

**Tesis doctoral**  
**Programa de doctorado en Psicología**

**El Círculo Vicioso de la Desigualdad Económica:  
El rol de las percepciones e ideologías de la  
desigualdad**

**The Vicious Cycle of Economic Inequality:  
The role of perceptions and ideologies of inequality**

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**Nota conceptual sobre el diseño de la portada:** La portada integra varios elementos claves del planeamiento de esta tesis. En el centro, hay un ojo que percibe la realidad externa situada al lado izquierdo y representada por una balanza. Esta balanza representa la idea de la (des)igualdad y la (in)justicia que hay en la sociedad. Esta realidad pasa a través del lente ocular que representa la percepción subjetiva de la desigualdad y la proyecta en diferentes direcciones y colores según las ideologías de las personas. Esta metáfora rodeada por la serpiente de Uróboros, la cual se engulle a sí misma, representando los ciclos que se perpetúan a sí mismos, en este caso, el círculo vicioso de la desigualdad.

**Conceptual note about the front cover:** The front cover integrates several key aspects of the core argument of this doctoral thesis. In the middle, there is an eye that perceives the external reality, placed to the left, represented by a balance. This balance represents the ideas of (in)equality and (in)justice that exist in society. This reality passes through the eyepiece lens that represents the subjective perception of inequality and projects it to the right in different directions on colours in accordance to the ideology of people. This metaphor is surrounded by the Uroboros snake, which swallows itself, representing self-perpetuating cycles, in this case, the vicious cycle of economic inequality.

*“it is wrong to see today’s high inequality*

*as the product of forces*

*over which we have no control,”*

*— Anthony B. Atkinson*

*“La obra maestra de la injusticia*

*es parecer ser justa sin serlo”*

*— Platón*

*“La verdad de los pueblos (...) no está en su presente de opresión,*

*sino en su mañana de libertad;*

*la verdad de las mayorías populares no hay que encontrarla*

*sino que hay que hacerla”*

*— Ignacio Martín-Baró*



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*A mi familia*



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# *Overview*



Despite the extraordinary increase of economic inequality over the last years, and its pernicious effects at the political, economic, social and individual level, its acceptance and justification are widespread (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, 2018). This indicates that objective economic inequality—understood as the unequal distribution of economic resources among individuals or groups—does not influence directly how individuals react to inequality, but it rather depends on how such inequality is subjectively perceived (Evans & Kelley, 2018; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Hauser & Norton, 2017). The perception of economic inequality does not mirror the objective reality, but rather it is the subjective estimation of the distribution of economic resources in accordance to several social psychological factors. These factors not only determine how much inequality is perceived, but also how it is perceived and to what extent it is considered fair and proper. However, there are some paradoxes associated to perception of economic inequality that facilitate its legitimization. In fact, under certain circumstances, perceived economic inequality can feed a vicious cycle in which perceived greater economic inequality lead to higher acceptance of inequality, such acceptance leads to lower support for redistribution, and this in turn, generates higher justification of economic inequality and more resistance to social change.

Accordingly, in this doctoral dissertation we aim to analyse the joint influence of perceived economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs on the acceptance of economic inequality and support for redistributive measures aimed at reducing inequality. Particularly, we analyse how system justifying-beliefs condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and 1) the level of economic inequality considered as ideal; and 2) support for the redistribution of resources. To achieve this goal, we posit the following guiding research questions:

- Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality?
- Do system-justifying beliefs condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?
- Do Ideal levels of economic inequality influence (suppress) the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?

Moreover, taking into account that responses toward economic inequality not only depend on how much inequality is perceived, but also on how such inequality is perceived from the perspective of individuals' daily-life; we raised the following question:

- How do people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life?

## *Overview*

Our general claim is that the perception of economic inequality interacts with system-justifying ideologies to generate a greater legitimation of economic inequality. Particularly, in this thesis we argue that: 1) perception of economic inequality is correlated to a greater acceptance of inequality among individuals who more justify the system—people who believe more in meritocracy and equality of opportunities; 2) perceiving more economic inequality is related to more support for redistributive policies among individuals who do not justify the economic system; 3) the ideal level of economic inequality that individuals are willing to accept can counteract the effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution; and 4) that perception of economic inequality is a multi-dimensional construct that contains several factors from people’s daily-life, which are not reducible to monetary and numeric estimates of how resources are distributed.

The current dissertation is structured in three sections. In the first section, Chapter 1 presents the conceptual framework we used to approach to our research questions, namely: economic inequality as social psychological phenomenon, perception of economic inequality, system-justifying ideologies, and support for redistribution. In Chapter 2 we outline our research by stating the motivations, research questions, aims, and general claims of this thesis.

In the second part, we present the empirical section of the research. In Chapter 3 we develop the first research question and examine whether system-justifying ideologies—beliefs in meritocracy and equality of opportunities—exacerbate the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality. To test this idea, we used data from an international database composed of representative samples of individuals in 41 countries across the world. In Chapter 3, 4 and 5, we address the second research question through several correlational studies. To these end, we used secondary data coming from international surveys, as well as primary data we collected from a sample of individuals in a highly unequal context, such as Colombia. In Chapters 6 and 7 we addressed the third research question, in which we explore both qualitative and quantitatively how economic inequality is perceived in the daily life of people in contexts with different levels of economic inequality, such as Colombia and Spain.

In general, our findings confirmed that perceived economic inequality was related, with some nuances, to acceptance of economic inequality and support for redistribution. We found that perceived economic inequality was positively related to the acceptance of economic inequality and support for redistribution, but system justifying ideologies moderated such associations. On the one hand, the more perceived economic inequality,

the more accepted economic inequality, but this relationship was stronger for those people who highly endorsed system-justifying beliefs. On the other hand, the more individuals perceive economic inequality, the more they support redistribution, but that was particularly true for people who rejected system-justifying ideologies, whereas there was no relationship, or was significantly smaller, among people that did justify the system. We also found that the acceptance of economic inequality—also called ideal economic inequality—counteract the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution. In this vein, we extended our hypothesized model by including socioeconomic status (SES), and found that high SES participants supported less redistributive policies due to higher perception and acceptance of economic inequality. In the latter empirical chapters, we found that people perceived economic inequality beyond the monetary and numeric distribution of economic resources, but they instead were more focused on the implications of income disparities on access to opportunities, capabilities, and other social resources.

In the third and last part of this thesis, we discuss our findings in accordance to our guiding research questions outlined before. We discuss the impact of existential standards, such as perceived economic inequality, on defining the ideal state of affairs. In other words, people use what they see, as a reference point to make judgments about what it should be. We argue that this association is upheld both by cognitive and motivational underpinnings. From a cognitive perspective, people use information available in their surroundings to make judgments and decisions about social reality. As such, there are cognitive biases that favour *status quo*, such as the anchoring or the mere existence heuristics, the type of framing, or even some measurement biases (e.g., Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). From a motivational perspective, individuals have a disposition to rationalize and justified the *status quo* (Friesen, Laurin, Shepherd, Gaucher, & Kay, 2018; Jost, Badaan, Goudarzi, Hoffarth, & Mogami, 2018). Therefore, ideologies work as motivated social cognitions that fulfil social psychological needs (certainty, safety, social affinity) that contribute to (de)legitimize inequalities.

As a whole, our findings highlight the importance of social psychological mechanisms, such as perceptions and ideologies of inequality, that work in tandem to legitimize the *status quo*, feeding the vicious cycle of economic inequality. However, these same mechanisms are useful to promote social change. Indeed, fixing perceptions of economic inequality, and engaging in ideologies that focus more on the processes (e.g., opportunities) rather than in the outcomes (e.g., incomes), might be a promising venue to



## Overview

create interventions that raise more concerns about inequality and bolster civic participation in favour of a more equal society. Further research should continue exploring the interplay between cognitive, motivational, and situational factors that uphold the *status quo*, with the purpose of finding new ways to break pernicious cycles that undermine individuals' well-being.

Taking into account that the empirical chapters are written for being published in peer-reviewed journals, and that some of them are already published or have been submitted for evaluation; some of the concepts and research questions could appear in several sections of this thesis. Therefore, we tried to keep the theoretical chapter in a general format, presenting the main theoretical foundations and empirical review related to our research topic; whereas the introduction of each chapter present in detail the empirical antecedents and implications for each research question. Likewise, we integrated the references of all the chapters in one single section, so we avoid repetition of references throughout the document. In addition, we endorsed open science practices throughout this research. We provide supplementary materials for all empirical chapters (e.g. code to reproduce analysis, raw data, complementary tables, and figures), which are publicly available at the Open Science Framework platform through the links provided throughout this document.

Finally, following the guidelines of the international doctorate programme at the University of Granada, some sections of this dissertation are written in Spanish, whereas others are written in English, or in both languages.

# *Resumen*



A pesar del extraordinario incremento de la desigualdad económica en los últimos años y de sus efectos perniciosos a nivel político, económico, social e individual, los niveles de aceptación y justificación de la desigualdad siguen siendo ampliamente generalizados entre las personas (Jost, Becker, et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2018). Esto quiere decir que la desigualdad económica objetiva—entendida como la distribución inequitativa de recursos económicos entre personas o grupos—no tiene una influencia directa sobre cómo las personas reaccionan ante este fenómeno, sino que depende más bien de cómo se perciba subjetivamente tal desigualdad (Evans & Kelley, 2018; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Hauser & Norton, 2017). La percepción de la desigualdad económica no refleja la realidad objetiva, ni tampoco consiste en una mera estimación de la distribución de recursos económicos; sino más bien, es el resultado de la interacción entre varios factores sociales (e.g. cultura, historia, política, etc.) e individuales (e.g. motivaciones, creencias, sesgos, etc.). Estos factores no sólo determinan qué tanta desigualdad se percibe, sino también cómo se percibe y en qué medida es considerada justa y apropiada. Sin embargo, hay algunas paradojas asociadas a la percepción de la desigualdad económica que contribuyen a su legitimación. De hecho, bajo ciertas circunstancias, la percepción de la desigualdad económica hace parte de un círculo vicioso donde: percibir más desigualdad se relaciona con un mayor grado de aceptación; esta aceptación se asocia con un menor apoyo a medidas que buscan reducir tal desigualdad; y en consecuencia, se justifica la desigualdad económica y se obstaculizan las posibilidades de cambio.

En consecuencia, esta tesis doctoral busca analizar la influencia de la percepción de la desigualdad económica y las ideologías que justifican el sistema sobre la aceptación de la desigualdad y el apoyo a medidas redistributivas orientadas a su reducción. Particularmente, analizamos cómo las ideologías que justifican el sistema condicionan la relación que hay entre la desigualdad económica percibida y 1) la desigualdad económica que las personas creen que debería existir (desigualdad ideal); y 2) el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos. Para desarrollar este objetivo, en esta tesis doctoral nos planteamos responder las siguientes preguntas:

- ¿La relación entre la desigualdad económica percibida y la desigualdad económica considerada como ideal está condicionada por las ideologías que justifican el sistema?
- ¿La relación entre la percepción de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a las medidas redistributivas está condicionada por las ideologías que justifican el sistema?

## *Resumen*

- ¿El grado de desigualdad económica ideal influencia (suprime) el efecto de la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos?

Además, teniendo en cuenta que las reacciones ante la desigualdad económica dependen no sólo de qué tanta desigualdad se percibe, sino también de cómo esa desigualdad es percibida por las personas en su vida cotidiana, también nos planteamos responder la siguiente pregunta:

- ¿Cómo se percibe la desigualdad económica desde la perspectiva de las experiencias de vida cotidiana de las personas?

Nuestro planteamiento general es que la percepción de la desigualdad económica interactúa con las ideologías que justifican el sistema para producir una mayor legitimación de la desigualdad. Concretamente, en esta tesis planteamos que: 1) la percepción de la desigualdad económica está asociada a una mayor aceptación de la desigualdad entre las personas que justifican más el sistema—las personas que creen más en la meritocracia y la igualdad de oportunidades; 2) percibir mayor desigualdad económica está asociada a un mayor apoyo a las políticas redistributivas entre las personas que justifican menos el sistema; 3) el grado de desigualdad que las personas están dispuestas a tolerar, puede suprimir el efecto de la desigualdad percibida sobre el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos; y 4) que la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un constructo multidimensional que incluye muchos factores del contexto y vida cotidiana de las personas, que no se reducen a la estimación numérica de cómo se distribuyen los recursos económicos monetarios.

La presente disertación se estructura en una parte conceptual, otra empírica y una final de discusión y conclusiones. En la primera parte, el capítulo 1 presenta el marco conceptual de referencia que hemos utilizado para abordar nuestra pregunta de investigación y cada uno de los constructos abordados en esta tesis: la desigualdad económica como fenómeno psicosocial, la percepción de la desigualdad económica, las ideologías que justifican el sistema, y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos. En el capítulo 2 se presenta la motivación, preguntas de investigación, objetivos y planteamiento general de la tesis.

En la segunda parte presentamos el desarrollo empírico de la disertación. En el capítulo 3 desarrollamos la primera pregunta de la investigación y evaluamos si las ideologías que justifican el sistema—creencias en la meritocracia e igualdad de oportunidades—, exacerba la relación entre la desigualdad percibida y la desigualdad aceptada. Para probar esta idea, utilizamos datos de una encuesta internacional con muestras representativas de 41 países alrededor del mundo. Los capítulos 3, 4 y 5, abordan

la segunda pregunta de la investigación a través de diferentes estudios correlacionales. Para ello se usaron datos secundarios de encuesta a nivel internacional, así como también realizamos estudios con población general y de estudiantes universitarios en un contexto altamente desigual, como por ejemplo el contexto colombiano. En los capítulos 6 y 7 desarrollamos la tercera pregunta de investigación, en donde exploramos de forma cualitativa y cuantitativa cómo se percibe la desigualdad económica en contextos económicos con diferentes grados de desigualdad, como supone el caso de Colombia y España.

En general, nuestros resultados confirmaron que la desigualdad económica percibida estuvo relacionada con la aceptación de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos. Encontramos que la percepción de la desigualdad económica estuvo positivamente relacionada con la aceptación de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a la redistribución, pero estas relaciones estuvieron moderadas por las ideologías que justifican el sistema. Por un lado, cuanto más desigualdad económica percibida, mayor desigualdad económica fue aceptada, pero esta relación fue más fuerte entre las personas que aceptaron más las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad (e.g., creencias en la meritocracia e igualdad de oportunidades). Por otra parte, cuánto mayor fue la desigualdad económica percibida, mayor fue el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos, pero esto ocurrió sólo en las personas que rechazaron las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad, mientras que esa relación no tuvo lugar (o fue significativamente menor) entre las personas que sí creían en tales ideologías. También encontramos que la aceptación de la desigualdad económica (denominada en esta tesis como “desigualdad económica ideal”) contrarrestó el efecto de la desigualdad percibida sobre el apoyo a la redistribución. En línea con estos resultados, incluimos el status socioeconómico (SES) con el fin de ampliar el modelo evaluado anteriormente y encontramos que las personas de mayor SES apoyaron menos las políticas redistributivas debido a una mayor percepción y aceptación de la desigualdad económica. En los últimos capítulos empíricos, también mostramos que la desigualdad económica percibida se extiende más allá de la distribución numérica de recursos económicos monetarios, enfocándose más bien sobre las implicaciones de tales desigualdades en cuanto al acceso a oportunidades, capacidades y otros recursos sociales.

En la tercera y última parte, se discuten los resultados de acuerdo con cada una de las preguntas orientadoras de esta disertación. Discutimos el impacto de los estándares existenciales, tal como la desigualdad económica percibida, en la definición de los estándares ideales de la realidad. En otras palabras, las personas usan lo que ven como

## Resumen

punto de referencia para hacer juicios sobre lo que debería ser. Argumentamos que esta asociación se debe tanto a mecanismos cognitivos como motivacionales. Desde una perspectiva cognitiva, las personas usan la información disponible en su entorno para crear juicios y tomar decisiones sobre la realidad social. De este modo, hay una serie de sesgos cognitivos que favorecen el *status quo*, tales como el efecto de anclaje, encuadre, la mera existencia, e incluso algunos sesgos derivados de las medidas del constructo (e.g., Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). Desde una perspectiva motivacional, las personas tienen una disposición a racionalizar y justificar el *status quo* (Friesen et al., 2018; Jost, Badaan, et al., 2018). Así, las ideologías también funcionan como una cognición social motivada que satisface necesidades psicosociales (control, seguridad, afinidad social) que contribuyen a (des)legitimar las desigualdades.

En general, nuestros resultados destacan la importancia de mecanismos psicosociales, tales como las percepciones e ideologías de la desigualdad, que trabajan en conjunto para legitimar el *status quo* y que perpetúan el círculo vicioso de la desigualdad económica. Sin embargo, estos mismos mecanismos también son claves para promover el cambio social. De hecho, corregir las percepciones de la desigualdad económica, así como proponer ideologías orientadas más a resaltar los procesos (e.g., oportunidades) que los resultados (e.g., ingresos económicos), podría ser una vía prometedora para crear intervenciones que incrementen la conciencia pública la desigualdad económica y fomente la participación ciudadana a favor de sociedades más igualitarias. Futuras investigaciones deberían continuar explorando la interacción entre factores situacionales, cognitivos y motivacionales que mantienen el *status quo*, con el propósito de encontrar nuevos caminos para romper círculos viciosos que deterioran el bienestar de los individuos y las sociedades.

Teniendo en cuenta que los capítulos empíricos se presentan en formato de artículos, de los cuales algunos ya han sido publicados o sometidos a evaluación, ciertos conceptos y problemáticas podrían repetirse en algunos apartados de esta disertación. Para ello hemos tratado de mantener el capítulo de la introducción conceptual de la tesis en una perspectiva más general, presentando los modelos teóricos sobre el tema de la investigación; mientras que en la introducción de cada capítulo empírico hay una presentación más exhaustiva de los antecedentes e implicaciones de cada pregunta de investigación. Así mismo, las referencias bibliográficas se han unificado en un único apartado al final del documento para evitar duplicidad en la información a lo largo del documento. Adicionalmente, en aras de aportar a las prácticas de la ciencia abierta, todos los artículos empíricos tienen asociado material suplementario (e.g. código para reproducir

los análisis, datos brutos, tablas y figuras complementarias.), a los que se puede acceder libremente desde la plataforma virtual Open Science Framework a través del link de acceso que se proporciona en cada capítulo.

Finalmente, siguiendo los lineamientos del programa internacional de doctorado de la Universidad de Granada, algunas secciones están escritas en español, otras en inglés y otras están escritas en ambos idiomas.





# *Capítulo 1.*

## **Marco Conceptual**



## **LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA COMO FENÓMENO PSICOSOCIAL**

La desigualdad económica es uno de los grandes desafíos de la actualidad. Diferentes organizaciones y líderes mundiales han planteado la necesidad de trabajar para reducir la desigualdad económica y luchar contra la economía de la exclusión que ésta promueve (World Economic Forum, 2019). De acuerdo con Wike (2014), la población general ha expresado su preocupación por el crecimiento de la desigualdad económica. La comunidad científica, por su parte, también se ha esforzado para comprender las causas, mecanismos y consecuencias de la desigualdad económica, a través de diferentes disciplinas como la economía, la sociología, la epidemiología, o la psicología, entre otras. Por tanto, el estudio de la desigualdad económica es una respuesta a la demanda social que existe actualmente sobre el tema.

En términos generales, la desigualdad económica consiste en la distribución inequitativa de recursos materiales entre personas o grupos dentro de un contexto específico (Peterson, 2017). Ésta puede expresarse de muchas formas: en función de los ingresos, la riqueza, la capacidad de consumo, el patrimonio antes y después de impuestos, entre otras formas que captan diferentes matices del constructo. La desigualdad económica también incluye otras dimensiones, tales como el desempeño de diferentes roles sociales, relaciones y actitudes, entre otros aspectos de la vida social que se transmiten intergeneracionalmente (Jackson, 2015). Por tanto, la forma de operacionalizar la desigualdad económica en este trabajo contempla la forma en que se distribuyen los recursos económicos en general, tanto los recursos monetarios como otros recursos inmateriales social y culturalmente valorados, por medio de los cuales las personas pueden acceder a diferentes oportunidades de desarrollo y bienestar (Haack y Sieweke, 2018; Svallfors, 2013).

La desigualdad económica ha despertado un particular interés en la actualidad. Por un lado, las crisis económicas que han afectado a distintos países alrededor del mundo y que han requerido extraordinarios rescates económicos, han puesto en evidencia la insostenibilidad de sistemas financieros orientados a maximizar sólo las ganancias de unos pocos. Por otra parte, instituciones políticas internacionales como el Fondo Monetario Internacional (FMI), el Banco Mundial (BM), la Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económicos (OECD), el Foro Económico Mundial —entre otros— han evidenciado cómo la desigualdad económica afecta también el desempeño de la economía a nivel global. Por su parte, las movilizaciones sociales ocurridas durante las “primaveras

árabes” y las ocupaciones del espacio público llevadas a cabo en Wall Street (Occupy Wall Street), en España (Movimiento 15-M), Grecia (Movimiento anti-austeridad), o Chile (movimiento estudiantil), entre otros, permitieron visibilizar esas desigualdades extremas a toda la sociedad en general. Bajo el slogan del “1% vs 99%”, la desigualdad económica se posiciona como un tema de interés general y se incorpora en el discurso público. Todo esto contribuyó ostensiblemente al resurgimiento de la desigualdad económica como un punto clave en la agenda pública, la cual había estado enfocada principalmente en temas como la pobreza, la educación o la violencia política.

Tanto la comunidad científica como las organizaciones civiles han investigado científicamente los efectos de la desigualdad económica sobre el bienestar social. Algunos estudios ha demostrado que la desigualdad económica se encuentra actualmente en unos de los niveles más altos de la historia y que ha crecido continua y significativamente desde los años 80's (Piketty, 2014). Actualmente el 1% de la población más rica se ha beneficiado del 27% del crecimiento económico desde 1980 hasta 2016; mientras que el 50% más pobre de la población tan sólo se ha beneficiado del 12% de ese crecimiento (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, y Zucman, 2018). En este mismo sentido, de acuerdo con los datos provenientes de Forbes y de los rankings mundiales de billonarios, en el año 2017 se registró el mayor incremento de la tasa de billonarios en el mundo (2043 en total), quienes acapararon el 82% del crecimiento económico global, mientras que el 50% más pobre no percibió ningún beneficio de ese crecimiento (Oxfam Internacional, 2018).

Estos niveles extremos de desigualdad económica tienen implicaciones a distintos niveles que no sólo afectan a las personas más desfavorecidas, sino a todo el conjunto de la sociedad. Específicamente, la desigualdad económica tiene consecuencias negativas sobre el crecimiento económico y la prosperidad, la democracia y los sistemas políticos y sobre el comportamiento y bienestar de las personas, entre otros aspectos (Peterson, 2017).

La desigualdad económica afecta el funcionamiento de la economía en sí misma como consecuencia de las decisiones políticas que pretenden maximizar los beneficios de unos pocos por encima de los generales (Stiglitz, 2012). Por ejemplo, los países con mayor desigualdad económica tienen un crecimiento económico más lento que aquellos con una menor desigualdad económica (Alesina y Rodrik, 1994; Easterly, 2007; Stiglitz, 2012) y esto es particularmente más acentuado en los países más pobres (Barro, 2000). Además, los países más desiguales suelen tener una economía menos sostenible a largo plazo (Berg y Ostry, 2011; Robinson y Acemoglu, 2013), puesto que gran parte del crecimiento económico se acumula en un segmento reducido de la sociedad que no permite que los

beneficios se redistribuyan para generar mayores fuentes de crecimiento (Piketty y Saez, 2014a).

La desigualdad económica también representa una amenaza a los sistemas políticos e instituciones democráticas. Los elevados niveles de desigualdad económica menoscaban la democracia cuando algunas élites con mayor poder económico ejercen gran influencia en el diseño de políticas públicas que maximizan sus beneficios en detrimento del bienestar de la sociedad en general, y en especial, de los más desfavorecidos (Bartels, 2016; Gilens, 2000). Esto se conoce como la “democracia desigual” (*unequal democracy*): la desigualdad económica produce desigualdad política, lo que a su vez redundaría en mayor desigualdad económica (Kelly y Enns, 2010). Esta desigualdad política se ve reflejada en la sobre-representación de las clases más aventajadas en los círculos de poder (Bonica, McCarty, Poole, y Rosenthal, 2013). En esta línea, Gilens (2012) evidenció que las políticas públicas sobre redistribución de ingresos gestionadas en el congreso de los Estados Unidos fueron mucho más receptivas a los intereses de los grupos más aventajados.

Por otro lado, la desigualdad económica tiene efectos perniciosos sobre el bienestar social e individual. Así, investigaciones realizadas desde diferentes disciplinas han encontrado que la desigualdad económica está asociada con menores niveles de felicidad, bienestar, auto-estima, confianza social, optimismo, control individual, peores niveles de salud física y mental (Burns, Tomita, y Kapadia, 2014; Buttrick, Heintzelman, y Oishi, 2017; Buttrick y Oishi, 2017; Cheung y Lucas, 2016; Delhey y Dragolov, 2013; Messias, 2011; Napier y Jost, 2008; Oishi y Kesebir, 2015; Osborne, Sibley, y Sengupta, 2015; Rothstein y Uslaner, 2005; Sommet, Elliot, Jamieson, y Butera, 2018; Uslaner y Brown, 2005; Wilkinson y Pickett, 2017). La desigualdad económica también se encuentra asociada con mayores tasas de criminalidad, independientemente de la densidad de la población, pobreza, composición familiar y racial (Enamorado, López-Calva, Rodríguez-Castelán, y Winkler, 2016; Hsieh y Pugh, 1993).

Además de los costos materiales, sociales e individuales que tiene la desigualdad económica, hay una dimensión moral de la misma que debe ser tomada en cuenta. Esto es, la desigualdad económica viola valores morales fundamentales como la justicia y la equidad social (Sen, 2010; Therborn, 2015). Esta dimensión moral no es menos importante que las anteriores, en tanto que los valores morales sientan las bases de las relaciones interpersonales e intergrupales, así como los sistemas de creencias y visiones del mundo. En suma, la desigualdad económica atraviesa todas las dimensiones de la vida social e

individual, motivo por el cual es importante comprender sus causas e implicaciones para procurar neutralizar sus efectos nocivos sobre el bienestar.

