el Estudio 1 arrojó un único factor, se llevó a cabo un análisis factorial confirmatorio por medio del estimador robusto de máxima verosimilitud y se determinó el ajuste del modelo a través de la valoración conjunta de los índices *Root Mean Square Error of Approximation* (RMSEA), *Standarized Root Mean Square Residual* (SRMR) y *Comparative Fit Index* (CFI) (Kaplan, 2000). Estas medidas de ajuste indicaron un modelo unidimensional aceptable (*RMSEA*=.00, *SRMR*=.01, *CFI*=1). El único factor de la escala también mostró una buena fiabilidad (α=.87).

En la Tabla 2 se muestran las correlaciones de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus con la medida de privación relativa, desigualdad percibida, SSS y

SES. Se replicaron los resultados del Estudio 1 en relación a la Hipótesis 1 al encontrarse una relación positiva entre la AE y privación relativa.

Nuevamente se encontró evidencia de validez, aportada por la correlación positiva entre la AE y la desigualdad percibida, predicha en la Hipótesis 5 y por la correlación negativa entre la AE y el SSS y el SES, predicha en la Hipótesis 6.

Tabla 2

Estudio 2. Descriptivos y Correlaciones con AE.

	M	DT	AE	95% CI
AE	4.24	1.59		
Privación relativa	3.12	.98	.26**	[.15, .37]
Desigualdad percibida	5.13	1.08	.28**	[.16, .39]
SES	4.95	3.11	-.28**	[-.41, -.14]
SSS	5.38	1.58	-.28**	[-.39, -.16]

Nota: ***p* < .001

Discusión

En el Estudio 1 encontramos evidencia de fiabilidad de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus, así como de su estructura unifactorial. En este segundo estudio se confirmó esta estructura unifactorial de la escala, al mostrar el modelo de un solo factor un ajuste adecuado en el Análisis Factorial Confirmatorio llevado a cabo.

En el presente estudio se replicaron los resultados del Estudio 1: la AE resultó positivamente relacionada con la privación relativa y se encontró que las personas que perciben mayor desigualdad y las que se encuentran en mayor desventaja en la escala social experimentan mayor AE. Estos resultados son congruentes con las predicciones de Wilkinson y Pickett (2017) acerca de las relaciones entre desigualdad económica, estatus socioeconómico y AE, así como con los resultados de otros estudios anteriores (Layte y Whelan, 2014).

Estudio 3

Con el fin de proporcionar evidencias sólidas en favor de la relación entre estatus socioeconómico y AE y de aportar mayor prueba de validez de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus se llevó a cabo un tercer estudio. Este estudio tuvo además como objetivo mostrar que la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus presentada en este artículo puede utilizarse como variable dependiente en los estudios que tengan como objetivo analizar los efectos de factores socio-estructurales sobre la AE, al ser una medida sensible a estos factores (e.g., estatus socioeconómico y desigualdad económica).

En este tercer estudio, de corte experimental, ampliamos nuestra Hipótesis 6, al postular una relación de causalidad del estatus socioeconómico sobre la AE. Por lo tanto, predecimos que las personas asignadas a un estatus socioeconómico bajo, mostrarían una mayor AE que las asignadas a un estatus alto (Hipótesis 7).

Método

Participantes

Participaron en este estudio 168 estudiantes de la Universidad de Granada de nacionalidad española. El estudio se llevó a cabo en bibliotecas universitarias en horario lectivo. De la muestra inicial se excluyeron 25 participantes por no haber completado la tarea incluida en la manipulación y 3 participantes por no cumplir los criterios de edad fijados en el pre registro del estudio. La muestra resultante estuvo compuesta por 140 participantes (60% mujeres; M_{edad} =22, DT_{edad} = 2.79).

Diseño

Se utilizó un diseño experimental mixto 2 (Desigualdad: Alta vs. Baja) x 2 (Estatus socioeconómico de la familia: Alto vs. Bajo), siendo la primera una variable manipulada entre participantes y la segunda intra participantes (osf.io/ubxet).

Manipulación Experimental. Se presentó información sobre dos familias, una de altos y otra de bajos recursos económicos. Cada participante administró el presupuesto mensual de ambas familias, eligiendo qué cantidad de dinero asignaría cada una de ellas a diversas categorías de gasto.

Manipulación del Estatus Socioeconómico (intra participantes). Las únicas diferencias entre las dos familias fueron los nombres de sus miembros, los ingresos mensuales totales y su estatus socieconómico, mostrado en una representación gráfica de la distribución de ingresos de la sociedad española. La familia de altos recursos se situó en el decil 10, mientras la familia de bajos recursos se situó en el decil 1.

Manipulación de la Desigualdad Percibida (entre participantes). Los participantes fueron asignados aleatoriamente a una de dos condiciones experimentales: alta desigualdad y baja desigualdad económica. Al presentar la posición ocupada por cada familia en la distribución de ingresos, se indicaron puntos de corte (falsos) entre los deciles de ingresos en España. Así las diferencias entre las condiciones experimentales de alta y baja desigualdad residían en los ingresos mensuales totales disponibles para las dos familias y en los puntos de corte indicados entre los deciles. Concretamente, tanto la ratio del punto de corte del decil 10 y el decil 1, como la ratio entre los ingresos medios de dos familias de estos segmentos de población fueron el doble de las ratios reales (éstas son 5.37 y 12.45 respectivamente)[2] en la condición de alta desigualdad, mientras fueron la mitad de las ratios reales en la condición de baja desigualdad.

Instrumentos

Ansiedad por el Estatus. Cada participante completó dos medidas de AE inmediatamente después de administrar el presupuesto mensual para cada una de las dos familias. Se adaptaron las instrucciones de la escala, de manera que los participantes contestaran a los ítems de la escala imaginando cómo se sentirían si fueran miembros de una familia de alto estatus socioeconómico (α = .75) o de bajo estatus socioeconómico (α = .80, e. g. "Te pedimos que pienses en la vida de los García-Pérez y expreses tu grado de acuerdo o desacuerdo con estas afirmaciones. ¿Cómo contestarías si pertenecieras a esta familia?").

Se midieron además el SSS y el SES de los participantes por el mismo procedimiento empleado en los estudios 1 y 2.

Comprobación de la Manipulación. Para verificar la eficacia de la manipulación de la desigualdad percibida se incluyeron los mismos items sobre la desigualdad percibida en la sociedad española incluidos en los estudios 1 y 2.

[2] Ingresos medios por unidad de consumo en 2016. Distribución de ingresos por deciles. Consultado en http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database el 09/04/2017.

Procedimiento

Las/os participantes, tras leer y aceptar las condiciones del consentimiento informado, rellenaron el cuestionario individualmente. Como parte de la manipulación experimental, tras conocer los ingresos y la posición económica de dos familias residentes en la misma ciudad, las/os participantes completaron dos tablas (e.g., Figura 1), una para cada familia, seleccionando la cantidad de dinero que considerarían oportuno destinar a diversas categorías de gastos mensuales, asegurándose de que la suma de las cantidades asignadas a todos los gastos en su conjunto no superara los ingresos mensuales de cada familia. El orden de presentación de la tarea y de la medida de AE para las dos familias fue contrabalanceado.

Figura 1

Tarea experimental empleada en el Estudio 3.

INGRESOS MENSUALES	11.827 €		
 VIVIENDA (HIPOTÉCA O ALQUILER), AGUA, ELECTRICIDAD, CALEFACCIÓN, GASTOS DE COMUNIDAD, CONSERVACIÓN, MANTENIMIENTO	210 €	810 €	1800 €
 PRODUCTOS DE PRIMERA NECESIDAD (ALIMENTACIÓN, HIGIENE, LIMPIEZA, ETC.)	100 €	190 €	300 €
.....			
 TECNOLOGÍA (TELEVISIÓN, ORDENADORES, TABLETS, ACCESORIOS, ETC.)	10 €	60 €	200 €
 BEBIDAS ALCOHÓLICAS Y TABACO	0 €	30 €	80 €
AHORRO			€

Resultados

Tal y cómo se predijo en la Hipótesis 8, los participantes experimentaron mayor AE en la condición de bajo estatus (M = 5.12, DT = 1.44) que en la condición de alto estatus (M = 2.81, DT = 1.31; F (1, 138) = 174.77, p < .001, η^2_p= .56)[3]. Sin embargo, la manipulación de la desigualdad percibida no fue efectiva, puesto que no se encontraron diferencias significativas entre las medidas de desigualdad percibida en la condición de baja y alta desigualdad (F (1, 138) = .58, p =.45, η^2_p= .00). Tampoco fue significativa la interacción entre la desigualdad y el estatus socioeconómico (F (1, 138) = .55, p =.46, η^2_p= .00).

[3] Estas diferencias continuaron siendo significativas al controlar por SES y SSS de las/os participantes.

Discusión

En este último estudio se obtuvo evidencia experimental del efecto producido por el estatus socioeconómico sobre la AE. Los/as participantes reportaron mayor AE cuando experimentaron un estatus socioeconómico más bajo. Este resultado, en un contexto de creciente desigualdad como el de la sociedad española, se encuentra en línea con las predicciones de Wilkinson y Pickett (2017) sobre el aumento de las diferencias entre ricos y pobres en sociedades desiguales, así como con los resultados de otros estudios transculturales (Layte y Whelan, 2014). Por otro lado, la manipulación de la desigualdad percibida no fue efectiva, por lo que no se pudo contrastar nuestra hipótesis del efecto predicho de la desigualdad percibida sobre la AE.

Discusión General

Los resultados de los estudios presentados muestran evidencia de validez y fiabilidad de la versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus. A través de dos estudios, y con la participación de una amplia muestra de población general española, se confirmó la estructura unifactorial de la escala, se han aportado evidencias a favor de la relación entre la AE y constructos teóricamente relevantes, como el estatus socioeconómico, la privación relativa, y la comparación social o la desigualdad percibida. Además, la AE se relaciona de forma no muy alta con estas variables con la AE ($r < .30$), lo cual pone de manifiesto la validez divergente de la Versión Española de Ansiedad por el Estatus, al medir diferencias individuales más allá de dichas variables. Por lo tanto, se confirma el rol de esta variable como relevante en el estudio de los efectos de la desigualdad económica y la capacidad de la escala para captar diferencias individuales en la forma en que las personas reaccionan ante ella. La relaciones encontradas, por ejemplo, podrían estar indicando que ante escenarios de elevada desigualdad económica las personas perciben su entorno como más competitivo, tienden a compararse con las demás personas y atribuyen mayor importancia al éxito económico, lo que las llevaría a sentir mayor preocupación por su posición social, a sentirse en desventaja respecto al resto de la sociedad, y en último término a tener menores niveles de salud (Marmot, 2004b) y bienestar (Buttrick y Oishi, 2017).

En un tercer estudio además, se confirmó experimentalmente que ocupar una posición de bajo estatus socioeconómico lleva a las personas a experimentar mayor AE. Este resultado confirma los hallazgos de anteriores estudios (Layte yWhelan, 2014). De forma importante, estos efectos se mantienen incluso al controlar el estatus socioeconómico real de los/las participantes.

Por otro lado, estos resultados divergen de los obtenidos en otras líneas de investigación, ya que estudios anteriores parecen indicar que las personas de estatus medio (Duguid y Goncalo, 2015) o de estatus alto (Jetten, Mols, Healy y Spears, 2017) podrían ser las que más sufren AE en determinadas circunstancias. La aparente incongruencia entre estos resultados podría deberse a que ésta puede ser moderada por otras variables como la estabilidad percibida (Duguid y Goncalo, 2015; Jetten et al., 2017), la ideología meritocrática (García-Sánchez et al., 2019), o la movilidad social percibida (Schneider, 2012). Futuras investigaciones podrían indagar sobre el papel de estas variables en la relación entre estatus socioeconómico, desigualdad percibida y AE con el fin de establecer bajo qué circunstancias las personas de bajo estatus sufren mayor AE en sociedades altamente desiguales. Además, replicar los efectos del estatus sobre la AE utilizando medidas validadas de este constructo y en contextos culturales diferentes al de los estudios originales podría aumentar la validez ecológica de estos hallazgos y la comparabilidad de los efectos encontrados. Por otro lado, futuros estudios deberían de poner a prueba los efectos de la desigualdad percibida sobre la AE a través de paradigmas experimentales en los que se manipule la desigualdad económica.

Por otro lado, creemos que la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus, al igual que sucede con otras escalas que miden la ansiedad (Endler, Parker, Bagby y Cox, 1999), permite operacionalizar este constructo como el resultado de una interacción compleja entre variables individuales y situacionales. A pesar de esto, y como se ha mostrado en este artículo, la escala puede ser utilizada para medir la ansiedad por el estatus como una diferencia individual relativamente estable (como sucede en los Estudios 1 y 2) o como una respuesta ante una situación concreta (Estudio 3).

La validación de la escala en España permite abrir nuevas líneas de investigación para el estudio transcultural de las variables predictoras de la AE. En concreto, cabría esperar que las diferencias en relación a las atribuciones sobre el estatus socioeconómico, las creencias meritocráticas y la movilidad social percibida entre diferentes contextos puedan predecir diferencias en la AE más allá de los efectos de la desigualdad percibida (Bjørnskov et al, 2013; Schneider, 2012).

El constructo de AE podría estar involucrado en muchos de los efectos negativos tradicionalmente asociados con la desigualdad económica (Rodríguez-Bailón, Sánchez-Rodríguez, García-Sánchez, Petkanopoulou, y Willis, 2019). Contar con un instrumento de medida válido y fiable que permita conocer el grado en que las personas se preocupan por la propia posición en la sociedad podría permitir desarrollar nuevas líneas de investigación que permitan explicar y predecir cómo la desigualdad económica crea sociedades disfuncionales

y repercute en el bienestar de las personas, así como idear formas en las que se pueden revertir estos procesos.

