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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 on the social ladder. We investigated through two 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 1, perceived economic inequality indirectly increased status anxiety through lesser expected upward mobility. In Study 2, perceived economic inequality decreased both expected upward and downward mobility, with opposite indirect effects on status anxiety. This suggests that the relationship 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 suppress the effect of inequality, lower expected upward mobility could exacerbate it.

KEYWORDS

economic inequality, social mobility, socioeconomic status, status anxiety

BACKGROUND

Although the average income per capita around the world has grown considerably in the last four decades (World Bank, 2021), only a small part of the economic growth benefitted the vast majority of the population, with a large share of it landing in only a few hands (Alvaredo et al., 2017). Indeed, the last data available showed that the bottom half of the world population received only half of the income growth

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captured by the top 1% and that income inequality increased almost everywhere, at different speeds, in the same period (Alvaredo et al., 2018).

Most government agencies consider reducing inequalities within and among countries such an urgent mission that the United Nations included it as one of the 17 goals in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly, 2015). On this matter, even if poverty still represents one of the most compelling challenges of modern times, inequality has profound consequences in society that go far beyond the effects of the material conditions of those in poverty.

At the individual level, evidence has shown that living in more unequal social contexts is related to impaired mental health and a reduced 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 exposed to high levels of economic inequality; that is, inequality affects all of society and all individuals along the social ladder (Subramanian & Kawachi, 2006). Psychological mechanisms could explain the effects societal material conditions are exerting at the individual level.

Given that in contexts of higher economic inequalities, socioeconomic status becomes more salient, one psychological mechanism proposed to explain the effects of economic inequality is status anxiety (Buttrick et al., 2017; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). Status anxiety has been defined as a tendency to worry constantly about one's socioeconomic status, leading to a competitive mindset, and has been said to describe concerns about not reaching societal standards of success, being stuck in one's social standing or losing status (Buttrick et al., 2017; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; De Botton, 2004). Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2017) posited that high levels of economic inequality enlarge 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 chronic stress reactions. Indeed, the higher the economic inequality, the more relevant the socioeconomic status becomes to self-worth as a dimension of social comparison (Walasek & Brown, 2019). Hence, because hierarchies have been observed to be seen as a threat among individuals in all positions and in a variety of contexts (Duguid & Goncalo, 2015; Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers et al., 2009), it is plausible that high economic inequality would increase status anxiety along the entire social ladder (see Layte & Whelan, 2014). The chronic stress of status anxiety and the attempts to avoid being left behind, in turn, could explain some of the negative effects of economic inequality on mental health and life expectancy (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017).

Results from large-scale international surveys have supported the status anxiety hypothesis: Higher economic inequality predicts valuing status and feeling marginalized because of socioeconomic position, over and above individual and national economic resources (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013). Congruently, experimental studies found that higher economic inequality increases the pursuit of positional goods, 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, although economic inequality has been proposed to have a direct relationship with status anxiety (e.g. Layte & Whelan, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), the evidence had some limitations: Most research examining the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety has been correlational, not experimental (e.g. Delhey et al., 2017; Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013, 2017). Moreover, the evidence has been based on indirect indicators (e.g. Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al., 2021; Layte, 2012).

Furthermore, when experimental evidence has been provided about the causal effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, the latter has been confounded with status seeking (e.g. Blake & Brooks, 2019; Du et al., 2021; Paskov et al., 2017). Both status anxiety and status seeking are based on the importance that individuals put on their socioeconomic status. However, as they have been defined in the literature, status anxiety and status seeking are triggered by different motivations and lead to specific

consequences: Status anxiety is triggered by the threat of anticipating a failure in the accomplishment of society's standard of success and the fear of being left behind and could be related to lower well-being and poorer mental health (De Botton, 2004; Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Frank, 2007; Layte, 2012). 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 on the social ladder, which results in snobbish attitudes and could be related to efforts to increase socioeconomic status, such as by buying more expensive products (Fiske, 2011; Veblen, 1934; Velandia Morales et al., 2022; Walasek & Brown, 2019).

