

Individual values predict desiring more economic inequality: The moderator role of social mobility

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Attitudes towards economic inequality are crucial to uphold structural economic inequality in democratic societies. Previous research has shown that socioeconomic status, political ideology, and the objective level of economic inequality associated with individuals' attitudes towards economic inequality. However, some have suggested that people are aware of the individual and social features that are more functional according to the level of economic inequality. Therefore, individual predispositions such as cultural values could also predict these attitudes. In the current research, we expand previous results testing whether cultural variables at the individual level predict attitudes towards economic inequality. After analysing survey data including samples from 52 countries ($N = 89,565$), we found that self-enhancement values predict positively, and self-transcendence negatively, attitudes towards economic inequality as the ideal economic inequality measures. This result remained significant even after controlling by socioeconomic status, political ideology, and objective economic inequality. However, this effect is only true in high and middle social mobility countries, but not in countries with low social mobility. The present research highlights how cultural values and country social mobility are crucial factors to addressing attitudes towards economic inequality.

Keywords: Economic inequality; Self-enhancement values; Self-transcendence values; Attitudes towards economic inequality; Social mobility.

A large body of research describes the increase in income inequality in most countries around the world (e.g., Alvaredo et al., 2017). From a rational-choice approach, when economic inequality increases in democratic societies, more people should prefer to reduce it (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). Nevertheless, the link between economic inequality (objective or perceived) and attitudes towards it is controversial. Although some research has shown that higher economic inequality relates to higher preferences for redistribution (e.g., Schmidt-Catran, 2016), other research suggests these variables do not relate (García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Kuziemko et al., 2018; Mijs, 2021). Indeed, objective levels of economic inequality predict attitudes towards economic inequality, which actually depends on people's awareness of those economic disparities. As such, socioeconomic status (SES) and ideology play crucial roles in predicting how individuals shape their attitudes towards economic

inequality (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; García-Sánchez et al., 2019).

However, less is known about how cultural variables might shape attitudes towards economic inequality. All cultures have had to handle the distribution of power and wealth, which have provided their populations different attitudes towards hierarchies (Schwartz, 1992). Despite this, cultural manifestations such as values have received little attention in exploring how they might affect attitudes towards economic inequality. In the current research, we cover this gap, proposing that the degree to which individuals hold different cultural values might predict their attitudes towards economic inequality. Building on Schwartz's (1992) values theory, we aim to test how two sets of values, self-enhancement and self-transcendence, held at the individual level, might predict attitudes towards economic inequality more so than economic inequality, SES and political ideology. According to

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the functionalist perspective of economic inequality (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2023), individuals should prefer higher levels of economic inequality when pursuing more self-enhancement and less self-transcendent values because that level of economic inequality would facilitate attaining their life objectives. However, achieving their life goals can be qualified by the level of social mobility in the country because low social mobility hinders people's opportunities to get ahead. Therefore, in the current research, we also analyse the role of social mobility in the relationship between values and attitudes towards economic inequality.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Research on attitudes towards economic inequality—that is, the assessment or judgement about the level of economic inequality—has grown considerably in the last years because these attitudes are considered one of the main forces to fight the rising economic inequality (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). Indeed, in the age of high economic inequality, negative attitudes towards inequality can lead individuals to demand the governments take measures to reduce it (Schmidt-Catran, 2016). Therefore, the objective level of economic inequality should be a strong predictor of attitudes towards economic inequality. However, high economic inequality is not always aligned with people's attitudes towards inequality. These attitudes include peoples' redistributive preferences, concerns about inequality, and ideal or desired levels of inequality.

The relationship between attitudes towards economic inequality and objective indicators of economic inequality is mixed. For instance, Luebker (2014), using 110 surveys from 26 countries, did not find a systematic relationship between market inequality and preferences for redistribution. Focusing on the United Kingdom in the 1983–2004 period, Georgiadis and Manning (2012) also did not find an association between income inequality and redistribution. However, note that low trust in the government might explain the lack of association between economic inequality and preferences for redistribution (Kuziemko et al., 2018). Recently, using several rounds of the International Social Survey Program for a 25-year period, Mijs (2021) showed a negative relationship between objective income inequality and people's concerns about inequality, that is, negative attitudes towards inequality. In a similar line, García-Sánchez et al. (2019) found that across 41 countries, those who perceived high (vs. low) levels of economic inequality tended to prefer more economic inequality (see also Castillo, 2011).

Apart from objective economic inequality, SES contributes to shaping attitudes towards inequality (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017). Indeed, SES positively

relates to ideal economic inequality, as such, high SES individuals desired a higher income gap in comparison with those with lower SES (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). In the same line, Gelman et al. (2007) analysed political elections in the United States and showed that those from lower SES had a political preference for candidates who held negative attitudes towards inequality (i.e., supported redistributive policies).