Economic Inequality Increases Status Anxiety Through Perceived Contextual Competitiveness

Chapter 5

Economic Inequality Increases Status Anxiety Through Perceived Contextual Competitiveness

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Abstract

Status anxiety, the constant concern about individuals' position on the social ladder, negatively affects social cohesion, health, and wellbeing (e.g., chronic stress). Given previous findings showing that status anxiety is associated with economic inequality, we aimed in this research to test this association experimentally. A cross-sectional study (Study 4) was run in order to discard confounding effects of the relationship between perceived economic inequality (PEI) and status anxiety, and to explore the mediating role of a competitive climate (N = 297). Then we predicted that people assigned to a condition of high inequality would perceive more status anxiety in their social context, and they would themselves report higher status anxiety. Thus, in an experimental study (Study 5) PEI was manipulated (N = 200). In Study 4, PEI uniquely predicted status anxiety, and perceived competitiveness mediated the relationship. In Study 5 PEI increased perceived contextual status anxiety, a specific form of perceived competitiveness based on socioeconomic status (SES). Moreover, preliminary evidence of an indirect effect was found from PEI to personal status anxiety, through (higher) perceived contextual status anxiety. These preliminary findings provide experimental evidence for the effects of economic inequality on status anxiety and the mechanism involved. Economic inequality makes people feel that they live in a society where they are constantly concerned and competing with each other for their SES. These results could have important implications as health and wellbeing could be promoted by reducing economic inequalities and the competitive and materialistic environments of our societies.

Keywords: status anxiety; economic inequality; socioeconomic status; competitiveness; wellbeing

Most modern societies are living in the most unequal time since the industrial revolution (Piketty, 2014). Economic inequality has been related with political polarization (Winkler, 2019), impaired democracy (Krieger and Meierrieks, 2016), and poorer health and wellbeing (Layte, 2012). All in all, it has been suggested that economic inequality increases social dysfunction (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2015).

Although many of these consequences are derived from the accumulation of power by an elite group of individuals acting on behalf of their own interests (Stiglitz, 2012), it has been argued that psychological processes must be taken into account in order to explain some of the negative effects of economic inequality (e.g., over mental health; Layte, 2012). One of these processes, according to the Spirit Level approach (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017; see also Buttrick et al., 2017), may be status anxiety (SA)—the tendency to worry constantly about one's own socioeconomic position and about socioeconomic success according to social standards (De Botton, 2004).

Status anxiety has been associated with income inequality across a variety of cross-sectional studies (Layte and Whelan, 2014; Delhey et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2020), but up to now, a causal relationship has not yet been demonstrated. The main goal of the present research is to provide experimental evidence about the causal effect of economic inequality on SA.

Economic Inequality and Status Anxiety

Social context shapes norms about which social categories are more relevant to make sense of the social world (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990); in turn, some social categories may become more chronically accessible and central to social identity (Oakes, 1987). Independent of their socioeconomic status (SES), people living in unequal countries tend to be more sensitive to hierarchies and status cues (e.g., Kraus et al., 2017), and to be more stressed when perceiving high inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009b; Sprong et al., 2019). As such, it is plausible that higher perceived economic inequality (PEI) will lead people to attribute more importance to their SES and to worry more about the position they occupy on the social ladder (De Botton, 2004).

Building on this idea, the SA theory posits that when economic distances are higher, SES—that is, one's status based on the economic dimension—gains a more relevant role in our perception of self-worth and wellbeing relative to other values and parameters (Walasek and Brown, 2019). Thus, when economic inequality is higher, people are more chronically concerned about their SES. According to SA theory, a

person who lives in a society with large income disparities, for instance, would probably feel a considerable pressure to achieve an equal or better salary than similar others. Moreover, as SES is a relative attribute that expresses one's rank in a given society or reference group, when inequality increases, so does the tendency to social comparison. More than absolute economic resources, relative economic position is what determines our life satisfaction (Cheung and Lucas, 2016).

In fact, preliminary evidence supports these notions. For instance, in more unequal countries, there is greater interest in status-signaling goods, and people spend more money on the lottery; all this may indicate a greater importance of the social position and economic success (Bol et al., 2014; Walasek and Brown, 2015). In experimental settings, it has been found that participants bet more money and assume more risks when they perceive higher inequality in a gambling game (Payne et al., 2017). These effects may also appear in other risk-taking behaviors such as crime, acquisition of debt, and unhealthy behaviors (e.g., drug consumption) because people strain to obtain greater reward in order to achieve perceived social standards of socioeconomic success (Payne, 2017).

Cross-sectional studies have directly examined the relationship between income inequality and SA. Among European citizens, for instance, regardless of their SES, those who live in more unequal countries report a higher degree of feeling that other people look down on them because of their job or income, and are found to report higher status seeking, both being considered as expressions of higher SA (Paskov et al., 2013; Layte and Whelan, 2014). Moreover, SA could cause harmful chronic stress reactions (Marmot, 2004a) and maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., risk-taking behaviors). In fact, in large cross-country observational studies, SA mediated the negative effects of inequality on well-being (Delhey and Dragolov, 2014) and depression (Layte, 2012). However, when including variation over time within countries, observational studies found opposite results, indicating that European citizens living in more unequal countries feel less motivated to improve their SES, as it seems to become an unreachable goal for most (Paskov et al., 2017).

Importantly, being immersed in an economic context perceived as highly unequal can shape descriptive norms about how people in that context tend to relate to each other. For instance, PEI has been found to increase the belief that the normative climate is individualistic and competitive, generating a highly demanding social environment that could lead to more competitive behaviors (Sommet et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). Furthermore, social comparison, although

distinct from competitiveness, is an important source of competitive behavior (García et al., 2013). Thus, given that SES becomes a relevant dimension of comparison as inequality increases, people may feel that they are competing with each other in order to maintain or increase their SES, and they may feel more pressure to obtain or borrow more resources than others do, and signal a higher material standing. Hence, we maintain that PEI could increase the perception of a social environment in which people are concerned about their SES and compete with each other for a better position (i.e., a social context where others are perceived as having higher SA). Ultimately, we hypothesized that PEI increases both personal SA and perceived contextual SA. As in previous studies (e.g., Layte and Whelan, 2014), we expect these effects to happen along the entire social ladder.

Similarly, as the social context could exhort a great influence on attitudes and motivational orientation (Cialdini et al., 1991; Sommet et al., 2019), perceiving similar others to be highly concerned about their SES could lead to an SES-competitive mindset that further boosts personal SA. In the present research, we explored the role of perceived contextual SA as mediator in the effect of PEI on personal SA.

The Present Research

In this paper we present an exploratory cross-sectional and a preregistered experimental study to examine whether PEI influences SA. Moreover, we investigated whether PEI increases perceived contextual SA (as indicated by similar others' perceived SA), and whether this variable could mediate the aforementioned effect between PEI and SA.

Given that PEI has been demonstrated to affect the way people perceive their social world and how they interact within it, we adapted a consolidated experimental paradigm to manipulate it (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). All presented protocols and studies were approved by the ethical committee of the authors' university of affiliation.

Study 4

We ran an exploratory cross-sectional study in order to test the role of PEI in the prediction of SA. Although the relationship between PEI and SA has already been established in previous studies (Melita et al., 2020), we aimed to exclude possible confounding effects, and explore the predictive validity of PEI on

SA, controlling for perceived competitive climate and for other variables that are theoretically related to PEI and SA, namely, SES and political orientation[1].

Method

Participants

This study was part of a larger set of studies. Participants were recruited in a bus station in a city in the South of Spain, and those who were working for an organization that had at least three other employees were assigned to another study (focused on organizational settings), whereas participants who did not meet this criterion were assigned to the current study.

After granting informed consent, 309 participants completed a short paper-pencil questionnaire ($M_{estimatedtime}$ = 10 min). We excluded 12 cases for not answering one of the focal variables or failing to answer an attention check item correctly. The final sample was composed of 297 participants, 108 students, 79 unemployed, 110 employed, self-employed or retired, 56% women (M_{age} = 29.86; SD_{age} = 13.21). Participants in each quintile of household income from the bottom to the top were 30, 18, 8, 12, and 11%, respectively (21% did not indicate their household income).

Measures

Status anxiety. Participants completed the Spanish Version of the Status Anxiety scale (Keshabyan and Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2020). The scale consists of five items and participants were instructed to rate their agreement with each item on the scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Examples of items included the following: "I worry that my social status will not change", and "I sometimes worry that I might become lower in social standing" (α = 0.86; M = 4.04, SD = 1.69).

Perceived economic inequality. Was indicated by averaging PEI in Spain in general and in a set of reference groups to which people usually compare themselves (i.e., their friends, family, schoolmates, and neighbors; Alderson and Katz-Gerro, 2016). Combining both the local and societal levels of PEI increases the generalizability of results (García-Castro et al., 2019). The items were adapted from a question used in the International Social Survey Program and in studies about PEI (e.g., Castillo et al., 2012; Shariff et al., 2016). Participants answered to what extent they agreed with the following

assertions: "Differences in income <in Spain/among people in the reference group> are too large", from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The resulting five items loaded on a single factor in EFA, explaining 46% of the variance (α = 0.70; M = 4.34, SD = 1.08).

Perceived competitive climate. Was indicated by averaging perceived competitiveness in Spain and in the same reference groups to which PEI was also asked. Participants answered to what extent they agreed with the following sentences: "I feel that <in Spain/among people in the reference group>, we are competing with each other", from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The resulting five items loaded on a single factor in EFA, explaining 45% of the variance (α = 0.70; M = 3.40, SD = 1.11).

Political orientation. Was measured by a single item asking participants to place themselves on a scale from 1 (far left) to 7 (far right; M = 3.41, SD = 1.45).

Participants' SES. Was indicated by their educational attainment (indicated on a scale from 1, "primary education", to 8, "doctoral degree") and their household disposable income decile, which referred to Spanish income distribution[2].

Subjective SES. Was measured using the MacArthur scale (Adler et al., 2000): a single item asking participants to place themselves according to their socioeconomic standing on a ladder with 10 steps representing society. (1 indicated those at the bottom, and 10 indicated those at the top; *M* = 5.48, *SD* = 1.54).

Finally, participants indicated their age, sex and work status. All materials and data are available at https://osf.io/h35uj/?view_ only=c026d785644948ea945650cb88aa5ff3.

Analyses

We ran a least squares linear regression analyses on SA in R (R Core Team, 2020). Then, we performed a bootstrap regression analysis in Macro Process for SPSS (Hayes, 2017) to examine whether PEI had an indirect effect on SA through a perceived competitive climate.

Multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) was used to account for missing values of seven control variables, which ranged from 4% (sex) to 21% (household disposable income). The conclusions were the same regardless MICE and the control variables.

Results

As shown in Table 1, both PEI and perceived competitive climate significantly and uniquely predicted SA scores in Model 2, that is, participants with higher scores in either of the two variables reported higher SA, independent of their sex, age, political orientation and SES.

In addition, perceived competitive climate partially mediated the effect of PEI on SA (*completely standardized indirect effect* = 0.11; *95%CI* [0.05, 0.17]; *RMSEA* = 0.063; *CFI* = 0.860; *TLI* = 0.835; *SRMR* = 0.064; Figure 1), as PEI predicted a higher perceived competitive climate, and this in turn predicted higher SA.

Figure 1

Indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through perceived competitive climate in Study 4

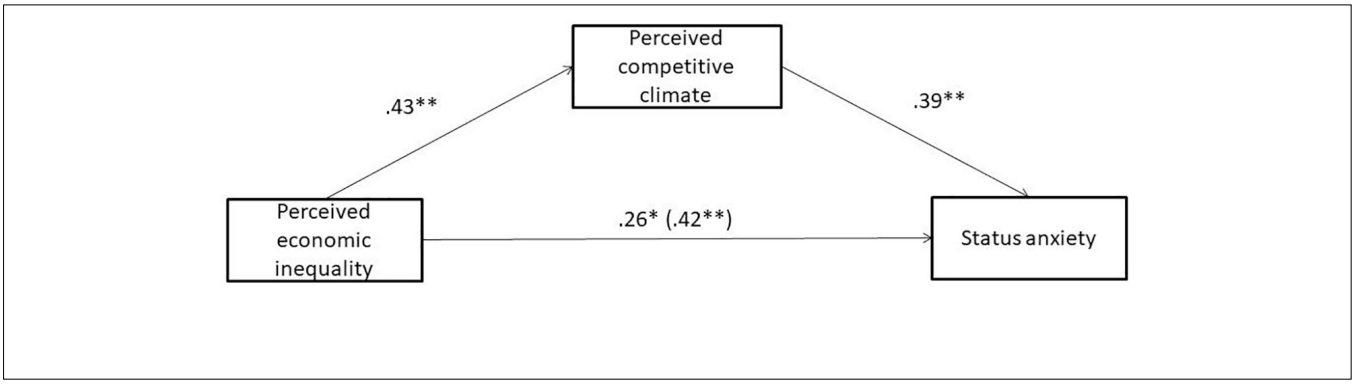


Table 1

Regression analyses' results using Status Anxiety as the criterion

	Model 1		Model 2	
Predictor	*b*	*b* 95% CI [LL, UL]	*b*	*b* 95% CI [LL, UL]
(Intercept)	4.41**	[2.99, 5.83]	1.75*	[0.15, 3.35]
Female	0.48*	[0.09, 0.86]	0.37*	[0.00, 0.73]
Age	0.00	[-0.01, 0.02]	0.00	[-0.02, 0.02]
Students[a]	0.37	[-0.21, 0.95]	0.22	[-0.34, 0.78]
Unemployed[a]	0.43	[-0.09, 0.95]	0.39	[-0.11, 0.90]
Political orientation	0.03	[-0.10, 0.17]	0.07	[-0.06, 0.20]
Education	-0.16*	[-0.30, -0.02]	-0.13*	[-0.26, -0.00]
Income decile	-0.05	[-0.12, 0.02]	-0.04	[-0.11, 0.02]
Subjective SES	-0.03	[-0.17, 0.12]	-0.00	[-0.14, 0.13]
Perceived economic inequality			0.26**	[0.07, 0.44]
Perceived competitive climate			0.39**	[0.20, 0.57]
Fit	R^2 = .090**	95% CI [.02,.13]	R^2 = .207**	95% CI [.11,.26]
Difference			ΔR^2 = .117**	95% CI [.05, .18]

Note. A significant *b*-weight indicates the semi-partial correlation is also significant. *b* represents unstandardized regression weights.
* indicates p < .05. ** indicates p < .01.
[a] contrasted against employed, self-employed or retired.

