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High relational mobility is associated with perceiving more economic inequality in everyday life

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that one of the variables that may influence perceived inequality in everyday life is cultural differences in relational mobility. We examined this research question across two cross-cultural studies in Japan (Study 1, $N=196$; Study 2, $N=214$) and Spain (Study 1, $N=199$; Study 2, 199), two countries that differ in their relational mobility levels. In Study 1, we contrasted two competing hypotheses: On the one hand, it could be predicted that individuals in countries with high relational mobility perceive greater inequality due to increased exposure to diverse social networks. On the other hand, it is also plausible that in contexts of high relational mobility, people perceive less inequality as they selectively choose to interact with individuals who share similar social backgrounds. Results supported the former hypotheses and showed that people in a country high in relational mobility (i.e. Spain) tend to perceive more economic inequality (vs. Japan, a country low in relational mobility). Moreover, we found an indirect effect of this cross-cultural difference through the cultural affordances for meeting new people (i.e. one of the dimensions of relational mobility). In Study 2, we preregistered and replicated these results.

KEY WORDS

cross-cultural differences, income inequality, perceived economic inequality, relational mobility, wealth inequality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality has been increasing during the last decades in most countries (Alvaredo et al., 2017). These greater wealth (and income) differences between the rich and the poor are associated with different social issues: Economic inequality is related to different social ills, such as higher crime, drug misuse, mental health issues and mortality rates (Burns et al., 2014; Messias et al., 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

However, despite the importance of economic inequality, people tend to misperceive its degree

(Jachimowicz et al., 2020; Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011). Whereas in some studies, participants tend to underestimate the degree of economic inequality, in others studies, the opposite result has been found, and participants overestimated it (Hauser & Norton, 2017). These misperceptions are common, as research has consistently shown that objective and subjective—also called perceived—levels of economic inequality are only weakly associated (Castillo et al., 2022; García-Castro et al., 2022; Schmalor & Heine, 2022; Trump, 2023). In short, the degree of perceived inequality not only depends on the objective

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levels but it is also influenced by other psychosocial processes (Willis et al., 2022).

In this paper, our objective is to broaden the understanding of factors influencing perceived inequality. Whereas existing research has already examined the effects of ideological variables (Du & King, 2021; García-Sánchez et al., 2019), the importance of cross-cultural variables has been underexplored (Oishi et al., 2022). Our contribution aims to highlight the role of cultural context in shaping perceptions of economic inequality. Specifically, we will examine the role of relational mobility—how much freedom and opportunity a society affords individuals to build new relationships (Yuki & Schug, 2020). Furthermore, we will examine its influence on one specific type of perceived inequality: Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL; García-Castro et al., 2019). By examining this research question, we aim to provide insight into how cultural dynamics may influence individuals' perceptions of their socioeconomic surroundings.

1.1 | Perceived economic inequality in everyday life

Past studies have shown that when people think about economic inequality, they tend to use their own experiences and are more sensitive to the inequalities that exist between their close circles (García-Castro et al., 2020; García-Castro, García-Sánchez, et al., 2021). Said otherwise, they think about the Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL): The daily experiences in which individuals perceive differences in how resources are distributed among the members of society (García-Castro et al., 2019). From this perspective, PEIEL is a different construct that diverges from the broader or abstract notion of perceived economic inequality. Whereas the latter refers to perceived disparities within the broader societal context, the former focuses more narrowly on individual experiences of inequality within close circles and daily life.

PEIEL influences other political and economic attitudes. For instance, García-Castro et al. (2019) found that it negatively predicted people's acceptance of economic inequality over and above abstract or broader measures. Importantly, these effects of PEIEL on support for inequality have been corroborated using longitudinal (García-Castro, González, et al., 2021) and experimental designs (García-Castro et al., 2020). This suggests that PEIEL is a relevant variable explaining people's political and economic attitudes.

The PEIEL is determined by the accessibility heuristic (Kahneman, 2003), as people tend to estimate their impressions about economic variables using their most accessible information: their close circles and reference groups (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Cruces et al., 2013). The information obtained is subsequently extrapolated

to the broader society through social sampling. For example, wealthier people tend to have wealthier social circles, which leads to thinking that the whole population is wealthier (Dawtry et al., 2015).

In this paper, we will examine whether cross-cultural differences in how social circles are made can determine PEIEL. We will, therefore, draw in a socioecological variable that shapes how social relationships are established within a given society: relational mobility.

1.2 | Relational mobility and perceived economic inequality

Relational mobility is one dimension of variation across human cultures and societies (Yuki & Schug, 2020). It refers to 'a socioecological variable that represents how much freedom and opportunity a society affords individuals to choose and dispose of interpersonal relationships based on personal preference' (Thomson et al., 2018; p. 7521). As such, in societies high in relational mobility, people tend to have many opportunities to meet new people (or belong to new social groups) and to choose whom they interact with; in societies low in relational mobility, people tend to belong to fixed social groups and have fewer chances for selecting or changing their interpersonal relationships.