Indeed, some efforts have been done to provide evidence about the causal effect of economic inequality on status anxiety: In an experimental study, employing a direct measure of status anxiety, Melita et al. (2021) found that economic inequality indirectly influenced individuals' status anxiety through contextual status anxiety—that is, the status anxiety that participants thought other people had. However, no evidence of a direct causal relationship was found in that study. In sum, what previous results could indicate is that the downstream effects of economic inequality could not be as straightforward as has been posited. In this research, we aimed to address this open question by providing direct evidence of the causal relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety.

Moreover, some unexpected results apparently have presented the actual limits of a relationship between economic inequality and both status anxiety and status seeking. For instance, in observational studies, inconsistent evidence has been found; country-level income inequality was associated with higher status seeking up to a certain threshold of income inequality, but it was associated with lower status seeking among countries that exceeded this threshold (Paskov et al., 2013, 2017). Additionally, although some evidence has been found of economic inequality having a positive effect on status anxiety, the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety appeared to be weaker in more affluent countries (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014).

How could these apparently incongruent findings be explained? People's appraisals of economic inequality—and their appraisals of the personal consequences economic inequalities potentially entail for them—could play a role in 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 indicate that people infer their future socioeconomic trajectories from perceived opportunities at the societal level (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Day & Fiske, 2019).

Mobility beliefs and status anxiety

Individuals tend to believe the socioeconomic system is fair and people in society usually get what they deserve—that economic differences are due to differences in effort and competence (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Jost et al., 2004). This motivated reasoning makes inequality more tolerable and buffers its impact on subjective well-being (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). In turn, because differences in socioeconomic status signal differences in merit (i.e. effort and competence), socioeconomic status has become a highly relevant dimension in people's social esteem in more unequal societies (Anderson et al., 2015; Walasek & Brown, 2019; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017).

However, these beliefs clash with perceived opportunities for economic success. People's estimations of upward mobility typically accurately reflect the real negative relationship between economic inequality and social mobility (see OECD, 2018): In observational and experimental studies, US residents' perceptions of economic inequality have been found to negatively predict their own and others' expected upward mobility (Davidai, 2018). In other words, when exposed to high economic inequalities, people perceive they have lesser opportunities to climb the social ladder, whereas, at the same time, they perceive that those with better positions are more talented or put forth more effort. In turn, the fewer opportunities they expect to have, the more their social esteem is threatened and the more they could become anxious about their socioeconomic status. Ultimately, status anxiety would be the negative affective reaction to the cognitive evaluation of reduced perceived mobility in the face of high economic inequality.

For that matter, in experimental studies, participants who read an article about low mobility reported lower levels of positive affect than participants exposed to an article about high mobility (Shariff et al., 2016, p. 377). Moreover, lower perceived chances of improving one's socioeconomic status have been found to be associated with lower well-being, increased risk-taking and a lower sense of personal control (Davidai & Wienk, 2021). All these consequences could be indicating that lower mobility beliefs are associated with higher status anxiety.

However, although previous literature and lay beliefs typically equate mobility with upward mobility (Davidai & Wienk, 2021), upward and downward mobility beliefs have been found to be separate constructs, and both of them decrease when perceived economic inequality is high (Browman et al., 2021). Similarly, concerns about socioeconomic status can refer to the fear of both losing status and not achieving a higher status (De Botton, 2004). Whereas in some circumstances the motivation to maintain status can outweigh the motivation to gain status (Pettit et al., 2010), we assumed that in everyday life, individuals are equally threatened by anticipating few opportunities to increase their socioeconomic status to obtain others' respect and by lowering their socioeconomic status and losing others' respect. Ultimately, these motivations are two sides of the same coin, namely status anxiety (see Melita et al., 2020). Put differently, because upward mobility would involve obtaining valuable gains, its anticipation would be reinforcing; meanwhile, because downward mobility would involve losing valuable goods, expectations of it would be threatening. Importantly, because no mobility would indicate both the absence of gains and the presence of losses relative to one's socioeconomic status, its anticipation would be both discouraging and reassuring at the same time.