Study 5

In this study, PEI was manipulated using an adaptation of the Bimboola Paradigm (Jetten et al., 2015; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 20192019). The aim of the study was to provide experimental evidence about the effects of economic inequality on both perceived others' and participants' own SA[3].

Preregistered Hypotheses

We predicted that participants assigned to the high (vs. Low) inequality condition would report higher SA (H1), and would attribute more SA to other people who belong to their own income group (H2).

Method

Participants

Given that we performed multiple hypotheses testing (i.e., two), we preregistered and applied a Bonferroni correction by setting hypotheses two-tailed testing α value at 0.025 (Bland and Altman, 1995). With this alpha, we calculated with G*power (RRID:SCR_013726; Faul et al., 2007) that the sample size required for the 80% statistical power to detect a medium effect size (d = 0.50) would be N = 156. To that end, data collection would run until we reached a minimum of 156 valid observations and a maximum of 200. The experiment was administered to 244 Spanish undergraduate students, aged between 18 and 30. Thirty- two cases were excluded from the final sample following pre-registration because they failed to answer the attention check correctly, and 12 participants were excluded from the finalsample because they already took part in other similar studies, involving manipulations of PEI. The final sample consisted of 200 participants (M_{age} = 21.59; SD_{age} = 2.45; 44.5% women). With this final sample size, and α = 0.025, we were able to detecta minimum effect size (d) as big as 0.44 with 80% power.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey and were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: low or high inequality. In both conditions, participants were instructed to imagine they would be starting a new life in a fictitious society called Bimboola, and they were asked to

choose some goods from a list in order to start their new lives (a house, a car and a holiday trip). We informed them that this society was divided into three income groups, and we emphasized that people from each income group could choose only from a subset of goods (e.g., whereas the richest group could choose any type of house, including the best ones, the poorest group could choose only between the cheapest houses). The only differences between the low and high inequality conditions were the monthly earnings of the lowest and highest income groups and the type of goods they can afford.

Importantly, participants' SES and their perceived mobility in Bimboola were kept constant across conditions by assigning participants to the same middle income group (i.e., Group 2), with the same amount of monthly income, and highlighting that in Bimboola there is a high chance to climb to an upper—or to descend to a lower—income group, according to one's effort and work. All instructions about Bimboola were reinforced with infographics (instructions and infographics are available at OSF[4]).

Measures

Participants' Expected Status Anxiety. Participants completed the same SA scale as in Study 4, thinking about how they would feel in Bimboola (α = 0.85).

Perceived contextual status anxiety. Was indicated by perceived SA among members of participants' income group in Bimboola (i.e., Group 2). To that end, participants were instructed to rate their agreement with the items of an adapted version of the same SA scale as in Study 4, thinking about how other people belonging to their same income group would feel in Bimboola (α = 0.82).

Manipulation check. PEI in Bimboola was measured by two items asking to what extent participants perceived the presented society as equal (reversed)/unequal (ranging from 1, "little equal/unequal", to 9, "highly equal/unequal"). Items were highly correlated (r = 0.92), so we averaged them.

Participants' SES. Was indicated by their household disposable income decile, referred to Spanish income distribution (19% bottom quintile of income, 19% second quintile, 19% middle quintile, 11% fourth quintile, and 15% top quintile, 18% did not indicate their household income).

Other variables not relevant to our hypotheses were measured with exploratory purposes[4].

Results

Preregistered Analyses

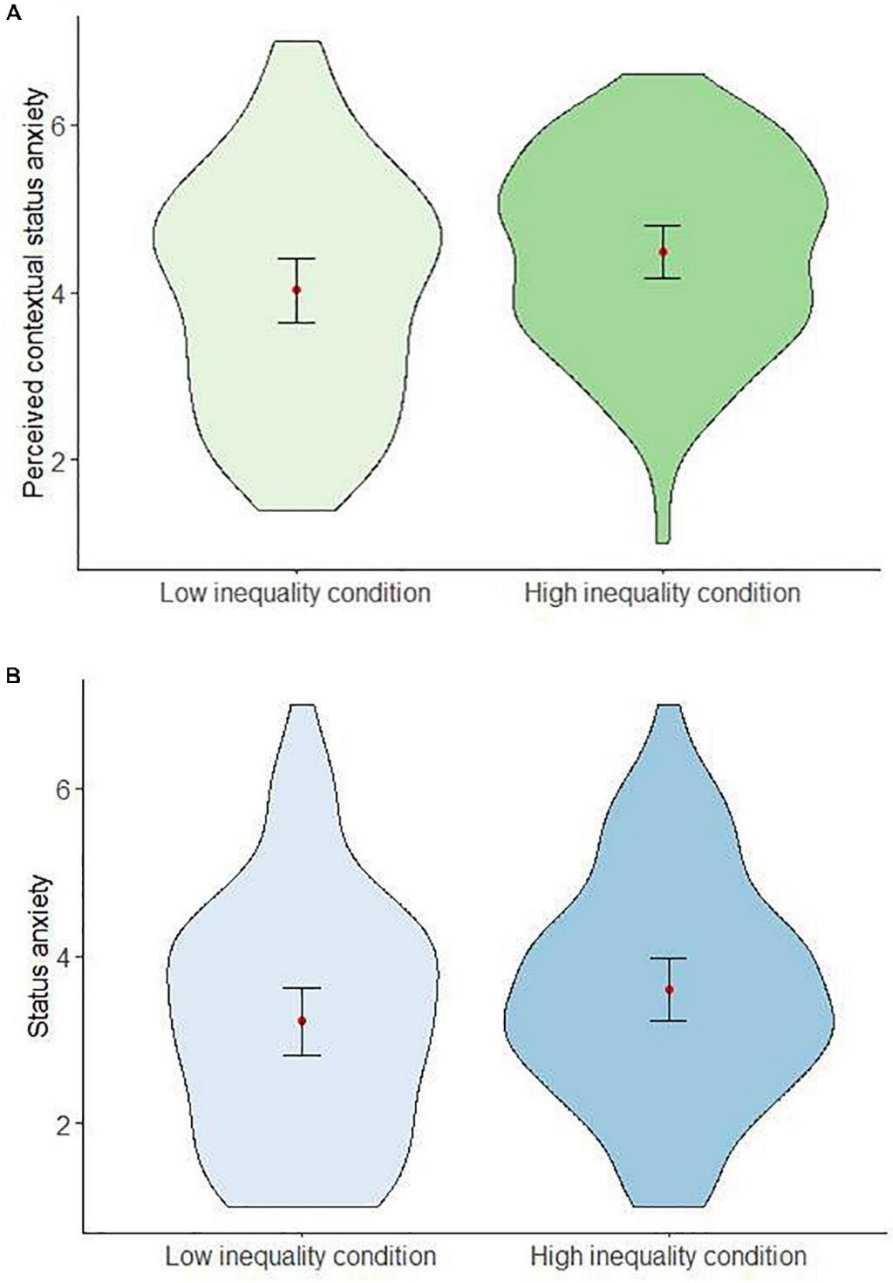
Manipulation check. Participants in the low inequality condition perceived Bimboola as significantly less unequal (M = 4.07; SD = 1.95) than participants in the high inequality condition (M = 8.13; SD = 1.35), $t(165.01) = 16.98$, $p < 0.001$; d = 2.44; *95%CI* [2.07, 2.80].

Status anxiety. In support of Hypothesis 2, perceived contextual SA differed significantly between conditions (Figure 2A), $t(183.08) = 2.53$, $p = 0.012$; d = 0.36; *95%CI* [0.08, 0.64]: participants in the low inequality condition perceived less SA among people in their income group (M = 4.03; SD = 1.39) than participants assigned to the high inequality condition (M = 4.49; SD = 1.15).

However, participants' SA did not significantly differ between the high and low inequality condition (Figure 2B), $t(198) = 1.88$, $p = 0.061$; d = 0.26; *95%CI* [0.01, 0.55]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not corroborated.

Figure 2

Effects of perceived economic inequality condition on perceived contextual status anxiety (A) and participants' status anxiety (B) in study 5

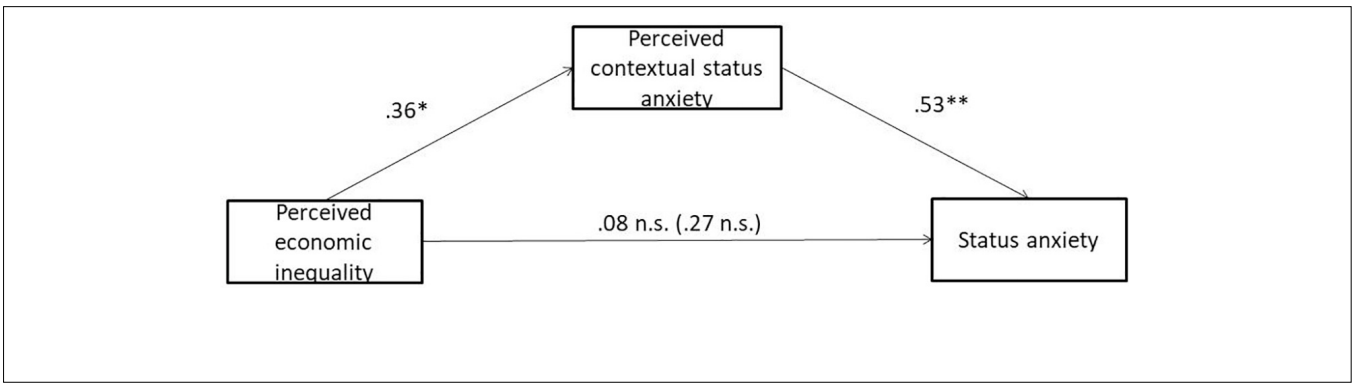


Exploratory Analysis

We performed a bootstrap regression analysis (Hayes, 2017) to examine whether the inequality manipulation had an indirect effect on participants' SA through perceived contextual SA. Indeed, we found that the inequality manipulation had an indirect effect on participants' SA through the perceived SA of others in their income group (*partially standardized indirect effect* = 0.19; *95%CI* [0.04, 0.35]; *RMSEA* = 0.141; *CFI* = 0.838; *TLI* = 0.787; *SRMR* = 0.085; Figure 3)[5].

Figure 3

Indirect effect of perceived economic inequality condition on participants' status anxiety through perceived contextual status anxiety in Study 5



Discussion

In Study 4, PEI uniquely predicted both SA and perceived competitiveness. Moreover, an indirect effect of PEI on SA was found, as PEI increased perceived competitiveness, which in turn increased personal SA. Results in Study 4 not only suggest that PEI increases SA, but also that perceiving the social environment as highly competitive could contribute to this effect. Thus, these results extend and bridge the gap between previous findings on the effect of economic inequality on the competitive normative climate on the one hand (Sommet et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019) and the SA theory on the other (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017). However, the observational nature of this study does not allow the establishment of causal relationships. In order to accomplish this goal, PEI was experimentally manipulated in Study 5. Moreover, in Study 5 we investigated the effect of PEI on a more specific form of perceived competitiveness, based on the struggle for SES: namely perceived contextual SA.

In Study 5, results supported Hypothesis 2, as PEI was found to increase perceived contextual SA. On the other hand, results did not support Hypothesis 1, as PEI was not found to have a significant direct effect on participants' SA. Exploratory analysis, however, revealed another indirect effect of PEI on SA, as perceiving similar others to be more concerned about their SES due to higher PEI gave rise to an SES-competitive mindset, further contributing to increase personal SA. These results suggest that perceived contextual SA may induce a competitive mindset that can favor status-oriented motives. On this matter, perceived SA could act as a descriptive norm, and as such, influence the motivation orientation (Manning, 2009). Importantly, PEI may indirectly affect participants own SA through this descriptive norm. However, this exploratory result should be treated with caution, given that it was not hypothesized.

At least three alternative hypotheses could explain the absence of a significant effect of PEI on participants' SA. First, as this is the first time to our knowledge that the effect of PEI on SA has been experimentally tested, we did not have information about the effect size, in case of Hypothesis 1 being true. We could have therefore underestimated the required sample size to detect it. Second, it may not be socially desirable to admit one's SA, so that participants could be censoring themselves. Third, although the experimental setup can manipulate the subjects' judgment of low vs. high-inequality situations, it may be not sufficient to influence participants' SA in the short term. After all, participants were asked to imagine their lives in a hypothetical society, and their feelings in this situation. For that matter, a more realistic context could better capture the contextual effect of economic inequality on SA. As these three alternative explanations have been created post hoc, further studies should test them.

On the other hand, although the exploratory results indicated that perceived contextual SA could lead to an indirect effect of PEI on SA, the study design does not allow the establishment of a causal relationship between the former and personal SA, as other alternative explanations could not be discarded (Spencer et al., 2005). For instance, it is possible that participants' SA may influence perceived contextual SA, as participants may project their own feelings onto those of similar others. Further studies experimentally manipulating perceived contextual SA could help in supporting or disconfirming the indirect effects presented in this article.

Finally, the presented results may be taken with caution, as both studies were conducted in a relatively rich and moderately unequal country, and most of the sample came from working and middle

class families. In modeling these effects in other contexts, country cultures as well as social class cultures have to be taken into account, especially regarding normative competitive climate and social standards of socioeconomic success. For instance, collectivistic and individualistic orientations can culturally vary between both countries and social classes (Markus and Kitayama, 2010; Kraus et al., 2012). Thus, future research should take these differences into account and explore their role in determining how income inequality affects personal or collective SA (i.e., concerns about in-group SES).

Implications

To our knowledge, this is the first time that experimental evidence has been provided on the causal effect of PEI on perceived contextual SA, or on the indirect effects of PEI on personal SA. As the struggle for SES becomes more intense, the consequences for societies could be disturbing. Perceiving a generalized competition for a better position on the social ladder (i.e., perceived contextual SA), for instance, could dampen social cohesion and generalized trust, which have been found to predict healthy life expectancy, civic and political engagement, and general well-being (Uslaner and Brown, 2005; Elgar, 2010; Buttrick et al., 2017).

SA makes societies less cohesive and individuals more likely to engage in selfish and competitive behavior (e.g., conspicuous consumption; Walasek and Brown, 2015), and is related with poorer health and wellbeing (Paskov et al., 2013; Layte and Whelan, 2014; Buttrick et al., 2017). This research joins a growing body of evidence on the deleterious psychological effects of economic inequality (see Jetten and Peters, 2019), and on the urge to reduce it in all its forms (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009b).