Relational mobility varies worldwide, with higher levels in North America, Western Europe, Australasia and Latin America; conversely, it has lower levels in East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Yuki & Schug, 2020). These differences may be explained by several ecological factors, such as the degree of ecological (e.g. the prevalence of pathogens) or historical (e.g. warfare) threats that a given culture has experienced (Thomson et al., 2018).

Moreover, differences in relational mobility are related to several psychological outcomes. High relational mobility is associated with higher intimacy in friendships and romantic relationships (Kito et al., 2017; Yamada et al., 2017), the motivation to engage in self-disclosure (Schug et al., 2010) and lower rejection sensibility (Lou & Li, 2017). Relational mobility can also influence deeper cognitive processes: San Martín et al. (2019) used observational and experimental designs to show that high relational mobility leads to an analytic way of thought, whereas low relational mobility affects holistic thinking.

In this paper, we examine another potential outcome of relational mobility: The degree of economic inequality that people perceive in their daily lives. However, drawing from the literature, two competing hypotheses could be made about this relationship.

On the one hand, it could be possible that high relational mobility affords people to experience less economic inequality within their close circles. In these societies, people have more opportunities to meet and select—and be selected by—new relationship partners.

Past research has shown that this leads people to choose friends and partners who are more similar to them. The first evidence comes from studies showing that in East Asian societies (i.e. societies low in relational mobility), the perceived similarity between the self and friendship partners tends to be lower than in North American societies (i.e. societies high in relational mobility; Kashima et al., 1995; Uleman et al., 2000). In addition, Schug et al. (2009) corroborated these results and directly showed that perceived similarity between friendship partners was higher in the USA than in Japan and that this was directly explained by differences in relational mobility. Importantly, in these studies, participants from Japan and the USA preferred to interact with similar others—but only the participants in the USA had the affordances and opportunities to meet them.

This greater freedom for meeting and selecting more similar others may also be translated to socioeconomic status. It may be that people living in societies with high relational mobility prefer to interact with others who have very similar income and wealth levels; as such, these social circles will be characterized by a low level of economic inequality (e.g. because all their members will have a very similar socioeconomic status). Given that people tend to extrapolate the economic conditions of their social circle to the rest of society (e.g. by a social sampling process; see Dawtry et al., 2015, 2019), they may think that because there is a low economic inequality in their close circles, there is also a low economic inequality in their society. From this perspective, people will perceive low PEIEL and also a low degree of inequality in their society.

On the other hand, the opposite result is also plausible. In high relational mobility societies, people also have broader networks, more social relationships and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Given that people living in these societies have greater possibilities for meeting and interacting with these weak ties, they could know more about economic differences within society. This is consistent with research showing that when people in Colombia were asked about where they perceive economic inequality, they spoke about spontaneous social encounters in public spaces (García-Sánchez et al., 2018; see also García-Sánchez et al., 2022). Said otherwise, people learn about economic inequality not only through their close social circles and friends but also through acquaintances; that is, people they know but not very well (i.e. weak ties).

From this perspective, people living in high relational mobility societies will have greater opportunities to meet with more socio-economically diverse acquaintances and learn more about the degree of economic inequality in their society. In fact, previous studies have shown that the number of acquaintances is positively related to the degree of perceived inequality

(Melamed et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2018). Given that in societies with high relational mobility, people tend to have more acquaintances (Thomson et al., 2018), high relational mobility may increase individual levels of PEIEL.

Summing up, two competing hypotheses could be made about the relationship between relational mobility and PEIEL. The relationship could be negative because when relational mobility is high, people prefer to establish relationships and meet people with more similar socioeconomic status, which may translate to lower levels of PEIEL; the relationship could also be positive because when relational mobility is high, they have greater opportunities and affordances for meeting more socio-economic diverse people, which may translate to higher levels of PEIEL.

1.3 | The present research

In this paper, we contrasted the two competing hypotheses using a cross-cultural comparison of one high and one low relational mobility country. Specifically, we will compare the PEIEL of Spain (which has a 0.13 score in relational mobility) and Japan (i.e. which has a -0.41 score) (Thomson et al., 2018). Importantly, these two countries do not have big differences in their objective levels of economic inequality: In 2019, the Gini coefficient of Spain was 0.32; for Japan, it was 0.33 (OECD, 2022). Similarly, the interdecile 90-10 (comparing the percentile 90 with the percentile 10 of the income distribution) was 4.8 for Spain and 5.2 for Japan (OECD, 2022). Of the countries belonging to the OECD, these two countries have, at the same time, the biggest difference in relational mobility but the lowest difference in objective economic inequality. Hence, these are among the best countries for testing the current research question.

To test our hypotheses, we ran two preregistered studies that compared the PEIEL in participants from both Spain and Japan. All the materials, data and the preregistrations can be found here: https://osf.io/a6gzq/?view_only=7fafa687fe3b43d79f647e254cc5fc19.

As has been done in past studies (San Martín et al., 2019; Schug et al., 2009, 2010), we examined whether relational mobility was behind the cross-cultural differences by examining whether it mediated the effect of the country on the PEIEL. In Study 1, we preregistered both competing hypotheses. In Study 2, we ran a confirmatory study, preregistering the results obtained in the first study.