Finally, ideology also plays a crucial role in relation to the attitudes towards economic inequality. For example, endorsing ideologies such as economic system justification (Goudarzi et al., 2020), Neoliberalism (Azevedo et al., 2019), meritocracy (García-Sánchez et al., 2019) and belief in a just world (García-Sánchez et al., 2021) are associated less with concerns about economic inequality. In the current research, we propose that apart from economic inequality, SES and ideology, culture variables might play a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards inequality.

THE ROLE OF VALUES FOR ATTITUDES TOWARDS ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Although classical social scientists linked culture with economic phenomena throughout most of the 20th century, culture was relegated to the background for being considered as a broad and vague concept that could not provide testable hypotheses to explain economic outcomes (Guiso et al., 2006). However, the growing cross-culture research field has provided large, global data sets and has developed better techniques that make it possible to design and test refutable hypotheses (e.g., World Values Survey; Inglehart et al., 2014) about the relationship between culture and economic outcomes. Culture can manifest as values, social norms, beliefs systems, and self-concepts, which individuals interiorize through socialisation (e.g., Schwartz, 1992). At the individual level, these features can affect economic outcomes because they shape their preferences (Guiso et al., 2006).

In the current research, we focus on values. Drawing on Schwartz's (1992) values theory, we aim to test how values shape the attitudes towards economic inequality as measured by ideal level of economic inequality. Although individuals can differ in which values—that is, desirable goals that motivate and guide action—they consider important, the structure of values relations tends to be universal (Schwartz, 1992). This structure is organised along two bipolar dimensions. In the current research, we focus on the dimension that captures the conflict between emphasising one's own interest over other's goals (i.e., self-enhancement) and concerns for others' welfare and interests of others (i.e., self-transcendence).

We propose that self-enhancement and self-transcendence values might shape attitudes towards economic inequality because individuals tend to choose

or create an environment that enables them to achieve their goals (Yamagishi, 2011). Values related to dominance and self-enhancement are encouraged in contexts with high economic inequality, whereas those related to self-transcendence and care of others are more common when economic inequality is low (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The economic inequality normative information model (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2023) proposes that people are aware of the individual and social features that are more functional according to the level of economic inequality. Therefore, individuals with higher self-enhancement values should consider that it is easier to achieve their goals in contexts with high economic inequality, thus, they should desire higher levels of economic inequality. In contrast, people with higher self-transcendence values ideally should prefer lower levels of economic inequality. However, there are structural conditions, such as relatively high social mobility, that need to be fulfilled; otherwise, the level of economic inequality should have a lower effect to achieve the person's goals according to their values. Therefore, social mobility might qualify the association between values and attitudes towards economic inequality.

THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

In the current research, we define social mobility as a structural feature of society that refers to the degree to which people's SES changes over time or intergeneration (Davidai & Wienk, 2021). Therefore, in countries with low social mobility, the influence of the families' SES has a decisive effect on their success or failure, whereas in countries with high social mobility, this factor has less impact.

This structural feature is crucial in shaping attitudes towards economic inequality from a functionalist perspective because in countries with low social mobility, the level of economic inequality is less important for individuals to achieve their goals according to their values. We expected that individuals with higher self-enhancement values, for example, might prefer higher levels of economic inequality because they consider it easier to attain the goals of achievement and power in that context. However, this is true as long as they can move in the social hierarchy. In a context where social mobility is low, a high level of economic inequality would not facilitate attaining their life objectives. Therefore, we expect that countries with lower social mobility will weaken the relationship between values and attitudes towards economic inequality.

In the current research, we tested the role of self-enhancement and self-transcendence values to predict attitudes towards economic inequality beyond previous predictors found in the literature (i.e., economic

inequality, SES, and political ideology). Nevertheless, given that social mobility should qualify the relationship between values and attitudes towards economic inequality from a functionalist approach, we analysed the moderating role of social mobility. Finally, we considered additional variables that might confound our results. At the individual level, we included gender and age because we expected that values would strongly relate to these sociodemographic features. At the country level, we included the Human Development Index because we expected that it would closely relate to economic inequality and social mobility as well as to avoid the confounding effects of economic inequality with development.

HYPOTHESES

Economic inequality and psychological tendencies are mutually constitutive (Gobel & Carvacho, 2023). Just as economic inequality promotes certain values (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020), these values should promote certain attitudes towards economic inequality. According to the functionalist perspective of economic inequality (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2023), individuals should prefer the level of economic inequality that facilitates the achievement of their life goals according to their values. However, the level of social mobility in the country may qualify the achievement of their life goals according to self-enhancement or self-transcendence values: low social mobility hinders people's opportunities to get ahead, and high social mobility fuels expectations of moving up the social ladder. We have therefore proposed the following hypotheses:

- H1. Self-enhancement values will positively predict positive attitudes towards economic inequality.
- H2. Self-transcendence values will negatively predict positive attitudes towards economic inequality.
- H3. Social mobility will strengthen the positive relationship between self-enhancement values and positive attitudes towards economic inequality.
- H4. Social mobility will strengthen the negative relationship between self-transcendence values and positive attitudes towards economic inequality.