Furthermore, the presented results could inform about both policies and interventions aimed at palliating the aforementioned effects. As PEI was found to increase personal SA only through perceived contextual SA, interventions should focus on the latter variable. Work settings that incentivize cooperation vs. competition, for instance, could dampen SA, contributing to higher job satisfaction and wellbeing (Keshabyan and Day, 2020). In the same vein, disseminating alternative normative messages oriented at reducing perceived competition based on material resources, and at increasing cooperation among low and middle classes for a general improvement in quality life, would contribute to building more cohesive and resilient societies. Messages promoting frugal behavior rather than materialism (Suárez et

al., 2020), for instance, could defuel the SA normative climate, as well as political movements based on shared identities among low and middle classes.

Conclusion

The present research provided evidence that economic inequality makes people feel that they live in a society where they are constantly concerned and competing with each other for their position based on the material resources they possess. Thus, reducing economic inequalities and working for less competitive and materialistic social environments would contribute to build healthier and more cohesive societies.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: https://osf.io/9wevd/?view_only=65ed212f44804aa5a50fe1d933eef01a.

Ethics Statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Comité de Ética en Investigación Humana (CEIH), Universidad de Granada. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Supplementary Material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg. 2021.637365/full#supplementary-material

Notes

[1]Other Hypotheses and analyses beyond the scope of this article were preregistered for Study 4. Preregistration, materials and data are available online (https://osf.io/h35uj/?view_only=c026d785644948ea94565ocb88aa5ff3). Other variables were measured with exploratory purpose (see Supplementary Material).

[2]Data retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database

Chapter 5

[3]https://osf.io/d9tnh/?view_only=eabd42cbbc884c7b8b67b79e963ad2ca

[4] https://osf.io/d9tnh/?view_only=eabd42cbbc884c7b8b67b79e963ad2ca

[5]Exploratory analysis, as well as contrasts on manipulation check, SA and perceived contextual SA, was repeated controlling for participants' sex, age, political orientation, SES and subjective SES. Results and conclusions did not differ from the ones presented here (see Supplementary Material).

Does Income Inequality Increase Status Anxiety? Not Directly, the Role of Perceived Upward and Downward Mobility

Chapter 6

Does income inequality increase status anxiety? Not directly, the role of perceived upward and downward mobility*

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Abstract

Status anxiety theory posits that higher income inequality leads people to attribute more importance to their socioeconomic status and to worry about the position they occupy in the social ladder. We investigated through 2 experimental studies (N = 1117) the causal effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, and whether expected upward and downward mobility mediates this effect. In Study 6 perceived economic inequality indirectly increased status anxiety through lesser expected upward mobility. In Study 7 perceived economic inequality decreased both expected upward and downward mobility, with opposite indirect effects on status anxiety. This suggest that the relation between inequality and status anxiety is not straightforward, and could implicate the presence of multiple processes working at the same time—whereas lower expected downward mobility could supress the effect of inequality, lower expected upward mobility could exacerbate it.

Keywords: Economic Inequality; Social Mobility; Socioeconomic Status; Status Anxiety.

Although there has been a considerable growth of the average income per capita around the world in the last four decades (World Bank, 2021), only a small part of the economic growth was of benefit to the vast majority of the population, while a large share of it ended in a few hands (Alvaredo et al., 2017). Indeed, the last data available show that the bottom half of the world population received only a half part of the income growth captured by the top 1%, and that income inequality increased almost everywhere, at different speeds, in the same period (Alvaredo et al., 2018).

Reducing inequalities within and among countries is considered as an urgent mission by most government agencies so much that it has been included as one of the 17 goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations. Furthermore, it has been considered as a differentiate goal from ending poverty in all its forms.

At the individual level, evidences have been found that living in more unequal social contexts is related with unpaired mental health and healthy life expectancy (Elgar, 2010; Layte, 2012; for different results see also Beckfield, 2004; Sommet et al., 2018), higher rates of risk-taking and selfish behaviours (Paskov et al., 2013; Payne et al., 2017), and women's tendency to self-sexualize (Blake & Brooks, 2019). Importantly, all these effects are independent of the individual material conditions of those who are exposed to high levels of economic inequality, that is, inequality impacts all society and all individuals along the social ladder (Subramianan & Kawachi, 2006). Psychological mechanisms could explain the effects that societal material conditions are exhorting at the individual level.

Given that in contexts of higher economic inequality socioeconomic status becomes more salient, one of those psychological mechanisms proposed to explain the effects of economic inequality is status anxiety, a constant concern about socioeconomic status that leads to a competing mindset (Buttrick et al., 2017; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; De Botton, 2004). The Spirit Level approach (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; 2017) posits that economic inequality enlarges the social distances between those who occupy different rungs in the social ladder. This in turn creates a threatening environment that triggers psychological mechanisms in response to hierarchies evolved as part of an adaptive defence system (Anderson et al., 2015). That is, people

become more vigilant about their socioeconomic status, causing them harmful chronical stress reactions. Indeed, the higher the economic inequality, the more relevant socioeconomic status becomes to self-worth as a dimension of social comparison (Walasek & Brown, 2019). Hence, as hierarchies have been observed to be seen as a threat among individuals across all positions and in a variety of contexts (Duguid & Goncalo, 2015; Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers et al., 2009), it is plausible that economic inequality would increase status anxiety along the entire social ladder (see Layte & Whelan, 2014). The chronical stress of status anxiety and the attempts to avoid being left behind, in turn, could be implicated in the negative effects of economic inequality on mental health and life expectancy, the higher rates of risk-taking and selfish behaviours, and women's tendency to self-sexualize in more unequal contexts (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Blake & Brooks, 2019).

Results from large-scale international surveys support the status anxiety theory, as economic inequality predicts both valuing status and feeling marginalized because of socioeconomic position, over and above individual and national economic resources (Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov, 2013). Congruently, experimental studies found that economic inequality increases pursuit of positional goods, as well as status seeking (i.e. how much people value status) and perceived contextual status anxiety, and that the latter in turn increases status anxiety (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al., 2021; Melita et al., 2021).

However, some unexpected results apparently present the actual limits of the status anxiety theory. For instance, opposing evidences have been found about the relationship between income inequality at the country level and the extent to which individuals value status, suggesting that economic inequality could exhort a galvanizing effect on status seeking, but also a discouraging effect when inequality is too high (Paskov et al., 2013; 2017). Moreover, the indirect effect of economic inequality on wellbeing through status anxiety is weaker in more affluent countries (Delhey & Dragalov, 2014). Similarly, a direct effect of economic inequality on personal status anxiety was not found in the aforementioned experimental study—inequality only influenced status anxiety indirectly, trough contextual status anxiety; that is, the status anxiety that participants thought other people have (Melita et al., 2021).

Therefore, how these apparently incongruent findings could be explained? People's appraisal of economic inequality – and their appraisal about the personal consequences economic inequality potentially entails for them – could play role on the psychosocial effects of economic inequality (Easterbrook, 2021; Phillips et al., 2020). For instance, meritocratic beliefs related to social mobility have been found to predict life satisfaction, over and above perceived and ideal income gaps, especially for those with lower incomes (Schneider, 2012). These results could be indicating that people infer their own future socioeconomic trajectories from perceived opportunity at the societal level (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Day & Fiske, 2019). Importantly, People's estimations of upward mobility typically accurately reflect the real negative relationship between economic inequality and social mobility (see OECD, 2018): both in observational and experimental studies, U.S. residents' perception of economic inequality has been found to negatively predict their own and others expected upward mobility (Davidai, 2018). Thus, those who are exposed to higher economic inequality could get more anxious about their socioeconomic status, because they accurately perceive they get stacked in their actual position in the society. For that matter, in experimental studies, participants who read an article informing about low mobility reported lower levels of positive affect than participants exposed to a high-mobility article (Shariff et al., 2016, p. 377). Moreover, lower perceived chances of improving one's own socioeconomic status have been found to be associated with lower wellbeing, increased risk-taking, and lower sense of personal control (Davidai & Wienk, 2021).

However, although both previous literature and lay beliefs about mobility typically equate it with upward mobility (Davidai & Wienk, 2021), upward and downward mobility beliefs have been found to be separate construct, and both of them decrease when perceived economic inequality is high (Browman et al., 2021). On the other hand, concerns about socioeconomic status can refer both to the fear of losing status and to the fear of not achieving a higher status. Whereas in some circumstances status maintenance motivation can out-weight status gain motivation (Pettit et al., 2010), we assume that in everyday life, at individual level, these two motivations are the two sides of the same coin, namely status anxiety (see Melita et al., 2020). Put

differently, as upward mobility would involve obtaining valuable gains, its anticipation would be reinforcing, meanwhile at the same time, as downward mobility would involve losing valuable goods, its anticipation would be threatening. Importantly, as no mobility would implicate both, the absence of gains and losses relative to one own socioeconomic status, its anticipation would be both discouraging and reassuring at the same time.

Thus, we posit an indirect effect of economic inequality on status anxiety through lesser expected personal upward mobility. That is, when individuals perceive more economic inequality they expect lower chances to climb up the social ladder, and this in turn increases their status anxiety. However, as income distances become larger, it may also happen that they expect lower chances of falling through the social ladder, and this in turn may decrease their status anxiety, given that status anxiety is derived both from concern of falling and to get stuck in the social ladder (Jetten et al., 2017, Melita el at., 2020). Put differently, whereas perceived upward mobility may mediate the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, perceived downward mobility may supress it (MacKinnon et al., 2000).

The Present Research

In this paper we present two preregistred experimental studies to examine whether economic inequality has a causal effect on status anxiety and the role of upward and downward mobility beliefs in this effect. The present research aims to expand previous works on the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety in multiple ways.

First, although previous experimental studies provided support to the status anxiety theory, they typically involved hypothetical reactions to an imagined society (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Melita et al., 2021). In the present research we built a new experimental paradigm for increasing the ecological validity of it in order to look for the hypothesized effects of economic inequality on participants' status anxiety.

Second, status depends on the reference group people use to compare with (Anderson et al., 2015). People tend to compare their income with salient reference groups (e.g. workmates, classmates or friends), and these comparisons have an impact

on subjective wellbeing (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). Hence, the educational context could be a relevant one to socioeconomic status and status aspirations. As young people get into college, they face socioeconomic status uncertainty, and are exposed to a potentially stressful mismatch between expectancies of socioeconomic success (according to the standards in their new social environment), and their real odds of social mobility (Destin et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2004). For that reason, in both studies we used an experimental paradigm in which we manipulated anticipated economic inequality between graduates, and measured expected downward and upward mobility and status anxiety in 2 samples of university students.

Third, previous studies provided some support to the status anxiety theory, but either found a direct effect of economic inequality only on indicators related with status anxiety, like perceived discrimination due to socioeconomic status or status seeking (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013), but not over status anxiety *per se*; or failed to provide evidence of a direct effect of economic inequality on personal status anxiety (Melita et al., 2021). In the present research, we employed a reliable and validated measure of status anxiety which tap into the constant concern for one own socioeconomic status (Melita el et al., 2020). Furthermore, it improves the statistical power of previous studies in order to provide evidence of a direct effect of economic inequality on status anxiety.

Finally, the present research aimed to deepen and expand the understanding of the status anxiety phenomenon, and to connect it with previous research on the appraisal of economic inequality, by exploring the role of personal upward and downward mobility beliefs in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety. In doing so, the present research also account for the complex nature of the phenomenon under scrutiny, as the relationship between macro-structural conditions and psychological functioning could imply the presence of motivated reasoning and multiple processes intervening at the same time.

In the present research, we predicted economic inequality to increase status anxiety, and that this effect would be mediated by lower expected upward mobility. Moreover, we explored whether lower expected downward mobility would suppress it.

Study 6

Although other consolidated paradigms successfully manipulated economic inequality, they involve hypothetical reactions to imagined societies. In Study 6 we built a new experimental paradigm for increasing the ecological validity of it in order to look for the hypothesized effects of economic inequality on participants' status anxiety. We also explored the role of expected upward and downward mobility as a mediator and suppressor variable respectively.

Preregistered hypothesis

H1: We predicted that participants assigned to high (vs. Low) inequality condition would report higher status anxiety (https://osf.io/8mjz5?view_only=2048f3c7a6bc4012a424afdd185a050d).

Method

Participants

We invited 639 Spanish undergraduate students to participate in an online survey experiment. As preregistered, 38 cases were excluded from the final sample because they failed to correctly answer the attention check item and 84 cases because they already took part in previous studies on economic inequality. The final sample was composed by 517 valid cases (M_{age} = 21.76, SD_{age} = 3.19; 52.2% women). With $\alpha = .05$, the final sample size and $1 - \beta = 0.80$, we were able to detect a minimum effect size (*d*) as big as .25.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: high or low inequality condition. Inequality was manipulated by presenting information about the supposedly estimated mean income of fellow graduates, which were divided in three terciles. We manipulated the mean income of the first and the last tercile, whereas the mean income of the second tercile was kept constant. In the low inequality condition, the first tercile mean income was €1800 and the last tercile mean income was

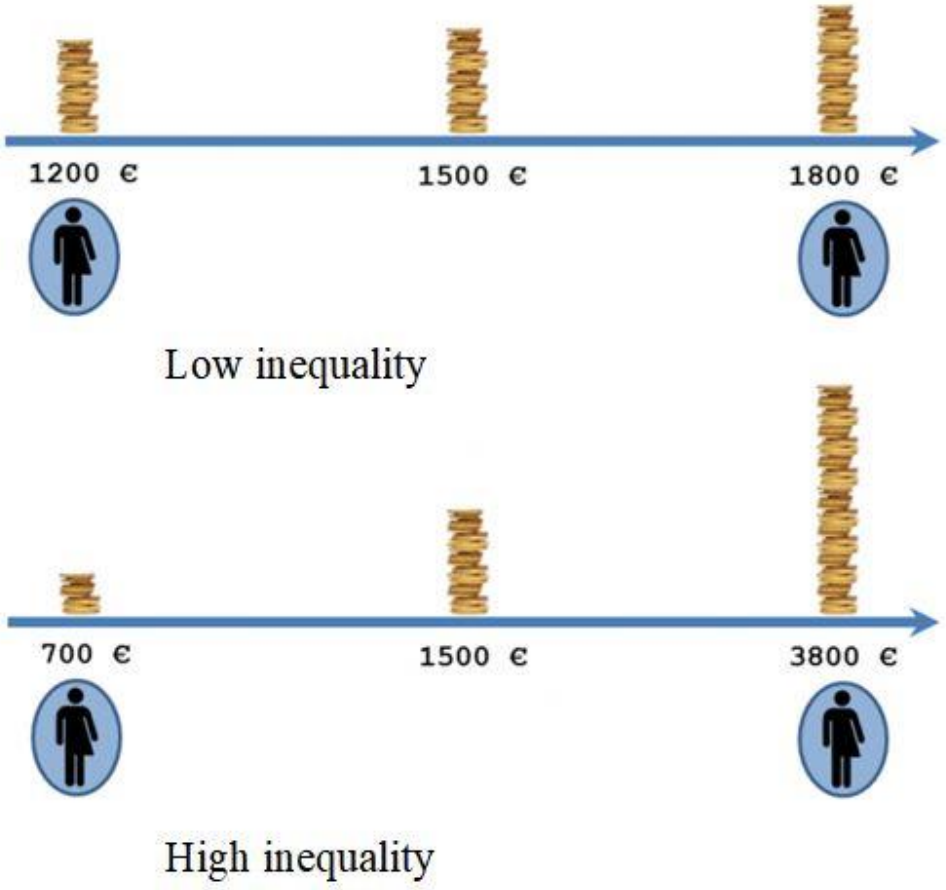
€1200. Conversely, in the high inequality condition the first tercile mean income was €3800 and the last tercile mean income was €700 (Figure 1).