### **Consideraciones sobre las causas de la desigualdad económica**

Las causas de la desigualdad económica pueden ser determinadas por factores evolutivos, históricos, económicos, políticos, filosóficos, psicológicos, entre otros que requieren de una revisión mucho más amplia e integradora de la que ofrecemos en esta tesis. Por tanto, en este trabajo presentamos de forma general algunas de las causas de la desigualdad económica que conciernen a la forma en la que se percibe y explica la realidad social. En este sentido, una de las primeras referencias sobre las causas de la desigualdad tiene que ver con el ensayo sobre el origen de las desigualdades entre los hombres de Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754/1999). Este autor planteó que el ser humano vivía en un estado de “igualdad moral” en el que, a pesar de las diferencias físicas, todas las personas en su estado natural eran moral y políticamente iguales. Sin embargo, esto cambió con la invención de la agricultura, a partir de lo cual se originaron otras ideas como la propiedad y las normas destinadas a protegerla, es decir, el Estado. Desde esta perspectiva, el origen de las desigualdades sociales (y económicas) se encuentra asociada al desarrollo de las tecnologías asociadas a la agricultura, así como a la creación de autoridades políticas y procedimientos legales por las cuales se reconoce y regula la propiedad privada (Rousseau, 1754/1999).

Los desarrollos tecnológicos han estado asociados a un incremento de la desigualdad económica en diferentes momentos de la historia. Por ejemplo, la desigualdad económica tuvo un incremento importante durante la revolución industrial, debido al crecimiento económico y concentración de recursos que tuvieron unos países en comparación con otros (Atkinson, 2015; Peterson, 2017). Del mismo modo, los desarrollos tecnológicos más recientes asociados con las tecnologías de la información y comunicación ha suscitado la creación de oligopolios informáticos que concentran recursos que acrecientan las desigualdades salariales (Atkinson, 2015; Deaton, 2013; Milanovic, 2012).

El aumento de la desigualdad también se ha visto favorecido por cuestiones como las diferencias en educación, determinadas políticas públicas, las crisis económicas, los conflictos bélicos, o la pérdida de poder de negociación de los sindicatos y movimientos sociales para intervenir efectivamente en el diseño de políticas que mitiguen la desigualdad y que promueven el bienestar social (Atkinson, 2015; Milanovic, 2016; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2015). Todo ello se ha acompañado de la flexibilización y precarización del trabajo, el estancamiento de los salarios de las clases trabajadoras, la implementación de políticas

fiscales regresivas y en general las grandes reformas en los sistemas de producción que han hecho prescindibles muchos puestos de trabajo (Dabla-Norris, Kochhar, Suphaphiphat, Ricka, y Tsounta, 2015).

En este sentido, es importante subrayar que la desigualdad económica no es un fenómeno dado por la naturaleza, algo fijo o pre-establecido como el orden natural de las cosas, sino más bien, es una construcción social, política e histórica, por medio de la cual se han distribuido inequitativamente recursos, oportunidades y condiciones que conducen a diferentes niveles de desarrollo humano (Therborn, 2015). Desde esta perspectiva, las desigualdades sociales y económicas también son el producto de prácticas y discursos que moldean la forma en que los individuos se perciben y se posicionan ante sí mismos, ante los otros y ante el mundo usando categorías valoradas socialmente (Berger y Luckman, 1995; Grusky, Kanbur, y Sen, 2006; Toft, 2014). Por tanto, la realidad social (incluyendo la desigualdad económica) es percibida, naturalizada e institucionaliza mediante procesos de socialización que permiten la aceptación tácita y pasiva del *status quo* (Berger y Luckman, 1995). Así, la forma de percibir y comprender las desigualdades económicas es clave en la aceptación y perpetuación del *status quo*.



## **LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA: CARACTERÍSTICAS, IMPLICACIONES Y PARADOJAS**

Podemos conceptualizar la percepción de la desigualdad económica como la forma en que las personas ven la distribución de recursos económicos entre individuos o grupos en la sociedad (Engelhardt y Wagener, 2014). Esto implica la selección de grupos o personas de referencia, así como la estimación subjetiva de las diferencias de recursos entre ellos (Bruckmüller, Reese, y Martiny, 2017; Hadavand, 2018). La dimensión subjetiva de la desigualdad económica incluye tanto su percepción como su justificación, lo cual suele estar relacionado entre sí. El análisis de la percepción de la desigualdad económica puede enfocarse en su contenido (¿desigualdad de qué? ingresos, riqueza, consumo, etc.), en su cuantificación (¿cuánta desigualdad se percibe? ¿cómo se cuantifica la desigualdad?) o en la comparación social (¿quiénes son los grupos o personas que se comparan? ¿el 20% más rico frente al 20% más pobre? ¿el 99% frente al 1%?), entre otros aspectos. Por otro lado, la justificación de la desigualdad contempla cómo deberían estar distribuidos los recursos económicos, ya sea a través de la aceptación de las diferencias (¿cuánta desigualdad es considerada correcta, justa o apropiada?), o de la explicación de tales diferencias (¿por qué existe la desigualdad?) (Jasso y Rossi, 1977). En el presente trabajo la percepción de la desigualdad económica se conceptualiza como la representación subjetiva sobre la forma en que están distribuidos los recursos económicos (la desigualdad percibida actual), la cual sirve como punto de referencia para evaluar cómo deberían estar distribuidos tales recursos económicos (la desigualdad percibida ideal).

Así pues, la percepción de la desigualdad económica tiene además unas características particulares que la distingue de otros constructos y/o procesos psicosociales asociados: es una representación subjetiva, es una estimación que suele estar ligada a una evaluación, y es relacional y relativa según los grupos de referencia.

Una de las características fundamentales de la percepción de desigualdad económica es su naturaleza subjetiva, lo que la distingue de la desigualdad económica objetiva. En su caso, la desigualdad económica objetiva hace referencia a la distribución material de los recursos medida a través de indicadores económicos estandarizados. Por tanto, se distingue de la percepción de la desigualdad, ya que ésta última se enfoca exclusivamente en la representación subjetiva de tal distribución, lo que se puede corresponder, en menor o mayor medida, con esa realidad objetiva.

Otro atributo de la percepción de la desigualdad económica es su carácter estimativo, que bien puede estar relacionado con un componente evaluativo, pero que no

se reduce a él. Así, la percepción de la desigualdad económica implica una estimación de la forma en la que están distribuidos los recursos (a través de brechas, porcentajes, salarios, etc.), por lo que es una apreciación de la realidad social y no necesariamente una evaluación de la propia situación, aunque puede estar ligada a ella. Estas estimaciones, pueden estar afectadas por el acceso a información sobre la distribución de ingresos, la habilidad numérica de las personas, e incluso por sus juicios de valor e ideologías. Estas estimaciones de la distribución de recursos difiere de otros constructos como el estatus socioeconómico, que refleja la posición absoluta de las personas dentro de esa estructura distributiva, y que puede ser también medido en términos subjetivos (Kraus y Park, 2017). Por otro lado, la percepción de la desigualdad económica se diferencia de la privación relativa, en tanto que la primera busca comprender cómo las personas representan distribución de recursos, mientras que la segunda se orienta a la comparación social y la consecuente sensación de carencia de ciertos recursos valorados (Runciman, 1966; Smith y Pettigrew, 2014).

La percepción de la desigualdad económica tiene una naturaleza relativa y relacional, en tanto que depende de los grupos o personas de referencia seleccionados y el tipo de comparaciones que se hagan entre ellos en función de sus recursos económicos. De allí que se diferencie de otros constructos que reflejan un estado o situación concreta, tales como la pobreza o la riqueza. La pobreza o la riqueza hacen referencia a la escasez (o abundancia) de recursos que tienen ciertas personas o grupos, lo cual no implica necesariamente un proceso de comparación social entre personas o grupos, como sí ocurre en el caso de la desigualdad (Ravallion, 2011).

Teniendo en cuenta lo anterior, la percepción de la desigualdad económica puede operacionalizarse de diferentes formas, captando así distintas dimensiones del mismo constructo. La primera de ellas está directamente relacionada con la definición objetiva de la desigualdad económica en función de la distribución de ingresos económicos monetarios. Así, la percepción de la desigualdad económica puede medirse a través de la estimación de las diferencias de recursos (e.g., Jasso, 2009, 2015). Otras medidas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica se han centrado en las evaluaciones más generales sobre la distribución de recursos económicos (e.g., “la desigualdad de ingresos económicos es demasiado grande”), que mezclan tanto elementos estimativos como evaluativos (Janmaat, 2014). Y algunas otras medidas, además contemplan las experiencias individuales de las personas y las relaciones sociales que tienen en su vida cotidiana en relación a las diferencias económicas entre las personas (e.g., García-Castro, Willis, y Rodríguez-Bailón, 2018; Minkoff y Lyons, 2019; Xu y Garand, 2010).

En la Figura 1, se representan de forma gráfica las características principales de la percepción de desigualdad económica.

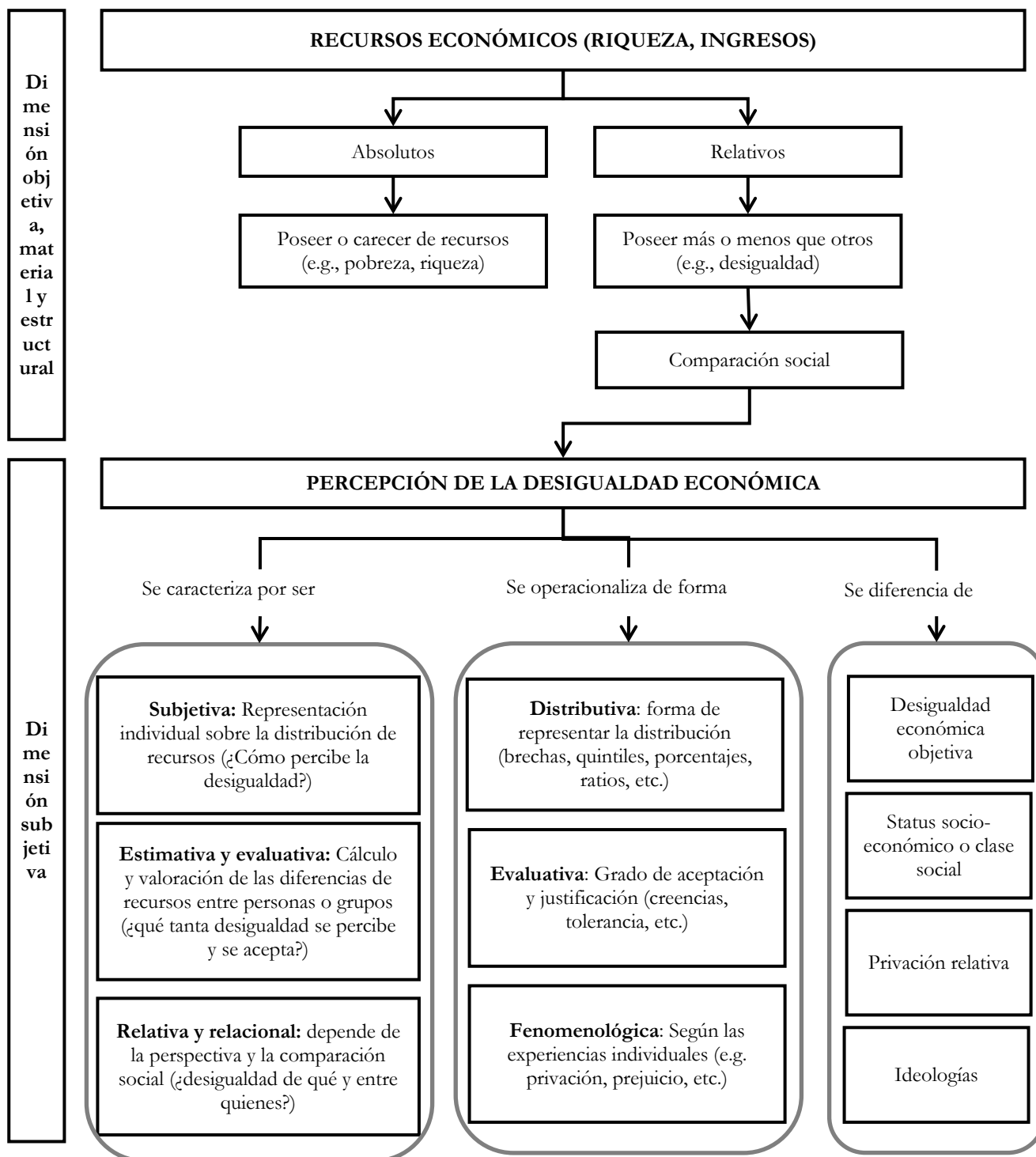


Figura 1. Características de la percepción de la desigualdad económica (elaboración propia)

### Algunas paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica

La percepción de la desigualdad tiene importantes implicaciones sobre la comprensión, aceptación y reacción que tienen las personas sobre su realidad (Major,

1994). Así, las percepciones de la desigualdad económica predicen las actitudes hacia la desigualdad incluso independientemente de las condiciones económicas objetivas (Gimpelson y Treisman, 2017; Kuhn, 2015; Schneider, 2012). Por ejemplo, independientemente de la desigualdad económica objetiva, diferentes estudios con miles de participantes alrededor del mundo han demostrado que la percepción de la desigualdad económica suele estar asociada con un mayor apoyo a políticas redistributivas orientadas a reducir tal desigualdad (Coppini y Rojas, 2018; Evans y Kelley, 2018; Fatke, 2018; Gimpelson y Treisman, 2017). La percepción de una desigualdad económica más alta también se relaciona con una mayor percepción de conflictividad social en términos de falta de confianza interpersonal, tolerancia y capital social (Kearns, Bailey, Gannon, Livingston, y Leyland, 2014), una menor disposición a cooperar (Nishi, Shirado, Rand, y Christakis, 2015), mayor percepción de amenaza y ansiedad por el status (De Botton, 2005), los cuales eventualmente pueden minar las actitudes hacia compartir y redistribuir recursos.

Además, percibir mayor desigualdad económica cuestiona la idea de que el mundo es un lugar justo y genera reacciones que pueden resultar contradictorias. Por ejemplo, dado que la percepción de la desigualdad económica viola principios de justicia e igualdad, es probable que las personas tiendan a apoyar estrategias para reducirla (Arikan y Ben-Nun Bloom, 2015); pero por otro lado, puede generar cierta disonancia cognitiva al ser una característica omnipresente en la mayoría de las sociedades contemporáneas, lo que activaría una necesidad de explicar y racionalizar la desigualdad que, en último término, podría favorecer su legitimación y perpetuación (Jost, Kay, y Thorisdottir, 2009; Kraus y Park, 2017). En este sentido, la percepción de la desigualdad económica encierra algunas contradicciones o paradojas que dificultan su comprensión. En este trabajo hemos identificado al menos tres de ellas que inciden en que se legitimen las desigualdades económicas.

Una de las paradojas relacionadas con la percepción de la desigualdad económica tiene que ver con la subestimación generalizada de los niveles de desigualdad económica actual. A pesar del continuo y exacerbado crecimiento de la desigualdad económica entre los países y dentro de cada uno de ellos (Milanovic, 2016), las personas perciben menos desigualdad de la que realmente existe (Kiatpongsan y Norton, 2014; Norton y Ariely, 2011; Norton, Neal, Govan, Ariely, y Holland, 2014). De hecho, a lo largo de los últimos 30 años, las personas se han mostrado poco preocupadas por la desigualdad económica, considerando incluso que ésta que no ha aumentado (McCall, 2013). Esta percepción

sesgada de la desigualdad económica se ha mostrado a través de una amplia variedad de indicadores, datos y muestras de participantes (Gimpelson y Treisman, 2017).

Una segunda paradoja tiene que ver con la relación entre la percepción y la legitimación de la desigualdad económica. Aunque las personas desean menos desigualdad económica de la que existe actualmente, estas dos variables están relacionadas de forma positiva, es decir, cuanto mayor es la desigualdad económica percibida, mayor es la desigualdad económica que las personas están dispuestas a tolerar. Esta paradoja ha sido demostrada en múltiples estudios, tanto de tipo correlacional como experimental (Hadler, 2005; Osberg y Smeeding, 2006; Trump, 2018; Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, López-Rodríguez, y García-Sánchez, 2015). Aunque esta asociación parezca contraintuitiva, se apoya en procesos cognitivos y motivacionales por medio de los cuales las personas suelen usar las normas descriptivas (“lo que es”) para hacer estimaciones sobre las normas prescriptivas (“lo que debería ser”) (Cialdini, Reno, y Kallgren, 1990; Kay et al., 2009).

La tercera paradoja consiste en la aparente desconexión que hay entre la percepción de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a políticas públicas orientadas a la reducción de la desigualdad. Aunque los individuos manifiestan cierto consenso en desear una sociedad menos desigual, este deseo no se traduce consistentemente en el apoyo a políticas públicas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad. Por ejemplo, pese a que los individuos desean que el gobierno reduzca las diferencias de ingresos entre los que tienen más y los que menos recursos tienen, existe una tendencia a rechazar las medidas asociadas al incremento de impuestos, incluso si esto se orienta hacia las personas con mayores ingresos económicos (Bartels, 2005). La preocupación por la desigualdad económica en sí misma tampoco parece estar asociada con un mayor apoyo al gobierno para intervenir la economía y facilitar la redistribución (Wright, 2018).

### **Mecanismos relacionados con las paradojas de la desigualdad económica**

Las paradojas de la desigualdad económica ponen en evidencia que la percepción de la desigualdad económica no refleja necesariamente las condiciones materiales objetivas, ni tampoco genera respuestas “racionales” en concordancia con los deseos o motivaciones explícitas de las personas que abogan por una mayor igualdad. Estas paradojas pueden ser explicadas por factores situacionales derivadas de los contextos objetivos en los que las personas se desenvuelven (e.g., status socioeconómico); factores cognitivos relacionados con la forma en que las personas perciben la realidad y procesan la información (e.g., sesgos cognitivos, heurísticos); así como por factores motivacionales, por los cuales hay una disposición a justificar el *status quo* y la desigualdad (e.g., orientación a la dominancia

social, justificación del sistema). En la Figura 2 se presentan las paradojas y algunos de los mecanismos que pueden facilitar su aparición (ver Figura 2).

**PARADOJAS DE LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA**

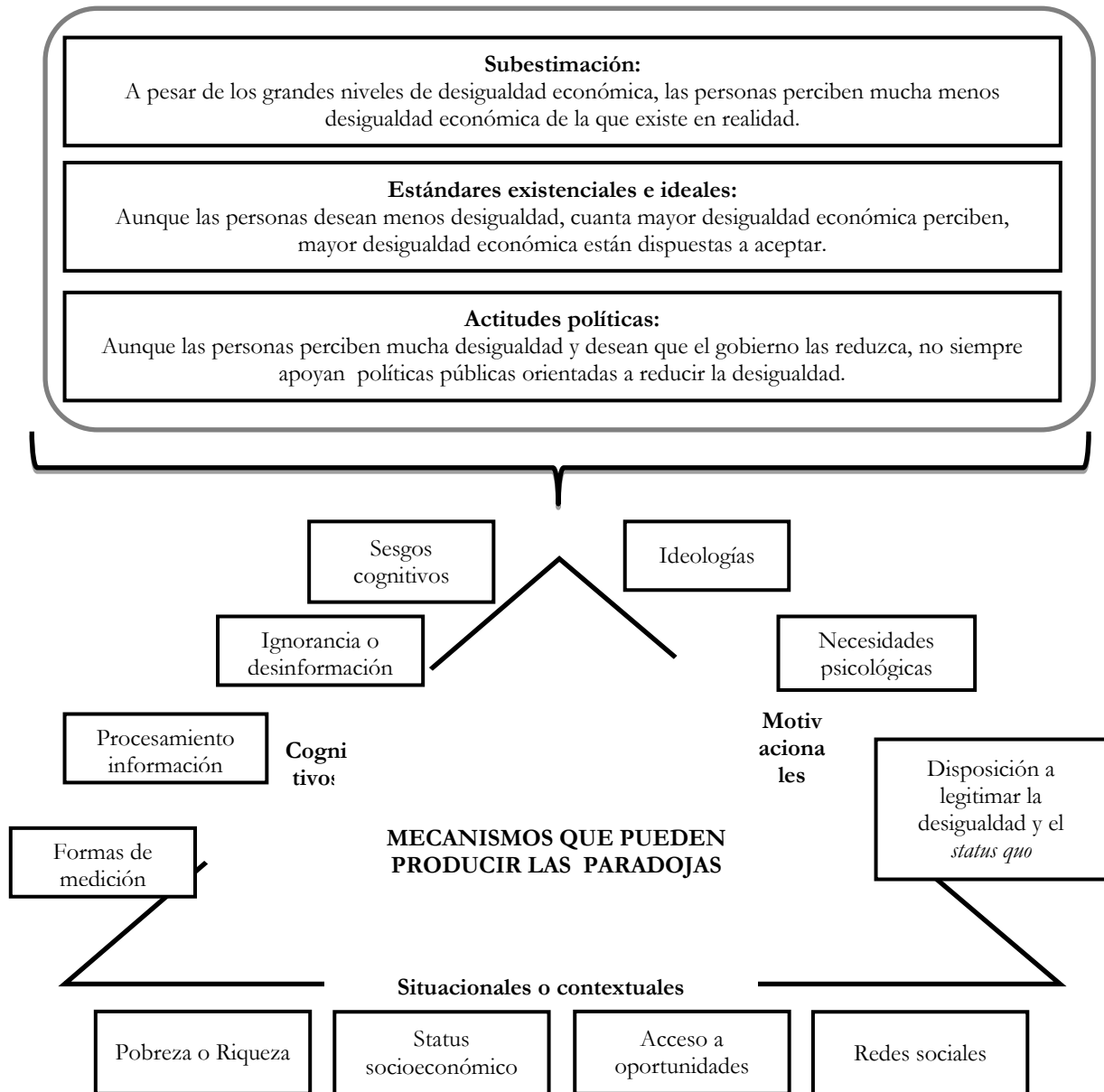


Figura 2. Paradojas y mecanismos que pueden incidir en su producción (elaboración propia)

**Factores situacionales**

Entre los factores situacionales, el status socioeconómico o la clase social es uno de los mecanismos por excelencia que moldea la forma de percibir y legitimar la realidad. La posición que ocupan las personas no sólo permite definir una consciencia de clase que determina valores e intereses, sino que también afecta otros procesos psicosociales que perpetúan la desigualdad económica (Laurin, Engstrom, y Alic, 2018; Piff, Kraus, y Keltner, 2018). Por ejemplo, las personas de clase alta no suelen ser víctimas de prejuicio y

discriminación (en comparación con las personas de clase baja), y por tanto, no están preocupadas por la desigualdad en tanto que consideran que sus logros son el resultado de su esfuerzo individual y no tanto de las circunstancias en las que viven (Thal, 2017). Otras investigaciones muestran que las personas de clase alta suelen fijarse más en objetos inanimados que en objetos animados (e.g. fotografías de personas que aparecían en la calles más que en las personas que transitaban por las mismas), por lo que es posible que las personas de clase alta perciban más la desigualdad en términos materiales que en términos sociales (Dietze y Knowles, 2016). De hecho, el contacto intergrupales e interpersonal promovidos por el hecho de pertenecer a un estrato socioeconómico determinado es una condición material y estructural que incide en que las personas puedan acceder a información y hacer estimaciones más o menos acertadas de la desigualdad económica, al igual que facilita que puedan percibirla como un fenómeno más social y no solamente monetario. Así, el status socioeconómico, al igual que otras categorías sociales, puede generar procesos de estereotipia y prejuicio entre grupos según su identidad de clase, así como la adopción de sistemas de creencias y estándares morales que acentúan las desigualdades económicas (Piff et al., 2018).

Adicionalmente, las personas subestiman y legitiman la desigualdad económica por falta de información correcta o por ignorancia sobre cómo están distribuidos los recursos económicos en la sociedad. Esta ignorancia no es sólo debida a la falta de acceso a la información especializada sobre economía, sino también a la escasez de contacto con grupos de diferente status al suyo, lo que limita la posibilidad de hacer comparaciones sociales significativas que les permitan estimar las diferencias económicas reales (Hadavand, 2018). Estas comparaciones sociales vienen determinadas por el contexto más inmediato, ya que las personas tienden a usar sus realidades más cercanas para hacer evaluaciones sobre la sociedad en general (Dawtry, Sutton, y Sibley, 2015; Galesic, Olsson, y Rieskamp, 2012; Irwin, 2018).

### ***Factores cognitivos***

A nivel más cognitivo también hay otros procesos que contribuyen a crear las paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica. Teniendo en cuenta que algunos indicadores de la percepción de la desigualdad económica son demasiado inespecíficos y otros demasiado sofisticados, estos pueden resultar algo confusos y suscitar sesgos en la forma de reportar la desigualdad económica percibida (Hadavand, 2018). Además, operacionalizar la percepción de la desigualdad económica a través de indicadores numéricos acarrea un efecto de anclaje, por medio del cual las personas usan la información disponible

más inmediata para hacer otro tipo de estimaciones semejantes. Por ejemplo, en diseños experimentales se ha demostrado que las personas ajustaron el grado de desigualdad percibida y deseada a la información que se les había proporcionado previamente sobre la desigualdad real (Pedersen y Mutz, 2018; Trump, 2018). Este efecto de anclaje está asociado a un sesgo a favor del *status quo*, por el cual las personas tienden la tendencia a preferir mantener el estado actual de las cosas (Eidelman y Crandall, 2009, 2012; Kahneman, Knetsch, y Thaler, 1991).

Otro mecanismo cognitivo que afecta a las paradojas es el encuadre (*framing*). El encuadre consiste en seleccionar ciertos aspectos de la realidad y hacerlos más visibles por encima de otros, con el fin de promover una perspectiva particular en la forma de comprender o evaluar un fenómeno (Entman, 1993). Así, la desigualdad económica puede ser percibida de diferentes formas, según en qué factor o dimensión se haga énfasis. Dado que la desigualdad económica involucra tanto a las personas más y menos aventajadas, ésta puede encuadrarse como los “ricos, o los que tienen más” o como los “pobres, o los que tienen menos”, lo cual tiene diferentes implicaciones, aunque ambas opciones sean lógicamente equivalente entre sí. Por ejemplo, cuando las personas se focalizan en los que tienen más recursos (vs. los que tienen menos), están más dispuestas a aprobar medidas que regulen los ingresos de los ricos (Lowery, Chow, Knowles, y Unzueta, 2012), legitiman menos la desigualdad económica (Bruckmüller et al., 2017) y apoyan más políticas redistributivas (Chow y Galak, 2012). Además, encuadrar la desigualdad a través del grupo más desaventajado activa representaciones basadas en las carencias y dificultades, mientras que cuando se focaliza en las persona más aventajadas se activan sus comodidades de vida (Bruckmüller et al., 2017; Lowery, Knowles, y Unzueta, 2007; Shnabel, Dovidio, y Levin, 2016).