METHOD

Data and respondents

We used data from the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2014). This survey collected a representative total sample of 89,565 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.85$ years; $SD = 16.65$; 51% female), from 60 countries across Europe (Belarus, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine), North and South America

(Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States and Uruguay), Asia (Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Yemen), Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tunisia and Zimbabwe), and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) between 2010 and 2014. For additional information about the procedure, see Inglehart et al. (2014).

Measurements

Predictor variables at the individual level

We used the following individual predictor variables.

Subjective socioeconomic status. Participants were shown a card with a ladder (Adler et al., 2000). The interviewer explained that it was an income scale on which 1 indicated the lowest income group and 10 the highest income group in their country. Participants then said in which group, between 1 and 10, their household was. To do this, they counted all wages, salaries, pensions and other sources of income.

Political ideology. Participants were told that in political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right.” The interviewer asked participants how they would place their views on the following scale, generally speaking. The scale ranged from 1 (left) to 10 (right).

Values. Values were measured with a reduced scale of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001). In this procedure, the interviewer explains to participants that they will briefly describe some people. Then, participants indicate for each description whether that person is very much like you (1), like you (2), somewhat like you (3), a little like you (4), not like you (5) or not at all like you (6). Self-enhancement values were computed as the average score of the following two items: “It is important to this person to be rich; to have a lot of money and expensive things,” and “Being very successful is important to this person; to have people recognize one’s achievements.” The Pearson correlation range between these two items across countries was .03–.48. The p values were all lower than .029, except in Haiti ($p = .166$). Self-transcendence values were computed by averaging three items: “It is important to this person to do something for the good of society,” “It is important for this person to help the people nearby; to care for their well-being” and “Looking after the environment is important to this person; to care for nature and save life

resources.” The Cronbach’s α range among these three items across the countries was .59–.82. We recoded the order of the numeric values to facilitate their interpretation, such that higher number meant higher values of engagement. We adjusted items for acquiescent response style by ipsatising raw responses.

Age and gender. Code respondents’ gender was collected by observation. Participants also reported their age in years. We included these variables as control variables.

Predictor variables at the national level

We used the following national variables.

Economic inequality. We used the Gini index as the index of economic inequality. Higher scores indicated higher economic inequality (ranged from 0, when every inhabitant has the same income, to 1, when one individual receives all available income). We took the Gini index relative to the year that data were collected by country (World Bank, 2021). When the Gini index for the exact year was not available for a country, we took the previous one available. Moreover, when the Gini index was not available in the World Bank data set for a country, we used the index available for that country in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2020). Gini indices in our sample ranged from .25 in Ukraine to .63 in South Africa.

Human Development Index. We included in our analyses an index of the development of a country measured by the Human Development Index (HDI; United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, 2019). This index is a summary measure of average achievement in long and healthy life (life expectancy at birth), being knowledgeable (expected and mean years of schooling), and having a decent standard of living (GNI per capita).

Social mobility. We used the Global Social Mobility Index as the measure of social mobility (World Economic Forum, WEF, 2020). This index provides a holistic index of social mobility based on mobility in health, education, technology, work and institutional protection.

Outcome variable

Attitudes towards income inequality. Participants were asked about their perspectives on ideal income inequality. They were presented with a 10-point bipolar scale in which 1 meant they agreed completely with the statement, “Incomes should be made more equal,” and 10 meant they agreed completely with the statement, “We need larger

income differences as incentives for individual effort.” If their views felt somewhere in between those extremes, they could choose any number in such a 10-point range. Higher values indicate that people support income differences for motivating effort.

RESULTS

Analytic strategy

Given the nested nature of the data, we used multilevel modelling treating the participants’ responses (Level 1) clustered in countries (Level 2). Age, subjective SES, political ideology and values were standardised by country and economic inequality, and HDI were standardised between countries. We fitted several models, predicting individuals’ scores on attitudes towards economic inequality (see Table 1).

Model 0 was an intercept-only model. This model showed an intraclass correlation (ICC) of .12, indicating that around 12% of the variance in attitudes towards economic inequality was between countries and 88% was within countries. This ICC is substantial and warrants multilevel modelling. Model 1 included our control variables at an individual level (subjective SES, political ideology, gender [0 = male, 1 = female], and age) and at the country level (Gini and HDI) to control for them in further models. Model 2 included self-enhancement and self-transcendence values at the individual level. Subsequently, to compare the random effects in each value separately, we added random slope in Model 3 only for self-enhancement values and in Model 4 only for self-transcendence values. In Model 5, we included both self-enhancement and self-transcendence values random slopes together.

We built two additional multilevel models to test the cross-level interactions effect between values (Level 1) and social mobility (Level 2) to predict attitudes towards economic inequality (Level 1). In Model 6a, we included the interaction between self-enhancement and social mobility, and in Model 6b, between self-transcendence and social mobility (Table 2).