All participants also took part in two tasks that served to reinforce the experimental manipulation. In the first task they were asked to indicate the main perceived differences in the lives of their graduate mates from the first and the last tercile, answering a series of questions about the differences in lifestyles of the richest and poorest graduate fellows in the presented distribution (i.e. those from the first and the last tercile of income). In the second one they took a bogus interactive questionnaire (items were on socio-economics and academic data and from a self-efficacy scale) and read that a calculator would presumably forecast participants' future income after completing their academic studies, based on their answers to the questionnaire.

Status anxiety was measured before they were informed about the feedback to the bogus interactive questionnaire with participants' forecasted income, so that when it was measured participants didn't know what their future income and their position in the income distribution would be. Materials and data from Study 6 can be found online at https://osf.io/hwakg/?view_only=91c8d07eeabb4599bf1bbc7a1547859d.

Figure 1

Inequality manipulation in Study 6



Measures

Status anxiety. Was measured by five items adapted from the Spanish Version of the Status Anxiety Scale (Keshabyan and Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2020). Participants were instructed to think about their life after they graduate and rate their agreement with each item on the scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). Examples of items included the following: "I worry that my social status will not change after college", and "Sometimes I worry that I may become lower in social standing after college" (α = .85).

Manipulation check. Perceived economic inequality was measured with 2 items asking to what extent participants agree that the income differences between their graduate mates from the first and the last tercile would be small (reversed) or big (ranged 1 "totally disagree", to 7 "totally agree"). Given the items were highly related (r = .71, p < .001) we averaged them.

Expected upward and downward mobility. Were measured by single-item indicators (i.e. "How probable you consider to climb up / fall down to the first / last group of graduates with the highest /lowest income?", ranged 1 "very low chances", to 7 "very high chances").

Finally, participants indicated their household income.

Results

Preregistered Analyses

Manipulation Check. The experimental manipulation successfully affected participants' economic inequality perception, $t(515) = 11.73$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.03$, *95% CI* [0.85, 1.22], so that participants in the high inequality condition ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.26$) perceived more economic inequality than participants in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.16$).

Status Anxiety. We did not find an effect of the inequality manipulation on status anxiety, $t(515) = -1.25$, $p = .211$, $d = -0.11$, *95% CI* [-0.28, 0.06].

Exploratory analyses

We tested the indirect effect of inequality manipulation on status anxiety, through expected upward mobility as a mediating variable, and expected downward mobility as a suppressing variable (see MacKinnon et al., 2000). Running Model 4 with the Macro process (Hayes, 2017) we found an indirect effect of inequality manipulation on status anxiety through expected upward mobility (see Figure 2; *partially standardized indirect effect* = .04; *95%CI* [.01, .10]), but not a supressing effect of expected downward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = -.01; *95%CI* [-.04, .02]).

Both preregistered and exploratory analyses were repeated controlling for participants' age, sex, and socioeconomic status (indicated by averaging standardized scores of their household income, and their parents' educational attainment; see Erola et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2017). Results were robust to these further analyses.

Discussion

Results in Study 6 did not support our preregistered hypothesis. However, even though inequality did not have a direct effect on status anxiety, in exploratory analyses we found an indirect effect from the former to the latter, through expected upward mobility, suggesting that perceived economic inequality threaten our participants by decreasing expected upward mobility. We aimed to preregister and replicate this result in Study 7.

Moreover, in Study 6 participants observed the income distribution across 3 terciles, and were lead to think about the lifestyle differences between their fellow graduates from the first and the last tercile. Given the differences between terciles may be not large enough to activate status aspiration motives related to inequality perception, and terciles may have too much blurred burdens to be perceived as differentiate groups, we subtly modified the experimental paradigm in Study 7, and presented participants income distribution between quintiles. We believed that using this new procedure it would be possible to find a main effect on status anxiety.

Study 7

The aim of Study 7 was twofold. First, to replicate exploratory analyses results of Study 6; that is, the indirect effect of the experimental manipulation expected upward mobility. Second, we improved the experimental manipulation to test whether we were able to obtain a main effect of economic inequality on status anxiety.

Preregistered hypotheses

We predicted that participants assigned to high (vs. Low) inequality condition would report higher status anxiety (H1). Furthermore, we predicted the effect on status anxiety would be mediated by expected upward mobility (H2; https://osf.io/t4ujd?view_only=9a117f943f3e4c0eaec331c93f588f4e)[1].

Method

Participants

We invited 744 Spanish undergraduate students to participate in an online survey experiment. As preregistered, we excluded 44 cases from the study because they failed to correctly answer the attention check item and 100 cases because they already took part in previous studies on economic inequality. Final sample was composed by 600 valid cases (M_{age} = 22.11, SD_{age} = 3.32; 67% women). Using an α = .05, the final sample size and 1 – β = 0.80, we were able to detect a minimum effect size (*d*) as big as .23.

Procedure

Similarly as in Study 6, participants were presented with information about the supposedly estimated mean income of future graduates from the first and the last quintile, and took the same two reinforcing tasks. In the low inequality condition first quintile mean income was 1800 € while last quintile mean income was 1200 €. In the high inequality condition first quintile mean income was 4000 € while last quintile mean income was 500 €.

Measures

All measures were the same as in Study 6 ($\alpha_{status\ anxiety}$ = .86).

[1] Other hypotheses were preregistered, but not included in this article, because they were not related with its general scope, and would make more difficult its reading. The hypotheses, materials and results can be found at https://osf.io/h9r3t/?view_only=41f813779efd4bf1aae5c154b17174da.

Results

Preregistered analyses

Manipulation Check. The experimental manipulation successfully affected participants' economic inequality perception, $t(577{,}77) = 18.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.54$, *95% CI* [1.36, 1.72], so that participants in the high inequality condition ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.06$) perceived more economic inequality than participants in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.16$).

Status Anxiety. Again, we did not find a main effect of the inequality manipulation on status anxiety, $t(598) = 0.16$, $p = .879$, $d = .01$, *95% CI* [-.15, .17].

Indirect Effect. We found evidence of the preregistered indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through expected upward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = .07; *95%CI* [.02, .12]). That is, the inequality manipulation decreased expected upward mobility, leading to increased status anxiety.

Exploratory analyses

As in Study 6, we explored expected downward mobility as a suppressor variable. For that matter, we run a bootstrap regression analysis with Model 4 using the Macro process and setting expected upward and downward mobility as mediators.

As can be observed in Figure 2, perceived economic inequality had an indirect and suppressor effect on status anxiety through expected downward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = -.05; *95%CI* [-.09, -.01]), opposite to the indirect effect through expected upward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = .06; *95%CI* [.01, .12]).

Both preregistered and exploratory analyses were repeated controlling for participants' age, sex, and socioeconomic status. Results were robust to these further analyses.

Discussion

Once more, in Study 7 we did not find a direct effect of perceived economic inequality effects on status anxiety. However, results in Study 7 support the preregistered hypothesis that perceived economic inequality has an indirect effect on status anxiety through perceived upward mobility.

Moreover, in an exploratory analysis we find opposite indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through (lesser) expected upward and downward mobility, suggesting that economic inequality could simultaneously activate opposite psychological processes, that harms individuals by increasing status anxiety on the one hand, and buffer these harmful consequences on the other.

Pooled analyses of Studies 6-7

Given we found an indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through expected upward mobility in Studies 6 and 7, and a suppressor indirect effect through expected downward mobility in Study 7, but not in Study 6, we run a pooled analysis with data from both studies in order to test it in a larger sample—with higher statistical power—the hypotheses of the two indirect but opposite effects of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety, through expected upward and downward mobility respectively. Pooled data analyses afford more reliable conclusions, and entail a more rigorous test (Curran y Hussong, 2009). Although we had no reasons to think there was a significant difference in testing indirect effects between the two studies due to the similarities in studies designs, pooled data analyses were run with fixed effect model between studies, given the number of samples was not large enough to run a random effect model (*Ibid*.). Sample size of pooled data was $N = 1117$.

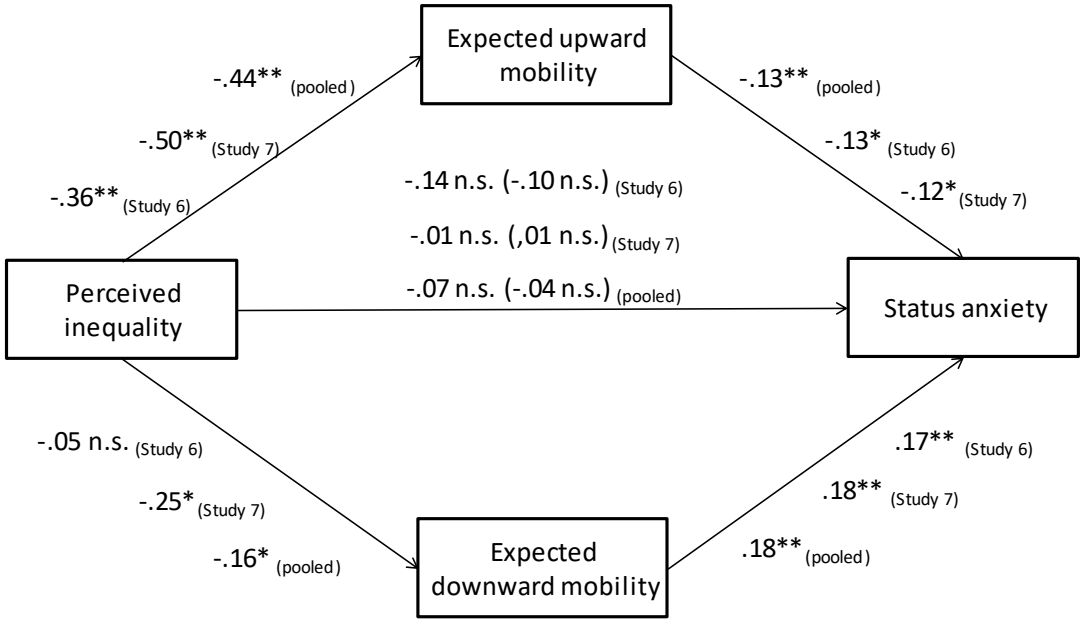
Results

As can be observed in Figure 2, perceived economic inequality had an indirect and suppressor effect on status anxiety through expected downward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = -.03; *95%CI* [-.05, -.01]), opposite to the indirect effect through expected upward mobility (*partially standardized indirect effect* = .06; *95%CI* [.02, .09]). Neither the former (*Index of moderated mediation* = -.03, *95%CI* [-.08, .01]),

nor the latter (*Index of moderated mediation* = .02, *95%CI* [-.01, .05]) indirect effects were moderated by the study (dummy coded, Model 7 in Macro Process). Results were robust controlling for participants' age, sex, and socioeconomic status.

Figure 2

Indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through expected upward and downward mobility



Note: Coefficients are standardized; total effect in parenthesis; *$p < .01$; **$p < .001$

Discussion

With a large sample and high statistical power, in a pooled data analysis we obtained further evidences in favour of two indirect and opposing effects of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety. Again, the two indirect effects were opposing each other. As a result, no total effect of economic inequality was found on status anxiety.

General Discussion

Status anxiety makes societies less cohesive and individuals more likely to engage in selfish and competitive behaviour (Paskov et al., 2013), and is related with poorer health and wellbeing (Buttrick et al., 2017; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). Understanding how economic inequality increases status anxiety could contribute to prevent and counteract these effects.

In two experimental studies, with a large sample (total N = 1117), using a novel experimental paradigm, we did not find a main effect of economic inequality on status anxiety. Therefore, it seems that the effects found in cross-sectional studies (Delhey et al., 2017; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Melita et al., 2020) may be hard to be shown in an experimental setting.

We replicated previous findings regarding the negative effect of perceived economic inequality on perceived mobility, and found the latter to be involved in two opposing indirect effects when predicting status anxiety. More concretely, perceived economic inequality decreased both expected upward and downward mobility, and meanwhile lesser expected upward mobility increased status anxiety, decreased downward mobility had a buffering effect on status anxiety.

Inequality creates disparities between the distant income groups. Thus, people living in more unequal societies may accurately think that it may be harder to climb up the economic ladder, but also that it is harder to fall. In fact, when economic inequality is low (compared to more unequal contexts), small changes in income may objectively improve —or decrease— more individuals' societal rank (Walasek & Brown, 2019). As such, when participants see that there are greater disparities, they may get anxious because they will not be able to increase their status. But at the same time, they may get less anxious because at least they will not decrease it. At the end, these two processes opposed to each other, and this may be the reason why we did not find a main effect of economic inequality over status anxiety in any of the two experimental studies. Therefore, future studies should take into consideration that the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety is not straightforward, but it is a more complex phenomenon then the one depicted by the Spirit Level approach (Wilkinson &

Pickett, 2009b; 2017), that involves the presence of multiple processes working at the same time.