En relación a esta dimensión cognitiva también es importante mencionar algunos sesgos cognitivos inducidos por la forma de operacionalizar (medir) la percepción de la desigualdad económica. Por ejemplo, las personas perciben y desean más desigualdad cuando se les pregunta por ella en términos de quintiles (porcentajes), que cuando se pregunta en términos de ratios (Eriksson y Simpson, 2012). Del mismo modo, se percibe y acepta más desigualdad cuando se pregunta por la desigualdad en ratios, que cuando se pregunta en valores netos (e.g., dólares) (Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). Por tanto, sobreestimar o subestimar la desigualdad económica, así como las relaciones que puedan tener esos valores con otros constructos también está afectado por las propiedades de las medidas. Por tanto, la percepción de la desigualdad económica no tiene la precisión empírica que tienen otros



indicadores económicos objetivos (e.g., índice Gini, ratio 90/10, etc.), ya que involucra una representación tanto a nivel social, como intergrupala e individual (Binelli y Loveless, 2016). La percepción de la desigualdad económica es entonces el resultado de un conjunto de experiencias, situaciones, creencias y valores que no necesariamente reflejan las estimaciones numéricas sobre cómo están distribuidos los recursos económicos (Sands, 2017). En este sentido, las paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica no son sólo el producto de la ignorancia, sino también de la interacción entre las estimaciones abstractas sobre la distribución de recursos económicos, las creencias, juicios y experiencias personales de los individuos (García-Castro et al., 2018).

### ***Factores motivacionales***

Las paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica también tienen un componente motivacional basado en la disposición individual que tienen las personas a racionalizar y justificar la realidad (Jost, 2018; Laurin, 2018). En este sentido, la teoría de la justificación del sistema plantea que las personas están motivadas a legitimar el *estatus quo* como una forma de satisfacer necesidades psicológicas básicas. Entre éstas se encuentran: las necesidades epistémicas, que están relacionadas con la motivación a reducir las incertidumbres y las ambigüedades que generan las diferentes situaciones; las necesidades existenciales, que propenden mantener un mayor control del entorno y evitar así amenazas e inseguridades para los individuos; y las necesidades relacionales, que pretenden obtener una percepción compartida de la realidad a través de la filiación social (Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, y Hardin, 2008; Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, y Hardin, 2018). Además, esta disposición individual a justificar el sistema puede exacerbase ante situaciones específicas, tales como percibir que el sistema es estable, inmutable, longevo, inevitable, o cuando es amenazado (Friesen et al., 2018; Laurin, Gaucher, y Kay, 2013; Laurin, Shepherd, y Kay, 2010). Así, aunque las personas perciban mucha desigualdad, si están motivadas a justificar el sistema —ya sea de forma disposicional o situacional— pueden estar más dispuestas a tolerar la desigualdad y resistirse al cambio social.

La motivación a justificar la desigualdad se sirve de las ideologías para legitimar las desigualdades económicas. Estos sistemas de creencias, también denominados ideologías que justifican la desigualdad o mitos legitimadores de la desigualdad, ofrecen un repertorio que explica “cómo es y debería de ser” el mundo, lo cual sirve como marco de referencia para racionalizar las desigualdades e injusticias sociales (Jost y Hunyady, 2005). Por tanto, las ideologías también afectan la percepción y legitimación de la desigualdad económica, induciendo un tipo de razonamiento motivado en el que las personas hacen estimaciones y

juicios sobre la desigualdad económica de acuerdo con sus sistemas de creencias (Kunda, 1990). Por ejemplo, las personas tienden a percibir menos y a aceptar más las desigualdades económicas cuando se adhieren más a ideologías políticas conservadoras (vs. liberales), cuando creen en la meritocracia, en la igualdad de oportunidades, en la movilidad social, en las atribuciones disposicionales (vs. situacionales) del éxito, etc. (Chambers, Swan, y Heesacker, 2014; Jost, Nosek, y Gosling, 2008; Napier y Jost, 2008).

Las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad tienen además implicaciones importantes sobre otros procesos psicosociales que perpetúan las desigualdades económicas, tales como la manifestación de prejuicio hacia los pobres, la discriminación de las clases bajas y las actitudes hacia políticas públicas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, y Tagler, 2001; Day y Fiske, 2016; Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Kay, Czaplinski, y Jost, 2010; Pratto et al., 2013). De forma similar, cuando se cree que los individuos son responsables de su situación, hay un mayor rechazo a cualquier tipo de incremento en la cuantía económica destinada a los servicios sociales orientados a ayudar a los más desaventajados (Fong, 2001; Kluegel y Smith, 1986). En este sentido, el apoyo a políticas públicas cuyo fin es reducir la desigualdad, no depende sólo de cuánta desigualdad económica se percibe, ni tampoco de la motivación por trabajar en pro de una sociedad más igualitaria, sino que además está condicionada por otros factores tales como las ideologías, las atribuciones de la pobreza, e incluso por la forma cómo se formulen las políticas públicas.

## IDEOLOGÍAS LEGITIMADORAS DE LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA

El concepto de ideología es ampliamente utilizado tanto en la literatura científica como en el discurso popular de las personas, sin que esto signifique que haya claridad sobre su significado. El concepto de ideología nace oficialmente pocos años antes de la revolución francesa como parte de la agenda del periodo de la ilustración. En ese momento la ideología se refería al estudio y enseñanza de las ideas, una disciplina científica que pretendía explicar el origen y evolución de las ideas en la sociedad (Stråth, 2013).

El intento de concebir la ideología como un campo de estudio neutral no perduró por mucho tiempo y fue politizado rápidamente. Particularmente, el concepto de ideología ha estado marcado fuertemente por su relación con el conflicto de clases propuesto por Marx y Engels. Estos autores plantearon que aquellos que poseen los medios de producción material, también tienen bajo su control los medios de producción cultural a través de los cuales se moldean las instituciones sociales, las creencias y valores que son aceptados como correctos y justos en la sociedad (Marx y Engels, 1846/2014). Estas ideologías dominantes generan una falsa consciencia que hace que las personas terminen aceptando situaciones que van incluso en contra de los intereses de su propia clase social (Marx y Engels, 1846/2014). Esta acepción de las ideologías plantea que son mecanismos que mantienen el conflicto de clases para producir y reproducir las relaciones de dominación, poder y desigualdad entre grupos de la sociedad (van der Grijp, 2011).

En esta línea, Antonio Gramsci (1977) plantea que las ideologías son mecanismos de dominación contruidos culturalmente por una comunidad de intelectuales que sobreponen las ideas de las clases dominantes y hegemónicas a las de las clases menos favorecidas. Por otra parte, Karl Mannheim, a su vez, afirma que las ideologías representan una serie de ideas o mitos de grupos sociales específicos con diferentes intereses y posiciones que justifican la dominación de unos sobre otros (Mannheim, 1936/2004). Por su parte, Althusser (1970/2005) planteó que ideología era sólo un imaginario sobre la realidad, mientras que la ciencia se ocupaba de lo verdadero y objetivo. Esta diferencia entre ideología y realidad fue abordada por personas vinculadas a la Escuela crítica de Frankfurt (y otras corrientes posestructuralistas), quienes plantearon que las ideologías representan y materializan realidades construidas social, discursiva y lingüísticamente, por tanto, desde su punto de vista las ideologías constituyen también la realidad (Stråth, 2013).

Aunque históricamente las ideologías han estado vinculadas con el conflicto, también pueden tener una connotación más neutral que funciona a nivel individual. Así, las

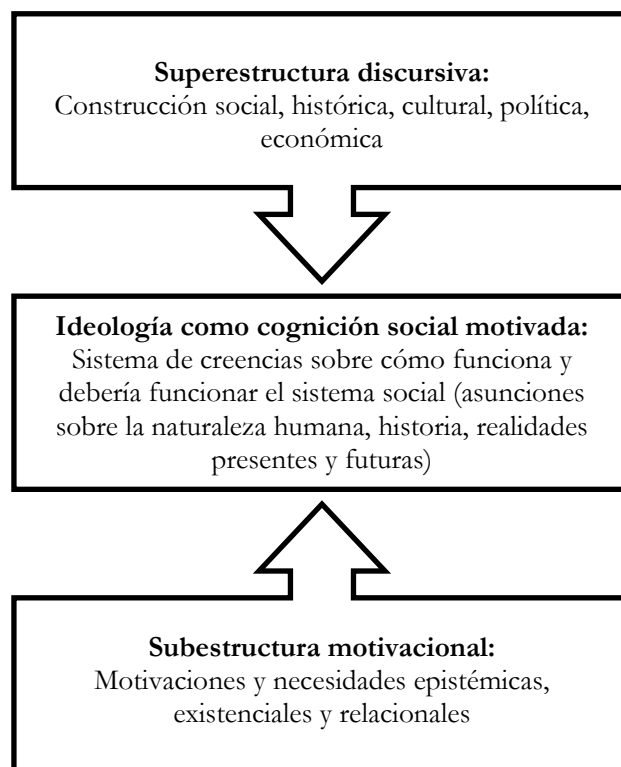
ideologías refieren al esquema cognitivo que articula muchos de los componentes de la vida social, política, económica, e incluso científica (van der Grijp, 2011).

Teniendo en cuenta la evolución que ha tenido el concepto de ideología a través de diferentes escuelas de pensamiento, es de esperar que la definición de este concepto varíe según la perspectiva que se adopte y el momento histórico que se tome como referencia. Desde una perspectiva general, el diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española define la ideología como el “conjunto de ideas fundamentales que caracteriza el pensamiento de una persona, colectividad o época, de un movimiento cultural, religioso o político” (Diccionario Real Academia Española, 2018). Desde una perspectiva crítica y discursiva, las ideologías se definen como visiones del mundo que suelen estar asociadas al poder y la dominación de unos grupos sobre otros (Leader y Mildenberger, 2018). También se han definido como un discurso por el cual las personas significan y dan sentido a la existencia, un mecanismo por el cual se interpreta y construye el mundo de forma dialéctica (van der Grijp, 2011). Desde una perspectiva más sociológica, las ideologías se definen como el conjunto de normas y valores sobre cómo debe funcionar la sociedad (Manstead, 2018); también como sistemas de actitudes y valores que están organizados en torno a un tema abstracto (Maio, Olson, Bernard y Luke, 2006); como un sistema comprensivo de afirmaciones que explica y justifica los acuerdos sociales (Huber y Form, 1973); o como un sistema de creencias para convencer a las personas de que las desigualdades e injusticias sociales son moralmente correctas (Kerbo, 2010). Desde una perspectiva más psicológica, las ideologías se definen como el conjunto de creencias, normas y prescripciones por las cuales las personas explican la realidad, proyectan su estado ideal y los medios para conseguirlo atendiendo a una serie de motivaciones individuales y necesidades psicológicas (Jost, Federico y Napier, 2009).

### **La ideología como una cognición social motivada**

La conceptualización de ideología que adoptamos en la presente tesis adopta una perspectiva psicológica, considerándola como una forma de cognición social motivada (*motivated social cognition*). Desde esta perspectiva, la ideología está ligada a una superestructura discursiva construida social e históricamente, así como también una subestructura motivacional. La primera genera todo un repertorio interpretativo que trasciende la existencia de cada persona y que se manifiesta a través de una gran variedad de dispositivos socio-culturales (e.g., educación, familia, trabajo, etc.); la segunda representa la motivación individual que tienen las personas para (re)producir cierto tipo de creencias que satisfagan sus necesidades psicológicas de control, seguridad y afiliación social (Hennes,

Hannah Nam, Stern y Jost, 2012; Jost, 2018; Jost, Federico, et al., 2009). Así, en esta tesis definimos la ideología como un sistema de creencias compartidas sobre cómo funciona y debería funcionar la sociedad, que explican, interpretan y dan sentido a la realidad (Feldman y Johnston, 2014; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski y Sulloway, 2003) a través de asunciones sobre la naturaleza humana, los eventos históricos, las realidades presentes y las posibilidades futuras (Jost, Federico et al., 2009) (ver Figura 3).



**Figura 3.** Conceptualización de Ideología adaptado de Jost et al. (2018) (elaboración propia)

La ideología entendida como una forma de cognición social motivada pretende satisfacer tres motivaciones (o necesidades psicológicas) fundamentalmente: la motivación epistémica que tiene como objetivo aumentar la sensación de certeza, predictibilidad y control sobre el entorno; la motivación existencial que procura generar una sensación de seguridad y protección frente a posibles amenazas; y una motivación relacional, que tiene como fin construir un sentido de identidad, pertenencia grupal y de realidad compartida (Jost, Federico y Napier, 2013; Jost, Federico et al., 2009). Estas motivaciones generan una predisposición a justificar el sistema que varía en función de otros factores situacionales e individuales. Por ejemplo, las personas de alto status socioeconómico tienen una mayor predisposición a legitimar el sistema como una forma de justificar su posición privilegiada; pero en el caso de las personas más desfavorecidas, éstas también pueden llegar a justificar ese sistema desigual—aunque no necesariamente en mayor medida que las personas de alto

status—como una forma de reducir el malestar que genera estar en una situación de desventaja (Cichocka y Jost, 2014). Del mismo modo, hay una mayor disposición a adherirse a ideologías que justifican el *status quo* cuando se percibe que el sistema de referencia está bajo amenaza, es inmutable, estable, inevitable, longevo y cuando se depende de él (Jost, Gaucher y Stern, 2015; Kay et al., 2009; Laurin et al., 2013; Shepherd y Kay, 2012; van der Toorn et al., 2015). Además, la motivación a justificar el sistema también puede aumentar cuando las personas reportan una mayor necesidad de cierre, cuando se sienten amenazados, perciben el mundo como un lugar peligroso o tienen saliente el concepto de muerte (Jost, Glaser et al., 2003; Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons y Landau, 2013; Landau et al., 2004).

Las ideologías también tienen un efecto paliativo que consigue reducir las emociones negativas asociadas al malestar de percibir las injusticias a nivel general e individual (Jost, Wakslak y Tyler, 2008; Osmundsen y Petersen, 2017). Las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad promueven mayores niveles de bienestar y satisfacción con el orden social imperante, lo cual incide en que haya una mayor aceptación de las autoridades y un mayor rechazo a medidas orientadas a cambiar el *status quo*, como lo podrían ser las políticas redistributivas y de asistencia social (Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Napier y Jost, 2008). Así, el efecto que tienen las ideologías para aumentar la “cohesión social” a través de la explicación de las injusticias, así como su papel para reducir las emociones negativas asociadas a las injusticias como la indignación, la culpa o la frustración pueden llevar a un estado de inactividad social y política que redundaría en la perpetuación del *status quo* (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, y Sullivan, 2003).

### **Ideologías que justifican la desigualdad económica**

Las ideologías, como sistemas de creencias que explican la realidad, pueden variar según el tipo de creencias y de sus contenidos. En cuanto al tipo de creencias, éstas pueden ser descriptivas o prescriptivas. Las ideologías descriptivas se refieren al sistema de creencias que recoge lo que las personas consideran son los principios rectores del funcionamiento actual del sistema social en su realidad (e.g., creer que en la sociedad todos tienen igualdad de oportunidades). Por otra parte, las ideologías prescriptivas se refieren a las ideas y creencias sobre cómo debería funcionar la realidad, es decir, son los ideales (abstractos) que definen la forma ideal en la que debe operar el sistema social (e.g., en la sociedad todos deberían tener igualdad de oportunidades) (Kluegel y Smith, 1986; Major y Kaiser, 2017; McCoy y Major, 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011; Zimmerman y Reyna, 2013).

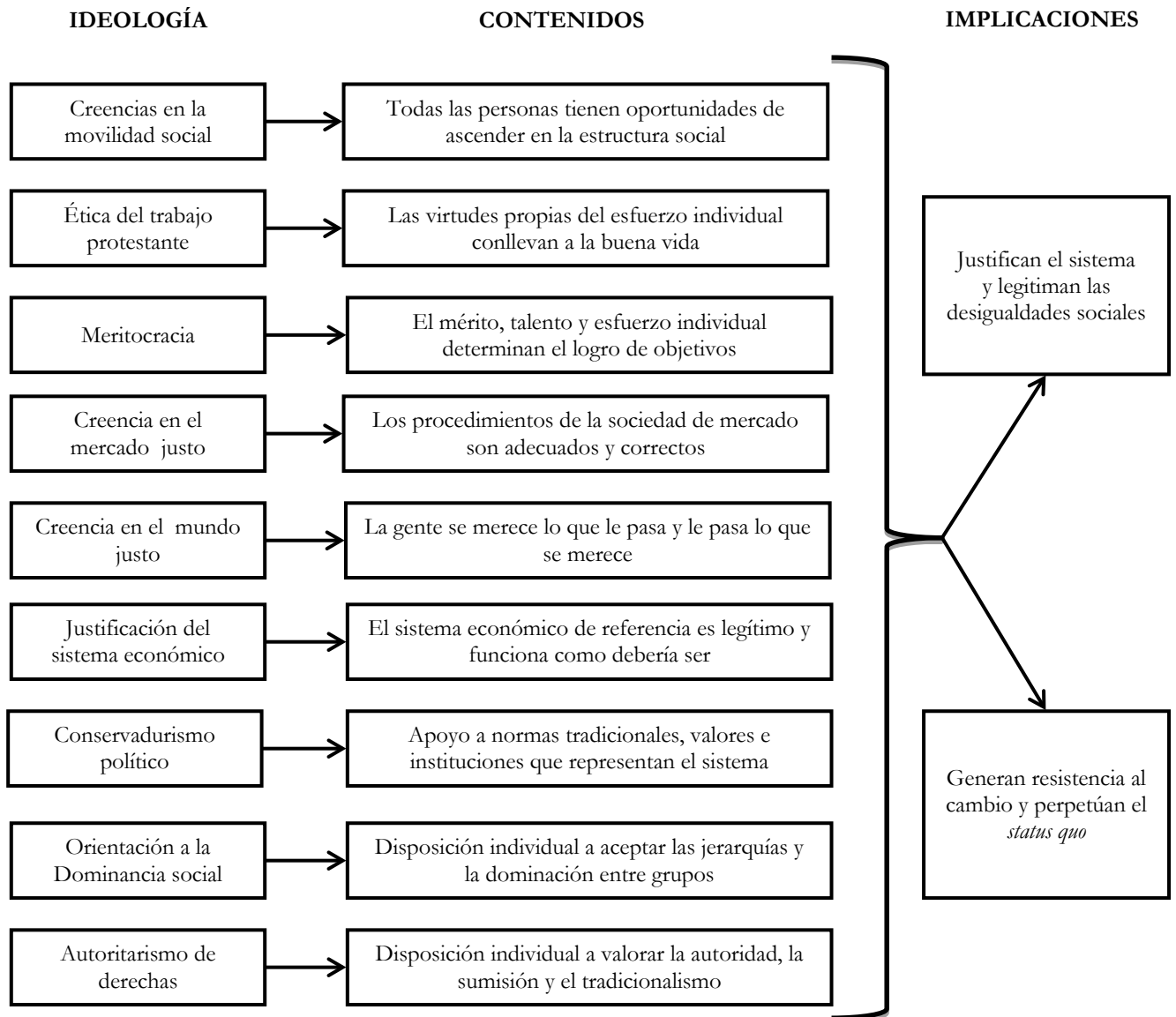
Las ideologías descriptivas y prescriptivas, aunque relacionadas, cumplen objetivos diferentes. Las creencias descriptivas juegan un papel más preponderante en la legitimación de la desigualdad, mientras que las prescriptivas proporcionan una brújula moral para evaluar el estado actual de las cosas. Por ejemplo, la creencia en que el esfuerzo individual y el trabajo duro sí permiten obtener éxito en la vida (descriptiva), se encuentra asociada a una mayor aceptación en la distribución desigual de recursos, mientras que la creencia en que la meritocracia debería existir (prescriptiva) no tiene tal efecto (Son Hing et al., 2011). De forma similar, la percepción de discrepancias entre las ideologías descriptivas y las prescriptivas conlleva a un cuestionamiento de las creencias descriptivas, lo que a su vez genera una mayor deslegitimación del sistema y un mayor apoyo a políticas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad (Zimmerman y Reyna, 2013).

Las ideologías también varían en función de su contenido. En el manual de Oxford sobre ideologías políticas hay una descripción concienzuda de 20 tipos de ideologías, en el que se analiza la historia de cada una de ellas, conceptos claves y los argumentos propios de cada uno de estos sistemas de creencias (e.g., conservadurismo, liberalismo, social democracia, comunismo, etc.) (Freeden, Sargent y Stears, 2013). Sin embargo, en el presente trabajo nos centraremos solamente en las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad. Las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad son un sistema de creencias que explican y dan sentido al sistema social, proporcionando una lógica específica para comprender las diferencias de autoridad, poder, status y riqueza (Costa-lopés, Dovidio, Pereira y Jost, 2013; Tyler, 2006). Estas ideologías legitimadoras de la desigualdad se componen de una serie de justificaciones o “mitos” (Major, 1994; Sidanius y Pratto, 2001) que conducen a las personas a percibir las autoridades, instituciones y demás sistemas sociales —político, económico, etc.— como correctos, justos, normativos y moralmente apropiados (Tyler, 2006). Por tanto, las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad son sistemas de creencias por medio de las cuales las personas racionalizan, legitiman y perpetúan la desigualdad. Estas racionalizaciones reducen las respuestas emocionales (o morales) que conducen a que las personas quieran apoyar medidas para ayudar a los más desfavorecidos (Jost, Wakslak et al., 2008). Así, las ideologías proveen una justificación moral y racional de las prácticas sociales que mantienen las desigualdades de poder, status, y por supuesto, sobre los recursos económicos (Sibley y Duckitt, 2010), contribuyendo a la estabilidad de las relaciones jerárquicas y de opresión (Jost y van der Toorn, 2012). Hay una gran variedad de ideologías que justifican la desigualdad. En la Figura 4 hacemos un resumen (no exhaustivo) de ellas basándonos en literatura psicosocial (Davidai, 2018; Duckitt y Bizumic, 2013; Jost, 2017;

Jost, Blount, Pfeffer y Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Glaser et al., 2003; Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Lerner, 1980; Sidanius y Pratto, 2001).

Aunque existen diferentes ideologías que justifican el sistema, la legitimación de la desigualdad económica está particularmente asociada con los principios de justicia distributiva (sobre los resultados) y procedimental (sobre los medios) mediante los cuales se determina la forma en la que deberían distribuirse los recursos. Desde esta perspectiva, se identifican al menos tres principios de justicia que son la equidad, la igualdad y la necesidad (Lerner, 1980; Lerner y Ross, 1974; Son Hing et al., 2011). Por ejemplo, los principios ligados a las recompensas se centran en evaluar en qué medida es justo que las personas tengan los recursos que tienen; mientras que los principios ligados a los procedimientos, se focalizan en si el medio para obtener tales recompensas ha sido legítimo. En este sentido, mientras que el principio de igualdad y necesidad prioriza los resultados (e.g., que las personas tengan los recursos suficientes para tener una vida digna), el principio de equidad prioriza los procedimientos para obtener los resultados (e.g., que las personas disfruten de los recursos que se merezcan en proporción a su esfuerzo). En este sentido, hay dos principios explicativos de la desigualdad económica, el primero se centra en el análisis de los esfuerzos individuales por los cuales unos individuos tienen mejores recompensas que otros debido a su desempeño (meritocracia); y el segundo se enfoca en la estructura de condiciones que permiten el desarrollo, bienestar y el mérito (oportunidades) (Rawls, 2012; Roemer, 1998; Sen, 2000). Estos dos principios de la desigualdad son representados principalmente por dos ideologías diferentes pero complementarias: la meritocracia y la igualdad de oportunidades.





**Figura 4.** Algunas ideología que justifican la desigualdad económica desde una perspectiva psicosocial (elaboración propia)

### Creencias en la meritocracia e igualdad de oportunidades

La ideología meritocrática consiste en la creencia de que el éxito (e.g., laboral, profesional, académico, personal, etc.) es el resultado de la habilidad, motivación y esfuerzo individual (Jost y Hunyady, 2005). El término de meritocracia fue acuñado por primera vez por el sociólogo británico Michal Young en su libro “The Rise of Meritocracy” (Young, 1958/1994), en el que describe un mundo distópico (símil de la utopía pero con consecuencias adversas) donde la inteligencia y el mérito individual son el único criterio por el cual se distribuyen los recursos en la sociedad, tales como el tipo de trabajo, la riqueza y el poder. De allí que la meritocracia se refiera a ese sistema de creencias por el cual los

recursos están administrados (y distribuidos) en función del mérito individual, reforzando el individualismo económico y disuadiendo a las personas de reconocer los factores situacionales que se sitúan detrás de las desigualdades (Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel y Smith, 1986). La meritocracia se basa en el principio de equidad y plantea que los inputs individuales (esfuerzo, talento, habilidad, etc.) deben ser proporcionales a los resultados (e.g., ingresos, prestigio, riqueza) (Knowles y Lowery, 2012), lo cual conduce a justificar la desigualdad económica. Además, la ideología meritocrática fomenta las atribuciones internas de la riqueza/pobreza, la oposición a políticas públicas afirmativas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad, y la discriminación de los más desaventajados (Ho et al., 2015; Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington y Ho, 2017; Sibley y Duckitt, 2010). Así, cuanto más se cree que la meritocracia existe, más se favorece a los miembros de grupos aventajados (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003), se hacen mayores atribuciones internas sobre los miembros de bajo status por su situación de desventaja (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; McCoy y Major, 2007) y se desconoce en mayor medida las desigualdades raciales (Knowles y Lowery, 2012).