Main results

Across all models, subjective SES positively predicted attitudes towards economic inequality. For each unit increase in subjective SES, respondents’ attitudes towards economic inequality increased 13%. Similarly, political ideology predicted positively attitudes towards economic inequality, meaning that for each unit increase in political ideology (i.e., higher right-wing), respondents’ attitudes towards economic inequality increased between 16% and 18%, depending on the model. Moreover, men tended to have higher attitudes towards economic inequality.

Age also predicted negatively attitudes towards economic inequality, although the effect size was low (lower than $-.01$). However, the Gini index and HDI did not predict attitudes towards economic inequality.

More important for our hypotheses, when we included values in Model 2, this model provided a significantly better fit to the data compared to Model 1: $\chi^2(2) = 69.45$, $p < .001$. Self-enhancement values predicted positively ($\beta = .05$, $p = .002$) and self-transcendence values negatively ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .001$) attitudes towards economic inequality at the individual level. These results suggest that self-enhancement and self-transcendence values at the individual level predict individual’s attitudes towards economic inequality. In other words, an increment of 1 on self-enhancement values predicts an increment of .05 on attitudes towards economic inequality, whereas an increment of 1 on self-transcendence values predicts a reduction of .10 on attitudes towards economic inequality. Interestingly, when we include the random slope of both self-enhancement and self-transcendence values, its effect on attitudes towards economic inequality became nonsignificant ($p \geq .153$, see Models 3, 4 and 5 in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2; see Tables S1 and S2 for means, standard deviation and correlation of the main variables at Level 2).

Social mobility interaction

Model 6a showed a better fit than Model 2 did: $\chi^2(4) = 66.98$, $p < .001$. Social mobility interacted with self-enhancement values to predict attitudes towards economic inequality ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$). Simple slopes revealed that in countries with the lowest social mobility ($-1 SD$), the relationship between self-enhancement values and attitudes towards economic inequality was significant and negative ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .001$), whereas this relationship was significant and positive in countries with average ($\beta = .06$, $p < .001$) and the highest levels of social mobility ($-1 SD$, $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$, see Figure 3).

Model 6b showed a better fit compared to Model 2: $\chi^2(4) = 46.69$, $p < .001$. Social mobility interacted with self-transcendence values to predict attitudes towards economic inequality ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .001$). Simple slopes revealed that in countries with the lowest social mobility ($-1 SD$), the relationship between self-transcendence values and attitudes towards economic inequality was nonsignificant ($\beta = .01$, $p = .62$), whereas this relationship was significantly negative in countries with average ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .001$) and highest levels of social mobility ($-1 SD$, $b = -.22$, $p < .001$, see Figure 4).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the so-called age of high economic inequality, it is crucial to understand people’s attitudes towards

TABLE 1
Multilevel regression analysis on attitudes towards economic inequality using restricted maximum likelihood (REML)

	Model 0. Null model		Model 1. Control variables		Model 2. Values variables		Model 3. Random slope self-enhanc		Model 4. Random slope self-transc		Model 5. Both random slope (self-enhanc and self-transc)	
	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Fixed effects												
Individual level												
(Intercept)	5.33 (5.05, 5.60)	<.001	4.70 (4.43, 4.97)	<.001	4.64 (4.37, 4.91)	<.001	4.62 (4.35, 4.90)	<.001	4.65 (4.38, 4.93)	<.001	4.63 (4.36, 4.91)	<.001
SES			.13 (.12, .14)	<.001	.13 (.12, .14)	<.001	.13 (.12, .14)	<.001	.13 (.12, .14)	<.001	.13 (.12, .14)	<.001
Ideology			.17 (.16, .18)	<.001	.18 (.16, .18)	<.001	.17 (.16, .18)	<.001	.17 (.16, .17)	<.001	.16 (.16, .17)	<.001
Gender			-.09 (-.13, -.04)	<.001	-.07 (-.12, -.03)	.001	-.06 (-.11, -.02)	.004	-.06 (-.11, -.02)	.004	-.06 (-.10, -.02)	.008
Age			<-.01 (-.01, <-.01)	<.001	<-.01 (-.01, <-.01)	<.001	<-.01 (<-.01, <-.01)	<.001	<-.01 (-.01, <-.01)	<.001	<-.01 (-.01, <-.01)	<.001
Self-enhanc					.05 (.02, .08)	.002	.05 (-.03, .12)	.228	.05 (.02, .08)	.002	.05 (-.02, .12)	.153
Self-transc					-.10 (-.13, -.06)	<.001	-.08 (-.11, -.04)	<.001	-.04 (-.13, .05)	.349	-.04 (-.12, .04)	.300
Country level												
GINI			.01 (-.02, .04)	.441	.01 (-.02, .04)	.445	.01 (-.02, .04)	.490	.02 (-.02, .05)	.314	.01 (-.02, .04)	.454
HDI			-1.55 (-3.79, .70)	.178	-1.63 (-3.88, .62)	.156	-1.08 (-3.30, 1.15)	.343	-1.04 (-3.26, 1.18)	.359	-1.80 (-4.08, .48)	.751
Random effects												
σ^2	7.36		7.13		7.12		7.09		7.09		7.07	
τ_{00}	1.01 _{Country}		.91 _{Country}		.91 _{Country}		.93 _{Country}		.93 _{Country}		.93 _{Country}	
τ_{11}							.06 _{Country,enhanc_group}		.08 _{Country,transc_group}		.05 _{Country,enhanc_group} .07 _{Country,transc_group}	
<i>p</i> ₀₁							-.23 _{Country}		.25 _{Country}			
ICC	.12											
N	52 _{Country} 60,989		52 _{Country} 60,989		52 _{Country} 60,989		52 _{Country} 60,989		52 _{Country} 60,989		52 _{Country} 60,989	
Observations												
Marginal R ² /conditional R ²	.000/.121		.041/.149		.042/.151		.036/.151		.038/.152		.042/.153	
Deviance	295,044.334		293,088.152		293,018.698		292,851.028		292,845.391		292,750.209	
AIC	295,052.426		293,148.647		293,096.217		292,930.607		292,924.917		292,828.022	
log-Likelihood	-147,523.213		-146,565.324		-146,537.109		-146,452.303		-146,449.458		-146,401.011	