Thus, we posited an indirect effect of economic inequality on status anxiety through lesser expected personal upward mobility. That is, when individuals perceive more economic inequality, they will expect lower chances to climb the social ladder, and this, in turn, will increase their status anxiety. However, high economic inequality could also lead to lower downward mobility beliefs, and this, in turn, can reduce worries about losing status, which is a core component of status anxiety (Jetten et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2020).

Put differently, we expected economic inequality to have two psychological effects with opposing downstream consequences on status anxiety: (a) It will reduce people's expected chances of gaining better socioeconomic status, which is threatening because individuals lose opportunities to obtain higher social esteem (i.e. it increases status anxiety); and (b) high economic inequality reduces people's expected chances to descend the social ladder, which is reassuring because individuals do not expect to lose their current social esteem (i.e. it reduces status anxiety). Ultimately, whereas perceived upward mobility may mediate an indirect effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, perceived downward mobility may suppress it (MacKinnon et al., 2000).

The present research

In this paper, we present two pre-registered experimental studies examining whether economic inequality has a causal effect on status anxiety and the role of upward and downward mobility beliefs in this effect. In this research, we aimed to expand previous works on the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety in multiple ways.

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

Second, status depends on the reference group people use for comparison (Anderson et al., 2015). People tend to compare their incomes with salient reference groups (e.g. workmates, classmates or friends), and these comparisons affect their subjective well-being (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). Hence, the educational context could be relevant to socioeconomic status and status aspirations. As young

people get into college, they face socioeconomic status uncertainty and are exposed to potentially stressful mismatches between expectancies of socioeconomic success (according to the standards in their new social environments) 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 two samples of university students.

Third, previous studies have provided some support for the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety but either found economic inequality to have a direct effect only on indicators related to status anxiety, such as perceived discrimination due to socioeconomic status or status seeking (Blake & Brooks, 2019; Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Layte, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013) but not on status anxiety, or failed to provide evidence of economic inequality having a direct effect on personal status anxiety (Melita et al., 2021). In this research, we employed a reliable and validated measure of status anxiety that tapped into people's constant concerns about their socioeconomic status (Melita et al., 2020). Furthermore, this research improves the statistical power of previous studies to provide evidence of the direct effect of economic inequality on status anxiety.

Finally, we aimed to deepen and expand the understanding of the status anxiety phenomenon and 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 this research, we predicted economic inequality would 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 the effect.

STUDY 1

Although other consolidated paradigms have successfully manipulated economic inequality, they involved hypothetical reactions to imagined societies. In Study 1, we built a new experimental paradigm for increasing the ecological validity of the manipulation to look for the hypothesized effects of economic inequality on participants' status anxiety. In addition, although no empirical data allowed us to have clear predictions on the roles of expected upward and downward mobility, we explored whether expected upward and downward mobility mediated or suppressed the effect of economic inequality on participants' status anxiety.

Pre-registered hypothesis

Hypothesis 1. We predicted that the participants assigned to a high (vs. low) inequality condition would report higher status anxiety (https://osf.io/8mjj5?view_only=2048f3c7a6bc4012a424afdd185a050d).