2 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, we corroborated which of the two hypotheses held true: whether participants in Spain (a country with a high relational mobility) perceived more economic

inequality or whereas Japan (a country with a low relational mobility) was the one scoring higher.

Moreover, in this study, we also wanted to corroborate that the effects of relational mobility go above and beyond ideological differences. As such, we also measured social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 2013). Past studies have shown that social dominance orientation is related to perceptions and attitudes toward inequality (Waldfoegel et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2015). As such, it will be important to corroborate that our results do not vary after controlling for this variable.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited and compensated for their participation using Prolific in Spain and Lancers in Japan. We recruited participants who were between 25 and 50 years old.¹

We got 200 participants from Spain and 200 participants from Japan. Following the preregistered criteria, five participants were excluded because they did not answer the attention checks correctly or did not belong to the age group. Thus, our final sample was 395 participants: 199 in Spain and 196 in Japan.²

In Spain, participants had a mean age of 34.21 ($SD=7.36$), and 117 men, 77 women and 4 nonbinary participants (and one unknown) completed the study. We also measured their subjective socioeconomic status (SSS) using MacArthur's ladder (Adler et al., 1994). The Spanish sample had a mean SSS of 5.48 ($SD=1.43$). In Japan, participants had a mean age of 39.99 ($SD=6.79$). We had 123 men and 72 women (and one unknown). The mean SSS of the Japanese sample was 3.86 ($SD=1.60$).³

2.1.2 | Measures

We used the Spanish and Japanese versions of the scales. When we only had the Spanish version, we first translated the items from Spanish to English. Then, they were translated from English to Japanese. We then back-translated the items from Japanese to English and compared both English versions.

Importantly, in both studies, we included more variables for exploratory purposes, as can be seen in the preregistration. Here, we only had the focal variables answered in the following order.

Perceived economic inequality in everyday life (PEIEL)

It was measured with nine items of the PEIEL scale (García-Castro et al., 2019). Participants answered

each item using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). Examples of items are 'I know people of many different income levels', 'Among the people I know, some have larger, more luxurious homes than others' or 'In my daily life, I perceive situations of economic inequality'. The scale showed adequate reliability in Spain ($\alpha=0.88$) and Japan ($\alpha=0.90$).

Moreover, given that this is the first time using this scale for comparing these two contexts, we first ran a measurement invariance test (Millsap, 2012). We evaluated the model's fit by jointly evaluating the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Kaplan, 2009). Results showed that the 9-item scale did not achieve adequate configural ($SRMR=0.09$; $CFI=0.79$; $TLI=0.73$), metric ($SRMR=0.10$; $CFI=0.79$; $TLI=0.76$) and scalar invariance ($SRMR=0.13$; $CFI=0.72$; $TLI=0.71$). Afterwards, we tested the invariance of different combinations of items. We found that a 5-item version did achieve an adequate configural ($SRMR=0.03$; $CFI=0.98$; $TLI=0.95$), metric ($SRMR=0.05$; $CFI=0.97$; $TLI=0.96$) and scalar ($SRMR=0.08$; $CFI=0.93$; $TLI=0.91$) invariances. We will, therefore, present the results using this shorter version of the scale (and deviating from the preregistration).

Relational mobility

This construct was measured with the 12-item Relational Mobility scale (Thomson et al., 2018). Participants answered each item using a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). This scale included the meet factor (with five items) and the choose factor (with seven items). Examples of items for the meet factor are 'They (the people around you) have many chances to get to know other people' or 'It is common for these people to have a conversation with someone they have never met before'. Some items of the choose factor are 'If they did not like their current groups, they could leave for better ones' or 'They are able to choose, according to their own preferences, the people whom they interact with in their daily life'. The reliability was good for both subscales in the Spanish ($\alpha_{\text{meet}}=0.83$, $\alpha_{\text{choose}}=0.87$) and the Japanese samples ($\alpha_{\text{meet}}=0.91$, $\alpha_{\text{choose}}=0.93$).

Social dominance orientation (SDO)

We measured individual differences in social dominance using the Pratto et al. (2013) four-item version (e.g. 'In setting priorities, we must take into account all social groups' (reverse item), 'Superior groups should dominate inferior groups'). Participants answered it using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). The Japanese version appears in Milfont et al. (2018); the Spanish version appears in Pratto et al. (2013). The scale showed adequate reliability (Spain $\alpha=0.67$; Japan $\alpha=0.75$).

Sociodemographic variables

In addition, we measured subjective socioeconomic status (SSS) using MacArthur's ladder (Adler et al., 1994). We also asked for age, gender and educational level.

2.1.3 | Analyses plan

For testing the two competing hypotheses, we first ran two ANCOVAs, using the country (Spain vs. Japan) as a between-participants factor and relational mobility and PEIEL as the dependent variables. We did it with the full scale and each relational mobility factor.

In both ANCOVAs, we controlled for age, gender and SSS. We used Model 4 of Process Macro (5000 bootstraps) to test the predicted indirect effects of the country in PEIEL through relational mobility (and both factors). We also controlled for age, gender and SSS in these analyses.