Studies 6-7 show how income disparities affects expectations and worries about economic future in university students, and thus could impulse new research aimed to improve their academic performance and wellbeing. However, these results indicate that any effort in order to improve students' adaptation and wellbeing in the educational environment would be worthless if no steps in order to reduce economic inequality and improve real equal opportunities are taken. Moreover, these results may be also taken with caution, as our sample is composed entirely by Spaniards university students, hence living in a developed but moderately unequal country, and most of the sample came from middle class families.

The two opposing pathways from economic inequality to status anxiety found could be moderated by contextual and personal variables. That is, while for some people lesser mobility due to higher inequality could be discouraging, for others it could be reassuring. For instance, it could be the case that those who pertain to advantaged groups, such as upper classes, whites or men, could react with higher concerns to the possibility of status loss (e.g. Jetten et al., 2017), while those who pertain to disadvantaged groups, such as lower classes, ethnic minorities or women, could be threaten to a higher extent by the perception of getting stacked in their position (e.g. Schneider, 2012). On the other hand, concerns for upward and downward mobility could be driven by different motivational systems, namely promotion and prevention motives, which orient human behaviour either towards growth and aspirations, or protection and duties (Molden et al., 2008). Future studies could further research these issues by exploring under which circumstances and for whom concerns for expected upward or downward mobility prevail and thus lead to potentially opposite effects of economic inequality on status anxiety.

Indeed, the suppressor effect of expected downward mobility could be a protective mechanism against the harmful effects of economic inequality, as it reduces its impact on status anxiety. However, this protective mechanism could lead to potentially damaging side effects. For instance, lower expected upward and downward mobility in unequal contexts could be driven by reduced internal attributions and higher

external attributions for personal SES (Davidai, 2018), and thus, be associated with decreased perceived personal control (Kraus et al., 2009). Decreased personal control, in turn, could activate a compensatory control mechanism, such as authoritarianism (see Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). Moreover, as argued by the System Justification Theory (Jost et al., 2004), buffering effects against economic inequality could be deleterious to social change. While relative deprivation and perceived impermeability contribute to motivate people to challenge the status quo, optimistic biases regarding one's own social class and downward mobility could defuel motivations to reduce inequalities, as they could dampen class consciousness (Keefer et al., 2015). Future research should better take into account which consequences these buffering effects bring for the maintenance of an unsustainable economic system.

All in all, status anxiety has been found to decrease mental health, wellbeing and job satisfaction (Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Layte, 2012). The present research contributes to explain how it relates with economic inequality and hopefully give some light on the avenues that interventions and policies aimed at reducing it could take.

Data availability statement

The data, pre-registrations, materials that support the findings of this study, as well as supplementary analyses are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/2ypd8/?view_only=0208ad15102b4a68acd2fde63e17011e.

General Discussion

Chapter 7

The large impact that EI exhorts on societies' functioning and individuals' health motivated this dissertation thesis. How does EI change societies? Why do people appear more selfish and competitive in unequal societies? Why is economic inequality (EI) harmful to individuals' health? Why is EI lethal? Previous evidence suggests that EI leads people to become obsessed with their socioeconomic status. However, the link between EI and status anxiety has not been directly investigated thus far. Therefore, this thesis aimed to investigate the relationship between EI and status anxiety.

More specific, this thesis aimed to address: (a) the lack of direct measures of status anxiety in the Spanish context, and (b) the lack of experimental evidence on the causal effect of EI on status anxiety. Moreover, EI alters people's perceptions of how others behave and think in their social context (i.e., their normative climate). This normative climate, in tun, could play a role in how individuals react to EI (e.g., Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sommet et al., 2019). Conversely, higher EI leads to perceived lower upward and downward mobility (Browman et al., 2021). Although lower perceived upward mobility could be threatening (i.e., not achieving a higher socioeconomic status), lower downward mobility could be reassuring (i.e., not losing actual socioeconomic status). Therefore, this thesis also aimed to investigate: (c) the role of the normative climate, and (d) the role of perceived upward and downward mobility in the relationship between EI and status anxiety,

To accomplish our main objective, we adapted an instrument to measure status anxiety in the Spanish context. From this, we obtained evidence of its reliability and validity. Furthermore, we conducted several cross-sectional and experimental studies to examine the relationship between EI and status anxiety.

In the following sections, each of these identified problems will be discussed in the light of the empirical findings presented in this thesis. Furthermore, some of the main contributions of this thesis to the field will be discussed, as well as its limitations. Finally, a selection of the remaining questions the main empirical findings raised will be presented to outline some future directions for a research program focused on the relationship between EI and status anxiety.

Direct Indicators of Status Anxiety

Although previous studies in the literature on status anxiety claimed they provided evidence about its relationship with EI, these studies did not directly measure status anxiety. Instead, the studies based their evidence on indirect indicators of status anxiety, such as the pursuit of positional goods, perceived social esteem because of an individual's socioeconomic status, self-enhancement bias, or desire for status (e.g., Du et al., 2021; Layte, 2012; Loughnan et al., 2011; Paskov et al., 2013). In this thesis, we adapted an instrument to measure status anxiety in the Spanish society. We found evidence for its reliability and validity, and about its relationship with other relevant psychological effects of EI. Moreover, we found that EI and low socioeconomic status caused independent effects on status anxiety through using this new instrument.

In Chapter 4, we analyzed empirical evidence regarding the Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale. In Study 6, after developing the instrument, its items adequately represented the status anxiety construct. The Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale presented a unifactorial structure indicating that all the items were included in one dimension of the same construct. Both Study 6 and Study 7 provided evidence about its reliability and validity.

Also in Chapter 4, the relationship between status anxiety and other relevant constructs were analyzed, and Study 6 and 7 simultaneously provided evidence of both convergent and divergent validity of the construct. On the one hand, findings show status anxiety to be related with a higher relative deprivation and comparison tendency. On the other hand, all correlations reported in these studies were low or moderate, indicating that status anxiety captures a different source of individual variability with respect to other related psychological effects of EI. On this matter, EI has been posited to reduce life satisfaction due to an increased comparison tendency and to an increased feeling of being materially deprived (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Osborne et al., 2019). However, our results indicated that the effect of EI on status anxiety should not be confounded with these other psychological effects.

Furthermore, status anxiety indeed related to perceived EI but not to the status-seeking consumption orientation. The will to buy products aimed at increasing an

individual's status had previously been found to be related to EI and considered as a symptom of status seeking (Walasek & Brown, 2015). Thus, although the absence of a correlation between status anxiety and status seeking in Study 6 could be due to a floor effect of the status-seeking measure, in our sample, it provides evidence that status anxiety is a psychological effect of EI, differentiated from status seeking.

By providing empirical data on the nature of the relationship between EI and status anxiety in the Spanish society, this thesis contributes to the generalizability of the findings on this phenomenon across different cultural contexts. A direct measure of status anxiety had been previously developed and validated in the United States (Keshabyan & Day, 2020). However, EI could have different implications for individuals, and it could be perceived differently depending on material and cultural differences between societies.

Concretely, English-speaking western countries (i.e., the United States and the United Kingdom) typically tend to embrace the neo-liberal ideology: high levels of meritocratic beliefs and relatively weak welfare protection systems characterize them (Jaanmat, 2014). However, the studies presented in this thesis were conducted in Spain: a moderately unequal European non-English-speaking country with a relatively moderate welfare protection system. Although the spread of the neo-liberal ideology has also influenced Spain during the last decades (Navarro, 1998), Spaniards show relatively low levels of meritocratic beliefs compared to English-speaking western countries' populations (Mijs, 2021).

Finally, our results provide support for both the status syndrome and the status anxiety hypotheses and contribute to disentangle the two effects from each other. The first predicts that the lower the socioeconomic status, the higher status anxiety; the second predicts that the higher EI, the higher status anxiety.

Along the empirical chapters of this thesis, participants' socioeconomic status did not confound the effect of EI on status anxiety. That is, Study 4 and 5 (Chapter 4) provided evidence of the contextual effect of perceived EI on status anxiety, even after controlling for participants' income and subjective socioeconomic status. Moreover, Study 6 and 7 (Chapter 6) provided evidence of an indirect effect of perceived EI on

status anxiety, after controlling for participants' income and their parents' educational attainment.

Further, in the empirical chapters, we found some evidence of the effect that socioeconomic status exhorts on status anxiety, independent from perceived EI. In Study 3 (Chapter 4), participants assigned to a low socioeconomic status condition reported higher status anxiety compared to participants assigned to a high socioeconomic status condition. perceived EI did not qualify this effect. Moreover, in Study 4 (Chapter 5), participants' educational level, which indicates objective socioeconomic status, independently predicted lower levels of status anxiety, even after accounting for the effect of perceived EI and the contextual effect of perceived competitive climate.

Some authors used the status syndrome hypothesis to argue against the status anxiety hypothesis: They attributed EI's effects on health and wellbeing to the aggregated effect of material deprivation on a large portion of individuals in unequal societies (e.g., Kawachi, & Subramanian, 2014; Sommet et al., 2018). That is, in unequal societies many people have a relatively low socioeconomic status, which increases their status anxiety. This, in turn, contributes to increasing the population's mean levels of status anxiety in unequal societies, with a higher impact on health and wellbeing.

However, our results demonstrated that the status anxiety and the status syndrome effects were not mutually exclusive. That is, on the one hand, unequal societies generate a social context in which socioeconomic status feels threatening to everyone. On the other hand, in unequal societies many people perceive they have a relatively low socioeconomic status, which increases their status anxiety. Both effects contribute to increase the population's mean levels of status anxiety in unequal societies.

Causal Effect of Economic Inequality on Status Anxiety

The first two chapters argued that status anxiety can be the main mediating mechanism (although not uniquely) that explains the health and social problems EI causes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). Thus, in providing evidence about the association between EI and status anxiety, this thesis contributes to strengthen further the

argument that EI exhorts damaging effects on humans' health and wellbeing. However, beyond the association between EI and status anxiety, showing a causal relationship between these variables would provide a more solid argument about the damaging effects of EI. Therefore, in this dissertation we have examined whether manipulated EI directly influences status anxiety.

In Study 5 (Chapter 5), we adapted a consolidated experimental paradigm (i.e., the Bimbola paradigm) to manipulate EI, while keeping constant perceived societal mobility and socioeconomic status. However, the research on the causal effects of EI on individuals and societies faces two main limitations. On the one hand, due to ethical and practical issues, it is not feasible to manipulate artificially the level of EI in a real society, or in a social context that resembles societies' class stratification. On the other hand, ideological variables and the experiences individuals go through in their daily lives largely influence perceptions of EI (García-Castro et al., 2019; García-Sánchez et al., 2019). Thus, effectively manipulating perceptions of EI in experimental contexts becomes a hard task. Experimental paradigms typically resort to abstract information about the distribution of resources in societies, or to artificial scenarios that are out of individuals' real-life experience, and thus they would hardly activate some threat to their social self-preservation system (Du et al., 2021; Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Payne et al., 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). In Chapter 6, we developed and validated a novel experimental paradigm. This allowed us to manipulate experimentally perceived EI in a relevant social context—one that implicates potential threats to participants' self-worth based on their rank among their peers.

Study 5 (Chapter 5) presented evidence of a normative causal effect of EI on status anxiety; that is, participants in a highly (vs. lowly) unequal scenario attributed higher status anxiety to those around them. This result provided, to our knowledge, the first evidence that EI causes a status anxiety normative climate; a context in which people are expected to compete and to be concerned about their socioeconomic status.

However, the evidence collected in the empirical chapters of this thesis does not allow establishing a direct causal relationship between EI and participants' personal levels of status anxiety. In the aforementioned experiment, participants in the highly

unequal scenario did not report significantly higher levels of expected personal status anxiety than those in the lowly unequal scenario. Moreover, in Study 6 and Study 7 (Chapter 6), when testing the causal relationship between EI and status anxiety in a more ecological scenario, we found no effect participants' status anxiety.

Our results suggested that the effects of EI on status anxiety at the individual level could be hardly detectable in the immediate and artificial environments of laboratory experiments. On this matter, expressing status anxiety could be socially sanctioned because it contravenes pan-cultural values of benevolence and universalism due to its competitive origins (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). These values are socially desirable, and they have evolved as mechanisms to maintain social groups' functioning. Moreover, expressing status anxiety could be counter-productive for the pursuit of a positive social esteem because people employ the strategies of overconfidence and self-enhancement as means to maintain or enhance their status (Anderson et al., 2012; Loughnan et al., 2011).

Although it could be costly to admit personal concerns regarding one's position on the social ladder, people could be expressing their concerns by projecting them onto other individuals in comparable material conditions, similarly to what happens when measuring other socially sanctionable attitudes or behaviors (e.g., drug consumption; Miller et al., 2012).

In sum, in the current research, we did not find that those who were exposed to high EI (vs. low EI) reported higher levels of personal status anxiety. However, we did find that EI increases perceived contextual status anxiety.

The Mediating Role of Normative Climate

As exposed in the Chapter 1, EI changes the way people perceive their social world. For instance, as they are exposed to highly unequal contexts, people tend to perceive others as more agentic and less communal, more individualistic and less collectivistic, more competitive and less cooperative, and more independent and less interdependent (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). In turn, the social world as they perceive it affects individuals. For instance, they tend to behave

in more aggressive and selfish ways when the unequal context leads them to perceive others are being competitive or selfish (Nishi et al., 2015; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019).

Considering those who are exposed to highly unequal contexts perceive their social environment to be highly competitive, they could be motivated to compete for their socioeconomic status (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sommet et al., 2019). Furthermore, as the competition for holding or achieving a good position in a highly unequal society intensifies, they could perceive that those from the same social class with whom they identify (typically the middle class; see Evans & Kelley, 2004) are concerned with their respective socioeconomic status, and might be preoccupied the same concerns. In the present research, we corroborated these results. Although we did not observe a direct causal effect of EI on individuals' status anxiety, we did indeed find a causal effect by EI on the worldviews of societies as social contexts where people compete and worry about their socioeconomic status, leading individuals to experience status anxiety.