Method

Participants

We invited 639 Spanish undergraduate students to participate in an online survey experiment. As pre-registered, 38 cases were excluded from the final sample because they failed to answer the attention check item correctly, and 84 cases were excluded because the participants had already taken part in previous studies on economic inequality. The final sample comprised 517 valid cases ($M_{age} = 21.76$, $SD_{age} = 3.19$; 52.2% women). Among them, 21% reported their families' income was less than 1200 €

per month, 24% between 1200 and 1800 € per month, 26% between 1800 and 2500 € per month, 18% between 2500 and 2900 € per month and 11% more than 2900 € per month. Moreover, 27% came from families where neither parent has attained upper secondary education, 57% from families where at least one parent has attained upper secondary education and 14% from families where at least one parent has attained tertiary education. With $\alpha = .05$, the final sample size and a power ($1 - \beta$) of 0.80, we were able to detect a minimum effect size (d) as big as 0.25.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: high or low inequality. Inequality was manipulated by presenting information about the supposedly estimated mean incomes of fellow graduates, which were divided into three terciles. We manipulated the mean incomes of the first and last terciles, whereas the mean income of the second tercile was kept constant. In the low inequality condition, the first tercile's mean income was €1800, and the last tercile's mean income was €1200. Conversely, in the high inequality condition, the first tercile's mean income was €3800, and the last tercile's 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 terciles by answering a series of questions about the differences in lifestyles of their richest and poorest graduate fellows in the presented distribution (i.e. those from the first and the last income terciles). In the second task, they took a bogus interactive questionnaire (items covered socioeconomics and academic data and self-reported self-efficacy) and read that a calculator would presumably forecast the participants' future incomes after completing their academic studies based on their answers to the questionnaire. The first reinforcing task was

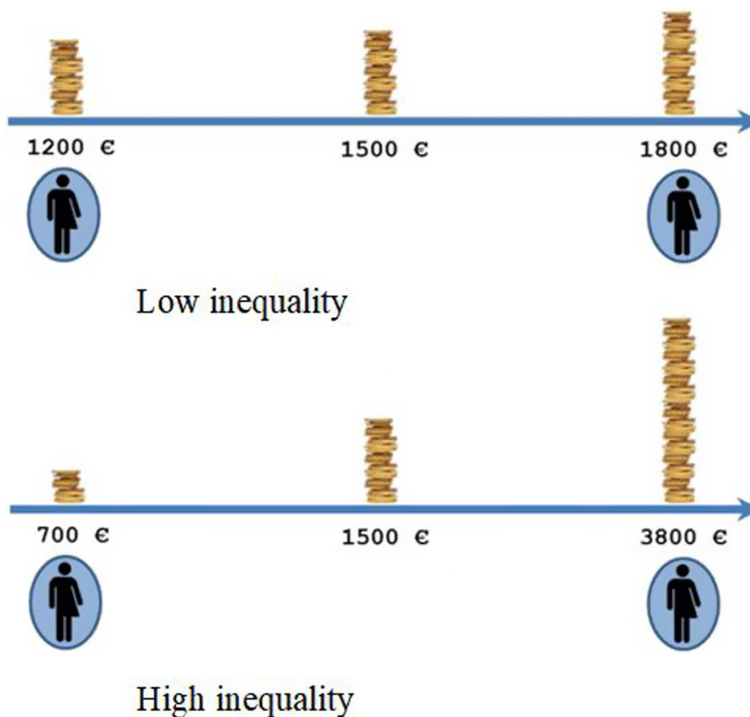


FIGURE 1 Inequality manipulation in Study 1.

introduced to help participants explicitly comprehend the implications that economic inequality had in their lives and those of their fellows. The second reinforcing task was introduced to mimic a real-life social context where people experience varying grades of uncertainty regarding their socioeconomic status, and economic inequality implicates potential threats to their self-worth based on their rank among their peers.

Participants' status anxiety was measured before they were informed about the feedback to the bogus interactive questionnaire forecasting income so that when it was measured, the participants did not know what their future incomes and positions in the income distribution would be. Expected upward and downward mobility was measured after participants received bogus feedback forecasting that they will be in the second decile of graduates' income distribution. Materials and data from Study 1 can be found online at https://osf.io/hwagk/?view_only=91c8d07eeabb4599bf1bbc7a1547859d.