2.1.4 | Ethics statement

All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before their participation. The study was conducted

in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the university's Ethics Committee.

2.2 | Results

First, we conducted an ANCOVA to examine whether there are country differences in relational mobility. We controlled for gender, age and SSS. As expected, Spanish ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.80$) participants showed higher relational mobility than Japanese ($M=3.49$, $SD=0.79$), $F(1, 386)=12.41$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.031$. Spanish participants ($M_{\text{choose}}=3.83$, $SD_{\text{choose}}=0.91$, $M_{\text{meet}}=4.12$, $SD_{\text{meet}}=0.87$) also scored higher than Japanese ($M_{\text{choose}}=3.35$, $SD_{\text{choose}}=0.92$, $M_{\text{meet}}=3.68$, $SD_{\text{meet}}=0.97$) on the choose, $F(1, 386)=10.06$, $p=0.002$, $\eta^2=0.025$ and the meet factors, $F(1, 386)=8.39$; $p=0.004$; $\eta^2=0.021$.

Moreover, we also contrasted our two competing hypotheses. As such, we ran another ANCOVA with the same covariates but including PEIEL as the dependent variable. Results showed that Spanish ($M=5.53$, $SD=1.06$) participants also scored higher than Japanese ($M=4.82$; $SD=1.06$) in their PEIEL levels, $F(1, 386)=38.49$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.091^4$ (see Figure 1). Crucially, relational mobility and PEIEL were positively related,

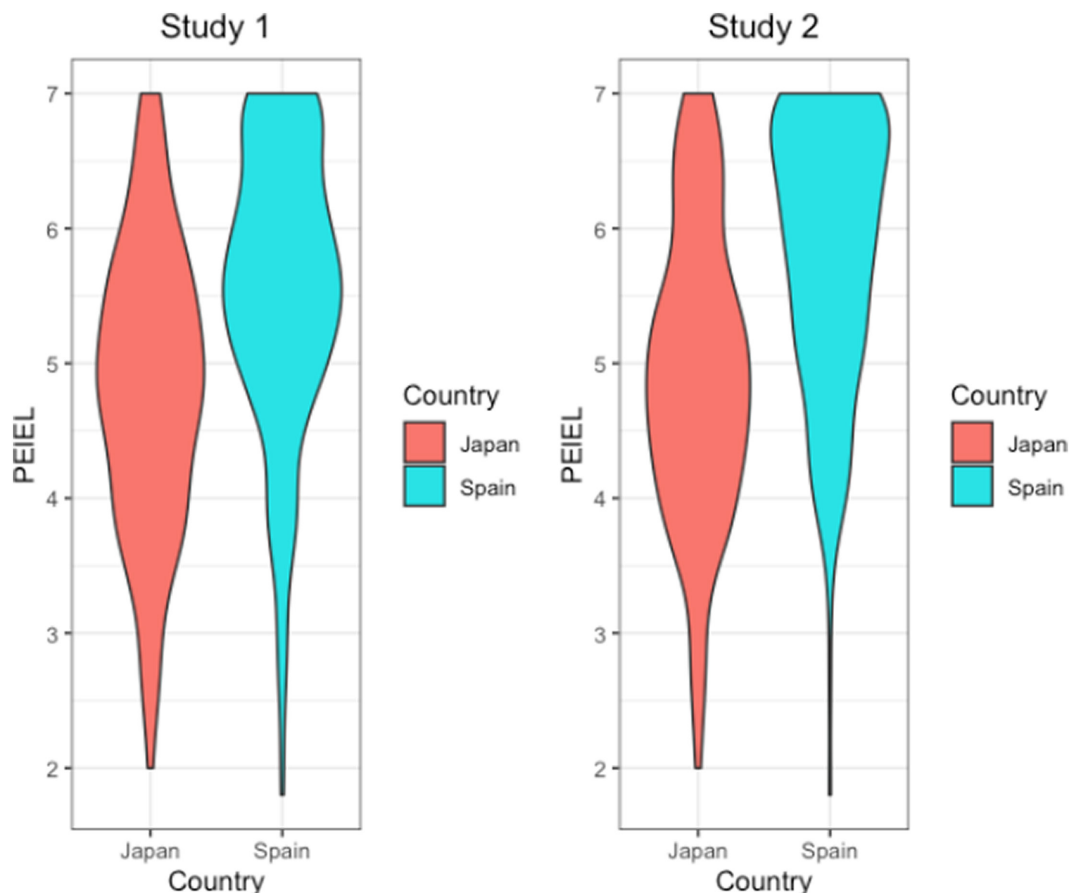


FIGURE 1 Violin plots showing the cross-country differences in perceived economic inequality in everyday life (PEIEL).

$r=0.15$, $p=0.003$ (see Figure 2). When analysing each relational mobility factor separately, we found that the meet factor was correlated with PEIEL ($r=0.28$, $p<0.001$), but the choose factor was not ($r=0.03$, $p=0.608$).

We then examined whether the country (Spain=1, Japan=0) had an indirect effect on PEIEL through relational mobility. We used PROCESS macro Model 4 (with 5000 bootstraps) for this. As preregistered, we controlled for SSS, age and gender differences. Results did not show an indirect effect, $B=0.03$, $SE=0.03$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.09].