Note: β s are standardized. *p*-values < .05 are shown in bold. Self-enhanc = self-enhancement values; Self-transc = self-transcendence values; HDI = Human Development Index.

TABLE 2
Multilevel regression analyses on attitudes towards economic inequality using restricted maximum likelihood (REML)

	<i>Model 6a</i>		<i>Model 6b</i>	
	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	β (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Fixed effects				
(Intercept)	4.48 (4.04, 4.92)	<.001	4.49 (4.05, 4.93)	<.001
Individual level				
SES	.14 (.13, .15)	<.001	.14 (.13, .15)	<.001
Ideology	.18 (.17, .20)	<.001	.18 (.17, .19)	<.001
Gender	-.06 (-.10, -.01)	.028	-.06 (-.11, -.01)	.019
Age	-.01 (-.01, -.00)	<.001	-.01 (-.01, -.00)	<.001
Self-enhancement	.07 (.04, .12)	<.001	.04 (.01, .08)	.014
Self-transcendence	-.10 (-.14, -.06)	<.001	-.12 (-.16, -.08)	<.001
Country level				
GINI	.02 (-.03, .07)	.356	.02 (-.03, .07)	.354
HDI	-3.74 (-13.64, 6.17)	.460	-3.78 (-13.69, 6.13)	.455
Social mobility	.02 (-.07, .11)	.690	.02 (-.07, .11)	.682
Cross level interaction				
Self-enhancement * Social Mobility	.01 (.01, .01)	<.001		
Self-transcendence * Social Mobility			-.01 (-.01, -.01)	<.001
Random effects				
σ^2	7.16		7.16	
τ_{00}	.99 _{Country}		1.00 _{Country}	
N	38 _{Country}		38 _{Country}	
Observations	46,948		46,948	
Marginal R ² /Conditional R ²	.052/.168		.052/.168	
Deviance	225,822.998		225,843.284	
AIC	225,917.421		225,937.508	
log-Likelihood	-112,945.710		-112,955.754	

Note: *p*-values < .05 are shown in bold.

economic inequality and what variables allow predicting them. In the current research, we tested how a particular cultural manifestation at the individual level, such as values that might shape attitudes towards economic inequality. Our results showed that self-enhancement values predict positively, whereas self-transcendence values negatively predict attitudes towards economic inequality confirming hypotheses 1 and 2. In other words, the more self-enhancement values are endorsed, the more economic inequality is preferred; whereas, the more self-transcendence values are endorsed, the less economic inequality is preferred. Self-transcendence and self-enhancement values stand apart from common predictors of attitudes towards inequality, such as HDI, subjective SES, political ideology, gender, and age. Although the standardised effects size of values predicting attitudes towards economic inequality are smaller than the effects of other predictors such as political ideology and SES, values have a unique and meaningful contribution to explain attitudes towards inequality. Unlike political ideology and SES that rely at the individual level, values can create a normative climate that shapes people's behaviours and responses towards inequality. Furthermore, values have additive effects that create a culture that reinforces societal narratives that enhance or discourage economic inequality.

We argued that values shape attitudes towards economic inequality because individuals tend to desire an environment that improves their opportunities to achieve their goals (Yamagishi, 2011). Self-enhancement and self-transcendence values are two poles of the dimension that capture the conflict between emphasising one's versus others' interest (Schwartz's, 1992). Environments with high economic inequality provide a self-interest-normative climate (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020); consequently, those who have self-enhancement values guiding their life should prefer to live in higher economic inequality contexts because they are more appropriate to pursuit one's interests. Indeed, our results suggest that the more individuals support self-enhancement values, the stronger they support economic inequality. In contrast, environments with low economic inequality provide an other-oriented normative climate (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). In line with this idea, our results suggest that the more individuals support self-transcendence values, the less they prefer economic inequality.