Measures

Status anxiety

Status anxiety was measured using five items adapted from the Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale (Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2020). The participants were instructed to think about their lives after they graduate and rate their agreement with each item on a 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' ($\alpha = .85$).

Manipulation check

Perceived economic inequality was measured with two items asking to what extent the participants agreed that the income differences between their graduate mates from the first and last terciles would be small (reversed) or big (ranging from 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree*). Because the items were highly related ($r = .71, p < .001$), we averaged them.

Expected upward and downward mobility

Expected upward and downward mobility were measured using single-item indicators (e.g. 'How probable do you consider you will climb up/fall down to the first/last group of graduates with the highest /lowest incomes?') ranging from 1 (*very low chances*) to 7 (*very high chances*).

Finally, the participants indicated their household incomes.

Results

Pre-registered analyses

Manipulation check

The experimental manipulation successfully affected the participants' economic inequality perceptions, $t(515) = 11.73, p < .001, d = 1.03, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.85, 1.22]$, so that the participants in the high-inequality condition ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.26$) perceived more economic inequality than the 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, $t(515) = -1.25, p = .211, d = -0.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.28, 0.06]$.

TABLE 1 Zero-order correlations between main and control variables in Studies 1–2.

	Age	Gender	Socioeconomic status	Expected upward mobility	Expected downward mobility	Status anxiety
Age		−0.049	−0.129**	−0.066	0.025	0.022
Gender	0.056		−0.134**	−0.180***	0.136**	0.167***
Socioeconomic status	0.063	0.017		0.190***	−0.156***	−0.039
Expected upward mobility	−0.014	−0.072	0.211***		−0.409***	−0.183***
Expected downward mobility	0.044	0.119**	−0.250***	−0.471***		0.224***
Status anxiety	0.072	0.073	−0.104*	−0.215***	0.244***	

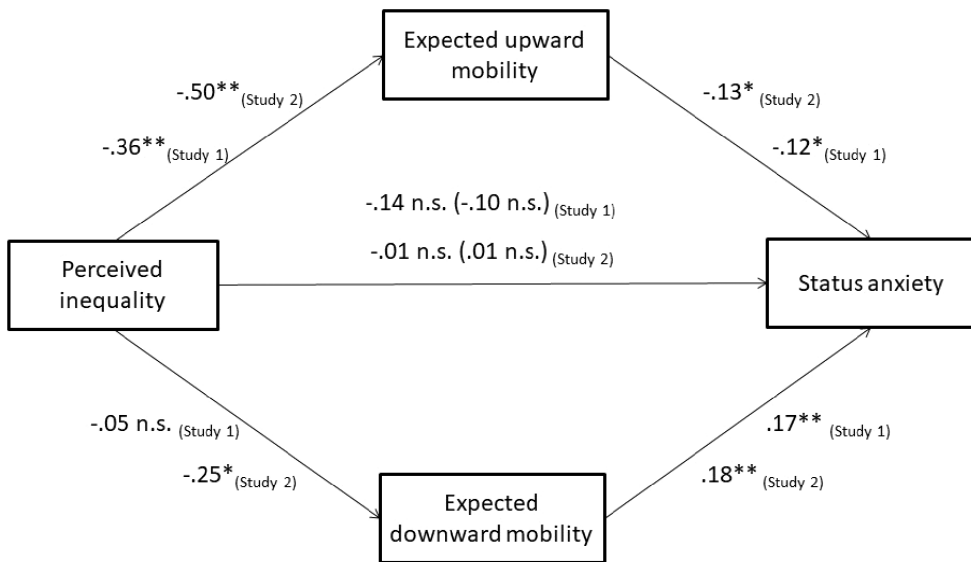
Note: Zero-order correlations in Study 1 are reported in the upper right triangle of the table. Zero-order correlations in Study 2 are reported in the lower left triangle of the table.

Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.