We next tested whether there was an indirect effect through the two relational mobility factors using the same analysis and covariates. As can be seen in Figure 3, results showed an indirect effect through the meet factor, $B=0.09$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.17].

However, we did not find an indirect effect through the choose factor, $B=-0.03$; $SE=0.03$; 95% CI [-0.09, 0.02]. As such, results suggest that the countries' differences in PEIEL are partially explained through cross-cultural differences in the opportunity for meeting new people.

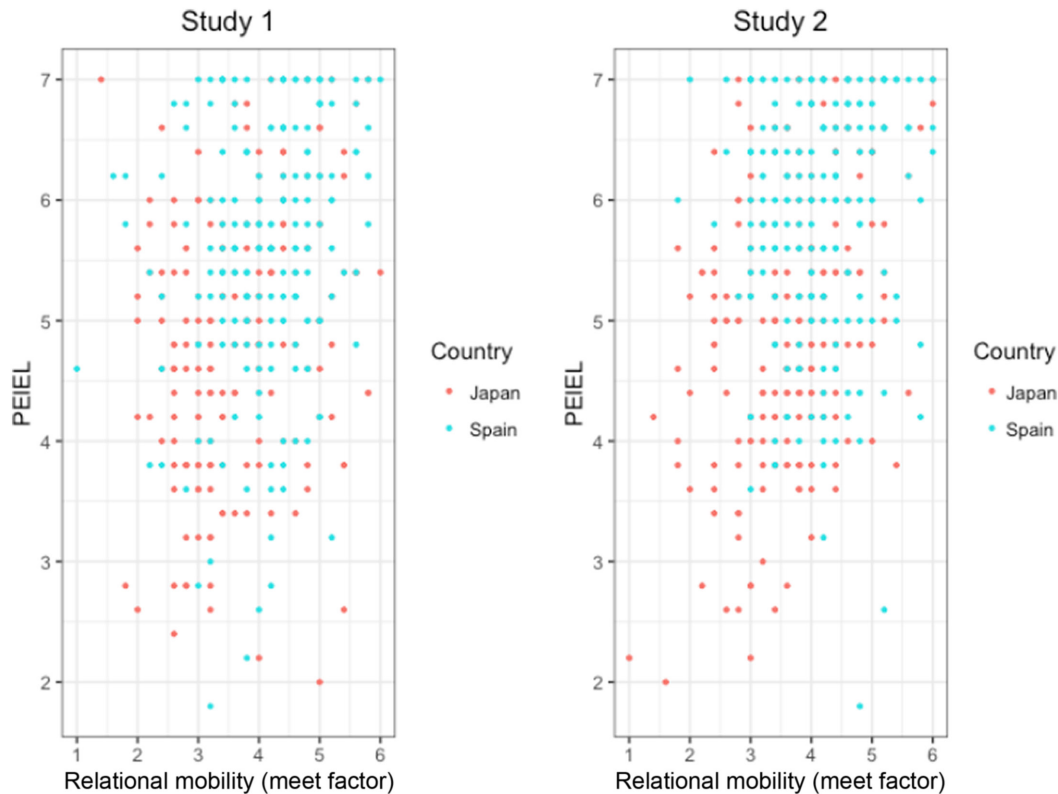


FIGURE 2 Scatterplots of the relationship between the meet factor of relational mobility and perceived economic inequality in everyday life (PEIEL).

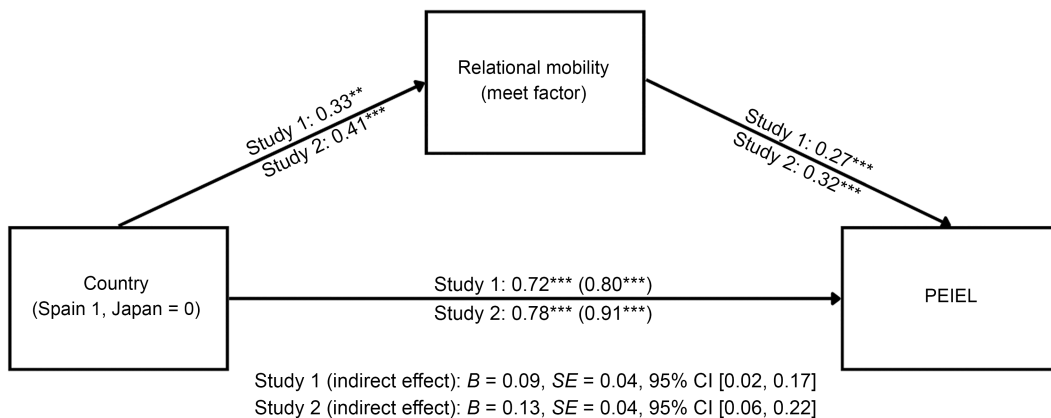


FIGURE 3 Indirect effect of Country (Spain=1; Japan=0) on perceived economic inequality in everyday life (PEIEL) through the meet factor. Note: $*p<0.5$, $**p<0.005$, $*p<.001$.