EI may generate a threatening social environment, which, similar to how air pollution does, could affect individuals' health and wellbeing (Kawachi & Subramanian, 2014). Although the effects of EI on status anxiety at the individual level seem hard to detect in the short-term context of laboratory experiments, EI could exhort an impact on personal status anxiety in the long term. That is, EI creates a normative climate in which people are expected to compete for their position in the economic hierarchy. However, the effects of this normative climate could be detectable only in the long term because people are constantly exposed to it in their daily lives, while they show some resistance in the short term. In the long term, the competitive and materialistic climate EI generates would presumably lead to increase individuals' status anxiety. In addition, in the long term, in highly unequal societies, it presumably would be culturally acceptable for an individual to express their desire for higher socioeconomic status. Yet, a person being pessimistic about their trajectory or complaining about their position on the social ladder would be socially sanctionable or counter-productive, considering it signals their failure to accomplish within the cultural norms of economic success disseminated in those societies that embrace the neoliberal ideology.

Individuals could be reluctant to report status anxiety because it would signal their vulnerability or failure to meet society's standard of success.

The Mediating Role of Expected Individual Mobility

Chapter 1 discussed how EI could exhort different effects, depending on how people perceive and appraise it. On this matter, previous research has provided experimental evidence on the effect that perceived EI exhorts on both upward and downward perceived mobility (Browman et al., 2021; Davidai, 2018). In addition, it some have argued that individuals infer their future trajectory based on both their past experiences and on the perception of the societal levels of social mobility, while perceived EI has been found to influence the latter (Browman et al., 2021, Davidai, 2018; Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Ehrenreich, 1989). Hence, in this thesis, the role of both upward and downward mobility expectations have been investigated in relation to the effect of EI on status anxiety.

The two studies presented in Chapter 6 found that EI triggered psychological processes that simultaneously enhanced and buffered status anxiety. Concretely, in a higher EI condition, students perceived they had lower chances to reach the bottom of the income distribution among their peers once they graduated. This, in turn, protected them against the increase in status anxiety. Although a person feeling stuck in their position would fuel status anxiety because it violates the expectations of upward mobility that meritocratic beliefs raise, a compensatory mechanism (i.e., thinking they have lower chances of falling in the social ladder) enacts against the threating effects of EI and helps individuals to restore or preserve their expected social esteem as well as to maintain a positive attitude toward economic success. The comforting safety of being distant from those who are lower on the social ladder could help individuals feel better with the absence of mobility and opportunities the huge distances from those who are at the top of the distribution cause.

Research about the effect of EI on status anxiety has taken into account the position individuals occupy on the social ladder (e.g., Layte, 2012). Study 3 (Chapter 4) confirmed that higher perceived EI increases concerns about socioeconomic status, and that the lower individuals are in the economic hierarchies, the higher their concerns are

about their socioeconomic status. Other lines of research indicated that perceived EI negatively affects an individual's rank on the social ladder (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Jetten et al., 2019). This in turn could further fuel status anxiety and generate other negative psychological effects, such as relative deprivation (Payne et al., 2017).

However, most people in modern societies share meritocratic beliefs (Mijs, 2021), which implicates that socioeconomic status is represented as a dynamic feature in people's minds. The approaches to the relationship between perceived EI and perceived socioeconomic status, as well as between the latter and status anxiety, have been neglecting this dynamic aspect of socioeconomic status.

In their representations of where they stand in the economic hierarchies, individuals usually rely on their perceptions about their trajectories in the social ladder: They compare their actual economic resources with those of comparable others and with those from their past. Furthermore, they integrate these comparisons with their expectations about their future economic resources compared with their actual ones and those of others in complex status-based identities (Destin et al., 2017; Verme, 2009).

Chapter 2 discussed how status anxiety could be derived from the unbalance between perceived societal expectations about an individual's socioeconomic trajectory, which individuals derive from shared meritocratic beliefs, and their actual achievements in their struggle for socioeconomic success (De Botton, 2004). Meritocratic beliefs and the normative standards of socioeconomic success contribute to exhort a constant pressure to "keep up with the Joneses" both culturally and materially Individuals in highly unequal societies experience a constant pressure to meet the standard of living that is considered the middle-class lifestyle (Christen & Morgan, 2005; Delhey et al., 2017). However, this standard is not achievable for most, or it is hard to maintain because it constantly shifts to higher material achievements, similar to the deceiving summit of a never-ending mountain (Frank, 2007). Thus, most of those who live in highly unequal societies feel compelled to improve their socioeconomic status, and they experience their failures to achieve this primary goal as losses of highly valued commodities (because they feel they are losing what they are supposed to achieve). Moreover, people tend to show aversion not only to the losses of

valued commodities, but also to the mere anticipation of such losses (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Thus, the expected chances to improve or to lose their socioeconomic status exhort a great influence on individuals' status anxiety, either threatening their opportunities to keep up with the normative expectations of ascending trajectories or reassuring them from the possibility of status loss.

The findings presented in Chapter 6 indicate that the effect of EI on status anxiety at the individual level depends on how the former is perceived and interpreted. Further, self-preserving mechanisms dampen it, such as comforting with the safety of not falling to the bottom of the socioeconomic status hierarchy. On the one hand, perceiving EI indirectly increases status anxiety through lower expected chances of upward mobility. On the other hand, it indirectly decreases status anxiety through lower expected chances of downward mobility. Ultimately, these two indirect effects oppose and annul each other, resulting in no effect of perceived EI on status anxiety.

Main Contributions and Implications

Theoretical Contributions

Many authoritative claims have been made on the negative effects of EI (e.g., Payne, 2017; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b; for counterarguments see Kelley & Evans, 2017; Snowdown, 2010). The debate these claims generated contributed to and continues to stimulate a considerable amount of research on EI in the effort to propose arguments against or in favor of the importance of reducing inequalities and regulating the accumulation of wealth at the top (e.g., Jetten & Peters, 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Rowlingson, 2011; Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sommet et al., 2018). However, the literature on the psychological effects of EI presents some contradictory findings. Concretely, while on the one hand, many findings suggest a linear positive relationship between EI and status anxiety (e.g., Delhey & Dragalov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov, 2013), others from large-scale international surveys suggests that people could lose interest for seeking a higher socioeconomic status when EI is too high (Paskov et al., 2017). Moreover, contrary to the claims on the negative effects of EI, some suggest that EI could stimulate societies and their economies, as the example of the advantaged

ones inspires hope to the rest, thus increasing general wellbeing (Cheung, 2016; Kelley & Evans, 2017). This dissertation thesis contributes to the debate about the convenience of reducing EI by affording a deeper understanding of its effects.

Firstly, this thesis provides evidence that the competitive climate EI promotes causes avoidance reactions because it leads people to live in a climate of constant concern for their socioeconomic status, and the anticipation of not being up to their society's success standards constantly threatens them. These results are in line with the model Sommet et al. (2019) proposed, in which EI increases both approach and avoidance motivations through higher perceived competitiveness. Importantly, the avoidance reaction EI promotes does not stimulate people's enterprise and will to make efforts for economic success, as those opposing redistributive policies sustain it. Rather, it could ultimately lead to chronic stress activations and could worsen individuals' health and wellbeing.

Second, this doctoral thesis contributes to elucidate how EI relates to status anxiety. Ultimately, the findings presented in this thesis indicate that the way EI increases individuals' status anxiety is not straightforward, and that, at least in the short term, other mechanisms intervene to buffer the effect of EI and to protect individuals against status anxiety. Thereby, this thesis could help to explain the apparently contradictory findings in the literature on the psychological effects of EI, and to understand better the mechanisms that may explain them.

We provided evidence in this thesis that individuals who are exposed to highly unequal social contexts are led to worry about their socioeconomic status because they perceive to have less opportunities to achieve the same resources as others in their social environment. At the same time, those individuals take comfort in thinking they are distant from the less advantaged ones; thus they hardly will lose their relatively privileged position compared to the latter. Ultimately, the findings presented in this thesis conclude that, far from encouraging people to make efforts to obtain more economic resources, EI leads people to seek solace in looking down on those who are below them in the economic hierarchy because they perceive that they would hardly be able to change their socioeconomic status.

Third, in the context of the research presented in this thesis, we developed a novel experimental paradigm. This experimental paradigm improves the ecological validity in the experimental study of the effects of perceived EI. Chapter 1 discussed how the way people perceive and make sense of EI plays a crucial role when looking at its psychological effects. Thus, studies on these effects should be based on the observation of the effects of individuals' perceptions of real-world EI in their social environment and their comprehension of its implications in their own lives. However, the research on EI has been typically based on abstract perceived EI measures, and when efforts have been made to engage participants in a comprehension of EI, this has been done by means of experimental paradigms in which participants were exposed to ostensibly fictitious scenario and EI had no potential implications for their lives (Phillips et al., 2020; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

In the experimental paradigm presented in Chapter 6, perceived EI was manipulated in a reference group that was salient to participants (university fellows), in a real-life social context meaningful for their socioeconomic status and life experiences (distribution of income among graduates). Moreover, to facilitate explicitly comprehending the implications that EI had in their lives and those of their fellows, the manipulation included a reinforcing task that linked perceived EI to perceived differences in the lifestyles of their graduated fellows. With this manipulation, we successfully manipulated participants' perceptions of EI. Thus, the experimental paradigm developed in this thesis increased the ecological validity in the experimental studies on the effect of EI on status anxiety. Moreover, it will allow achieving reliable and valid findings on the relationship between EI and other psychological effects in future studies.

Practical Implications

Overall, the findings presented in this thesis contribute to progress in building a solider theoretical framework on the antecedents of status anxiety, which could orient interventions and policies aimed at enhancing the general population's health and wellbeing.

First, Study 3 (Chapter 4) provided evidence that lower socioeconomic status led to higher status anxiety. Importantly, socioeconomic status is relative in its nature. Thus, to improve the health and wellbeing of the vulnerable sectors of societies, interventions should not only focus on eradicating poverty, but also, they would be effective to the extent that they succeeded to reduce the gap between the living conditions of those who have less and the rest of the society. Policies should aim to improve the material conditions of those who have less and rise them to the same level of those who are in the middle class. By doing so, they would increase the health and wellbeing of those individuals by reducing the chronic stress socioeconomic status concerns cause.

Second, the results from the experimental studies in this thesis indicate that perceived EI has an indirect effect on status anxiety among those who perceive to be in the middle class, which typically include most of the population (Evans & Kelley, 2004). Hence, eradicating poverty and improving the living conditions of those who are at the bottom of the distribution is important in reducing status anxiety and to ultimately increase general health and wellbeing, but should not be enough to prevent the chronical vigilance for socioeconomic status that characterizes highly unequal societies. Instead, reducing the accumulation of resources at the top of the distribution and in a very few hands would benefit the whole spectrum of the social hierarchies because it would prevent the generation of a deleterious competitive climate, and it would defuel the status anxiety climate and the perceived lack of opportunities, which lead to higher status anxiety.

Third, the research findings presented in this thesis lay bare the importance of implementing policies and interventions aimed at increasing equal opportunities. Results from the studies presented in Chapter 6 indicate that EI leads individuals to perceive they have less chances to improve their position in the society. This in turn increases their status anxiety. This effect could be stronger when a high share of the resources is concentrated in a small part of the society, as it occurs in many modern societies, and when people perceive the latter to be ossified with low rates of mobility along the social ladder (Browman et al., 2021).

Therefore, as EI increases, policies should aim not only to redistribute resources from the top to the rest of the society, but also to increase social mobility, ensuring equal opportunities of educational and professional achievements as well as reducing disparities in health outcomes and access to services. Furthermore, policies and interventions should aim to counteract the economic segregation that typically accompanies EI to reduce perceived distance among social classes, and to prevent the feeling of the most affluent part of society is leaving behind the rest.

Fourth, the planet's temperature is increasing, which could seriously threaten human life within a couple of generations (Bordera & Prieto, 2021). Even if governments transitioned to removable energy on a large scale and had the technology to do so, this would not be enough to stop and reverse climate change. The only effective strategy societies could turn to in order to prevent the worst scenario for their future and sustainability, would be to degrowth, that is, to reduce economic growth while improving services and welfare (Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021).

Status anxiety could play a key role in the way to degrowth and create sustainability. Considering it activates the self-monitoring social vigilance system, status anxiety leads people to feel threaten by their social environment. Therefore, the constant concern people experience about their socioeconomic status because of EI could lead them to resort to any available means to avoid getting stacked or losing their position on the social ladder, even if it implicates producing and consuming at unsustainable rhythms. Ultimately, status anxiety could lead people to behave in more selfish and competitive ways, and to sacrifice the sustainability of societies for the sake of protecting themselves against the threats of not achieving the standard of economic success, rather than cooperating with others to grant a better future for everyone.

For instance, the ascent of political leaders who appeal to their supporters' status anxiety and promote an economic growth based on limitless production and consumption could detriment the objectives of sustainability and global warming reduction. The case of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 elections in the United States created an important relapse in the fight for intergovernmental agreements against climate change, and some have suggested that status anxiety could have played a role in the electoral results (Mutz, 2018). Those who felt threaten by the experience or

anticipations of socioeconomic status losses felt seduced by the promises related to the rhetoric of the American dream.

In short, as EI creates a competitive climate in which socioeconomic status constantly concerns the population, policies aimed at increasing societies' sustainability could come second, and those who promise to maintain or increase their socioeconomic status, no matter its costs, could seduce the population. This thesis contributes to understanding and predicting how EI relates to status anxiety, thus assisting in finding better strategies to prevent civic disengagement in the fight against climate change. One way of doing that is to disseminate social norms contrary to materialism and status competition, thus contributing to reduce status anxiety, and to increase more sustainable lifestyles, such as conscious frugal behavior (Suárez et al., 2020)

Fifth, Chapter 2 discussed that status anxiety could lead to individual damaging coping strategies, such as high-calorie food and drug consumption. In previous research, some evidence has been provided about the mediation role that status anxiety has on this kind of harmful EI effect (e.g., Delhey & Dragalov, 2014). Importantly, Study 5 (Chapter 5) found that EI led to a climate of higher perceived status anxiety. This could strengthen social norms that are favorable to unhealthy and risky behaviors. Interventions and policies aimed at preventing socially costly behaviors (e.g., drug abuse, high-calorie food consumption, gambling) should take into account the role of EI as a risk factor and compel governments to its reduction. However, as this evidence is based on indirect indicators of status anxiety and on cross-sectional studies, future studies should directly investigate the relationship between status anxiety and its negative potential outcomes as well as test status anxiety's mediation role in the effects of EI.