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

FIGURE 2 Indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through expected upward and downward mobility in Studies 1–2.

Exploratory analyses

As can be observed in Table 1, expected upward and downward mobility was moderately and negatively related. In turn, status anxiety was found to be negatively related to expected upward mobility and positively related to expected downward mobility.

We tested the indirect effect of inequality manipulation on status anxiety with 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 = 0.04, 95% CI [0.01, 0.10], but did not find a suppressing effect of expected downward mobility, partially standardized indirect effect = $-.01$, 95% CI [-0.04 , 0.02].

Both pre-registered and exploratory analyses were repeated, controlling for participants' age, sex and socioeconomic status (indicated by averaging standardized scores of their household incomes and their parents' educational attainments; see Erola et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2017). The results were robust in these further analyses. Furthermore, socioeconomic status was not found to moderate the effect of inequality on status anxiety, $F(1, 511) = 0.55, p = .458$; expected upward mobility, $F(1, 508) = 0.00, p = .957$; or expected downward mobility, $F(1, 507) = 0.69, p = .407$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 did not support our pre-registered 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 threatened our participants by decreasing expected upward mobility. We aimed to pre-register and replicate this result in Study 2. On this matter, as we measured expected upward and downward mobility after participants received a bogus forecast regarding their position in graduates' distribution of income, participants' expected mobility could have been influenced by this information. For instance, they could have relied on this information as an anchor to estimate their chances of reaching the highest or lowest group of income. In study 2, we aimed to examine the effects of economic inequality on expected upward and downward mobility discarding any confounding or dampening effect of the bogus forecast.

Moreover, in Study 1, the participants observed the income distribution across three terciles and were led to think about the lifestyle differences between their fellow graduates in the first and the last terciles. Because the differences between terciles may be not large enough to activate status aspiration motives related to inequality perceptions and the terciles may have had too much blurred burdens to be perceived as differentiated groups, we subtly modified the experimental paradigm for Study 2 and presented the participants' income distribution between quintiles. We believed that using this new procedure would make it possible to find the main effect on status anxiety.

STUDY 2

The aim of Study 2 was twofold. First, we wanted to replicate the exploratory analysis results of Study 1, 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. Moreover, we explored whether expected downward mobility suppressed the effect of economic inequality on participants' status anxiety.

Pre-registered hypotheses

We predicted that the participants assigned to a high (vs. low) inequality condition would report higher status anxiety (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we predicted the effect on status anxiety would be mediated by expected upward mobility (Hypothesis 2; https://osf.io/t4ujd?view_only=9a117f943f3e4c0eacc331c93f588f4e).¹

Method

Participants

We invited 744 Spanish undergraduate students to participate in an online survey experiment. As pre-registered, we excluded 44 cases from the study because they failed to correctly answer the attention

¹Other hypotheses were pre-registered but not included in this article because they were not related to its general scope, and would make it more difficult to read. The hypotheses, materials and results can be found at https://osf.io/h9r3t/?view_only=41f813779efd4bf1aac5c154b17174da.

check item, and we excluded 100 cases because the participants had already taken part in previous studies on economic inequality. The final sample comprised 600 valid cases ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.11$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.32$; 67% women). Among them, 29% reported their families' income was less than 1200 € per month, 23% between 1200 and 1800 € per month, 22% between 1800 and 2500 € per month, 15% between 2500 and 2900 € per month and 11% more than 2900 € per month. Moreover, 34% came from families where neither parent has attained upper secondary education, 51% from families where at least one parent has attained upper secondary education and 12% from families where at least one parent has attained tertiary education.

Using $\alpha = .05$, the final sample size and a power $(1 - \beta)$ of 0.80, we were able to detect a minimum effect size (d) as big as 0.23.