We ran the same analysis as a robustness check, this time also controlled for SDO and education. Results also corroborated this indirect effect after controlling for these variables, $B=0.06$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.15].

2.3 | Discussion

In Study 1, we corroborated one of our two competing hypotheses: We showed that in a country with high relational mobility, people tend to perceive more economic inequality in everyday life (i.e. PEIEL). This is explained—at least partially—through higher levels of relational mobility. However, this effect only happened through the meet factor of relational mobility, but not through the choose factor. In fact, the meet factor correlated positively with PEIEL, but the choose factor was not significantly associated with the latter. This suggests that the cultural affordances of meeting and knowing more people could be associated with the degree of PEIEL. Moreover, this effect exceeded differences in social dominance orientation.

In Study 2, we wanted to corroborate these findings. Given that our results corroborated one of the two competing hypotheses, we follow a confirmatory approach in this study: We preregistered the results found in Study 1.

3 | STUDY 2

Following the results found in Study 1, we preregistered three hypotheses: Spanish participants will score higher (than Japanese participants) in the meet factor of the relational mobility scale (Hypothesis 1). Spanish participants will score higher (than Japanese participants) in Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL) (Hypothesis 2). We will find an indirect effect of the country (Spain vs. Japan) on PEIEL through relational mobility (Hypothesis 3).

In this study, we were also interested in controlling for individual differences in extraversion (Gosling et al., 2003). Given that extraversion is strongly related to the motivation and capacity for meeting and interacting with new people (McCrae & Costa, 1987), we wanted to test whether the relation between the meeting factor and PEIEL went above and beyond these individual differences. As such, we wanted to show that cross-cultural differences in PEIEL are explained by the cultural affordances for meeting new people—not by individual differences in extraversion.

3.1 | Method

Again, participants were recruited through Prolific in Spain and Lancers in Japan. For this study, we had

a sample of 200 participants from Spain and 214 from Japan. Following our preregistered criteria, one participant missed the attention check. This left a total sample of 413 participants: 199 participants in Spain and 214 Japanese participants.

This time, we recruited participants between 25 and 45 years old to limit the age variability of both samples (following the same criteria we followed in Study 1). In Spain, participants had a mean age of 32.18 ($SD=6.00$). 99 men, 97 women, and three non-binary participants took part in the study. This time, we measured objective socioeconomic status (OSS) and subjective socioeconomic status (SSS). SSS was measured as in Study 1, whereas OSS was using 10 different levels⁵ of household income. Participants had a mean SSS of 5.54 ($SD=1.49$) and a mean OSS of 3.85 ($SD=2.90$).

In Japan, participants had a mean age of 36.60 ($SD=5.40$). The sample consisted of 124 men and 87 women (and three unknown). Participants had a mean SSS of 4.60 ($SD=1.65$) and a mean OSS of 4.16 ($SD=2.67$).⁶

3.1.1 | Measures

We used the same scales used in Study 1 to measure the main variables. Relational mobility showed good reliability in both the Spanish ($\alpha_{\text{meet}}=0.82$; $\alpha_{\text{choose}}=0.83$) and the Japanese samples ($\alpha_{\text{meet}}=0.83$; $\alpha_{\text{choose}}=0.85$) again. The 5-item measure of PEIEL—obtained from Study 1—also showed good reliability in Spain ($\alpha=0.76$) and Japan ($\alpha=0.85$).

We also measured extraversion to control for its effects and other variables for exploratory reasons (see the preregistration for the complete list of variables).

Extraversion

We also wanted to rule out the possibility of individual differences in the effect. As such, we measured extraversion using the Spanish and Japanese versions of the Ten-item personality inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003). We used the Japanese (Oshio et al., 2013) and the Spanish (Romero et al., 2012) versions. Participants answered two questions [i.e. to what extent would you describe yourself as (a) Reserved/Quiet (a reverse item) and (b) extraverted/enthusiastic] using a Likert scale that went from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). This two-item scale showed good reliability in both Spain ($r=0.77$; $p<0.001$) and Japan ($r=0.54$; $p<0.001$).

3.1.2 | Analysis plan

For testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, we ran two ANCOVAs, using the country (Spain vs. Japan) as a between-participants factor and relational mobility and PEIEL as the dependent variables. In both ANCOVAs, we controlled for age, gender and SSS. For testing Hypothesis 3,

we used Model 4 of Process Macro to test the predicted indirect effects of the country in PEIEL through relational mobility. We controlled for age, gender and SSS in these analyses.

3.1.3 | Ethics statement

As in Study 1, all participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before their participation. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the university's Ethics Committee.

3.2 | Results

Before testing our three preregistered hypotheses, we ran a correlational analysis to examine the relationship between RM and PEIEL (see Figure 2). Again, the results showed a positive relationship between the variables ($r=0.25$; $p<0.001$). This time, we found that both the meet ($r=0.32$; $p<0.001$) and the choose factors ($r=0.15$; $p=0.003$) were positively associated with PEIEL.