En esencia, la meritocracia se plantea como un sistema libre de sesgos y prejuicios que facilitan el desarrollo individual y la movilidad social. Sin embargo, tal como lo plantea Young en su novela, el sistema meritocrático encierra una distopía donde el mérito no se distribuye de forma libre o equitativa, sino que constituía un sistema plutocrático que se perpetúa a sí mismo. Así, una ideología conexas a la meritocracia es la creencia en la igualdad de oportunidades. En este sentido, mientras que las creencias en la meritocracia están relacionadas con el mérito individual basado en el esfuerzo y habilidad de cada persona, las creencias en la igualdad de oportunidades se refiere a las condiciones para desarrollar ese mérito (Mijs, 2016). Roemer (1998) distingue entre la desigualdad de esfuerzos, lo que depende de cada individuo (y sería un concepto parecido a la meritocracia), y la desigualdad de oportunidades, que concierne a los factores fuera del control del individuo y que pueden incidir en sus recompensas. La desigualdad de oportunidades consiste, por tanto, en las diferencias en los beneficios y ventajas que tiene cada persona y que son inherentes a las condiciones de vida de cada una de ellas (e.g., haber nacido en una familia rica o no, vivir en un país desarrollado o no, etc.) (Collins, 2016). En otros términos, la desigualdad de oportunidades se refiere a la estructura de posibilidades, condiciones y situaciones que potencian (o constriñen) el desarrollo de las personas, tales como su sexo, etnia, ocupación de sus padres, lugar de nacimiento y residencia (Brunori, 2015; Checchi, Visser y van de Werfhorst, 2010; Dabla-Norris et al., 2015).

La creencia en la igualdad de oportunidades es por tanto una ideología que justifica las desigualdades económicas que puede reforzar (o cuestionar) la ideología meritocrática. Por ejemplo, las personas que perciben mayores niveles de desigualdad de oportunidades, perciben mayores niveles de desigualdad económica a su alrededor, y por tanto, están más interesadas en reducirla (Hadavand, 2018). De forma similar, cuando las personas creen que los pobres son víctimas de un sistema injusto y desigual muestran un mayor apoyo a la redistribución de recursos; mientras que cuando se cree que pueden salir adelante por medio de su esfuerzo individual, apoyan en menor medida políticas redistributivas que pretenden reducir la desigualdad económica (Evans y Kelley, 2018).

En esta línea, el estudio de la legitimación de la desigualdad económica debe tener en cuenta de forma conjunta tanto los esfuerzos individuales como el acceso a oportunidades. De hecho, las desigualdades económicas son consideradas como justas cuando las personas creen que reflejan el mérito y esfuerzo individual, y cuándo creen que las personas han tenido las oportunidades para competir en equidad (Kim y Choi, 2017). Por tanto, la creencia en una verdadera meritocracia requiere de un sistema que provea igualdad de oportunidades a todos los miembros de la sociedad para poder competir en igualdad de condiciones. De este modo, cualquier persona podría tener la posibilidad de salir adelante independientemente de su posición social, clase económica, género o etnia, entre otros (Kim y Choi, 2017). La igualdad de oportunidades es uno de los aspectos más importantes incluidos en el concepto de meritocracia, ya que fortalece la creencia en que el éxito es debido al esfuerzo individual y no un mero resultado de situaciones azarosas y arbitrarias que derivan en una recompensa ilegítima.

## **ACTITUDES POLÍTICAS Y APOYO A LA REDISTRIBUCIÓN**

La redistribución de recursos es una de las formas más efectivas para reducir la desigualdad económica y mitigar los efectos nocivos sobre el bienestar de las sociedades y las personas (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Atkinson, 2015). Además, la redistribución de recursos atiende a una demanda moral por la cual las personas buscan tener un sistema legítimo en el que se valore la igualdad y la justicia. Por tanto, el Estado como un sistema orientado a promover el desarrollo social, tiene el deber de proveer justicia, seguridad y protección a las personas frente a potenciales amenazas del entorno (Mau, 2004; Roosma, Gelissen y van Oorschot, 2013). Para tal fin, el Estado debe implementar una serie de medidas que proporcionen bienestar y seguridad social basadas en la redistribución apropiada de riesgos, servicios y recursos, tanto a nivel económico y social, como a nivel de condiciones, oportunidades y posibilidades de desarrollo (Mau, 2004). Así, la redistribución de recursos consiste en el uso de políticas fiscales y sociales para transferir diferentes tipos de recursos entre las personas en un sistema político determinado (Luebker, 2014).

La redistribución de recursos funciona de manera dinámica entre dos partes: una parte que representa la demanda, es decir, las personas que exigen y prefieren la implementación de políticas redistributivas; y otra parte que representa el suministro, es decir, los organismos encargados de ejecutar las medidas redistributivas y de proveer los recursos necesarios a quienes así lo necesiten (McCarty y Pontusson, 2011). La redistribución de recursos depende tanto del apoyo ciudadano hacia dicha redistribución, como de la infraestructura social, política y económica que permita su ejecución. Sin embargo, la demanda y la oferta de medidas gubernamentales que propendan por la redistribución de recursos no siempre van de la mano. Esto es, las decisiones políticas no reflejan necesariamente las exigencias de la ciudadanía, ni las actitudes de la ciudadanía apoyan de forma consistente las políticas implementadas por el gobierno. Por ejemplo, los países más desiguales, que requieren una mayor implementación de políticas redistributivas, suelen tener menores niveles de redistribución de recursos que los países más igualitarios y con Estados de bienestar (Alt y Iversen, 2017; Iversen y Soskice, 2006). Esto es conocido con la paradoja de Robin Hood: la redistribución de los ricos hacia los pobres difícilmente ocurre en los lugares donde la gente más lo necesita (Lupu y Pontusson, 2011). De forma similar, a pesar de la tendencia general de las personas a desear menos desigualdad económica, las personas tienden a rechazar la implementación de políticas redistributivas, tales como el aumento de impuestos y redistribución del gasto público entre los más desaventajados (Bartels, 2005; Fong, 2001; McCaffery y Baron, 2005). En la presente

investigación nos enfocamos en cuestiones concernientes a las actitudes hacia la redistribución de recursos, las cuales están incluidas en el lado de la demanda ciudadana de medidas que promuevan la redistribución económica.

El apoyo a la redistribución de recursos depende de tres principios fundamentales: el primero de ellos, tiene que ver con los valores morales, es decir, que los motivos para redistribuir representen los intereses y valores de la comunidad, así como que se considere que la redistribución es necesaria, útil y justa. El segundo principio se relaciona con la justicia procedimental, que se refiere a los criterios sobre cómo se deben redistribuir los recursos (e.g., equidad, igualdad, mérito, etc.). Y el tercero hace referencia a un principio de efectividad y eficiencia en la redistribución, en el que las personas evalúan si la redistribución de recursos se está realizando de forma consistente con los principios anteriores (Roosma et al., 2013).

### **Algunas abordajes sobre el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos**

Las actitudes hacia la redistribución de recursos pueden explicarse desde una perspectiva económica, política y comportamental (o psicológica) (Iglesias, López, Manuel y Santos, 2013). La perspectiva económica se refiere a cómo las dinámicas propias de la economía tienden a su regulación, es decir, que la economía en sí misma facilita ciertas condiciones para reducir la desigualdad. Este es el caso de la propuesta de Kuznets sobre la U invertida (primero tiene que haber un aumento de la desigualdad económica ligada al crecimiento económico, para después poder redistribuir los recursos y reducir la desigualdad); o la hipótesis de Meltzer y Richard (1981), que plantea que un mayor incremento en la desigualdad económica generará una mayor demanda del votante promedio en favor de mayor redistribución de recursos que permitan reducir la desigualdad.

La segunda perspectiva es de naturaleza política y refiere a la toma de decisiones por parte de los sistemas de gobierno que responden a intereses específicos sobre cómo deberían redistribuirse los recursos económicos (e.g., modelos socio-políticos y económicos de tipo socialista, capitalista, comunista, etc). La tercera forma de explicar el apoyo a la redistribución tiene que ver con aspectos más individuales (o psicológicos), tales como los valores, normas sociales y sistemas de creencias (Iglesias et al., 2013).

En la dimensión individual, también se identifican diferentes motivaciones que conducen a las personas a apoyar la redistribución de recursos. Uno de ellos es el status socioeconómico y la posición relativa que ocupan las personas con relación a otros grupos sociales. Así, desde esta perspectiva las personas pueden tener un interés personal (*self-*

*interest*) en maximizar sus ganancias y evitar cualquier tipo de pérdidas. Por tanto, las personas que esperan obtener una mayor ganancia proveniente de la redistribución de recursos, estarán más motivadas a apoyarla. El apoyo a la redistribución es, por consiguiente, el producto de una decisión racional tomada en función de los costes y beneficios asociados a tales políticas (Kim y Lee, 2018).

El apoyo a la redistribución también puede estar motivado por la necesidad de tener una mayor sensación de seguridad y protección frente a las amenazas económicas, o ante la exposición al riesgo e incertidumbre sobre el futuro (Rueda y Stegmueller, 2016). Por tanto, aunque las personas más aventajadas no se beneficien directamente de la redistribución, pueden estar motivadas a apoyar la redistribución como una forma de reducir amenazas derivadas de la inestabilidad política, falta de cohesión social, criminalidad, entre otros factores negativos asociados a la desigualdad económica (Rueda y Stegmueller, 2016). Otras motivaciones individuales pueden promover un mayor apoyo a la redistribución de recursos, tales como el altruismo, el comportamiento prosocial, la identidad y afinidad grupal, las normas sociales y las ideologías. Estas motivaciones representan una dimensión psicológica importante que puede competir con los intereses propios del propio grupo (Jost et al., 2017; Lupu y Pontusson, 2011; Pontusson y Rueda, 2010). De hecho, Kulin y Svallfors (2013) plantean que los valores humanos y el interés propio son dos motivaciones que compiten entre sí. Así, los valores sociales de igualdad y benevolencia están asociados con un mayor apoyo hacia la redistribución de manera más consistente en sociedades más ricas y seguras que en sociedades donde las personas experimentan más riesgos e incertidumbre. Esto quiere decir que las personas anteponen más el auto-interés en sociedades con mayores dificultades económicas (pobres), mientras que en sociedades con mayores beneficios (ricas) las personas pueden anteponer sus creencias y valores por encima del interés propio.

Sin embargo, los resultados de algunas investigaciones muestran que las actitudes hacia la redistribución están mayormente determinadas por cómo se percibe la sociedad y cómo se cree que debería funcionar en términos de ideologías políticas, incluso por encima de variables situacionales como el status socioeconómico o el interés personal (Evans y Kelley, 2018). Por ejemplo, las actitudes hacia políticas públicas orientadas a reducir la pobreza o la desigualdad están influenciadas por las creencias que tienen las personas sobre sus causas, de modo que las atribuciones internas o disposicionales de la pobreza y la desigualdad conducen a desaprobar políticas redistributivas (Bullock, Williams y Limbert, 2003; Kluegel y Smith, 1986). Del mismo modo, si las personas consideran que las causas

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sobre la riqueza y la pobreza están determinadas esencialmente por el mérito y esfuerzo individual (vs. suerte o las circunstancias), habrá un menor apoyo a la redistribución (Frank, Wertenbroch y Maddux, 2015). En esta tesis, nos enfocamos particularmente en estas variables ideológicas que no sólo inciden en el apoyo a la redistribución, sino también en la percepción de la desigualdad económica y la forma de ver la realidad en general.

## **EL CÍRCULO VICIOSO DE LA DESIGUALDAD ECONÓMICA**

Hasta ahora hemos hecho una revisión general de cuatro factores claves asociados a la desigualdad económica, tales como: las implicaciones psicosociales de la desigualdad económica, las percepciones de la desigualdad económica, las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos. Todos estos factores están relacionados entre sí, creando una serie de bucles que se retroalimenten a sí mismos en una especie de círculo vicioso. Los círculos viciosos son cadenas de eventos en donde los eslabones pueden ser causa y consecuencia de otros eventos de forma simultánea (DRAE, 2018b), perpetuando una situación perniciosa y dificultando su resolución. Así, nuestra propuesta de conceptualizar los factores asociados a la desigualdad económica como un círculo vicioso, atiende a una integración entre las realidades materiales y estructurales (e.g., la desigualdad económica) y los procesos psicosociales (e.g., cogniciones y motivaciones) que repercuten en el mantenimiento y/o transformación de dicha realidad material. Por tanto, la desigualdad económica como un círculo vicioso representa no sólo una forma de explicar un fenómeno que se retroalimenta a sí mismo a través diferentes vías que operan a distintos niveles de actuación (e.g., política, económica, sociológica, psicológica); sino también, comprender cómo puede romperse para promover el cambio social (ver Figura 5).

El círculo vicioso de la desigualdad económica contempla, en primera instancia, una situación material en la que los recursos económicos están distribuidos de forma inequitativa entre los miembros de la sociedad. Esta distribución desigual de los recursos no solamente refleja la disparidad de ingresos económicos o de riqueza material, sino que redundando en una desigualdad en la estructura de oportunidades, condiciones y posibilidades de desarrollo de las personas. Por tanto, la desigualdad económica tiene unas consecuencias negativas a nivel económico (e.g., reducción del crecimiento económico, excesiva concentración de riqueza y menor flujo de capitales), político (e.g., debilitamiento de la democracia, desmotivación de la participación política), social (e.g., peores niveles de bienestar y cohesión social) y psicológico (e.g. mayor ansiedad, actitudes negativas hacia determinados grupos, exclusión).



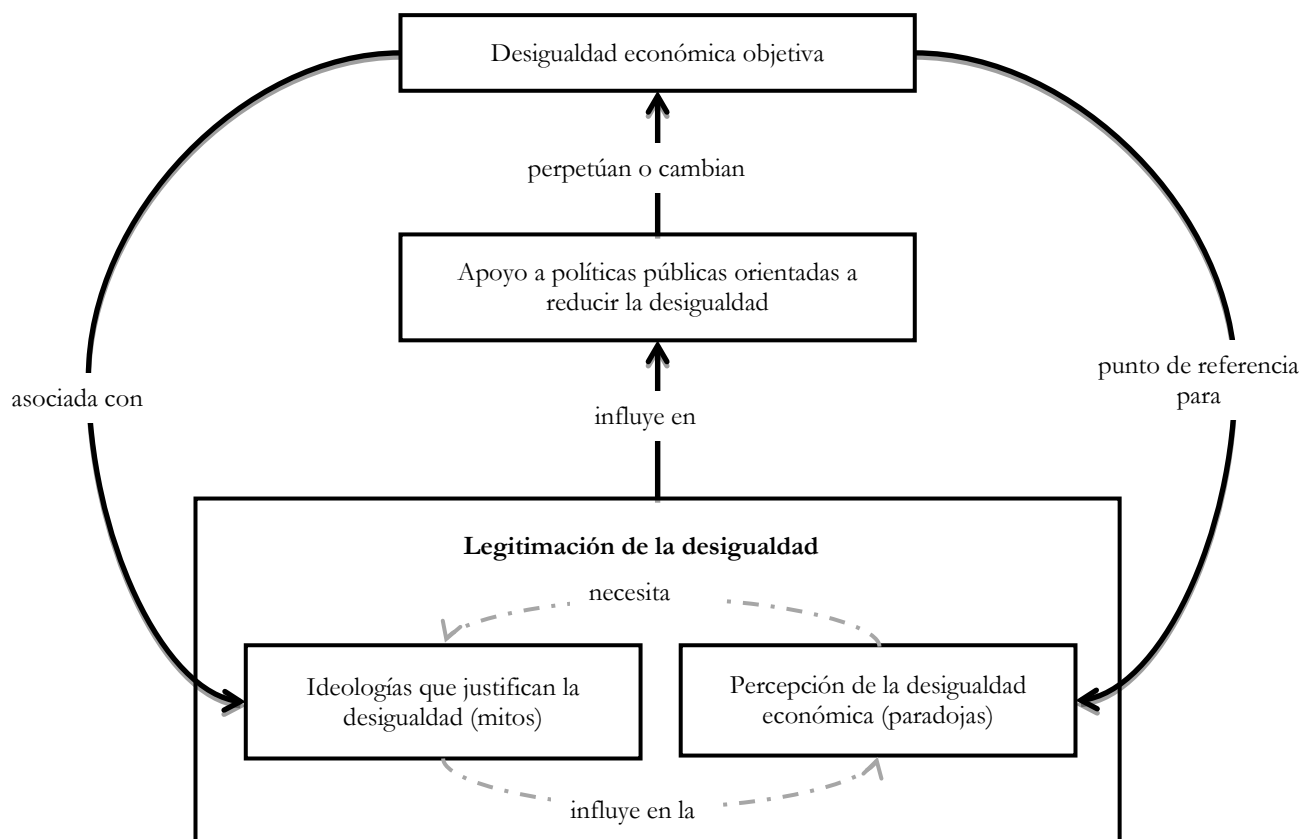


Figura 5. Círculo vicioso de la desigualdad económico (elaboración propia)

Sin embargo, la desigualdad económica no es un fenómeno que se corrija a sí mismo. Por el contrario, la reducción de la desigualdad económica es una cuestión eminentemente política (Grusky et al., 2006; Piketty y Saez, 2014b; Stiglitz, 2015) y depende de las decisiones sobre la forma cómo las personas perciben, justifican y apoyan la forma en que se distribuyen los recursos en la sociedad. De hecho, las percepciones e ideologías sobre la desigualdad tienen una influencia significativa sobre las decisiones políticas de los individuos, incluso por encima de las condiciones materiales de la desigualdad económica propiamente dicha. Esto no quiere decir que la desigualdad económica no influya en las actitudes políticas; sino más bien, que la desigualdad económica afecta la forma como las personas perciben y explican su realidad, lo cual repercute en la legitimación de esa desigualdad. Por tanto, uno de los primeros pasos del círculo vicioso es que la desigualdad económica como realidad material es un punto de referencia para percibir esa realidad.

En este sentido, las personas pueden percibir y experimentar subjetivamente la desigualdad económica de diferentes formas, aunque convivan en un contexto con los mismos niveles objetivos de desigualdad. Por tanto, la percepción de la desigualdad económica no refleja necesariamente los niveles de desigualdad real, ni tampoco genera en todas las ocasiones respuestas consistentes con los intereses individuales o grupales en

relación a esta desigualdad. En este sentido, en el presente trabajo hemos identificado al menos tres paradojas de las percepciones de la desigualdad económica. La primera es la paradoja de la subestimación, la cual consiste en que las personas tienden a percibir mucha menos desigualdad de la que existe en la realidad, incluso a pesar del incremento progresivo que ha tenido este fenómeno en las últimas décadas. La segunda paradoja está relacionada con los estándares existenciales e ideales. Esta paradoja plantea que hay una correlación positiva entre la percepción de la desigualdad y su aceptación, es decir, cuanto mayor es la percepción de la desigualdad económica, mayor suele ser el grado de desigualdad considerado como justo y apropiado. La tercera paradoja se relaciona con las actitudes políticas, de manera que percibir mayores niveles de desigualdad económica no se traducen necesariamente en el apoyo a políticas públicas orientadas a su reducción.

Estas paradojas tienen implicaciones importantes sobre la legitimación de la desigualdad económica. Por una parte, subestimar la desigualdad económica, invisibiliza la problemática y no despierta el interés (ni la indignación) de las personas para tratar de reducirla. Por otra parte, las personas ajustan sus estándares ideales según lo que perciben en su realidad, motivo por el cual percibir mayores niveles de desigualdad está asociado a aceptar más desigualdad, debido a que el fenómeno se naturaliza y se considera como algo “normal” en un contexto específico. Además, el apoyo a políticas públicas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad económica, como el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos, no es un producto exclusivo de la percepción de la desigualdad económica, sino que depende de otras variables como las creencias, valores o las normas sociales, entre otros. No obstante, estas paradojas no se deben exclusivamente a las características inherentes de la percepción de la desigualdad sino que pueden estar influenciadas por una serie de mecanismos situacionales (e.g. pobreza, desigualdad, status), cognitivos (e.g. estimaciones, sesgos, etc.) o motivacionales (necesidades epistémicas, existenciales, relacionales, etc.).

Adicionalmente, la desigualdad económica está asociada a unas ideologías que la justifican (Larsen, 2016). Estas ideologías consisten en una serie de creencias sociales (*societal beliefs*) que se componen de diferentes contenidos históricos, culturales, memorias colectivas, ideologías o valores que trascienden y preceden a los individuos (Bar-Tal, 2000), y que inciden en cómo se procesa la información y se perpetúa el *status quo* (Bar-Tal, Halperin y Oren, 2010). Por otro lado, la percepción de la desigualdad económica viola algunos principios fundamentales de justicia e igualdad, que a su vez generan una motivación individual a explicar tales inequidades. Esta motivación genera una necesidad de racionalizar la desigualdad económica a través de ideologías que explican (y justifican)

sus causas y dinámicas. Así, las ideologías cumplen un papel paliativo en la reducción de la incertidumbre, al mismo tiempo que permite ganar control (al menos cognitivamente) sobre lo que ocurre alrededor. De hecho, la creencia en la meritocracia, como ideología que justifica la desigualdad, se ha incrementado de manera proporcional con el aumento en la desigualdad económica en los últimos años (Mijs, 2018).

Las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad se convierten en “mitos” (Major, 1994; Sidanius y Pratto, 2001) que ofrecen explicaciones sobre la realidad social que corresponden de forma parcial e imperfecta con la realidad objetiva. Por tanto, la creencia en la meritocracia o la igualdad de oportunidades, en la movilidad social, el “sueño americano”, en el mundo justo, entre otros sistemas de creencias que justifican la desigualdad, suelen representar ideales que no se sostienen de acuerdo a la evidencia empírica al respecto. De hecho, la movilidad social se ha estancado en la mayoría de países (particularmente los más desiguales); el mérito y las habilidades personales no son el resultado del esfuerzo individual, sino más bien de las condiciones de vida de las personas; la igualdad de oportunidades está condicionado por el contexto en el que las personas nacen y se desarrollan; lo cual indica que las ideologías sirven como mecanismos que condicionan la forma de percibir la realidad y proveen de determinados posicionamientos en relación a los ideales de la sociedad y los medios para conseguirlos.

Considerando que las percepciones e ideologías asociadas a la desigualdad económica afectan la forma en que comprendemos la desigualdad, así como la forma en que reaccionamos ante ella, dentro del círculo vicioso descrito hemos identificado como un elemento importante las actitudes hacia políticas públicas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad, tales como las políticas redistributivas. Así, tanto las paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica, como los mitos recreados por las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad, conllevan a que las personas legitimen en mayor medida la desigualdad y apoyen menos las medidas que buscan redistribuir recursos en la sociedad. En consecuencia, un menor apoyo a la redistribución de recursos va a generar una menor protección social de las personas, lo cual limita la participación y representación política de los grupos más desfavorecidos, lo que finalmente redundará en que las políticas públicas van a seguir favoreciendo los intereses de las élites políticas y económicas que abogan por sus propios beneficios (Kelly y Enns, 2010; Scruggs y Hayes, 2017). Esta situación contribuye entonces a la paradoja de Robin Hood presentada anteriormente, en la que se describe que las sociedades que más necesitan de las transferencias de los ricos hacia los pobres son en las que hay una menor probabilidad de implementar tales políticas redistributivas

(McCaffery y Baron, 2005; McCaffery y Baron, 2006). De hecho, se argumenta que puede incluso ocurrir justo lo contrario, de modo que sean los más desaventajados los que terminan transfiriendo recursos a los más ricos a través del pago de impuestos y el consumo de sus productos o servicios.

En resumen, el círculo vicioso de la desigualdad económica consiste en que la desigualdad de recursos económicos repercute en la desigualdad de oportunidades de desarrollo, el bienestar social y en la forma de percibir y justificar la desigualdad. Así, cuando las personas perciben la desigualdad económica, aparecen una serie de paradojas que promueven su legitimación, al igual que se asocia con ideologías que racionalizan, explican y justifican tales desigualdades. Esta legitimación de la desigualdad económica hace que las personas se desmotiven a apoyar diferentes medidas redistributivas que buscan reducir la desigualdad económica y modificar el *status quo*. Por tanto, la desigualdad económica como realidad material, se acepta y promueve condiciones sociales y psicológicas que la perpetúan.

Esta problemática sitúa una agenda de investigación importante para investigadores/as de diferentes disciplinas que pretenden el cambio social. Entendiendo que la desigualdad económica representa una estructura macro-social que difícilmente puede ser alterada de forma directa, la propuesta del presente trabajo es la de desvelar algunos mecanismos psicosociales por los cuales es posible romper este círculo vicioso y trabajar por el diseño una sociedad más justa e igualitaria.



# *CAPÍTULO 2.*

## Motivación, Preguntas de Investigación y Objetivos



## **Motivación**

El presente trabajo de investigación se centra en tres cuestiones claves. El primero de ellos tiene que ver con el extraordinario incremento de la desigualdad económica a nivel internacional durante las últimas décadas. Esta situación ha despertado gran interés en la agenda pública al mostrarse asociada con diversos tipos de problemáticas sociales, políticas, económicas y psicológicas (Buttrick y Oishi, 2017; Peterson, 2017; Wilkinson y Pickett, 2017). La segunda cuestión tiene que ver con la relativa poca atención que se ha prestado desde una perspectiva psicológica al tema de la desigualdad económica en comparación con otras disciplinas tales como la economía, la sociología y las ciencias políticas (McLeod, Lawler, Scwalbe, 2014). Y el tercer elemento tiene que ver con la preocupación por los altos niveles de aceptación, conformismo y legitimación que tienen las personas sobre la desigualdad económica, incluso cuando ésta va en contra de sus propios intereses (Jost et al., 2017; McCall, 2013; Osborne et al., 2018). La reflexión sobre estas tres cuestiones que acabamos de enumerar suscitan preguntas como ¿cuánta desigualdad económica percibimos y estamos dispuestos a tolerar?, ¿qué hace que aceptemos y justifiquemos la desigualdad económica?, ¿qué hace que las personas reaccionen ante la desigualdad económica y exijan medidas para su reducción?, e incluso de forma más general, ¿cómo percibimos la desigualdad económica?, ¿cómo creemos que debería ser la desigualdad económica en nuestra sociedad?

Estas motivaciones y cuestionamientos generales han servido de antesala a lo que constituye la cuestión central del presente trabajo: ¿qué implicaciones tiene la percepción de la desigualdad económica y las ideologías que justifican el sistema sobre la legitimación de la desigualdad y el apoyo a medidas redistributivas para su reducción? Esta pregunta pretende integrar en una misma agenda de investigación diferentes líneas de trabajo. La primera de ellas plantea que la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un fenómeno diferenciado de la desigualdad económica objetiva. De hecho, se ha demostrado que la representación subjetiva de la desigualdad económica tiene antecedentes e implicaciones distintos a los que tiene la desigualdad económica en términos materiales (Buttrick y Oishi, 2017; Gimpelson y Treisman, 2017; Hauser y Norton, 2017). Así, la percepción de la desigualdad económica, como constructo, permite identificar uno de los procesos potenciales que vinculan las realidades materiales-estructurales con las realidades psicológicas e individuales.