Procedure

As in Study 1, the participants were presented with information about the supposedly estimated mean incomes of future graduates from the first and the last quintiles, and they completed the same two reinforcing tasks. In the low-inequality condition, the first quintile's mean income was €1800, whereas the last quintile's mean income was €1200. In the high-inequality condition, the first quintile's mean income was €4000, whereas the last quintile's mean income was €500.

Furthermore, although participants completed both reinforcing tasks as in Study 1 and they expected they would receive a forecast of their position in the income distribution, in Study 2 they did not receive any bogus forecast to ensure that the effects on expected upward and downward mobility were not affected by the latter.

Measures

All measures were the same as in Study 1 ($\alpha_{\text{status anxiety}} = .86$).

Results

Pre-registered analyses

Zero-order correlations for the main and the control variables are presented in Table 1.

Manipulation check

The experimental manipulation successfully affected the participants' economic inequality perceptions, $t(577.77) = 18.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.54$, 95% CI [1.36, 1.72], so that the participants in the high-inequality condition ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.06$) perceived more economic inequality than the 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, $t(598) = 0.16$, $p = .879$, $d = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.17]

Indirect effect

We found evidence of the pre-registered indirect effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety through expected upward mobility, partially standardized indirect effect = 0.07, 95% CI [0.02, 0.12]. That is, the inequality manipulation decreased expected upward mobility, leading to increased status anxiety.

Exploratory analyses

As in Study 1, we explored expected downward mobility as a suppressor variable. For that matter, we ran 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 = -0.05 , 95% CI [-0.09 , -0.01], opposite to the indirect effect through expected upward mobility, partially standardized indirect effect = 0.06 , 95% CI [0.01 , 0.12].

Both the pre-registered and exploratory analyses were repeated, controlling for participants' age, sex and socioeconomic status. The results were robust in these further analyses. Furthermore, as in Study 1, socioeconomic status was not found to moderate the effect of inequality on status anxiety, $F(1, 574) = 0.19$, $p = .662$; expected upward mobility, $F(1, 573) = 0.28$, $p = .867$; or expected downward mobility, $F(1, 574) = 0.40$, $p = .526$.

Discussion

Once more, in Study 2 we did not find perceived economic inequality to have a direct effect on status anxiety. However, the results in Study 2 supported the pre-registered hypothesis that perceived economic inequality has an indirect effect on status anxiety through perceived upward mobility.

Moreover, in an exploratory analysis, we found 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, which not only harms individuals by increasing status anxiety but also buffers these harmful consequences.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Status anxiety makes societies less cohesive and individuals more likely to engage in selfish and competitive behaviours (Paskov et al., 2013) and is related to poorer health and well-being (Buttrick et al., 2017; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). Understanding how economic inequality increases status anxiety could lead to ways 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 economic inequality to have a main effect on status anxiety. These results were unexpected given previous studies relating economic inequality to status anxiety (e.g. Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Melita et al., 2020). The samples in our studies were large enough to detect a small-to-medium effect size, and the null effect cast some doubts on the presence of a direct effect, or at least it may be indicating that the effects found in cross-sectional studies may be hard to show in an experimental setting. However, the absence of evidence is not evidence of an absence; that is, the null effect does not necessarily indicate that economic inequality has no effect on status anxiety. Some mechanisms could be operating to result in a positive relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety in the long term, whereas other mechanisms could dampen the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety, at least in the short term. In this respect, we replicated previous findings in which perceived economic inequality led to lower perceived mobility (Browman et al., 2021; Davidai, 2018), and we found that lower expected upward and downward mobility were involved in two opposing indirect effects when predicting status anxiety. More concretely, perceived economic inequality decreased upward mobility in Study 1 and decreased expected upward and downward mobility in Study 2, and whereas lesser expected upward mobility increased status anxiety, decreased downward mobility had a buffering effect on status anxiety.