These results are in line with the functionalist approach of the consequences of economic inequality, which holds that different levels of economic inequality provide contexts in which some attitudes and behaviours are more functional, and therefore, preferable than

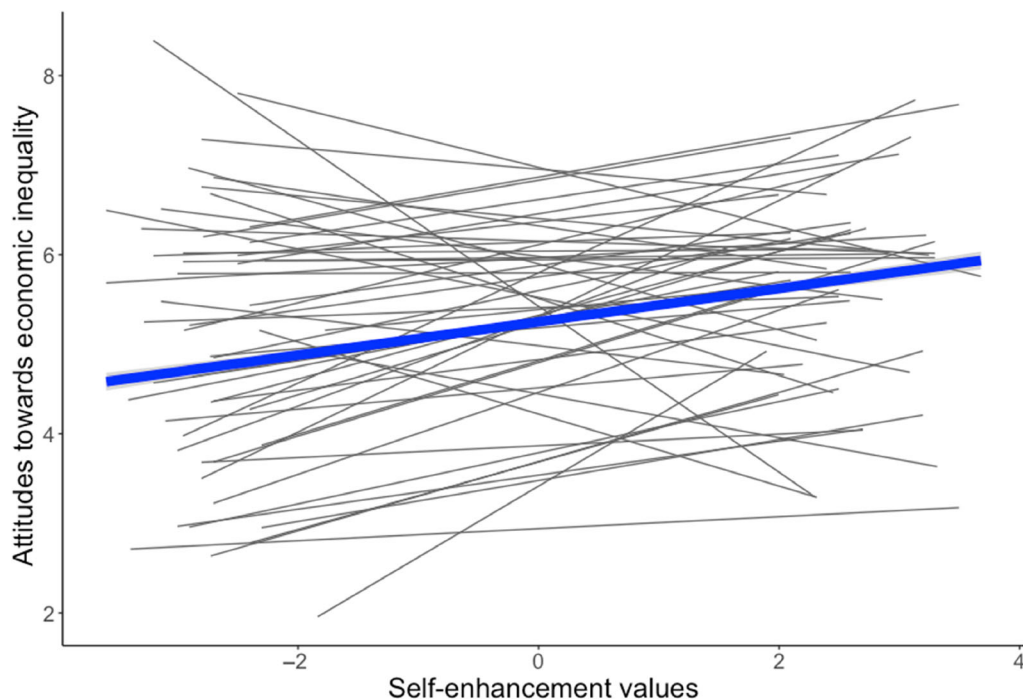


Figure 1. Within-country association plot of the relationship between self-enhancement values and ideal economic inequality.

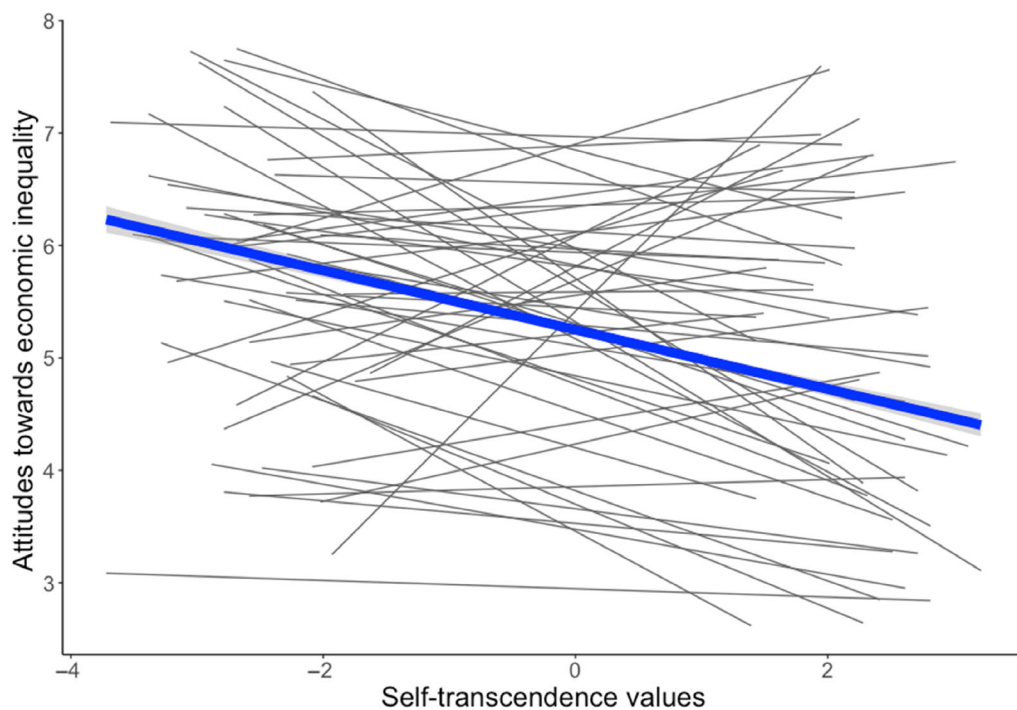


Figure 2. Within-country association plot of the relationship between self-transcendence values and ideal economic inequality.