La segunda línea de trabajo tiene que ver con las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad. Aunque la ideología ha sido abordado tradicionalmente como una



construcción socio-histórica que sirve como artefacto de poder y dominación entre grupos sociales, a efectos de este trabajo, integramos la perspectiva social de las ideologías como un conjunto de creencias compartidas, con la perspectiva de la ideología como una cognición social motivada que atiende a unas necesidades psicológicas que facilitan la racionalización del sistema social, bien sea para justificarlo o para transformarlo (Jost, Nosek, et al., 2008; Jost, van der Linden, et al., 2018). Así, la investigación sobre ideologías que justifican la desigualdad influye cómo en se percibe la desigualdad económica y cómo se reacciona ante ella. Por tanto, una de las asunciones básicas del presente trabajo es que la percepción de la desigualdad económica y las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad interactúan entre sí, influyendo en la formación de actitudes políticas.

La tercera línea de trabajo concierne a las respuestas de las personas ante la desigualdad económica, particularmente, a la legitimación de la desigualdad. Esta legitimación se analiza de dos formas complementarias. Por un lado, se analiza el grado de aceptación de la desigualdad económica, es decir, el nivel ideal de desigualdad económica que las personas consideran debería existir en la sociedad. Por otro lado, se analiza el grado de aceptación de políticas públicas o medidas orientadas a reducir la desigualdad económica tales como las políticas redistributivas (e.g., impuestos progresivos, gasto público, etc.).

### **Objetivos y preguntas de investigación del presente trabajo**

El objetivo principal de este trabajo es analizar la influencia de las percepciones de la desigualdad económica y las ideologías que la justifican, sobre la aceptación de tal desigualdad y el apoyo a medidas redistributivas que tienen como objetivo su reducción. Bajo este marco, se pretende analizar cómo las ideologías condicionan la relación entre la percepción de la desigualdad económica y las actitudes hacia la redistribución de recursos. Por tanto, el planteamiento general de la investigación contempla que la percepción de la desigualdad económica y las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad interactúan entre sí y tienen como consecuencia una mayor legitimación de la desigualdad. En la Figura 1 se presenta un esquema conceptual de los planteamientos generales que hacemos en el presente trabajo y que serán abordados de forma empírica dentro del mismo.

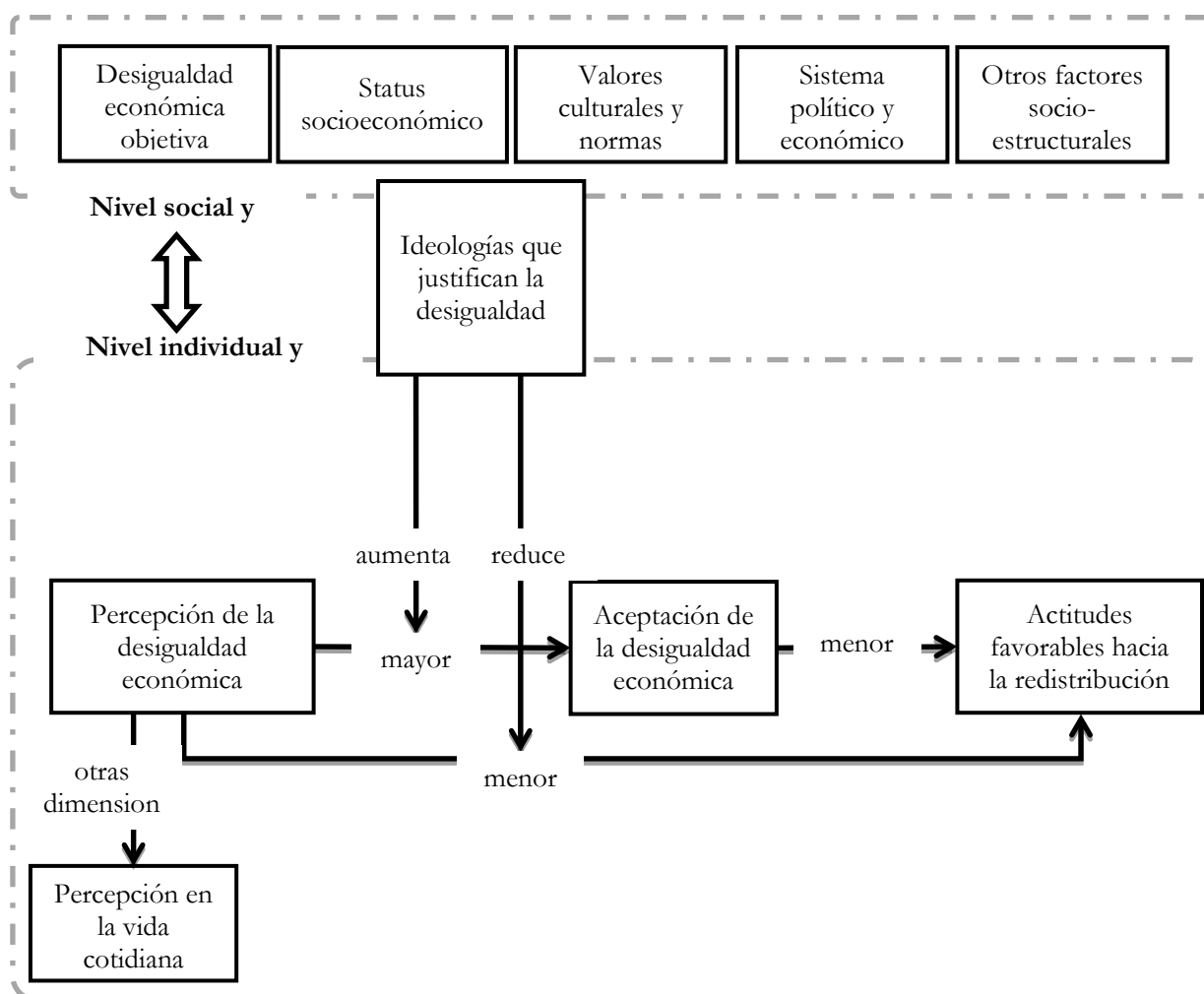


Figura 1. Esquema del planteamiento general del presente trabajo (elaboración propia)

Para desarrollar el objetivo principal de este trabajo hemos identificado tres problemáticas generales que conducen a las tres preguntas orientadoras con las que delimitamos los objetivos específicos del mismo. La primera problemática se recoge en una de las paradojas de la percepción de la desigualdad económica presentada en la introducción de esta tesis, a saber, la paradoja de los estándares existenciales e ideales. Esta paradoja plantea que cuanto mayor desigualdad económica se percibe (estándar existencial), mayor desigualdad económica se acepta (estándar ideal). Esta relación ha sido previamente mostrada en la literatura aduciendo que la realidad percibida sirve como un punto de referencia para valorar lo que sería el estado ideal de las cosas (e.g. Castillo, 2012; Hadler, 2005; Kay et al., 2009; Osberg y Smeeding, 2006). Sin embargo, esta asociación está motivada por ideologías que legitiman la desigualdad, de manera que la relación positiva entre la desigualdad percibida y la desigualdad ideal sucede especialmente entre las personas que legitiman el sistema, mientras que es más débil (o no aparece) entre las personas que no

justifican esa desigualdad (Willis et al., 2015). Por tanto, la primera pregunta de investigación fue: *¿condicionan las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad la relación entre la desigualdad económica percibida y deseada por las personas?* Así, el primer objetivo específico de la tesis fue analizar si las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad económica, tales como la meritocracia y la creencia en la igualdad de oportunidades, moderan la relación entre la desigualdad percibida y la desigualdad ideal. En relación a esta pregunta, nuestra hipótesis de trabajo plantea que ( $H_1$ ) habrá una correlación positiva entre la desigualdad percibida e ideal, pero esta relación será más fuerte entre aquellas personas que creen más en la meritocracia e igualdad de oportunidades.

La segunda problemática está asociada con la paradoja de la percepción de la desigualdad y las actitudes políticas. En ésta se plantea que el percibir una mayor desigualdad económica no siempre se traduce de forma consistente en un mayor apoyo a políticas redistributivas. La evidencia empírica en torno a este tema muestra que la percepción de la desigualdad económica está asociada a un mayor apoyo a la redistribución (Borge y Rattsø, 2004; Evans y Kelley, 2018; Finseraas, 2009; Gimpelson y Treisman, 2017; Schmidt-Catran, 2016); pero al mismo tiempo, hay otros estudios que muestran que esta asociación no siempre ocurre (Dallinger, 2010; Kelly & Enns, 2010; Kenworthy & McCall, 2008). De esta problemática se desprenden dos preguntas de trabajo: *¿condicionan las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad la relación entre la percepción de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a las medidas redistributivas?* y *¿el grado de desigualdad económica ideal influencia (suprime) el efecto de la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos?* Así, el objetivo de esta segunda pregunta se divide en dos. Por un lado, identificar si las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad moderan la relación entre la desigualdad percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución. Y por otro lado, identificar si el grado de desigualdad ideal influye —con un efecto supresor— en la relación que hay entre la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo hacia la redistribución de recursos. En relación a este aspecto, nuestras hipótesis de trabajo plantean que habrá una relación positiva entre la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución en las personas que creen menos (vs. las que creen más) en la meritocracia y en la igualdad de oportunidades ( $H_{2a}$ ). Además, planteamos, que el grado de desigualdad que la gente está dispuesta a tolerar podría suprimir el efecto de la desigualdad percibida sobre el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos ( $H_{2b}$ ).

Finalmente, la tercera problemática retoma de alguna manera la paradoja de la subestimación de la desigualdad, en la que se plantea que las personas tienden a percibir

mucha menos desigualdad de la que existe en realidad. Este fenómeno pone de manifiesto una idea clave del presente trabajo, a saber, la percepción de la desigualdad económica no refleja los niveles de desigualdad económica actual (Kiatpongsan y Norton, 2014; Norton y Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014). En relación a este último aspecto se ha demostrado que las personas no están suficientemente informadas acerca del nivel de desigualdad económica de su entorno (Castillo, 2012; Castillo, Miranda y Carrasco, 2012), tienen sesgos ideológicos (Chambers, Swan y Heesacker, 2015), o incluso, tienen problemas para percibir la desigualdad económica en términos numéricos (Arsenio, 2018; Eriksson y Simpson, 2012; Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). Estos resultados sugieren que la percepción de la desigualdad económica, bajo la perspectiva de estimación numérica de las diferencias de recursos monetarios sólo captaría parcial e imperfectamente el constructo. Así, consideramos importante hacernos la siguiente pregunta abierta para abrir nuevas líneas de investigación en este campo: ***¿Cómo perciben la desigualdad económica las personas en su vida cotidiana?*** Por tanto, el tercer objetivo específico es identificar de qué forma(s) las personas perciben la desigualdad económica en su vida cotidiana. Dado que este objetivo es de carácter descriptivo y exploratorio, en esta parte no buscamos confirmar una hipótesis, sino más bien utilizamos una idea de trabajo (IT) que orientó el ejercicio analítico. Particularmente, consideramos que (IT<sub>1</sub>) la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un constructo multidimensional y situado en la vida cotidiana de las personas. Por tanto, la percepción de la desigualdad no se limita a una estimación subjetiva de cómo están distribuidos los recursos monetarios (ingresos, riqueza, etc.) entre las personas o grupos, sino que abarca aspectos relacionados con diferentes tipos de recursos económicos y sociales que forman parte del día a día de las personas. Teniendo en cuenta la importancia de las ideologías en la percepción de la desigualdad económica, una segunda idea de trabajo fue la de explorar si la percepción de la desigualdad económica en la vida cotidiana varía según la ideología política de los participantes (IT<sub>2</sub>) (ver la Tabla 1 para un esquema de los problemas, preguntas, objetivos e hipótesis o ideas del presente trabajo).

**Tabla 1.** Síntesis de las problemáticas, preguntas, objetivos, hipótesis e ideas del presente trabajo

<b>Problemática (Paradoja)</b>	<b>Pregunta de investigación</b>	<b>Objetivo específico</b>	<b>Hipótesis o Idea de Trabajo</b>
Estándares existenciales e ideales	¿Condicionan las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad la relación entre la desigualdad económica percibida y deseada por las personas?	Analizar si las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad económica, tales como la meritocracia y la creencia en la igualdad de oportunidades, moderan la relación entre la desigualdad percibida y la desigualdad ideal.	H <sub>1</sub> : habrá una correlación positiva entre la desigualdad percibida e ideal, pero esta relación será más fuerte entre aquellas personas que apoyen más la meritocracia y la creencia en la igualdad de oportunidades.
Percepción de la desigualdad y actitudes políticas	¿Condicionan las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad la relación entre la percepción de la desigualdad económica y el apoyo a las medidas redistributivas?	Analizar si las ideologías que justifican la desigualdad moderan la relación entre la desigualdad percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución.	H <sub>2a</sub> : Habrá una relación positiva entre la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución, pero esta relación será más débil (o no existe) en las personas que creen menos (vs. las que creen más) en la meritocracia y en la igualdad de oportunidades.
	¿El grado de desigualdad económica ideal influye (suprime) el efecto de la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos?	Identificar si el grado de desigualdad que la gente está dispuesta a tolerar modera la relación que hay entre la desigualdad económica percibida y el apoyo hacia la redistribución de recursos.	H <sub>2b</sub> : el grado de desigualdad económica deseada por las personas reducirá (o suprimirá) el efecto de la desigualdad percibida sobre el apoyo a la redistribución de recursos.
Subestimación de la desigualdad	¿Cómo perciben las personas la desigualdad económica en su vida cotidiana?	Identificar de qué forma(s) las personas perciben la desigualdad económica en su contexto y vida cotidiana.	IT <sub>1</sub> : la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un constructo multidimensional y situado en la vida cotidiana. IT <sub>2</sub> : la percepción de la desigualdad económica en la vida cotidiana varía según la ideología política de los participantes

# *CHAPTER 2.*

Motivation, research  
questions and aims



## **Motivation**

This doctoral thesis was motivated by three core issues. The first one has to do with the excessive increase of economic inequality over the last decades. This situation has awakened a particular interest on the public agenda, insofar as these levels of inequality are related to different social, political, economic and psychological problems (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Peterson, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). The second one is related to the limited attention that economic inequality has had from a psychological perspective, compared to others disciplines such as economics, sociology and political science (McLeod, Lawler, Scwalbe, 2014). The third motivation refers to the high levels of acceptance, conformity and legitimisation of economic inequality among the people, even if it goes against their own interests (Jost et al., 2017; McCall, 2013; Osborne et al., 2018). These three motivations raise questions such as “How much economic inequality do we perceive?”, “How much economic inequality are we willing to accept?”, “what makes us accept and justify economic inequality?”, “When do people react to economic inequality and demand measures to reduce it?”, or even in a more comprehensive manner, “How do we perceive economic inequality?”, and “How do we think should be economic inequality in our society?”

These motivations and questions provided the starting point for the core issue of this thesis: What implications have the perception of economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs on the legitimacy of economic inequality and support for redistribution? This question seeks to integrate different lines of work through in the same research agenda. The first line argue that perception of economic inequality is a phenomenon distinct from objective economic inequality. Indeed, it has been proved that the subjective representation of economic inequality has different antecedents and implications from objective economic inequality (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Hauser & Norton, 2017). In this vein, the perception of economic inequality, as a construct, allows us to identify one of the potential processes that link structural-material realities to individual and psychological realities.

The second stream of work has to do with system-justifying beliefs. Although ideology has traditionally been addressed like a socio-historical construction, working as a mechanism of power and domination among social groups, in our work we integrate a societal perspective of ideologies as shared beliefs systems, with a more psychological one by which ideologies are motivated social cognitions that respond to psychological needs in order to rationalize (justify or challenge) the world (Jost, Nosek, et al., 2008; Jost, van der



Linden, et al., 2018). Therefore, research on system-justifying ideologies influences how people perceive economic inequality, as well as how they might react to it. Accordingly, one of the core assumptions of this thesis is that perception of economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs interact between them, in the formation of political attitudes.

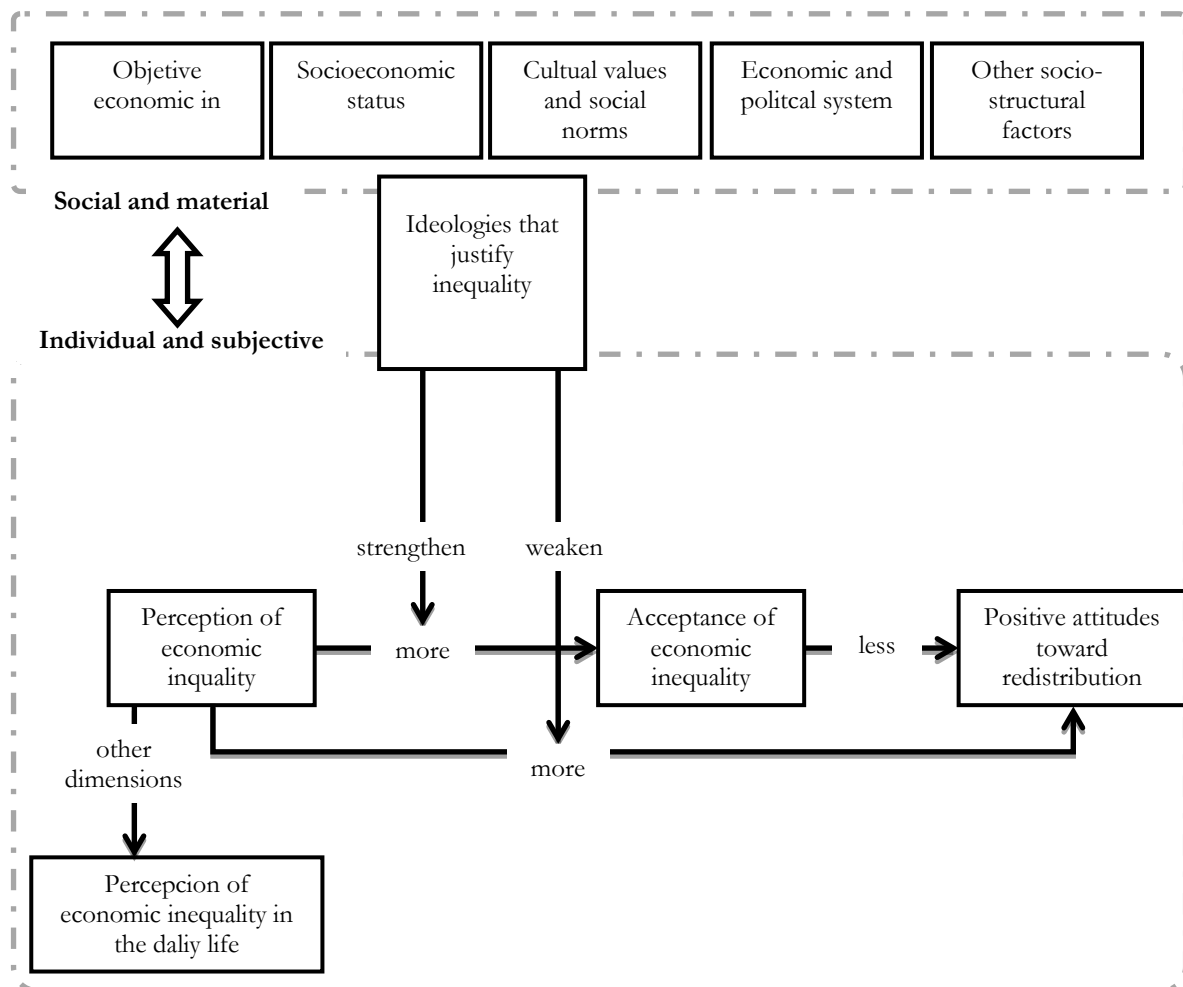
The third line of work is related to how people respond to economic inequality, particularly, the legitimisation of inequality. This legitimisation is analyzed in two complementary ways. On the one hand, we analyse the acceptance of economic inequality, that is: What is the ideal amount of economic inequality in society? On the other hand, we analyse the individuals' support for public policies or measures aimed at reducing economic inequality, such as redistribution, the role of the government and progressive taxation..

### **Research questions and aims of the current research**

The main goal of this dissertation is to analyse the influence of perceptions of economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs, along with the acceptance of such inequality and support to redistributive measures, which seek its decrease. Under this framework, we aim to analyse how ideologies condition the relationship between the perception of economic inequality and attitudes toward redistribution. Therefore, the general approach of this thesis posit that the perception of economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs interact between them to produce a greater legitimisation of inequality. In Figure 1 we outline our general approach and main hypothesis that will be addressed empirically in this thesis.

To develop the aims of this thesis, we identified three general problems that lead us to raise the three guiding questions of this research. The first problem is contained by one of the paradoxes of perception of economic inequality exposed in the conceptual framework of this thesis, namely, the existential and ideal standards paradox. This paradox posits that the more perceived economic inequality (existential standard), the more acceptance of economic inequality (ideal standard). This relationship has previously been proved in the literature, claiming that perceived reality works as a reference point to assess what would be the ideal state of affairs (e.g., Castillo, 2012; Hadler, 2005; Kay et al., 2009; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). However, this association is also motivated by system-justifying ideologies, in such a way that the positive relationship between perceived and ideal inequality is stronger among the people who highly endorse system-justifying ideologies (meritocracy and equality of opportunities), whereas it was weaker (or non-significant) among people who do not justify such inequality (Willis et al., 2015). Then, the first question was: *do system-justifying beliefs condition the relationship between*

*perceived and ideal economic inequality?* Thus, the first specific objective of this dissertation was to test whether system-justifying beliefs, such as the belief in meritocracy and equality of opportunities, moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and ideal inequality. Regarding this question, we posit that that (H<sub>1</sub>) there will be a positive correlation between perceived and ideal inequality, but this relationship will be stronger among those people who believe more in meritocracy and equality of opportunities.



**Figure 1.** Outline of the general approach and hypothesis of the current research (prepared by the author)

The second issue is related to the paradox of perception of inequality and political attitudes. This paradox states that perceiving a greater economic inequality not necessarily leads to greater support for redistribution. Although empirical evidence have shown that perceived economic inequality is related to greater support for redistribution (Borge & Rattsø, 2004; Evans & Kelley, 2018; Finseraas, 2009; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Schmidt-Catran, 2016); other studies has also shown that this association does not always

happen (Dallinger, 2010; Kelly & Enns, 2010; Kenworthy & McCall, 2008). This issue motivate us to raise two research questions: *Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perception of economic inequality and support for redistribution?* and *Do ideal levels of economic inequality desired by the people influence (suppress) the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?* Thus, the aim of this second question is divided up into two goals. On the one hand, to identify whether system-justifying ideologies moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution; and, on the other hand, to test if the level of inequality people are willing to accept affects (with a suppressor effect) the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. In this vein, our hypotheses posit that there will be a positive relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution among people who believe less (vs those who believe more) in meritocracy and equality of opportunities (H<sub>2a</sub>). Similarly, we posit that the level of inequality people are willing to accept could suppress the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution (H<sub>2b</sub>).

Finally, the third issue to some extent takes up the paradox of inequality understimation, which states that people tend to perceive far less inequality than it currently exists. This phenomenon represent one of the core ideas of this dissertation, namely, perception of economic inequality does not mirror the current levels of economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014). In this regard, research has shown that people are poorly informed about economic inequality (Castillo, 2012; Castillo, Miranda, & Carrasco, 2012), that they are ideologically biased (Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2015), or even have problems to perceive economic inequality in numerical terms (Arsenio, 2018; Eriksson & Simpson, 2012; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). These findings suggest that perception of economic inequality, under the perspective of numerical estimation of differences between monetary economic resources, only capture the construct in a partial and imperfect way. Therefore, we consider important to ask ourselves the following open question: *How do people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life?* Thereby, the third specific aim is to identify in what way(s) people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life. Considering that this is a descriptive and exploratory goal, we do not pretend to confirm specific hypothesis, but rather we pose working ideas (IT) that led our analytical approach. Particularly, we consider that (IT<sub>1</sub>) perception of economic inequality is a multi-dimensional construct located in the daily-life of individuals. Therefore, perception of inequality is not reduced to the subjective

estimation of how monetary and economic resources are distributed among people or groups, but it covers a broader range of aspects related to people’s experiences in their daily-life. Taking into account the relevance of ideologies on perception of economic inequality, a second working idea was to explore whether the perception of economic inequality in the daily life vary in accordance to individuals political ideology (IT<sub>2</sub>) (see Table 1 to see an outline of the problems, research questions, hypotheses and working ideas of the current research).

**Table 1.** Outline of the research issues, questions, aims, hypotheses and working ideas of this thesis

<b>Issue (Paradox)</b>	<b>Searching question</b>	<b>Specific aim</b>	<b>Hypothesis or working idea</b>
Existential and ideal standards	Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality?	To analyse whether ideologies that justify economic inequality, such as the belief in meritocracy and equality of opportunities, moderate the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality.	H <sub>1</sub> : there will be a positive correlation between perceived and ideal inequality, but this relationship will be stronger among those people who believe more in meritocracy and equality of opportunities.
Perception of inequality and political attitudes	Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perception of economic inequality and support for redistribution?	To analyse whether ideologies that justify economic inequality moderate the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution.	H <sub>2a</sub> : there will be a positive relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution, but this relationship will be weaker (or even void) among people who believe less (vs those who believe more) in meritocracy and equality of opportunities.
	Do ideal levels of economic inequality desired by the people influence (suppress) the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution.	To Identifying whether the level of economic inequality that people are willing to accept influence (suppress) the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution.	H <sub>2b</sub> : the level of economic inequality desired by people will reduce (or suppress) the effect of perceived inequality on support to redistribution of resources.
Underestimation of inequality	How do people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life?	To identifying how people perceive economic inequality from the perspective of their daily life.	IT <sub>1</sub> : perception of economic inequality is a multi-dimensional construct located on daily-life. IT <sub>2</sub> : perception of economic inequality in individuals’ daily-life varies in accordance to political ideology



# *CHAPTER 3.*

The Vicious Cycle of  
Economic Inequality:

The Role of Ideology in  
Shaping the Relationship  
between “What Is” and  
“What Ought to Be” in 41  
Countries



The Vicious Cycle of Economic Inequality: The Role of Ideology in Shaping the  
Relationship between “What Is” and “What Ought to Be” in 41 Countries

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## Abstract

People's desired levels of inequality are informed by the levels of inequality they perceive to exist. Perceived economic inequality is used as a reference point in determining people's ideal level of inequality. However, recent research has suggested that the strength of this relationship depends on people's endorsement of system justifying beliefs. The current paper extends this body of research by replicating these findings across 41 countries (N=42078), showing the impact of system justifying beliefs at both the individual and the societal level. We conducted a multilevel analysis and found that the higher the endorsement of equality of opportunity beliefs—both at the individual and the societal level—, and meritocratic beliefs—at the individual level—, the stronger the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality. These findings are in support of a motivated account of the perceived legitimacy of economic inequality.