Limitations

Considering research justly presents the relationship between EI and status anxiety, the empirical findings presented in this thesis show several limitations, which are mainly related with the early stage in which this research program exists. First, as discussed above, we conducted the studies included in this thesis in Spain, a moderately

unequal country, with moderate levels of social welfare protection. From this, we could apparently infer that the presented findings would be generalizable to other social contexts with similar characteristics. Moreover, the literature on human responses to psychological stressors indicates that a social self-preservation system is universally activated when people perceive their social self could be threaten (Anderson et al., 2015; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). However, generalizing these findings to other cultural contexts without cross-cultural data could lead to incorrect recommendations. Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies such as the Spanish one differ from most of the societies in the world (Henrich et al., 2010). For instance, people living in Western countries are more analytical, make more internal attributions, and tend to show lower levels of conformity than Asians, while the latter tend to have more holistic thinking. In addition, moral reasoning, justice perceptions, and economic behaviors have been found to vary considerably between industrialized and small-scale societies, suggesting that the economic organization and social structures could influence the way people compete or cooperate with others, and the way people perceive their position in the society (Henrich et al., 2010). Hence, the relationship between EI and status anxiety could vary in different cultural contexts, and it should be studied across continents before generalizing the findings.

Second, we conducted the experimental studies presented in the empirical chapters on samples consisting of undergraduate students. Despite this, we included control variables in the analyses performed, thus limiting the confounding effects of the sample compositions. The results included in this thesis were virtually the same with or without controlling for participants' socioeconomic status, gender, age, and political orientation. However, given the low variability in some of the control variables and the homogeneity of the sample in other characteristics, the results may be different in other populations. For instance, prior experiences of social mobility could influence future expected mobility and the way in which people perceive and interpret EI in terms of personal consequences (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Destin et al., 2017). Moreover, those who live in urban areas could feel that the EI threatens them more compared to those who live in rural areas because smaller communities could buffer individualistic status concerns via providing more interconnected social networks (Putnam, 2000).

Third, the results in this thesis provided evidence of a series of indirect effects linking EI to status anxiety. The models tested in the empirical chapters were theoretically driven, and we excluded the influence of putative confounders by including the latter as control variables in the regression analyses. However, the empirical results presented in this thesis are not sufficient to conclude that the mediators and the suppressor variable in these models (e.g., perceived competitiveness and contextual status anxiety, and expected upward and downward personal mobility) exhort a causal effect on status anxiety (MacKinnon et al., 2000). Future experimental and longitudinal studies should be designed to test directly these causal relationships.

Finally, Chapter 2 discussed that status anxiety and status seeking should be considered as distinct phenomenon. While status anxiety describes an avoidance orientation toward the threat of losing socioeconomic status or not achieving a sufficiently high socioeconomic status, status seeking describes an approach orientation toward desiring high socioeconomic status. This thesis aimed to investigate the relationship between EI and status anxiety. However, both correlational and experimental evidence suggest that EI could affect status seeking as well (e.g., Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al., 2021; Paskov et al., 2013; Walasek & Brown, 2015). Chapter 2 discussed that status anxiety and status seeking could have distinct outcomes. For instance, while status anxiety is linked with poorer health and wellbeing, status seeking could paradoxically derive in higher subjective wellbeing, and thus, lead to more borrowing and consumption of positional goods. Future studies should distinguish the effect of EI on status anxiety from the effect on status seeking and test the predictive value of the two phenomena relative to the aforementioned outcomes.

Future Directions

The current research does not intend to be exhaustive in analyzing the effects of EI on status anxiety, or to provide a final answer to the status anxiety hypothesis. Instead, it contributes to promote a research program on EI and status anxiety. The findings presented in the previous chapters and the limitations discussed above pave the way to this research program's future developments. In this section, we have devised and grouped some of these future developments in three main areas: (a) the

exploration of other mediators and suppressors involved in the effect of EI on status anxiety, (b) the boundary conditions of this effect, and (c) the relationship between status anxiety and class consciousness.

Other Mediators and Suppressors

Firstly, other mechanisms, different from the ones analyzed in the current research, could play a role in the relationship between EI and status anxiety, either as mediators or suppressors of the effects of EI on status anxiety. For instance, Study 6 and 7 presented in Chapter 6 found no direct effect from EI to status anxiety and expected downward individual mobility to suppress this effect. However, in the highly unequal condition, participants possibly would not even compare themselves with their more affluent fellow graduates because they would perceive the latter as unreachable (Paskov et al., 2017). Thus, future studies should explore the role of perceived distance toward the richest and the poorest groups as suppressing the relationship between EI and status anxiety.

Second, some people could embrace antimaterialistic values as a way of reacting to the rise of materialism in highly unequal societies. As discussed in the first two chapters, the neoliberal ideology that supports EI further pushes individuals in unequal societies to a constant rush for material success. However, the high relevance that unequal societies give to individual achievements and economic success derived from these ideologies could frustrate individuals to feel alienated in these societies and reject such ideologies. For instance, the term "neijuan" ("involution") has been recently popularized in China to describe how the rush for economic success threatens many young people's health and wellbeing, as well as the term "sang" to describe an attitude of apathy and nihilism as a response to the frustration the expectations in their societies generate in young Chinese groups (Liu, 2021).

This suggests that those who are immersed in unequal social contexts could enact a type of resistance to the hierarchization of societies based on material resources. For instance, some individuals could reject materialism and turn to other values they perceive as more useful to fulfill their needs. Future research should investigate which mechanisms of resistance people enact to react against the harmful

effects of EI, and how these mechanisms could suppress the effect of EI on status anxiety.

Third, Chapter 1 discussed how social classes become more salient social categories in unequal societies (Fiske, 2011; Stephens et al., 2014), and class conflict is expressed in the form of classism, similarly to the way other types of prejudice express social conflicts among groups with unequal status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Classism, as an expression of social conflict, could work as an ideological tool for social dominance and system justification (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017; Sainz et al., 2020). On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 2, experience with classism relates with depression, anxiety, and stress, which could be considered as symptoms of status anxiety (Thompson & Subich, 2013). Being exposed to a highly unequal social context could lead individuals to feel others look down on them because of their socioeconomic status, or to be constantly concerned about meeting society's standard of economic success. As discussed above, even if the direct effect of perceived EI could be hardly noticeable in the immediate term, the experience of daily life in highly unequal societies could indeed increase status anxiety in the long term, which could happen through a higher experience with classism. Thus, longitudinal studies should investigate how EI relates with societal levels of classism, and how daily life experiences with classism relate with status anxiety in the long term.

Boundary Conditions

Fourth, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the way EI affects individuals depends on the way they perceive it. Two dimensions related to the perception of EI consist of the proximity level and the reference groups. On the one hand, local perceived EI could affect individuals stronger than more broad country-level perceived EI could (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). On the other hand, depending on the group of people individuals have in mind when thinking about EI, its perception could exhort different effects (Dawtry et al., 2015; Jachimowicz et al., 2020). Moreover, perceptions of EI in people's daily lives have been found to exhort greater influence on their attitudes toward inequality and redistribution (García-Castro et al., 2019). Future research should

investigate if daily life experiences of EI exhort a higher influence on status anxiety than perceived societal EI.

In addition, perceived EI in salient reference groups that are relevant for individuals' social esteem would presumably better predict status anxiety compared to general country-level perceived EI. Previous studies demonstrated that people's tendency to compare to those groups that are salient to participants (vs. non-salient groups) has a greater impact on their subjective wellbeing (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). Thus, the same would be true for the relationship between perceived EI and status anxiety. Ultimately, future research should elucidate which are the most salient reference groups in the perception of EI and investigate if they exhort a higher influence on status anxiety.

Fifth, this thesis investigated the relationship between EI and status anxiety among the advantaged and the disadvantaged individuals as well as among both males and females. In doing so, we considered both socioeconomic status and gender as control variables across all the presented studies. Moreover, in Study 3 (Chapter 4), we provided evidence that occupying a lower rung on the social ladder led to higher status anxiety. Those who have less economic resources face a higher threat to their social esteem, given they are looked down on and blamed for their situation (e.g., Layte & Whelan, 2014; Heiserman & Simpson, 2017). However, social class, gender, and race usually intersect to produce social disadvantage and contribute to reduce opportunities of social mobility (Opara et al., 2020; Rucker et al., 2018). Some evidence in our presented studies indicate that gender could exhort a similar effect as social class on status anxiety. In Study 4 (Chapter 5), women reported higher status anxiety independently of their socioeconomic status, levels of perceived EI, and perceived competitiveness. Future studies should investigate how social class, gender, and race independently contribute and how they intersect to heighten status anxiety. Moreover, considering they contribute to reduced opportunities of ascending the social ladder, future research should investigate the role of gender, social class, and race in the indirect and opposite effects of EI on status anxiety through expected individual upward and downward mobility.

Class Consciousness

Finally, status anxiety could diminish class consciousness in the disadvantaged group and increase it among those whom EI advantages (Keefer et al., 2015). Previous research indicates that people do not accurately estimate their own position on the social ladder (Castillo et al., 2013; Evans & Kelley, 2004). Why do people usually overestimate their own socioeconomic status? A person's tendency to present themself in a favorable light has been interpreted as a signal of status anxiety (Loughan et al., 2011). Similarly, showing overconfidence could contribute to achieve a higher status, at least in the short run (Anderson et al., 2012). Thus, in unequal social contexts where socioeconomic status concerns people, the tendency to overestimate their socioeconomic status could be reinforced because it could help them to protect themselves against the threat to their social esteem of occupying an insufficiently high socioeconomic status through increasing their perceived socioeconomic status in others' eyes.

Chapter 2 reviewed how in highly unequal societies, people perceive social class as more entitative and salient, and this, together with social distancing and hierarchization among social classes, lead to social conflict. Following social identity theory, the higher the salience of social classes that EI drives, the more it would lead the disadvantaged groups (i.e., low social classes) to enact strategies of individual mobility (i.e., self-categorization in a higher social class) or social competition (i.e., prejudices and stereotypes toward high-class individuals), depending on the perceived permeability of social boundaries (i.e., perceived social mobility) and the social system's legitimacy and stability (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Moreover, the system justification theory posits that those in the disadvantaged groups face a conflict between the need to justify the status quo on the one hand, and the need to preserve and improve their social esteem on the other hand (Jost & Humyady, 2005). To face this dilemma, self-categorizing in a higher social class provides a strategy of individual mobility. Individuals from lower social classes could identify themselves with a higher position in the social hierarchy to preserve and increase their perceived social esteem. Considering the middle class is a broad category representing the normative standard of living in many societies, most of individuals would self-categorize as middle class to protect

themselves against the threat of being too low in the social ladder (Castillo et al., 2013; Frank, 2007).

Ultimately, this strategy leads to false class consciousness, that is, as Marxist theory describes, the elite exploiting the working class through an ideological infrastructure aimed at demonizing the working-class identity. This process, in turn, leads those who the economic system exploits to legitimize inequalities and to aspire to become part of the elite instead of fighting for reducing inequalities (Keefer et al., 2015). False class consciousness, or the absence of class consciousness, in turn, is related with lower support for redistributive policies. Status anxiety could promote a false consciousness in those who are exposed to high EI because they are motivated to maintain their social esteem via identifying themselves with higher social classes. Future research should investigate whether status anxiety influences class consciousness and what kinds of effects could be exhorted on supporting for redistribution, voting intentions, and political mobilization among those who belong to disadvantaged groups.

Final Conclusion

EI produces such a large impact on individuals' health and wellbeing that it could be comparable to the lethal pandemics. Although some have theorized that status anxiety is the main factor involved in this phenomenon, the status anxiety hypothesis has not been rigorously tested thus far. The main goal of this thesis was to investigate the relationship between EI and status anxiety, and the psychological processes involved in this relationship.

We adapted an instrument to measure status anxiety in the Spanish societies and we provided evidence of its reliability and validity. We adapted a consolidated experimental paradigm to examine the causal effect of perceived EI on status anxiety, and we created and validated a novel experimental paradigm to examine the effect of perceived EI in a more ecological context that is meaningful for participants' daily life experiences. The findings presented in this thesis support the notion that EI creates a competitive climate where others are perceived to worry constantly about their socioeconomic status. These effects, in turn, increase individuals' status anxiety. On the

other hand, those who are exposed to higher EI in their social context feel stuck in their position, but they also feel safe from the risk of falling behind. In the end, these two effects annul each other, thus resulting in an absence of a direct causal effect between EI and status anxiety.

Ultimately, perceiving EI is necessary but not sufficient to instill status anxiety. People could become anxious about their socioeconomic status according to the extent they strive to live in unequal contexts. That is, EI enters into people's minds and changes their social world depending on how it is perceived. Further, to be constantly exposed to EI influences their worldview, creating a normative climate of constant concern and competition for a higher material standing.

This dissertation thesis aspires to lay the groundwork for a new research program on EI and status anxiety. In Lakatosian terms, this research program is in an early progress stage because it is generating new problems and research questions, while maintaining its core assumptions regarding the existence of a positive relationship between EI and status anxiety (Dienes, 2008). Thus, the research on the relationship between EI and status anxiety is expected to generate new predictions while it attempts to provide answers to the problems and questions proposed here, and to those that will follow in the near future.

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Apendix 1

Appendix 1. Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale

Apéndice 1. Versión española de la Escala de Ansiedad por el Estatus.

1. Me preocupa que mi posición social actual sea demasiado baja.

2. Me preocupa mucho no ser capaz de alcanzar mis metas académicas o profesionales.

3. Me preocupa que mi estatus social no vaya a mejorar.

4. Me preocupa que mi posición social baje.

5. Siento ansiedad al pensar que me voy a quedar estancado/a en mi posición social toda la vida.