others (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). In this vein, previous research has shown that individuals living in a context with higher (vs. lower) levels of economic inequality tend to engage more with self-enhancement values and practices

(e.g., Du et al., 2022). Our research expands these results showing that higher self-enhancement values also predict support of economic inequality. This pattern of results suggests a vicious cycle in which higher levels of economic inequality predict more self-enhancement values,

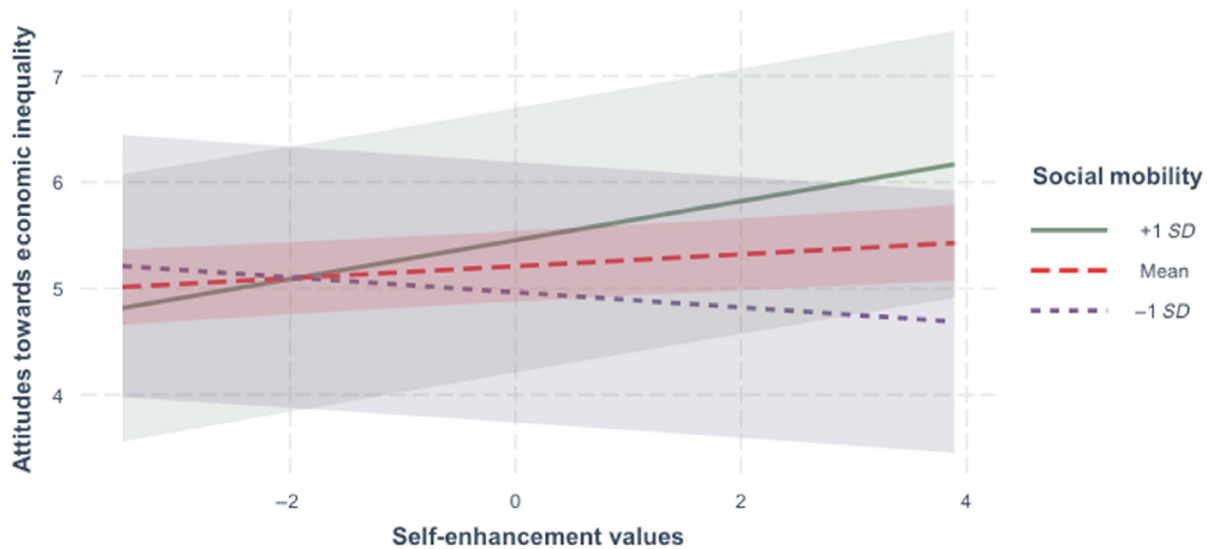


Figure 3. Cross-level interactions effect between self-enhancement values (level 1) and social mobility (level 2) to predict attitudes towards economic inequality (level 1).

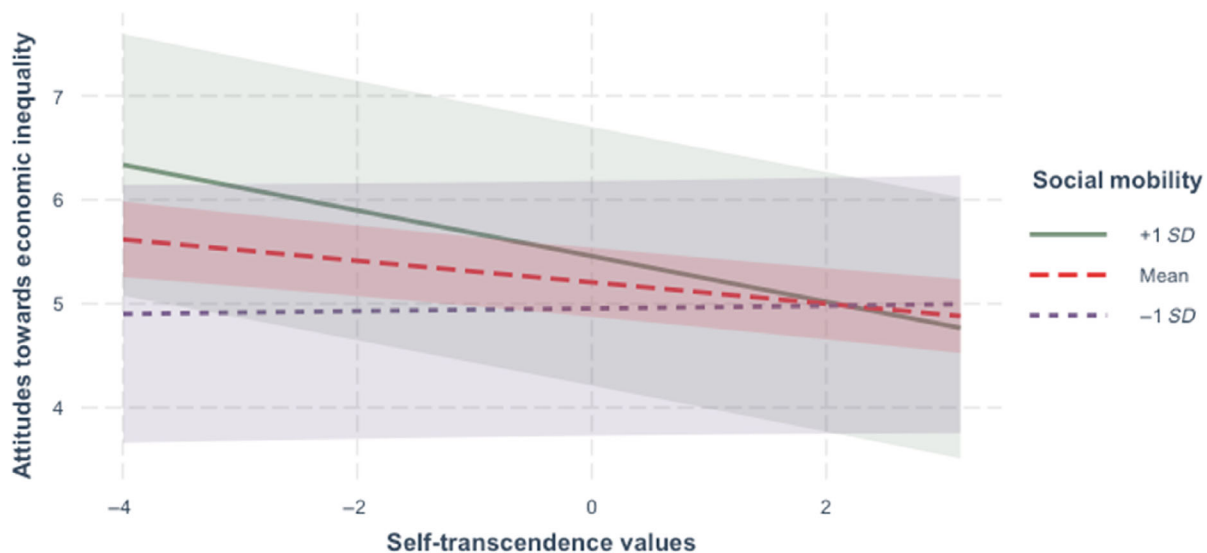


Figure 4. Cross-level interactions effect between self-transcendence values (level 1) and social mobility (level 2) to predict attitudes towards economic inequality (level 1).

which, in turn, predict higher attitudes towards economic inequality. Future research should delve deeper into this cycle.