**Key words:** Economic inequality, perceptions of inequality, system justifying beliefs, societal beliefs, legitimacy.



## Introduction

Despite evidence of the pervasive and pernicious effects of economic inequality on health, wellbeing, happiness, trust, social cohesion, and mortality (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017), inequality tends to be widely accepted, and justified (Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, & Jost, 2013; Walker, 2014). In determining acceptable levels of economic inequality, people make use of existential standards—the current levels of national wealth and inequality that are perceived to exist. Thus, information about how economic resources *are* distributed (i.e., perceived inequality) is used in people’s assessment of how they *should be* distributed (i.e., ideal inequality; Castillo, 2011; Hadler, 2005; Shamon & Dülmer, 2014; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). However, little research has examined *why* this is the case.

In line with Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, López-Rodríguez, and García-Sánchez (2015), we argue that the relationship between the perceived and ideal level of inequality is explained partially by a motivation to rationalize the *status quo* (i.e., system justification). Hence, ideologies—measured as individual differences in the endorsement of system justifying beliefs—moderate the effects of existential standards—perceived inequality—on judgements of the ideal income distribution.

In this research, we aim to extend these findings in at least two ways: First, by replicating this interaction effect in bigger and more diverse samples from 41 countries; second, by demonstrating that the interaction also occurs at the societal level, such that the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality is stronger in those countries that are characterized by higher aggregated system justifying beliefs scores.

### Existential Standards and Ideal Estimates of Inequality

The concept of existential standards and its relationship with the ideal estimations was coined by Shepelak and Alwin (1986) who proposed that *what ought to be* is defined “strictly in terms of established practices” (p. 31). Indeed, perceptions of the current state of affairs significantly shape ideal levels of inequality (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014; Kay et al., 2009; Willis et al., 2015). When it comes to economic inequality, people who perceive greater income gaps in society have been found to also be the ones willing to accept greater income gaps (Castillo, 2012a; Trump, 2017; Willis et al., 2015). Similarly, in countries with greater objective economic inequality, people perceived greater inequality (Castillo, 2012b) and reported higher levels of tolerance for inequality (Schröder, 2017). Thus, economic inequality provides a reference point for the formation of the existential standards used to evaluate the *status quo*.

The relationship between perceived and desired inequality may be due to heuristic processes, so that people anchor their responses on the current information available in their more immediate context (Amos Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For instance, people that were provided information about actual income inequality used it as an anchor to estimate the desired levels of inequality (Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). However, there is also evidence that supports a motivational component that leads people to justify their *status quo* (Jost & Banaji, 1994; van der Toorn & Jost, 2014). That is, people perceive inequality as an acceptable state of affairs (Kay et al., 2009), and justify it by endorsing ideologies that rationalize inequality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

### **System Justifying Ideologies and the Motivational Underpinnings of Perceived Economic Inequality**

According to system justification theory, people are motivated to justify existing social, political and economic arrangements in order to fulfill psychological needs for meaning, order, and stability (Jost, Gaucher, & Stern, 2015; van der Toorn & Jost, 2014). Certain ideologies contribute to meeting these needs by providing narratives through which people make sense of their—unequal—realities.

Meritocratic beliefs, which posit that rewards are based upon individual merits (i.e., hard work, ability or talent; Jost & Hunyady, 2005), are central to the legitimation of economic inequality (see Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Shepelak, 1989). These beliefs are particularly stable and widespread in Western societies, and are associated with judgments of how economic resources should be distributed (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007) and help to maintain social cohesion in unequal societies (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012).

Alongside meritocratic beliefs, equality of opportunity beliefs also play a role in the legitimation of economic inequality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). This type of beliefs relies on the “level-the-playing-field” principle (Roemer, 1998), which posits that society should provide the resources people need to develop their potential (e.g., education) to compete for valued social positions.

Though related, meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs stress two different dimensions of how economic inequalities are justified: merit refers to the bases on which resources are distributed (e.g., competence, talent, effort), whereas equality of opportunity refers to the conditions that allow the development of such merits (Mijs, 2016). Both types of beliefs can be depicted as *descriptive* or *prescriptive* beliefs. The former refers to factual perceptions that meritocracy and equal opportunities *do exist* in society, whereas the latter refers to preferences for the merit and equal opportunities principles, that is, how resources

*should* be allocated. Descriptive (but not prescriptive) meritocratic beliefs have been shown to play a hierarchy-legitimizing function (Son Hing et al., 2011).

Beliefs are also held at the societal level. These societal beliefs are “enduring beliefs shared by society members, with contents that are perceived by society members as characterizing their society” (p. 39, Bar-Tal, 2000); they are shared cognitions that mirror a common perceived reality, and go beyond the beliefs of individuals. Societal beliefs help to structure social life (e.g., setting behavioral norms and institutions; Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012); and are entrenched in socio-historical narratives, collective memory, public debates, media products, and institutional communication (Bar-Tal, 2000). Hence, societal beliefs become a “meaning template” to interpret and navigate reality, which contribute to legitimize the *status quo*, even before rampant levels of violence, unfairness and inequality (Bar-Tal, 2007; Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Dgani-Hirsh, 2009; Sharvit, 2014).

In addition, societal beliefs serve as social cues that may influence individuals’ judgments of their reality. From a social judgment perspective, aggregated judgments—societal beliefs—create “consensus” about what is normative and desirable in a given context, which accordingly enhances individual judgments about what is legitimate (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

Situational factors can also trigger individuals’ motivation to justify the system. For instance, under system threat, people strongly endorsed meritocratic beliefs and worked harder on behavioral tasks in defense of the meritocratic system (Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011). Similarly, meritocracy reminders via priming have been shown to lead disadvantaged groups to justify inequality by self-stereotyping (McCoy & Major, 2007), or by denying racial discrimination (Knowles, & Lowery, 2012). Thus, ideologies—both at the individual and at the societal level—are part of a multilevel process that reinforces the legitimacy of the current state of affairs. Individual beliefs help people to justify the *status quo* by judging it as proper and fair; and societal beliefs provide a sense of validation that reinforces individual judgments (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Indeed, people’s endorsement of narratives of modernity, both at the individual and the country level are related to more acceptance of income inequality (Larsen, 2016). Thus, the acceptance of economic inequality is the result of an active interplay between socioeconomic and dominant ideologies within and between countries (Hadler, 2005).

### **The Current Research**

The first aim of this study was to replicate previous research examining the moderating role of system justifying beliefs on the relationship between the economic inequality individuals perceive and the inequality they consider ideal. Although Willis and colleagues (2015) have already shown that this relationship was stronger when system justification motivation was enhanced, they collected data from convenience samples in the Spanish context and used a measure of social dominance orientation to operationalize system justification. The current study tests the robustness of these previous findings by using a large cross-national sample and by including other system justifying beliefs in the model (i.e., meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs). Moreover, we also explore the influence of the societies' ideological climate by testing the role of system justifying beliefs at the societal level on individual estimations of economic inequality.

Our first hypothesis was that system justifying beliefs—meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs—moderate the positive relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality within countries, such that the relationship would be stronger among respondents who highly endorse these two system justifying ideologies ( $H_1$ ). Our second hypothesis is that these relationships also hold at the country-level: the higher endorsement of system justifying beliefs at the societal level, the stronger the positive relationship between respondents' perceived and desired level of economic inequality ( $H_2$ ). This will allow us to test the intriguing possibility that above and beyond people's *own* endorsement of system justifying beliefs, the ideological climate that surrounds them influences their desired level of inequality.

## **Method**

### **Data and Respondents**

We used data from the Social Inequality Module carried out by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 2009 (ISSP Research Group, 2017). This module included surveys of 41 countries around the world ( $N=56021$  respondents). We used all data available to estimate each model, and applied a listwise deletion method when there were missing data in the variables of interest. Final analyses were conducted with  $N=42078$  cases ( $M_{age}=46.75$ ,  $SD=17.20$ ; 55.01% female).

### **Outcome Variable**

**Ideal economic inequality.** This variable corresponds to the estimations of how income is ideally distributed among high vs. low status occupations. It was calculated by computing the ratio between the earnings considered as fair for a chairman of a large

national company, and an unskilled worker in a factory. Considering that the logarithmic function helps this measure meet important assumptions regarding perceptions of economic differences (i.e., loss aversion, scale invariance, and symmetry), we log-transformed the ratio as suggested by the literature<sup>1</sup> (Jasso, 1978; Jasso, Törnblom, & Sabbagh, 2016).

### **Predictor Variables**

**Perceived economic inequality.** This variable was operationalized as respondents' individual estimations of the ratio between current earnings of a chairman of a large national company and an unskilled worker in a factory. This variable was calculated using the same procedure used to calculate ideal economic inequality, but using respondents' estimates of the salary that those workers actually earn.

**Meritocratic beliefs.** These beliefs represent the idea that getting ahead in life is due to individual effort and ambition. They were operationalized as the average score of two items, where respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (*essential*) to 5 (*not important at all*), “How important is hard work?” and “How important is having ambition?” for getting ahead in life ( $r_{(54607)}=.426, p<.001$ )<sup>2</sup>. The items were reverse-scored such that higher values indicate higher levels of endorsement of meritocratic beliefs.

**Equality of opportunity beliefs.** These beliefs refer to the credence that people have equal access to opportunities to get ahead in life, regardless of systematic group-based bias in education. We operationalized equality of opportunity beliefs as the average score of the following three items, with response scales ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*): “In <country>, only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university degree”; “In <country>, only the rich can afford the costs of attending university”; and “In <country>, people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background” (reverse-scored) ( $a=.584^3, N=54083$ ). Higher values indicate stronger endorsement of the belief that people have equal access to opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> The logarithm of the ratio is used in accordance with the literature, given that the log transformation attenuates the differences made at the top and at the bottom of the scores (e.g., a difference of 10 between 990 and 1000 does not have the same meaning as a difference of 10 between 90 and 100; for a more extensive explanation, see Jasso, 2015; Jasso, Törnblom, & Sabbagh, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Zero-order correlations for each country are provided in the supplementary materials Table S1.

<sup>3</sup> This overall alpha level is relatively low, which is not surprising as survey items reliabilities are “generally mediocre at best” (Feldman, 1999). Despite this, we decided to use this measure because it has been successfully used in other international surveys, allowing comparison with similar research in the field. See Table S2 in the supplementary materials for Cronbach's alpha per country.



### **Individual Socio-Demographic Variables**

We additionally included two status indicators in the analysis to control for their possible effects: respondents' subjective socioeconomic status and their educational level. The first was measured using the MacArthur Scale of subjective SES (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). On an image of a ladder with ten rungs, numbered from 1 (the lowest position) to 10 (the highest position), respondents indicated where they would place themselves on such a scale. The second status indicator was educational level, which was scored from 0 (*no formal degree*) to 5 (*university degree*). Respondent sex (Male=0, Female=1) and age were included as control variables.

### **Societal Level Variables**

As objective economic inequality indicators at the societal level we included the Gini index to account for economic inequality, and the Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP) based on purchasing power parity—an overall wealth indicator that converts the values of goods and services from different countries into the values of a country of reference, so comparisons between countries can be made—. Both the Gini index and the GDP were retrieved from the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2018) for the year in which the ISSP data were collected. When data were not available in this dataset, we retrieved information from The World Factbook published by the Central Intelligence Agency (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

We aggregated the individual scores for perceived inequality and system justifying beliefs within each country to examine the variance of those variables at the societal level and test their influence on respondents' estimations of ideal inequality. Aggregating variables from lower levels into grouping variables at higher levels (e.g., groups, communities, countries, etc.) is a common practice in multilevel modelling to take care of the ecological fallacy when testing micro- and macro-level relationships (Heck & Thomas, 2015; Hox, Moerbeek, & van de Schoot, 2018). Analyses were conducted using the lme4 package implemented for R Software (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015).

## **Results**

Due to the nested nature of the data, with individuals (Level-1) clustered in countries (Level-2), we estimated a series of Multilevel Models (MLM) to test our hypotheses. MLM takes into account that respondents within countries may be more strongly correlated with each other, and provides better estimations than regular OLS regression. We estimated a random slope-intercept model, to account for the variability of the outcome intercept and predictors aside from the sociodemographic variables across

countries. Individual-level variables were group-mean centered, and societal-level variables were grand-mean centered to conduct the within- and cross-level interactions (Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2016). Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1 and full information for each model is presented in Table 2.

**Table 1.**

Descriptive statistics for variables included in the model at the individual and societal level

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
<b>Individual level</b>					
Ideal income gap	42078	1.71	1.16	-10.60	13.59
Perceived income gap	42078	2.59	1.37	-10.40	13.82
Meritocratic beliefs	42078	3.98	0.75	1.00	5.00
Equality of opportunity beliefs	42078	3.28	0.88	1.00	5.00
Status (educational level)	42078	2.95	1.43	0.00	5.00
Subjective SES	42078	5.12	1.77	1.00	10.00
<b>Societal level</b>					
Ideal income gap	41	1.58	0.51	0.78	3.34
Perceived income gap	41	2.47	0.67	1.41	3.99
Meritocratic beliefs	41	3.94	0.26	3.47	4.39
Equality of opportunity beliefs	41	3.32	0.35	2.52	4.19
Status (educational level)	41	2.86	0.46	1.77	3.65
Subjective SES	41	5.05	0.65	3.74	6.12
Gini index	41	34.57	7.77	24.8	63
Gross Domestic Product (purchase power parity)	41	27901.7 3	12176.0 3	5115.4 8	50344.5 1

*Note:* See supplementary material for descriptive statistics per country Table S2.

Chapter 3

Table 2.

Unstandardized estimates of Multilevel Regression Analysis with random intercepts between countries and random slopes for perceived income gap, meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs, estimated with Full Maximum Likelihood Estimator.

	Model 0. Intercept only			Model 1. Control variables			Model 2. Perceptions + Individual beliefs (fixed slopes)			Model 3. Perceptions + Individuals beliefs (random slopes)			Model 4. Perception + Individual and societal Beliefs (random slopes)		
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Fixed Parts</b>															
(Intercept)	1.592 (.078)	1.440 – 1.745	<b>&lt;.001</b>	1.432 (.079)	1.277 – 1.587	<b>&lt;.001</b>	1.593 (.078)	1.439 – 1.746	<b>&lt;.001</b>	1.572 (.079)	1.418 – 1.726	<b>&lt;.001</b>	1.563 (.034)	1.498 – 1.629	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Status (educational level)				.076 (.004)	.068 – .083	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.023 (.003)	.017 – .029	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.028 (.003)	.022 – .034	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.028 (.003)	.022 – .034	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Subjective SES				.024 (.003)	.018 – .029	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.030 (.002)	.025 – .034	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.029 (.002)	.024 – .033	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.029 (.002)	.024 – .034	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Sex (female)				-.159 (.009)	-.177 – -.141	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-.081 (.008)	-.096 – -.065	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-.087 (.008)	-.102 – -.072	<b>&lt;.001</b>	-.087 (.008)	-.102 – -.072	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Age				.005 (.000)	.005 – .006	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.001 (.000)	.001 – .002	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.002 (.000)	.001 – .002	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.002 (.000)	.001 – .002	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Perceived income gap (PIG)							.529 (.003)	.522 – .535	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.496 (.017)	.463 – .528	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.499 (.016)	.468 – .529	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Meritocratic beliefs (MB)							.021 (.005)	.011 – .032	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.021 (.008)	.004 – .037	<b>.015</b>	.021 (.008)	.004 – .037	<b>.014</b>
Equality of opportunity beliefs (EQB)							.059 (.005)	.050 – .069	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.059 (.008)	.043 – .075	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.059 (.008)	.043 – .074	<b>&lt;.001</b>
PIG x MB							.013 (.005)	.003 – .022	<b>.008</b>	.010 (.005)	.001 – .019	<b>.033</b>	.010 (.005)	.001 – .019	<b>.033</b>
PIG x EQB							.031 (.004)	.023 – .039	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.028 (.004)	.021 – .036	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.029 (.004)	.021 – .036	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Perceived income gap (PIG-E) (L-2)													.679 (.050)	.581 – .777	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Meritocratic beliefs (L-2)													.146 (.127)	-.103 – .394	.251
Equality of opportunity beliefs (L-2)													.206 (.132)	-.054 – .465	.120

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	Model 0.	Model 1.	Model 2.	Model 3.	Model 4.		
					<i>B (SE)</i>		
					<i>95% CI</i>		
					<i>p</i>		
Gini index (2009)					.004 (.004)	-.003 – .012	.237
GDP per capita by PPP (2009)					-.043 (.041)	-.124 – .037	.291
PIG x MB (L-2)					.046 (.063)	-.077 – .169	.462
PIG x EQB (L-2)					.093 (.045)	.005 – .181	<b>.039</b>
<b>Random Parts</b>							
Individual variance	1.019	.995	.631	.612			.612
Intercept variance	.253	.251	.252	.252			.040
Perceived income gap				.011			.009
Meritocratic beliefs				.002			.002
Equality of Opportunity beliefs				.002			.002
Covariance PIG x Intercept				.388			.680
ICC	.199	.202	.285	.291			.062
N (L-1)	47005	46168	42078	42078			42078
N (L-2) <sup>+</sup>	42	42	42	42			42
R <sup>2</sup>	.234	.253	.533	.548			.548
AIC	134511.93	131018.51	100335.19	99253.00			99169.25
BIC	134538.21	131079.69	100438.96	99391.35			99368.14
Deviance	134505.93	13110.51	131004.51	99221.00			99123.25

Note. <sup>+</sup>Although ISSP 2009 collected data from 41 countries, they distinguished between East and West Germany resulting in data from 42 groups. When we conducted the same analysis excluding outliers—respondents with scores above and below 4 SD—results were nearly identical.

Model 0 is the intercept-only model, which provided fairly good evidence of substantial intraclass correlation ( $ICC=.199$ ) and between-level variance in the outcome variable to warrant multilevel modeling. Model 1 includes the status indicators and the sociodemographic variables in order to control for them in further models. Model 2 includes perceptual and ideological variables at the individual level, as well as their interaction term. Given that multilevel models that maximize the random effects variance perform more sensitive tests (Barr, Levy, Scheepers, & Tily, 2013), in Model 3 we added random effects for perceived income gap, and for meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs. Model 4 is the final model, where we additionally tested the effect of societal variables.

Across all models, SES was found to positively predict ideal income inequality. For each unit increase in educational level, respondents' estimation of the ideal economic inequality increased by 2.84%<sup>4</sup>. The same was found for subjective SES, such that each unit increase on this scale translated into a 2.94% increase in respondents' estimation of the ideal economic inequality. This is consistent with previous research on the influence of status (Castillo, 2012; Kelley & Evans, 1993) and self-interest motivations (Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, & McKee, 2017; Sznycer et al., 2017), suggesting that high SES respondents accept higher levels of economic inequality as a way to justify their privileged position.

### **Perceived Inequality and Individual System Justifying Beliefs Influence Estimations of Ideal Inequality**

According to our hypotheses, desired levels of economic inequality are influenced by perceptions of existing inequality and system justifying beliefs. Model 4 shows that the perceived level of economic inequality predicted the ideal level of inequality: each 10% increase in perceived inequality was found to be associated with a 4.86% increase in ideal inequality. Meritocratic beliefs and perceived equal access to opportunities both also positively predicted the ideal economic inequality, and this association was stronger for equality of opportunity beliefs than for meritocratic beliefs ( $\beta=3.358$ ,  $p<.001$ )<sup>5</sup>. For meritocratic beliefs, each unit increase was associated with a 2.12% increase in judgments of ideal inequality, and for the equality of opportunity beliefs there was a 5.97% increase.

Regarding our first hypothesis, both two-way interaction terms between perceived inequality and system justifying beliefs—meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs,

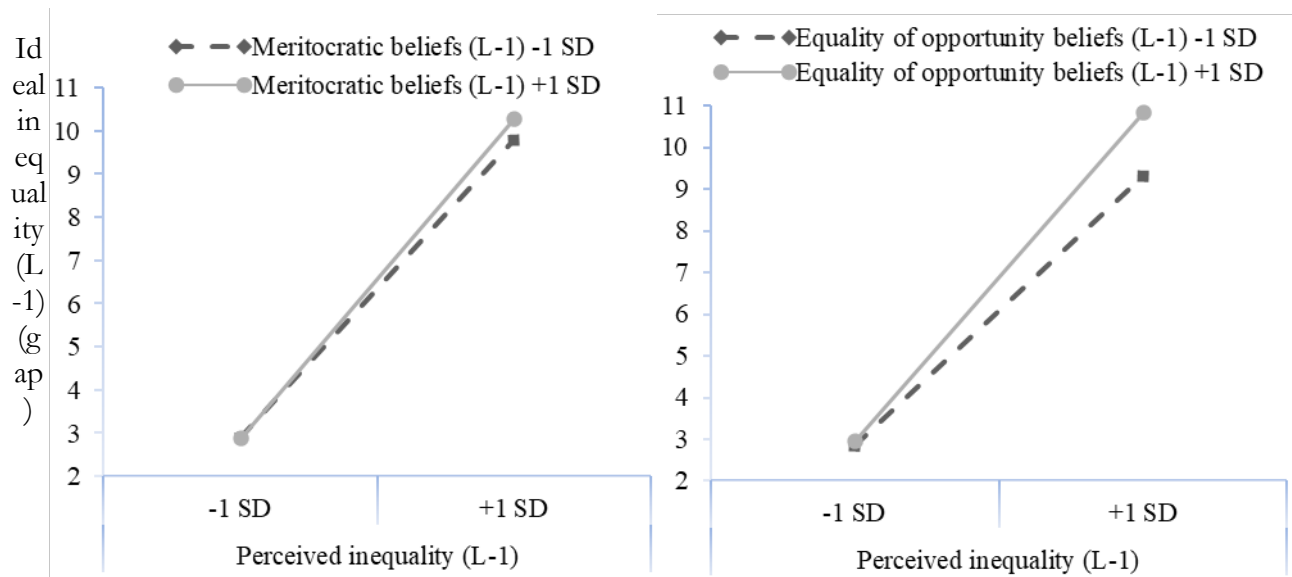
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<sup>4</sup> Log-Log and Liner-Log transformation are conducted according to Yang (2012).

<sup>5</sup> The difference between two regression coefficients was estimated using the formula

$$Z = \frac{b1-b2}{\sqrt{SEb1^2+SEb2^2}}, \text{ as proposed by Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, \& Piqueiro (1998).}$$

respectively—were found to be associated with ideal levels of inequality (see Table 2). Thus, the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality was stronger for respondents endorsing higher levels of meritocratic beliefs (i.e., +1 SD;  $b=.506$ ,  $t=31.52$ ,  $p<.001$ ), than for those endorsing lower levels (i.e., -1 SD) ( $b=.491$ ,  $t=30.58$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Figure 1, panel A). Equality of opportunity beliefs also positively affected the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality, such that the more strongly respondents endorsed these beliefs, the stronger was the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality. We found that this association was stronger at higher levels of equality of opportunity beliefs ( $b=.522$ ,  $t=32.46$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than at lower levels ( $b=.475$ ,  $t=29.72$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (Figure 1, panel B).



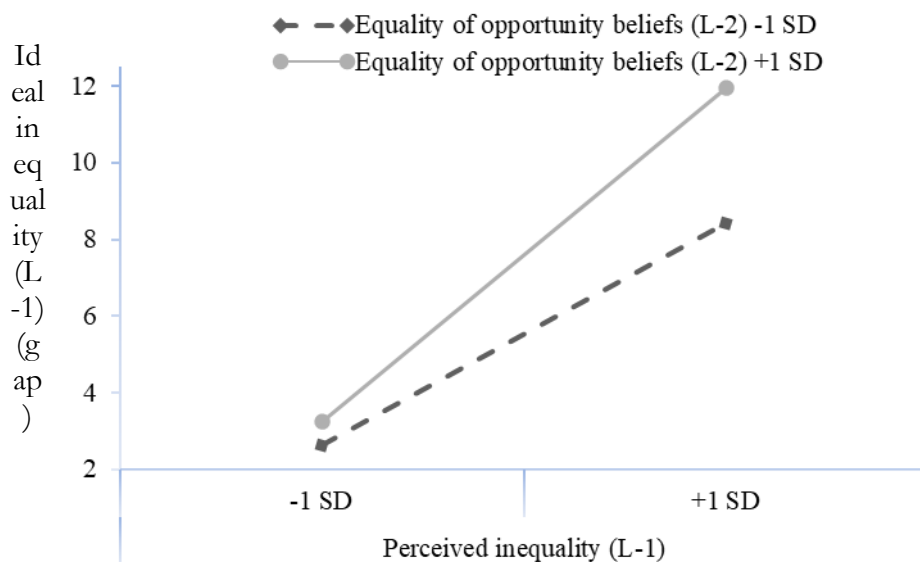
**Figure 1.** Within-level interaction between perceived inequality and meritocratic beliefs (Panel A), and equality of opportunity beliefs (Panel B), on ideal inequality.

### The Influence of Societal Variables on Estimations of Ideal Economic Inequality

As for the role of societal variables, after controlling for individual variability between and within countries, we found that objective indices of inequality and wealth were not associated with the ideal levels of inequality that respondents desired. However, as hypothesized, perceived economic inequality at the societal level was found to predict individual levels of desired economic inequality ( $b=.679$ ,  $p<.001$ ). For each 10% increase in

perceived inequality at the societal level, there was a 6.68% increase in ideal inequality at the individual level. Meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs at the country level were not associated with the desired levels of economic inequality.