We then corroborated our hypotheses. First, we ran an ANCOVA on relational mobility after controlling for age, gender and SSS. We corroborated that Spanish participants ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.72$) scored higher than Japanese ($M=3.53$, $SD=0.77$), $F(1, 396)=23.96$; $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.057$. This result was also found for each factor. Spanish participants ($M_{\text{choose}}=3.90$, $SD_{\text{choose}}=0.82$, $M_{\text{meet}}=4.14$; $SD_{\text{meet}}=0.82$) scored higher than Japanese ($M_{\text{choose}}=3.44$, $SD_{\text{choose}}=0.83$, $M_{\text{meet}}=3.66$, $SD_{\text{meet}}=0.90$) for both the choose [$F(1, 396)=18.61$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.045$] and the meet [$F(1, 396)=18.60$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.045$] factors.

For testing Hypothesis 2, we ran another ANCOVA with the same covariates. As can be seen in Figure 1, we corroborated that Spanish participants ($M=5.81$, $SD=1.01$) scored higher than Japanese ($M=4.90$, $SD=1.08$) on PEIEL, $F(1, 396)=60.21$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.132$.

Finally, we tested Hypothesis 3 using the same procedure as in Study 1. We controlled for SSS, age and gender. Results also corroborated this hypothesis and showed an indirect effect of the country (Spain = 1; Japan = 0) on PEIEL through relational mobility, $B=0.09$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.17].

We then ran the same analysis using each factor instead of the full relational mobility scale. As in Study 1, we found no indirect effect through the choose factor, $B=0.03$, $SE=0.03$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.09]. Nevertheless, we replicated the indirect effect through the meet factor, $B=0.13$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.22] (see Figure 3).

For a robustness check, we then performed the same analysis. However, this time, we also included OSS,

education and extraversion as covariates (in addition to SSS, gender and age). This will allow us to show that the effect of the meet factor goes above and beyond individual differences in extraversion. Results corroborated again the indirect effect, $B=0.13$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.23].

3.3 | Discussion

In Study 2, we corroborated the results found in Study 1. First, we found that people living in a high relational mobility context (i.e. Spanish participants) had a higher PEIEL than participants living in a low relational mobility context (i.e. Japanese participants). Moreover, we found an indirect effect through relational mobility; however, as in Study 1, we only found this effect through the meet factor but not through the choose factor. Study 2 also showed that this effect happens beyond individual differences in extraversion. This showed that the effects are related to the cultural affordances for meeting and knowing more people—not just by individual differences in the motivation for having more social relationships.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this paper, we examined whether cross-cultural differences could explain differences in perceived economic inequality in daily life. In short, in Studies 1–2, we found that people living in Spain scored higher in PEIEL than people living in Japan and that this effect was mediated through relational mobility. Notably, the effect happened through the meet—but not through the choose—factor. Since relational mobility is defined as the cultural affordances for choosing and meeting people based on personal preferences (Thomson et al., 2018; Yuki & Schug, 2020), the possibilities for meeting new people were more crucial for explaining the PEIEL. This is consistent with previous studies showing that people with a broader social network tend to be more conscious about the levels of economic inequality around them (Melamed et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2018). However, our results go beyond these studies by showing that this is not only explained by differences within society in the size of social circles, but by cultural differences in relational mobility, especially those related to meeting people.

Importantly, the choose factor did not mediate the cross-cultural differences in PEIEL. We believed that when participants had the opportunity to choose and leave their relationships, they may end up being friends and partners with people with a more homogenous socioeconomic status, which will, in turn, be related to less PEIEL. However, in Study 1, we found a null relationship between the choose factor and PEIEL, and in Study 2, we found a small positive—not negative—relationship between the variables. These results go against one of our

competing hypotheses: that relational mobility would be negatively related to PEIEL. Our data did not support this account, as the relationship between the variables was not in that direction. One way of explaining this effect could be that when people can choose the relationship they can have, they tend to prioritize other aspects, such as similarity in personality and attitudes (Schug et al., 2009), rather than similarity in socioeconomic status. From this perspective, the social interaction between people from different socioeconomic statuses may be related to different sociocultural variables that may not be captured by relational mobility, such as how different societies tend to segregate social classes (Mijs & Roe, 2021).

Furthermore, in these studies, we also found that this effect went beyond the effects of other variables that may explain the PEIEL. For instance, past studies have revealed that ideology can influence the degree of economic inequality people perceive (Goudarzi et al., 2020; Waldfogel et al., 2021). In Study 1, we found that even after controlling for social dominance orientation, the meet factor mediated the cross-country difference in PEIEL. In addition, we wanted to show that this relationship went beyond individual differences in extraversion, which is a personality difference in the motivation and capacity for meeting and interacting with new people (McCrae & Costa, 1987). In Study 2, we found that controlling for extraversion did not influence the indirect effect through the meet factor. These suggest that the relationship between PEIEL and cultural differences that afford people to meet new people is beyond individual differences.