Given that the data set used to conduct our analyses was collected with global representative samples, the current research provided strong arguments to generalise our results. However, we should note that the effect of both self-enhancement and self-transcendence on attitudes towards economic inequality become nonsignificant when we include the random slope. These results might suggest there are important moderators that condition this effect. Indeed, Figures 1 and 2 show that in some countries, the relationship between individual values and

attitudes towards economic inequality differs than the pan-cultural relationship.

Considering cultural values predict attitudes towards economic inequality and that people desire contexts that improve their opportunities to achieve their goals, we reason that it would be necessary to account for other structural variables that allow people to attain their objectives. If someone has a life goal based on self-enhancement values, it is expected that they prefer a more unequal and hierarchical context because it provides an environment in which they have more odds to achieve their goals of obtaining more status in the social hierarchy. However, to do so, people need to be able to

move up the hierarchy ladder in that context. For this reason, we argue that social mobility could be a potential moderator, as our results show.

According to our results, the relationship between values and attitudes towards economic inequality only occurs in those countries in which social mobility is moderate or high, which is in line with our functionalist approach and H3 and H4. However, in the countries with low social mobility, the relationship between self-transcendence and attitudes towards economic inequality was nonsignificant, whereas the relationship between self-enhancement and attitudes towards economic inequality was negative. These last results suggest that, in context with low social mobility, individuals with higher self-enhancement values might prefer lower levels of economic inequality as a strategy to avoid the frustration of not being able to achieve their life goals based on their values.

Nevertheless, further research might explore additional moderators that explain in a fine-grained way the relationships between values and attitudes towards economic inequality. For instance, the level of religiosity might moderate this relationship. Indeed, self-transcendence values closely relate to religion (Saroglou et al., 2004) and religion usually has provided a set of beliefs that legitimise inequalities (Wisman & Smith, 2011). Therefore, self-transcendence values might predict positively attitudes towards economic inequality in countries with high religiosity; whereas it might predict negatively attitudes towards economic inequality in countries with low religiosity.

Previous research found that the level of (objective and perceived) economic inequality relates to how individuals consider it (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2021; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Mijts, 2021). However, we did not find a significant relationship between objective economic inequality (Gini index) and attitudes towards economic inequality. As previous research has shown, perceived economic inequality not only depends on actual economic inequality but also on a reflection of system justification and fairness considerations (Du & King, 2022). Therefore, future research could explore these concepts, incorporating a measure of perceived economic inequality across countries.

Apart from economic inequality, subjective SES and political ideology were pointed to as crucial predictors of attitudes towards economic inequality (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017, 2021; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Gelman et al., 2007). In line with previous research, we found that individuals with higher subjective SES and supporters of right-wing political ideologies preferred higher levels of economic inequality. These relationships function as evidence of the way SES shapes ideology and that self-interest motivation can explain the (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017).

Although the current results extend the predictors of attitudes towards economic inequality, we should note

that our data are correlational, which limits our causal inference. Future research should address this limitation and conduct experimental research in which individual values can be manipulated. However, given that individual values are conceptualised as a set of preferences that are relatively permanent (Schwartz, 1992), manipulating them with an experimental paradigm could be difficult. Alternatively, indirect evidence of the causal link might be explored in future research.

Another limitation we should highlight is that attitudes towards economic inequality were measured with a single item. Although this is an usual practice in large surveys, using one item could have limited the validity of our measure. Although some single-item measures have been proven reliable, it would be prudent to replicate the current results with a multi-item measure of attitudes towards economic inequality.

In sum, cultural manifestations are crucial to understand economic outcomes because they shape preferences. The current research shows how cultural values at the individual level can predict attitudes towards economic inequality around the world. We extended previous research that showed that economic inequality, subjective SES, and political orientation predicted attitudes towards economic inequality, providing empirical evidence that showed that self-enhancement and self-transcendence values also shaped attitudes towards economic inequality. Therefore, this research contributes to understanding how cultural values shape the preferences for the level of economic inequality, which is a crucial social and economic issue to address.

ETHICS STATEMENT

We used secondary data. Ethical approval was obtained by the team responsible of World Values Survey (see Inglehart et al., 2014).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1. Means and standard deviation (in brackets) of the main variables.

Table S2. Correlations of the main variables at level 2 (variables at level 1 were aggregated).

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