We also confirmed our second hypothesis that societal beliefs would moderate the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality at the individual level, adjusting for individual beliefs. We found a cross-level interaction between equality of opportunity beliefs at the societal level and the perceived inequality at the individual level, indicating that the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality was stronger for residents of countries with higher aggregated levels of equality of opportunity beliefs ( $b=.527, t=24.77, p<.001$ ) compared to countries that endorse lower levels ( $b=.461, t=19.60, p<.001$ ) (Figure 2). After specifying a random slope-intercept model (model 4), we did not find a cross-level interaction between meritocratic beliefs at the societal level and perceived inequality on ideal economic inequality.



**Figure 2.** Cross-level interaction between perceived inequality at the individual level and equality of opportunity beliefs at the country level, on ideal inequality.

### Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the moderating role of system justifying beliefs on the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality. Although previous research has shown a consistent association between the perception of the current level of inequality and its ideal level (Castillo, 2012; Kay et al., 2009; Trump, 2018), our findings provide further support for the moderation of this relationship by system

justifying beliefs. In fact, we demonstrate that the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality is stronger among individuals who endorse meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs. This moderating role of ideologies was obtained at both the individual and the societal level.

Our findings replicate previous work demonstrating that adherence to ideologies that legitimate the *status quo* boosts the perceived-ideal economic inequality relationship (Willis et al., 2015). Considering that previous findings were obtained using smaller samples from a specific European country (i.e., Spain), the current research takes this work a step further by providing evidence of the robustness of the effect across national contexts.

Other work has also examined ideologies that justify economic inequality at the macro level. Larsen (2016), for instance, identified that narratives related to expectancies of upward social mobility, procedural justice, and belief of living in a middle-class society, lead to accept more inequality. Our research findings are consistent with this previous work because they suggest a role for system justifying narratives in making sense of inequality, but contribute new insights too. First, our outcome variable relies on the distribution of income that people judge as ideal, which is different from the general judgment that income inequality in a given country is too large. This constitutes a different and more accurate operationalization of the ideal economic inequality that people would be willing to accept, than the indicator that “inequality is too large”, which has been interpreted in diverse ways (e.g., tolerance of inequality, attitudes toward inequality, general perception, acceptance, concerns). Therefore, we argue that the estimation of income gaps is a useful alternative to measure perceptions and acceptance of economic inequality.

Second, we shed light on the social psychological underpinnings of the acceptance of inequality by demonstrating how system justifying ideologies shape the perceived-ideal inequality relationship. People are not simply anchoring on what they perceive to be the *status quo*, as their judgments of the ideal level of inequality are reinforced by their endorsement of system justifying beliefs. Although people’s perceptions of the current level of inequality provide a reference point that anchor their judgments of what should be (Kay et al., 2009), we show that this anchoring is facilitated by people’s ideological beliefs. We argue that the heuristic- and motivation-based approach do not compete in explaining why people legitimate economic inequality; rather, they depict two different and complementary mechanisms through which individuals contribute to the maintenance of the *status quo*. Although previous research has demonstrated the effect of the anchoring effect on judgments about economic inequality (Pedersen & Mutz, 2018); we provide



evidence that the process is also motivated, so that ideologies affect how perceptions of existing inequality affect the acceptance of inequality. In this line, more research should be conducted to test the interplay between the heuristic- and motivated-based approaches to the legitimation of inequality.

Third, we also found that the relationship between how much inequality people perceive and how much inequality they desire was stronger not just among individuals who endorse greater system justifying beliefs, but also for individuals living in countries that are characterized by beliefs that everyone has a chance to get ahead in life. Thus, even though individuals themselves may not necessarily endorse system justifying beliefs, the ideological context in which they live also plays a relevant role in their judgments of ideal economic inequality. This is a novel observation that extends the existing research on the justification of economic inequality in important ways. First, we showed that the higher the perceived inequality at the country level, the higher the ideal level of inequality at the individual level. Second, we showed that pervasive societal beliefs posing that everyone has a chance to get ahead, were associated with a stronger relationship between perceived and ideal inequality. These findings suggest that the cultural narratives that are shared and formed over time in a society have an important role in influencing individual perceptions, values, and positioning toward social phenomena.

These findings at the societal level might be explained from two different but complementary approaches. One of them comes from a social norms perspective, and argues that people use widespread beliefs to discern what to do or what to think. As such, social norms express social values (Sheriff, 1936) and prescribe attitudes and behaviors internalized by individuals (Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). Then, what is perceived in the social climate can give a sense of consensual validation that leads people to reaffirm such perceptions as prescriptive, and consequently, contributes to the justification and perpetuation of the *status quo* (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). An alternative explanation is related to the motivation to justify the *status quo* (Jost, Gaucher, & Stern, 2015). Previous research has shown that contextual stimuli that activate system justifying ideologies, can trigger people's motivations to justify the *status quo* (Ledgerwood et al., 2011; McCoy & Major, 2007). In this perspective, the adherence to societal beliefs that justify inequality can fulfill epistemic and relational needs by providing a coherent and shared narrative that explains the world, which maximizes the relationship between what is and what ought to be (Jost, Sterling, & Langer, 2015). Although both perspectives are plausible, we argue that societal beliefs are not just social norms that prescribe what should be, but could also

trigger individual motivations to justify the current state of affairs. However, further research is needed to clarify how the ideological climate influences individual perceptions and judgments about inequality.

The conditioning role of societal beliefs on perceived inequality should be interpreted with caution and still requires more robust testing in future research. Given the relatively small number of groups included in this research, and the difficulty of increasing the number of participating countries, future research might use other group-level clustering (e.g., organizations with different ideological climates) to increase the statistical power of the contextual level and get more robust estimates of these cross-level effects. Likewise, to overcome potential limitations derived from the aggregation of individual-level indicators, ideological climate could also be captured through direct contextual indicators (e.g., organizational culture).

Additionally, we found that, at the individual level, meritocratic beliefs had a smaller effect on ideal inequality, than equality of opportunity beliefs; and, at the societal level, only equality of opportunity beliefs moderated the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality. Although we had expected to find a stronger influence of meritocratic beliefs on the perceived-ideal relationship than we did, we think this finding may be due to the specific wording of the items used to operationalize these beliefs. People were asked how important they thought merit is to get ahead in life, which seems to reflect a preference for the merit principle (Davey, Bobocel, Son Hing, & Zanna, 1999), rather than a description of the factual meritocracy of the system. Conversely, the operationalization of equality of opportunity beliefs assessed respondents' credence that, in their country, everyone has an equal chance for getting ahead; which seems to be descriptive in nature. Given the different implications of prescriptive versus descriptive beliefs for the legitimation of inequality (Son Hing et al., 2011), it is worth noting that meritocracy as a prescriptive notion works as a moral principle and does not necessarily translate into a system justifying ideology, while descriptive beliefs do (Son-Hing et al., 2011). Thus, the larger influence of equality of opportunity beliefs might be a result of the greater importance of descriptive beliefs in the justification of economic inequality, rather than a result of the content of these beliefs in itself.

Although objective economic inequality—Gini index—did not affect ideal economic inequality in this research, we must not lose sight of the potential pernicious effect that actual levels of inequality might have on the legitimacy of inequality. As Schröder (2017) showed, objective inequality can feed a vicious cycle where higher

economic inequality leads to greater acceptance of inequality. Our research suggests that this may be further exacerbated by system justifying beliefs in the sense that the perceived-ideal inequality relationship is enhanced as a function of individuals' motivations, and the ideological climates in which they live. Then, the more actual inequality there is, the more inequality people are likely to perceive and, consequently, to desire or tolerate; however, this is particularly true if individuals—or those around them—endorse system justifying beliefs.

What we can take away from this research is that the mere perception that economic inequality is high is not enough to encourage people to work towards eliminating it (rather, the opposite), and that system justifying beliefs (both at the individual and the societal level) can make this worse. In this regard, counteracting system justifying beliefs may be a first step toward attenuating—and perhaps breaking down—the vicious cycle. If we want to reduce societal inequality, it is important to discuss the ideologies that people endorse, and work on creating new repertoires that challenge such widespread system justifying beliefs, while at the same time meeting underlying psychological needs as meaning, order, or stability. Research on the legitimacy of economic inequality is not just an ideological issue, but a way to understand how our perceptions and beliefs can shape the world that we live in.

## Supplementary material

**Table S1.** Reliability measures for ideological variables: Cronbach's alpha for Equality of opportunity Beliefs, and bivariate correlation for Meritocratic Beliefs

Country	Cronbach's alpha for Equality of opportunity Beliefs	Correlation between items related to Meritocratic Beliefs
AR-Argentina	0.578	.380**
AT-Austria	0.664	.688**
AU-Australia	0.699	.448**
BE-Belgium	0.437	.357**
BG-Bulgaria	0.651	.694**
CH-Switzerland	0.539	.401**
CL-Chile	0.636	.331**
CN-China	0.333	.521**
CY-Cyprus	0.389	.375**
CZ-Czech Republic	0.529	.541**
DE-Germany	0.548	.532**
DK-Denmark	0.562	.457**
EE-Estonia	0.525	.186**
ES-Spain	0.592	.382**
FI-Finland	0.700	.422**
FR-France	0.574	.287**
GB-Great Britain and/or United Kingdom	0.644	.534**
HR-Croatia	0.539	.445**
HU-Hungary	0.297	.475**
IL-Israel	0.474	.500**
IS-Iceland	0.506	.418**
IT-Italy	0.597	.230**
JP-Japan	0.606	.327**
KR-South Korea	0.417	.385**
LT-Lithuania	0.544	.387**
LV-Latvia	0.418	.168**
NO-Norway	0.605	.450**
NZ-New Zealand	0.570	.485**
PH-Philippines	0.355	.396**
PL-Poland	0.589	.384**
PT-Portugal	0.459	.458**
RU-Russia	0.557	.416**
SE-Sweden	0.651	.586**
SI-Slovenia	0.639	.539**
SK-Slovakia	0.636	.408**
TR-Turkey	0.370	.337**
TW-Taiwan	0.326	.358**
UA-Ukraine	0.399	.329**
US-United States	0.504	.483**
VE-Venezuela	0.642	.311**
ZA-South Africa	0.602	.426**

\*\* p &lt; .001

**Table S2.**

Aggregated Means (standard deviation in brackets) for 41 Countries Participating in the IV Social Inequality Module of the International Social Survey Programme (2009)

Country	Perceived inequality	Ideal inequality	Meritocratic Beliefs	Equality of Opportunity Beliefs	Status (educational level)	Subjective SES	Gini (2009)	GDP per Capita (PPP)
AR-Argentina	1.81 (0.82)	1.23 (0.69)	3.63 (0.82)	3.41 (0.81)	2.32 (1.46)	4.96 (1.54)	45.30	16618.12
AT-Austria	2.68 (1.06)	1.65 (0.82)	3.86 (0.76)	3.58 (0.89)	2.43 (1.23)	6.01 (1.37)	31.50	40704.41
AU-Australia	3.62 (1.33)	2.09 (1.15)	4.22 (0.64)	3.42 (0.92)	3.46 (1.64)	5.84 (1.55)	35.60	40282.31
BE-Belgium	1.67 (0.74)	1.13 (0.67)	3.7 (0.67)	3.33 (0.72)	2.91 (1.16)	5.86 (1.53)	28.70	38047.68
BG-Bulgaria	1.8 (0.72)	1.23 (0.61)	4.31 (0.74)	3.26 (0.89)	3.41 (1.24)	4.89 (2.16)	33.80	14132.99
CH-Switzerland	2.73 (1.2)	1.71 (0.86)	3.75 (0.69)	3.44 (0.75)	2.62 (1.28)	5.71 (1.56)	33.00	51632.65
CL-Chile	3.58 (1.31)	2.45 (1.32)	3.67 (0.86)	3.07 (0.84)	2.53 (1.43)	4.03 (1.66)	52.00	16267.46
CN-China	2.46 (1.43)	1.76 (1.21)	4.12 (0.69)	3.1 (0.66)	2.18 (1.31)	4.6 (1.96)	42.60	8374.43
CY-Cyprus	1.78 (0.38)	1.5 (0.33)	4.18 (0.61)	3.57 (0.65)	3.07 (1.39)	5.5 (1.54)	32.10	33922.67
CZ-Czech Republic	2.24 (0.71)	1.49 (0.63)	4 (0.81)	3.1 (0.83)	2.57 (1.09)	4.87 (1.56)	26.20	27567.20
DE-Germany	3.16 (1.54)	2.05 (1.31)	3.89 (0.65)	3.16 (0.88)	2.24 (1.38)	5.7 (1.53)	31.50	37080.31
DK-Denmark	1.41 (1.04)	0.78 (0.99)	3.62 (0.75)	4.19 (0.82)	3.38 (1.15)	5.77 (1.59)	28.80	40380.94
EE-Estonia	2.19 (0.8)	1.54 (0.69)	3.63 (0.71)	3.12 (0.88)	3.24 (1.13)	4.94 (1.75)	31.60	20523.35
ES-Spain	2 (0.75)	1.07 (0.69)	3.72 (0.78)	3.5 (0.81)	2.57 (1.37)	4.98 (1.41)	35.40	32423.60
FI-Finland	2.22 (0.94)	1.51 (0.77)	3.58 (0.74)	3.88 (0.8)	3.02 (1.53)	6.04 (1.73)	27.50	37868.72
FR-France	3.28 (1.32)	2 (1.04)	3.7 (0.77)	2.84 (0.9)	2.83 (1.53)	4.89 (1.63)	33.10	34767.15
GB-United Kingdom	2.71 (1.32)	1.78 (1.22)	4.03 (0.68)	3.27 (0.82)	2.43 (1.84)	5.24 (1.7)	34.70	34402.96
HR-Croatia	2.27 (0.66)	1.31 (0.59)	4.19 (0.71)	3.16 (0.86)	2.71 (1.28)	4.62 (1.68)	33.20	19470.59
HU-Hungary	3.01 (0.83)	1.67 (0.8)	4.04 (0.77)	2.9 (0.71)	2.48 (1.24)	4.04 (1.51)	27.00	20573.38
IL-Israel	1.97 (0.76)	1.33 (0.65)	3.99 (0.74)	3.3 (0.75)	3.09 (1.33)	5.42 (1.93)	42.80	27578.43
IS-Iceland	1.87 (0.63)	1.02 (0.51)	4.39 (0.57)	3.77 (0.69)	2.84 (1.62)	5.86 (1.55)	28.70	41063.73
IT-Italy	2.76 (1.17)	1.54 (0.93)	3.77 (0.76)	3.37 (0.8)	2.99 (1.26)	4.61 (1.7)	33.70	34549.28
JP-Japan	2.49 (1.03)	1.89 (0.98)	3.61 (0.77)	3.67 (0.98)	3.2 (1.31)	4.65 (1.59)	32.10	33099.27
KR-South Korea	3.99 (1.99)	2.82 (1.67)	4.1 (0.68)	2.93 (0.81)	3.39 (1.35)	4.51 (1.57)	30.70	28642.84
LT-Lithuania	2.46 (0.97)	1.34 (0.79)	3.75 (0.77)	3.12 (0.76)	3.24 (1.34)	4.25 (1.75)	37.40	18164.40
LV-Latvia	2.24 (0.98)	1.25 (0.76)	3.86 (0.71)	3.1 (0.76)	3.07 (1.24)	4.47 (1.71)	34.80	16889.04
NO-Norway	1.55 (1.01)	0.85 (0.86)	4.18 (0.65)	4.02 (0.65)	3.58 (1.3)	6.12 (1.48)	26.40	55459.99
NZ-New Zealand	2.28 (1.02)	1.64 (0.85)	4.31 (0.64)	3.75 (0.74)	3.27 (1.64)	5.94 (1.62)	32.30	30699.30
PH-Philippines	1.66 (1.26)	1.33 (1.21)	4.28 (0.63)	3.45 (0.82)	2.61 (1.42)	4.5 (1.82)	42.90	5115.48
PL-Poland	2.71 (1.01)	1.68 (0.89)	4.17 (0.56)	2.97 (0.83)	2.89 (1.3)	5.27 (1.7)	33.60	19266.13
PT-Portugal	2.67 (0.95)	1.55 (0.89)	4.17 (0.68)	3.13 (0.78)	2.04 (1.45)	4.42 (2.07)	34.90	26496.18
RU-Russia	3.1 (1.23)	1.69 (1.02)	3.73 (0.84)	2.76 (0.85)	3.47 (1.18)	4.66 (1.9)	39.70	19386.58
SE-Sweden	1.6 (0.92)	0.91 (0.72)	4 (0.64)	3.79 (0.78)	3.01 (1.48)	5.89 (1.53)	26.60	39693.33
SI-Slovenia	2.69 (0.71)	1.55 (0.69)	3.94 (0.78)	3.5 (0.8)	2.66 (1.38)	4.93 (1.53)	24.80	27504.07
SK-Slovakia	2.04 (0.75)	1.34 (0.63)	4.03 (0.74)	3.26 (0.88)	2.73 (1.17)	4.86 (1.58)	26.00	23082.79
TR-Turkey	2.08 (0.83)	1.2 (0.76)	3.75 (0.73)	2.85 (0.78)	1.77 (1.38)	4.23 (1.86)	39.00	15501.85
TW-Taiwan	3.86 (1.74)	3.34 (1.62)	4.22 (0.62)	3.44 (0.67)	2.95 (1.51)	4.26 (1.63)	31.60	34526.29
UA-Ukraine	2.53 (1.14)	1.24 (0.96)	3.66 (0.86)	2.52 (0.75)	3.56 (1.04)	3.74 (1.68)	25.30	7239.62
US-United States	3.6 (1.83)	2.16 (1.44)	4.34 (0.55)	3.51 (0.77)	3.65 (1.14)	5.79 (1.6)	40.50	47001.56
VE-Venezuela	1.59 (0.99)	1.13 (0.78)	3.47 (0.9)	3.57 (0.87)	2.71 (1.33)	5.43 (1.9)	46.90	16507.34
ZA-South Africa	2.75 (1.21)	2.13 (1.11)	4.18 (0.69)	2.98 (0.92)	2.13 (1.59)	4.9 (1.97)	63.00	11462.61

# *CHAPTER 4.*

**Attitudes toward  
redistribution and the  
interplay between  
perception and beliefs  
about inequality**



Attitudes toward redistribution and the interplay between perception and beliefs about  
inequality\*

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## Abstract

Support for redistributive policies is not widely accepted by the public, even though economic inequality has increased over the last few decades. In this paper, we examine whether attitudes toward redistribution are a product of perceptions and beliefs about inequality. Specifically, we argue that the association between perceived inequality and support for redistribution varies by beliefs that justify inequality. We investigated this hypothesis in a cross-cultural/country sample (N=56021 from 41 countries) using two different operationalisations of support for redistribution and two beliefs that justify inequality. As hypothesized, the perceived size of the income gap correlated positively with believing that it is the government's responsibility to reduce inequality among those who rejected beliefs that justify inequality, whereas there was no association for those who endorsed these beliefs. Similarly, perceived economic inequality correlated positively with support for progressive taxation, but this association was weaker among those who believed that hard work leads to success and that everyone has opportunities to get ahead. Together, these results demonstrate that ideologies influence the relationship between perceived inequality and attitudes toward redistribution, and that support for redistribution varies by how the policy is framed.

**Keywords:** Redistribution; Ideology; Beliefs about inequality; Perception of inequality; economic inequality



## **Introduction**

Economic inequality represents one of the biggest challenges to society, not only in terms of economic development, but also for political stability and social wellbeing (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). To reduce inequality, several political decisions must be made regarding how economic resources should be distributed, such as providing more insurance programs, strengthening welfare spending, implementing progressive taxation systems, and increasing public control of the economy (Atkinson, 2015). In any case, most strategies to redress inequality require governments to take stronger roles regulating the markets and redistributing resources, often via transfer policies that allocate monetary resources to the less fortunate (Luebker, 2014).

In spite of the importance of redistributive policies to reduce inequality, such measures are surprisingly unpopular among the public. For instance, Americans support tax cuts even for the very rich, and generally oppose government spending on social services (Bartels, 2005; Fong, 2001). Similarly, the Meltzer and Richard hypothesis—which posits that higher levels of inequality should trigger greater demands for redistribution (Meltzer & Richard, 1981a)—has only received mixed support. Some studies find a positive link between inequality and redistribution (Borge & Rattsø, 2004; Finseraas, 2009; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), whereas others find negative (Dallinger, 2010; Kelly & Enns, 2010), or even null (Kenworthy & McCall, 2008) associations. In other words, rather than being straightforward, the relationship between economic inequality and redistribution depends on several factors that influence the formation of political preferences; and this may include perceptions and beliefs about economic inequality.

Support for redistribution does not seem to operate according to rational economic models based on self-interest, but instead, is conditional on people's experiences, beliefs, and perceptions (Alesina, Cozzi, & Mantovan, 2012). Although perceptions of income inequality should increase support for redistribution, it is not always the case, as previous research revealed that perceiving inequality is only weakly related to support for redistribution (Bartels, 2005; Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2015). Such a disconnect might be due to people's lack of understanding of how inequality works (Bartels, 2005), because of their endorsement of beliefs that justify such economic disparities (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Bartels, 2005), or due to a lack of trust in the government (Kuziemko et al., 2015).

Although much has been written about perceptions of inequality and ideologies of justice (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Alesina et al., 2012; Durante, Putterman, & van der Weele, 2014; Isaksson & Lindskog, 2009), how these variables interact to predict support for redistribution has received less attention. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap and build on research arguing that the effects of perceived inequality are not straightforward—they tend to depend on people’s ideologies (García-Sánchez, van der Toorn, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2018; Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, López-Rodríguez, & García-Sánchez, 2015). In short, we predict that the relationship between perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution is moderated by the endorsement of two sets of beliefs that justify inequality: meritocracy and equality of opportunities.

To investigate our hypotheses, we used data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and operationalized support for redistribution in two ways: one focused on the responsibility of the government to reduce inequality, and the other focused on a particular way to do so, namely, by redistributing resources via progressive taxes. Since previous research has focussed on the societal level (see Dallinger, 2010; Guillaud, 2013; Jæger, 2009), we examine individual perceptions and beliefs about inequality in order to provide relevant insights regarding the psychological processes that contribute to the rejection of redistributive policies despite the recognition of current levels of inequality and desire for greater equality.

### **Perception of Economic Inequality and Support for Redistribution**

The Meltzer-Richard hypothesis posits that economic inequality should motivate the median voter to demand more redistribution (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). This claim assumes that voters are knowledgeable about the economic realm, but in fact people tend to underestimate economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011) and endorse systematically misguided perceptions of how resources are allocated in society (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017). These perceptions of economic inequality, rather than objective economic indicators, correlate positively with support for redistribution (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Niehues, 2014). Accordingly, correcting people’s misperceptions about their actual position in the income distribution (which is typically overestimated) increases support for redistributive policies above and beyond personal socioeconomic status (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, & Tetaz, 2013).

A lack of understanding about how economic inequality works may also contribute to the disconnect between people’s perceptions of inequality and their public policy preferences: citizens who are poorly informed about the actual distribution of resources

often rely on their own experiences—and usually misguided self-interest—to inform their attitudes toward economic redistribution (Bartels, 2005). Similarly, perceiving distress within one's social network increases support for government-based interventions (Newman, 2014). Kuziemko et al. (2015) also showed that informing people about levels of inequality only modestly increases support for heavier taxation on the wealthy or wealth transfer programs for people in need (p. 41). Similarly, perceived economic inequality was associated with more support for redistribution when the people did not endorse system-justifying ideologies (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018); and led to less acceptance of inequality among those who were motivated to justify the system (Trump, 2018). Thus, although information about inequality might increase people's concerns about inequities, it may not directly motivate people to favour redistribution.

On the other hand, socioeconomic status constrains perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution. For instance, high-status individuals in wealthy environments tend to overestimate the fairness of the economic distribution and express less support for redistribution (Dawtry et al., 2015). Similarly, preferences about, and justifications for, redistribution are influenced by subjective status, such that people perceive themselves as having higher socioeconomic status than reality and tend to be less supportive of redistribution (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Evans & Kelley, 2018). However, perceived economic inequality is distinct from socioeconomic status. Perceived economic inequality refers to how individuals see the distribution of economic resources among groups within a given context (Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014; Kim, Huh, Choi, & Lee, 2017), whereas objective socioeconomic status refers to one's personal standing in the social structure based on material or symbolic resources including wealth, prestige, and power (Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011; van der Toorn et al., 2015).

Beyond the materialistic distinction, subjective socioeconomic status is a psychological indicator of social comparison that captures the position of an individual relative to others (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). Although status and perceptions of inequality are correlated, misperceptions of inequality are widespread such that individuals underestimate income inequality above and beyond their socioeconomic status (Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011).

### **Beliefs of Inequality and Support for Redistribution**

Responses to inequality are shaped both by people's perceptions of inequality, and by normative ideas about the ideal size of the income gap (Sen, 2000). That is, attitudes toward redistribution (partly) depend on people's beliefs about how the world *should* be. Accordingly, individual beliefs about the causes of economic inequality affect people's support for redistributive policies (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986) and can obfuscate self-interest. For example, the disadvantaged rarely push more than the advantaged for economic redistribution (Ashok, Kuziemko, & Washington, 2015; Jost, Langer, et al., 2017; Kelly & Enns, 2010; Luttig, 2013). To these ends, beliefs that emphasise that inequality and wealth are caused by internally controllable factors (i.e., working hard, ambition, merit, etc.) tend to decrease support for redistribution, whereas beliefs that highlight the role of external forces to succeed (i.e. luck, lack of opportunities, ethnicity, social background, etc.) often increase support for redistribution (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall, 2013; Weiner, Osborne & Rudolph, 2011). Other sets of beliefs also correlate negatively with support for redistribution, including the belief that the economic distribution is fair (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005), the causes of inequality are due to individual effort or lack of opportunities (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall, Burk, Laperrière, & Richeson, 2017), upward mobility is possible (Alberto Alesina, Stantcheva, & Teso, 2018; Piketty, 1995), and that economic inequality is legitimate and justifiable (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Because beliefs in meritocracy and equality of opportunity stress personal control over outcomes, endorsement of these beliefs should undermine support for redistributive policies (Frank et al., 2015).