Summing up, these results add to the existing models about the factors that influence the perceived level of economic inequality (Willis et al., 2022). These models have been focused on the role of different ideological variables, such as meritocracy (García-Sánchez et al., 2019), social dominance orientation (Waldfogel et al., 2021) or economic system justification (Du & King, 2021; Goudarzi et al., 2020). However, in these studies, the potential role of cultural variables has been underexamined. In the present paper, we showed that not only ideology matters: There are also important cross-cultural variables—such as relational mobility—related to perceived inequality. We believe that this helps to understand perceived inequality from a multidimensional perspective in which different explanation levels should be considered.

One of the main implications of these results is that it may help clarify why, in some countries, the relationship between objective and perceived (i.e. subjective) inequality is stronger than in others (García-Castro et al., 2022; Schmalor & Heine, 2022). Although past models have suggested that physical segregation matters and this relationship is less strong in contexts in which the rich and the poor neighbourhoods are more isolated from each other (Mijs & Roe, 2021; Willis et al., 2022), here we argue that there are also cultural variables, such as

differences in relational mobility, that may promote having more contact with more diverse people, which may increase the experiences of economic inequality in everyday life. As such, PEIEL is related to the physical and the cultural environment.

We also believe that this is a new way of thinking about the relationship between culture and inequality, given that past studies have mainly examined how economic inequality influences cultural processes (Oishi et al., 2022). For instance, past research has shown that inequality shapes cultural dimensions, such as individualism (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), masculinity (Moreno-Bella et al., 2019), or achievement and power values (Du et al., 2022). Here, we suggest that cultural variables may also predict the levels of perceived inequality. Moreover, future studies should also consider the specific micro-social practices that translate the macro-cultural process of relational mobility to higher levels of PEIEL (Uchida et al., 2019, 2020).

However, it is important to note that these studies are the first step in determining the relationship between PEIEL and relational mobility. One limitation of these studies is that we only used two countries to test these ideas. It will be necessary to corroborate these results using a bigger sample of countries. Moreover, it will also be important to use more homogenous samples to contrast these hypotheses, as our Japanese and Spanish samples differed in age and subjective socioeconomic status. It will also be important to include more sociodemographic covariates, such as differences in occupation or whether they live in a city or a town.

Importantly, in these studies, we only ruled out the potential confounding role of SDO and extraversion, but there are other ideological and personality variables that may be measured, such as meritocracy, beliefs in social mobility, beliefs in equal opportunities, or openness to experience. Future research should also control for the potential effect of these variables.

Another potential limitation of these studies is that we examined the mediational effects using a cross-sectional design. Although past cross-cultural studies have followed this design for arguing that relational mobility explains cross-cultural differences in other psychological processes (San Martín et al., 2019; Schug et al., 2009), it is important to go beyond these cross-sectional approaches to establish that relational mobility is mediating the cross-country differences, given that the present mediational approach does not allow us to conclude a causal relationship between relational mobility and perceptions of economic inequality (Bullock & Green, 2021). As such, with these data, we cannot rule out the potential effect of third variables or a reverse causality issue, in which relational mobility may also be influenced by PEIEL. Future studies may use experimental mediation approaches and longitudinal studies to further corroborate these ideas (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016). Furthermore, these future studies could examine not only the effect

of relational mobility on PEIEL but also the different mechanisms that are behind this effect. In this present paper, we suggest that having a broader social network of acquaintances may explain this effect, but this still has to be corroborated.

In conclusion, this set of studies presents evidence about how cultural differences influence socioeconomic perceptions. We believe that these two studies may be the first step in understanding how relational mobility, especially the affordances that cultures give individuals to meet new people, is related to the perceived level of inequality in everyday life.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Guillermo B. Willis: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft. **Yukiko Uchida:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; resources; supervision; validation; writing – review and editing. **Juan Diego García-Castro:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Kosuke Takemura:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We selected this age range following two different criteria. Firstly, we wanted to ensure the homogeneity of samples to minimize potential confounding variables related to age; however, we also had practical limitations regarding the total number of participants available in the recruiting companies, making it challenging to select a narrower age range. As such, we decided to select these age ranges after considering both criteria.

² Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) argued that you need at least 377 participants to achieve a 0.80 power when the α path is bigger than $f=0.14$ (small effect size) and the β path is bigger than $f=0.26$ [a halfway (between small and medium) effect size]; or that you need 368 participants when the α path is bigger than $f=0.26$, and the β path is bigger than $f=0.14$. As such, in Studies 1 and 2, we had enough power (more than 0.80) to detect one small and one half-way effect size.

³ There were significant differences in the SSS of the Japanese and the Spanish samples, $t(393)=-10.63$; $p<0.001$; $d=-1.07$.

⁴ If we do all the analyses of this section with the 9-item version included in the preregistration instead of the 5-item version, the results remain the same (i.e. all the significant results will still be significant).

⁵ To create the 10 different levels, we first used the mean household income in both countries. Then, we added 20% until we achieved 200% of the mean income. We also subtracted 20% from the mean income until reaching the poverty line (i.e. 60% of the mean household income).

⁶ As in Study 1, the Japanese and the Spanish samples differed in their SSS, $t(411)=-6.05$; $p<0.001$; $d=-0.60$. However, they did not differ in their OSS, $t(373)=1.09$; $p=0.137$; $d=0.11$.

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