High levels of economic inequality create disparities between the distant income groups. Thus, people living in more unequal societies may accurately think that it may be harder to climb 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—individuals' societal ranks to a higher extent (Walasek & Brown, 2019). As such, when participants see greater disparities, they may get anxious because they will not be able to increase their status. However, at the same time, they may become less anxious because at least they will not decrease it. In the end, these two processes opposed each other, and this may be the reason we did not find economic inequality to have a main effect on status anxiety in either 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 than the one Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2017) depicted, which involves the presence of multiple processes working at the same time. Further experimental studies could be conducted to provide evidence of the personal consequences of income inequality where upward and downward mobility expectations and perceived economic inequality are investigated as different processes. These future studies would allow examining whether each of the two indirect effects shown in this research results in economic inequality has a positive or negative effect on status anxiety once the opposing indirect effect of each one is controlled for.

Studies 1 and 2 show how income disparities affect university students' expectations and worries about their economic futures and thus could prompt new research aimed to improve their academic performance and well-being. However, these results indicate that any effort to improve students' adaptation and well-being in the educational environment would be worthless if no steps are taken to reduce economic inequality and improve real equal opportunities. Moreover, these results may be also taken with caution because our sample was composed entirely of Spanish university students, hence living in a developed but moderately unequal country and most of the sample came from middle-class families.

Perceptions of economic inequalities in people's daily lives at the local level and among salient reference groups that are relevant to their social esteem could have even stronger psychological effects than the broad abstract perceived inequality at the country level (Dawtry et al., 2015; García-Castro et al., 2019; Jachimowicz et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2022). In Studies 1 and 2, economic inequality was manipulated among the participants' university peers, that is, a reference group that was salient to them and relevant to their self-esteem, at the local level, in a real-life social context meaningful to their socioeconomic status and life experiences. It is possible that invoking a broader sense of inequality in society would lead to weaker effects than those found in this research. Furthermore, other cultural norms could moderate the effects of economic inequalities in educational contexts, such as a competitive climate and the societal expectations of intergenerational mobility (Destin et al., 2017; Takata, 2003). Moreover, the two opposing pathways found from economic inequality to status anxiety could be moderated by contextual and personal variables. That is, for some people, lesser mobility due to higher inequality could be discouraging, but for others, it could be reassuring. For instance, it could be the case that those who belong to advantaged groups, such as upper classes, Whites or men, could react with higher concerns to the possibility of status losses (e.g. Jetten et al., 2017), whereas those who belong to disadvantaged groups, such as lower classes, underrepresented groups or women, could be threatened to a higher extent by the perception of becoming stagnant in their positions (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, which orient human behaviour towards either 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 high economic inequality because lower expected downward mobility 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 socioeconomic status (Davidai, 2018) and thus could 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 the system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004) argued, buffering effects against economic inequality could be deleterious to social change. Whereas relative deprivation and perceived impermeability can motivate people to challenge the *status quo*, optimistic biases regarding their social class and downward mobility could dampen class consciousness and defuel their motivation to reduce inequalities (Keefer et al., 2015). Future research should better take into account which consequences these buffering effects have on the maintenance of an unsustainable economic system.

All in all, status anxiety has been found to decrease mental health, well-being and job satisfaction (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Layte, 2012). This research contributes to explaining how status anxiety relates to economic inequality and hopefully sheds some light on the avenues that interventions and policies aimed at reducing status anxiety could take.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Davide Melita contributed to the conceptualization, data curation, formal analyses, investigation, methodology, visualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, and validation. Rosa Rodríguez Bailón contributed to the conceptualization, formal analyses, methodology, writing—review and editing, funding acquisition, project administration, supervision and validation. Guillermo B. Willis contributed to the conceptualization, formal analyses, methodology, writing—review and editing, funding acquisition, project administration, supervision and validation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data, Open Materials and Preregistered Research Design badges. Data, materials and the preregistered design and analysis plan are available at https://osf.io/2ypd8/?view_only=0208ad15102b4a68acd2fde63e17011e.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data, pre-registrations and 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.

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