Consistent with this intuition, Kluegel and Smith (1986) showed that meritocratic beliefs (i.e., beliefs that emphasize individual efforts to succeed) correlate negatively with support for redistribution. In this sense, meritocracy provides a sense of fairness and legitimacy about inequality, thereby justifying current inequalities and eliciting aversion to policies that attempt to alter these ostensibly "fair" outcomes. Indeed, endorsement of just world beliefs was associated with less support for redistributive compensation systems (Frank et al., 2015). Conversely, individuals tend to support redistribution when they believe that the disadvantaged lack the opportunities to succeed (Evans & Kelley, 2018).

Additional research demonstrates that people are particularly likely to legitimate inequality when meritocracy combines with the belief that everyone has a chance to get ahead in life (Shepelak, 1989). Indeed, the belief that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in life correlates negatively with support for redistribution (Fong, 2001; Fong,

Bowles, & Gintis, 2006). These associations likely emerge because providing equal opportunities allows people to develop their potential (i.e., education, social assistance, etc.) and “levels the playing field” (Roemer, 1998). Yet this set of beliefs ultimately justifies unequal outcomes. Indeed, McCall, Burk, Laperrière and Richeson (2017) found that scepticism regarding the existence of economic opportunities in the United States increased support for policies aimed at reducing economic inequality. Similarly, thinking that luck is key to success correlates negatively with support for redistribution (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall, 2013).

### **The Current Study**

Given that support for redistribution is not only associated with perceptions of inequality, but also with beliefs that justify inequality, the impact perceptions of economic inequality have on support for economic redistribution might depend on peoples’ beliefs. To these ends, previous research showing that perceptions of inequality do not always drive to support for redistribution often focus on people’s misperceptions of inequality (e.g., Cruces et al., 2013; Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2017). Yet little research has examined the possibility that the relationship between the perceived size of the income gap and support for redistribution depends on people’s endorsement of beliefs that justify inequality. The current study addresses this oversight by investigating the interactive effects of both perceptions and beliefs about economic inequality on support for redistribution.

In going forward, it is important to recognise that redistribution can be framed differently in respect to the role of the government. For example, government intervention could entail implementing policies that regulate the economic market, increase wealth transfers to the poor, raise taxes for those with higher incomes, or increase the provision of government services including social insurance, and so forth (Atkinson, 2015; McCall & Kenworthy, 2009). Therefore, the same socio-psychological processes may not explain attitudes toward all the redistributive policies. For instance, Bartels (2005) showed that people oppose heavier taxation of the rich due to inaccurate perceptions of their own tax burden and misunderstandings about how the policy would personally affect them. Thus, perceptions of inequality may correlate positively with some redistributive measurements (e.g., supporting equality-based policies), but might also correlate negatively with others (e.g., heavier taxation system). Opposition to taxes might be explained by loss aversion, as taxation could be seen as a loss (rather than a gain) in social welfare (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Mccaffery & Baron, 2005). To capture these important nuances and to examine the



generalizability of our results, we operationalized support for redistribution in two ways: attitudes toward the responsibility of the government to reduce economic inequality, and support for progressive taxation.

Our main hypothesis is that system-justifying beliefs will moderate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and support for redistributive policies. Because research on the association between perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution has yielded mixed results, we argue that ideologies that justify inequality likely shape these associations. Specifically, the positive association between perceptions of economic inequality and support for redistribution will be attenuated by the endorsement of meritocracy ( $H_{1a}$ ) and equality of opportunity beliefs ( $H_{1b}$ ). That is, the more perceived economic inequality, the more support for redistribution. But this association should be weaker among those who endorse (vs. reject) beliefs that justify inequality.

In addition to individual-level variables, contextual factors inherent to each country provide standards to perceive and justify inequality, as well as to estimate the amount of redistribution that is acceptable. As such, between-country factors are likely to influence individual-level responses. For instance, in more economically developed countries, increases in economic inequality correlate positively with support for redistribution (Kenworthy & Pontusson, 2005). Conversely, countries where the belief that hard work will bring success is prominent are less supportive of redistribution, whereas countries where working hard is inconsistently associated with success in life tend to express less support for redistribution (Duman, 2013). Given these findings, we control for contextual factors related to objective economic indicators, including the Gini and Human Development indexes.

Support for redistribution is also affected by the legitimacy of the government and cultural factors. For example, perceptions of corruption discourage people from supporting redistribution (Kuziemko et al., 2015; Sánchez & Goda, 2018). Likewise, income inequality enhances inferences that the normative climate is individualistic (rather than collectivistic) (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, Jetten, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2018), and individualism is associated with minimal government intervention, so that people are less supportive for welfare and redistributive policies (e.g. Arıkan & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2015; Berigan & Irwin, 2011; Pitlik & Rode, 2017). As such, we control for country-level perceptions of corruption and levels of individualism/collectivism. We also included aggregated scores per country for individual responses related to perceptions and beliefs about inequality. This enabled us to examine the possibility that countries that perceive more inequality and endorse fewer

beliefs that justify inequality also tend to show more support for redistribution. Thus, we test if country-level perceptions of economic inequality ( $H_2$ ) correlate positively with support for redistribution; and if country-level endorsement of meritocracy ( $H_{3a}$ ) and equality of opportunities beliefs ( $H_{3b}$ ) promote a normative climate that reduces support for redistribution.

## Method

### Respondents

Data for the current study come from the Social Inequality Module (IV) of the 2009 ISSP version 4.0 (ISSP Research Group, 2017). The ISSP is a cross-national collaborative programme that conducts surveys on a variety of social issues. The complete sample size for this module contained 56021 individuals ( $M_{age}=46.75$ ,  $SD = 17.19$ , 55.01% Female) distributed across 41 countries from different regions around the world. Representative samples were collected for each country ( $N_{average-country}=1366$ , ranging from  $N_{Finland}=880$  to  $N_{South-Africa}=3305$ ).

### Measures

**Government responsibility toward redistribution.** The following item was used to assess beliefs about the role the government should take to reduce income inequality: “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low”. This item was scaled from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree). For interpretation purposes, the item was reverse-scored so that higher values reflect more support for the government to reduce economic inequality.

**Support for Progressive Taxation.** Consistent with previous research (McCall & Kenworthy, 2009), we used two items to assess the extent to which people judge the tax system in their country to be fair. The first item asked participants if they “think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share, or a smaller share” (reverse-scored) on a scale from 1 (Much larger share) to 5 (Much smaller share). The second item had participants “describe taxes in <country> today for those with high incomes?” using a scale from 1 (taxes are much too high) to 5 (taxes are much too low). The first item was reverse-scored so that higher scores on this scale reflect higher support for progressive taxing ( $r_{(49109)} = .36, p < .001$ )<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Due to inconsistencies in the reliability of this two-item scale, two countries (namely, the Philippines and South Africa) were removed from our analyses. Specifically, there was a negative correlation between these two items in the Philippines, whereas the zero-order correlation was not statistically significant in South Africa (see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material).

**Perceived economic inequality.** Perceived economic inequality captures the estimated size of the income gap between the wealthy and the poor. Accordingly, participants were asked to estimate the amount high status (i.e., chairman of a large national company) and low status (i.e., an unskilled factory worker) workers “actually earn each year before taxes”. We log-transformed participants’ estimates and used the ratio of the difference between the high status and low status workers to create a measure of perceived economic inequality, as is often done in the literature to satisfy assumptions associated with this construct including loss aversion, scale invariance, and symmetry (see Jasso, 2009; Jasso, 1978; Jasso, Törnblom, & Sabbagh, 2016).

**Meritocratic beliefs.** Two items were used to measure system justifying beliefs about the importance of individual effort and merit to succeed in life. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate how important “ambition” and “hard work” were to getting ahead in life using a scale from 1 (Essential) to 5 (Not important at all). Both items were reversed-scored so that higher values reflect stronger endorsement of meritocratic beliefs ( $r_{(54607)} = .46, p < .001$ ).

**Equality of opportunity beliefs.** Three items were used to assess the belief that everyone within the respondent’s country has an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their ethnicity or social background. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statements: “In [country], only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university degree”; “In [country], only the rich can afford the costs of attending university”; and “In [country], people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background” (reverse-scored). Items were rated on a scale that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.58$ ). Higher values reflect stronger beliefs that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed.

**Individual-level covariates.** Because people may be motivated to maximize their self-interest by opposing (or supporting) redistribution policies, we controlled for socioeconomic status. Accordingly, we assessed objective socioeconomic status via education level<sup>7</sup>, as well as subjective socioeconomic status via a self-report scale ranging from 1 to 10. In both cases, higher values reflect higher status. We also controlled for sex (male = 1, female = 2) and age (years), since men tend to prefer hierarchies more than women (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), and because

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<sup>7</sup> Values for this scale are labelled accordingly: 0 = No formal qualification; 1 = Lowest formal qualification; 2 = Above lowest qualification; 3 = Higher secondary completed; 4 = Above higher secondary level, or other qualification; 5 = University degree completed.

support for progressive policies (e.g., pensions, taxes, etc.) might vary by age. Variables at the individual level were group mean centred. As such, values of zero represent the average score within each country.

**Societal variables:** In order to control for objective socioeconomic factors at the country-level, we included the Gini Index and Human Development Index (HDI). The first indicator measures how incomes are distributed in a given population, ranging from 0 (i.e., “complete equality”, where everyone has the same resources), to 100 (i.e., “complete inequality”, where one individual has all the resources) and was retrieved from the official World Bank dataset (World Bank, 2017). The HDI assesses the capabilities of a given country in terms of economic growth (based upon the gross national income per capita), health (based on life expectancy at birth), and education (based on the mean years of schooling for adults and children; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019a). This indicator was retrieved from the Human Development Data (1990-2017) (UNDP, 2019b)<sup>8</sup>, and is scaled from 0 to 1, where higher values reflect higher levels of development in a given country.

To control for the legitimacy of the government, we included the Perception of Corruption Index (CPI). The CPI is an indicator of how business people, experts and institutions, perceive corrupt behaviours (e.g., bribery, diversion of public funds, etc.) and mechanisms to prevent them (e.g., enforce integrity, prosecution of corrupts, etc.) in a given country (Transparency International, 2019). Scores range from 0 (highest level of perceived corruption) to 100 (lowest level of perceived corruption) and were retrieved for the year in which the survey was fielded in the given country.

Finally, to adjust for country-level cultural values and beliefs, we included the country scores of individualism (i.e., societal values that related to autonomy, independence, and loose interpersonal ties) derived from Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010). We also aggregated the individual scores of perceptions and beliefs about inequality per each society<sup>9</sup>. We took this approach because aggregated scores of perceptions and beliefs about inequality arguably depict the normative climate that justifies inequality (e.g., a “culture” of meritocracy, or generalized perceived inequality). Aggregating ideological individual variables at the country-level recognises that beliefs can vary both within-

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<sup>8</sup> Since the United Nations does not include data for “Taiwan”, we imputed this score with the value estimated by the New World Encyclopedia (2018) that follows the UNDP methodology.

<sup>9</sup> The database provided in the supplementary material of Hofstede et al. (2010) regarding the six dimensions of culture did not include values for Cyprus. Therefore, we decided to impute these values with the scores for Greece, as Cyprus is mainly composed of Greek Cypriots who share common history, language and culture with Greeks. Though imperfect, this imputation has been used in earlier studies (e.g., De Angeli & Kyriakoullis, 2006; Mitchell & Vassos, 1997).

(individual level) and between- (societal level) countries (see Heck & Thomas, 2015; Hox, Moerbeek, & van de Schoot, 2018). All variables at the societal level were grand-mean centred before conducting the analysis. Descriptive statistics per country are shown in Table S2 in the supplementary material.

## Results

*Analytic Approach:* To investigate our hypotheses, we followed Hox, Merbeek and van de Schoot's (2018) suggestion and used a Restricted Maximum Likelihood (rML), rather than Full Maximum Likelihood (fML), estimator. We made this decision because rML achieves less biased estimates of the variances and covariances for random effects than fML, particularly when the number of clustering units are small and samples are unbalanced (as is the case for our study; we have 41 countries at the second level; De Leeuw & Meijer, 2008). Analyses were conducted using the lme4 package developed for R Software (Bates et al., 2015). Supplementary material, including R code and appendixes, are available at: [goo.gl/gN9jVe](https://goo.gl/gN9jVe).

*Preliminary Analyses:* Although government responsibility toward redistribution at the individual level correlated positively with support for progressive taxation ( $r(47223) = .311, p < .001$ ), it received more support from the public ( $M = 3.87, SD = 1.09$ ) than did endorsing progressive taxation ( $M = 3.68, SD = 0.78$ ),  $t(47224) = 33.17, p < .001, d = 0.15$ . Despite this difference, both indicators of support for redistribution were above the mid-point of the scale (3), suggesting that individuals generally agreed with both forms of redistribution. Zero-order correlations further revealed that both indicators of support for redistribution correlated positively with perceived economic inequality, but negatively with economic-justifying beliefs (meritocracy and equality of opportunity), and socioeconomic status (education and subjective perception; see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations).

At the country-level of analysis, countries differed in their support for the government to reduce income inequality,  $F(40, 54359) = 215.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ . The least support was found in the United States ( $M=2.69$ ), New Zealand ( $M=3.10$ ) and Denmark ( $M=3.29$ ), whereas the most support was found in Ukraine ( $M=4.51$ ), Russia ( $M=4.39$ ) and Portugal ( $M=4.38$ ). Regarding support for progressive taxation, there were also significant differences across countries,  $F(40, 49070) = 188.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ . Specifically, New Zealand ( $M=3.10$ ), Israel ( $M=3.29$ ), and Venezuela ( $M=3.22$ ) reported the least support, whereas South Korea ( $M=4.15$ ), Ukraine ( $M=4.15$ ), and Russia ( $M=4.04$ ) reported the most support.

Our preliminary analyses also revealed that country-level endorsement of the belief that the government should be responsible for reducing inequality correlated negatively with the corruption perceived index, individualism, human development, and beliefs in equality of opportunity. On the other hand, country-level support for progressive taxation correlated positively with perceptions of economic inequality and objective economic inequality (Gini index), but negatively with beliefs in equality of opportunities. Following reviewers' suggestions, we also estimated preliminary alternative multilevel models investigating the antecedents of perceived economic inequality and beliefs that justify inequality (see Table S3 of the online supplementary material).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations at the individual level (below the diagonal) and at the societal level (N= 41) (above the diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Mean (L-2)	SD (L-2)	Min (L-2)	Max (L-2)
1. Government responsibility		.537***	.009	-.271	-.627***	-.256	-.613***	.418**	-.090	-.521***	-.361*	-.079	-.379*	3.87	.41	2.69	4.51
2. Progressive taxation	.311***		.396**	-.284	-.435**	.173	-.430**	.350*	.303	-.147	-.190	-.466**	.143	3.69	.27	3.11	4.15
3. Perceived income gap	.011*	.154***		.140	-.446**	.035	-.298	.126	.198	.051	-.001	.123	.165	2.47	.67	1.41	3.99
4. Meritocracy beliefs	-.057***	-.052***	.044***		.073	.064	.130	-.122	-.084	.100	.065	-.020	.012	3.94	.26	3.47	4.39
5. Equality of opportunity beliefs	-.240***	-.155***	-.109***	.048***		.235	.714***	-.468**	.095	.615***	.257	-.229	.527***	3.32	.35	2.52	4.19
6. Status by education	-.138***	-.029***	.069***	.051***	.162***		.216	.246	.372*	.177	.195	-.331*	.369*	2.86	.46	1.77	3.65
7. Subjective status	-.218***	-.191***	-.068***	.066***	.222***	.294***		-.394*	.191	.694***	.523***	-.202	.585***	5.05	.65	3.74	6.12
8. Sex (Female)	.056***	.001	-.055***	-.009	.008	-.004	-.037***		.264	-.234	.044	.050	-.284	1.55	.05	1.48	1.66
9. Age	.022***	.132**	.100***	-.052***	-.057***	-.171***	-.042***	-.022***		.515***	.541***	-.451**	.571***	46.94	3.57	36.79	55.06
10. Corruption Perception (L-2)											.579***	-.368*	.788***	5.99	2.18	1.90	9.40
11. Individualism (L-2)												-.185	.492***	53.05	22.15	12.00	91.00
12. Gini index (L-2)													-.585***	34.57	7.77	24.80	63.00
13. Human Development (L-2)														.84	.07	.64	.94
Mean (L-1)	3.87	3.68	2.57	3.95	3.26	2.83	4.98	1.55	46.75								
SD (L-1)	1.09	.78	1.37	.76	.88	1.45	1.81	.50	17.20								
Min (L-1)	1.0	1.0	-1.4	1.0	1.0	.0	1.0	1.0	15.0								
Max (L-1)	5.00	5.00	13.82	5.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	2.00	98.00								
N (L-1)	54400	49111	46535	54609	52908	55634	55071	55976	55883								

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Correlation coefficients above  $p > .05$  are shown in shaded grey. L-1 = Individual level; and L-2 = Societal level.

*Main Analyses:* To test our prediction that beliefs that justify inequality would moderate the relationship between the perceived size of the income gap and attitudes toward redistribution, we estimated two separate multilevel regression models with the same predictors, but different outcome variables (namely, attitudes toward the government's responsibility to reduce economic inequality and support for progressive taxation). In the first step of these analyses, we estimated an intercept-only model (Model 0) so that we could document the intraclass correlation and confirm the suitability of pursuing multilevel analyses. Model 1 tested the main effects of perceptions of, and concerns about, economic inequality, as well as the endorsement of inequality justifying beliefs, on the given outcome variable. We also controlled for the potential effects of subjective social status, education, age, and sex. In Model 2, we tested our hypothesis  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$  that system justifying ideologies would reduce the effect of perceptions of inequality on attitudes toward redistribution. In Model 3, we added the country-level variables in order to control for contextual influences and test the hypothesis that country-level perceptions of economic inequality ( $H_2$ ) positively correlate with support for redistribution at the individual level. Model 3 also tested hypotheses  $H_{3a}$  and  $H_{3b}$  that country-level meritocracy and equality of opportunity beliefs correlate negatively with individuals' support for redistribution.

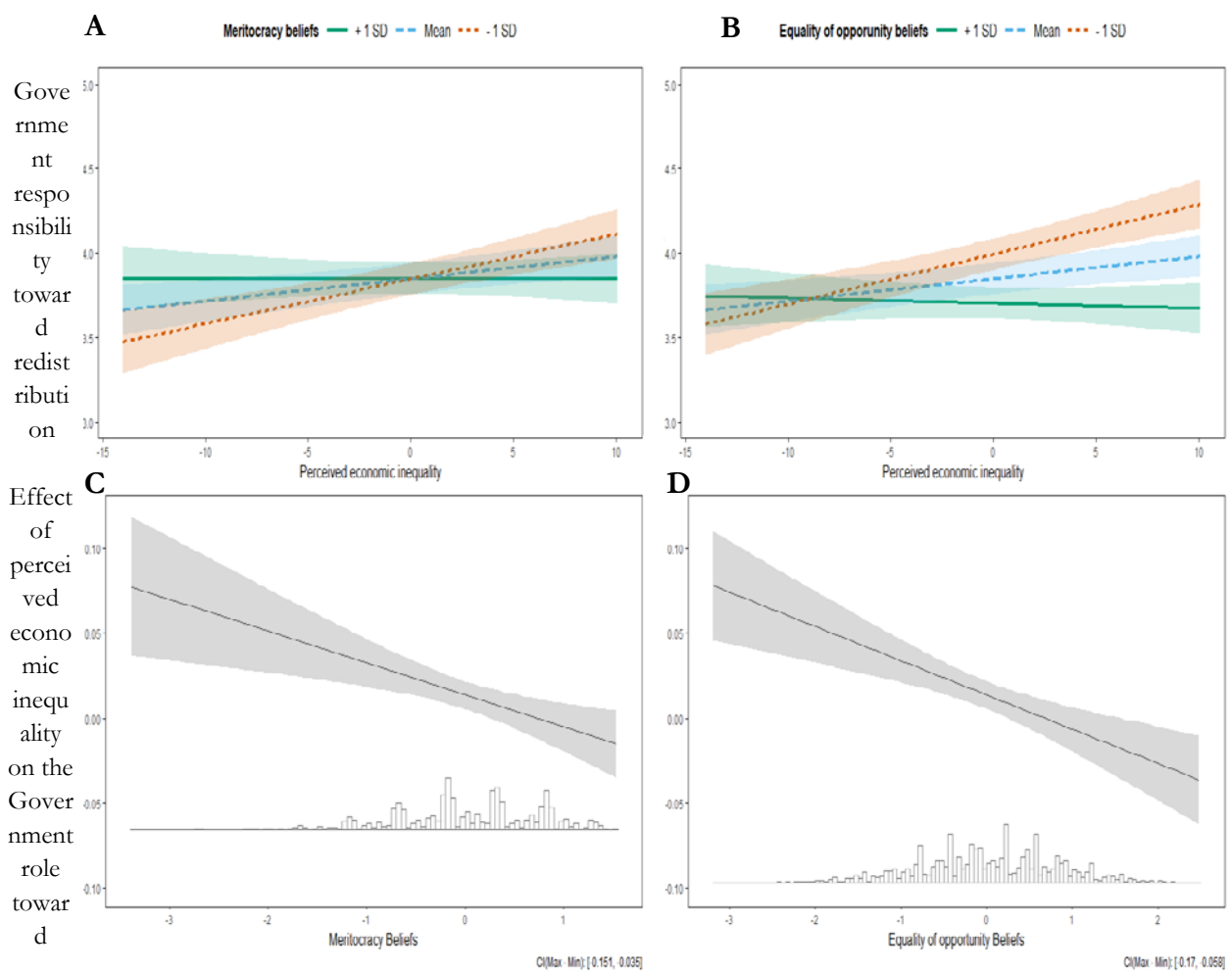
### **Government Responsibility**

Table 2 shows the unstandardized estimates of the multilevel regression analysis. The intraclass correlation coefficient ( $ICC=.140$ ) in the intercept-only model confirmed the need to pursue multilevel regressions, as approximately 14% of the variance in our outcome variable occurred at the between-country level of analysis. Accordingly, results from Model 1 reveal that both objective and subjective indicators of socioeconomic status correlated negatively with support for the government's role in the redistribution process. Likewise, endorsing beliefs in equality of opportunity, but not meritocracy, was negatively (and independently) associated with believing that the government should reduce economic inequality. Finally, perceptions of economic inequality correlated positively with believing that the government should redistribute economic resources.

In Model 2, we tested our main hypothesis that the effects of the perceived income gap and concerns about economic inequality on attitudes toward redistribution would be weakened by system justifying ideologies. As hypothesised, the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for government redistribution was moderated both by meritocracy ( $H_{1a}$ ) and equality of opportunity beliefs ( $H_{1b}$ ). Follow-up simple slope



analyses indicated that the association between perceived inequality and support for the government to reduce inequality was positive for those who believed less in meritocracy (i.e.  $-1$  SD),  $b=0.027$ ,  $se=.006$ ,  $t=4.527$ ,  $p<.001$ , whereas the slope was non-significant for those who strongly (i.e.,  $+1$  SD) endorsed meritocracy,  $b=-0.000$ ,  $se=.006$ ,  $t=-0.022$ ,  $p=.982$  (see Figure 1, Panel A). Also, as hypothesized, perceived inequality correlated positively with support for redistribution among those who were low ( $-1$  SD) on equality of opportunity beliefs,  $b=.030$ ,  $se=.006$ ,  $t=5.157$ ,  $p<.001$ , whereas this association was non-significant for those who were high ( $+1$  SD) on equality of opportunity beliefs,  $b=-0.003$ ,  $se=.006$ ,  $t=-0.522$ ,  $p=.602$  (see Figure 1, Panel B). Thus, in both cases, the effects of meritocracy and beliefs about the equality of opportunities attenuated the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. The effect of perceived inequality on support for government redistribution as a function of meritocracy and equality of opportunity beliefs are shown in Figure 1, Panel C and D, respectively.



**Figure 1.** Slopes of perceived income inequality on support for the government responsibility toward redistribution at different levels ( $\pm 1$  SD) of meritocracy beliefs (Panel A), and equality of opportunity beliefs (Panel B), as well as the estimated effect of perceived economic inequality on support for government redistribution as a function of meritocracy beliefs (Panel C) and equality of opportunities beliefs (Panel D).

To ensure that the previous findings were consistent after controlling for contextual factors, we included country-level variables in Model 3. The results displayed in Table 2 demonstrate that the hypothesised direct effects and interaction terms at the individual-level remained significant after controlling for between-country variability in inequality and ideological beliefs, as well as after accounting for objective economic indicators and cultural values. Regarding  $H_2$ , we (unexpectedly) did not find that perception of economic inequality at the country-level correlated negatively with support for the government to reduce inequality at the individual level. Indeed, societal-level objective economic conditions (i.e., corruption, objective economic inequality and human development) were generally not related to support for the government to reduce inequality, nor were individualistic societies more likely than collectivist societies to oppose redistribution. Nevertheless, we found support for  $H_{3b}$ . Specifically, individuals tended to oppose government interventions to reduce inequality in countries that strongly endorsed equality of opportunity beliefs,  $b=-0.866$ ,  $se=.246$ ,  $t=-3.519$ ,  $p <.001$ . Country-level meritocratic beliefs, however, were not associated with individual-level attitudes toward redistribution (disconfirming  $H_{3a}$ ).

### **Support for progressive taxation**

The second set of multilevel regression analyses examined the correlates of support for progressive taxes. As in the previous analyses, the intraclass correlation derived from the intercept-only model ( $ICC=.091$ ) justified the use of multilevel analyses to test our hypotheses (see Table 3 for unstandardized regression estimates). Accordingly, the results displayed in Model 1 indicate that, as hypothesized, perceptions of economic inequality correlated positively with support for progressive taxes. But unexpectedly, endorsing meritocracy and equality of opportunities beliefs were negatively associated with support for progressive taxes.

In Model 2, we tested our main hypotheses that beliefs that justify inequality will attenuate the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and support for progressive taxes. Consistent with hypothesis  $H_{1a}$ , the positive relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for progressive taxation was weaker for those who strongly endorsed meritocracy beliefs (+1SD),  $b=0.044$ ,  $se=0.005$ ,  $t=9.732$ ,  $p<.001$ , relative to those who only weakly believed in meritocracy (-1SD),  $b=0.063$ ,  $se=0.005$ ,  $t=13.915$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Figure 1, Panel A). Likewise, consistent with hypothesis  $H_{1b}$ , the positive relationship between perceptions of the income gap and support for progressive taxes was weaker among those who highly endorsed equality of opportunity beliefs

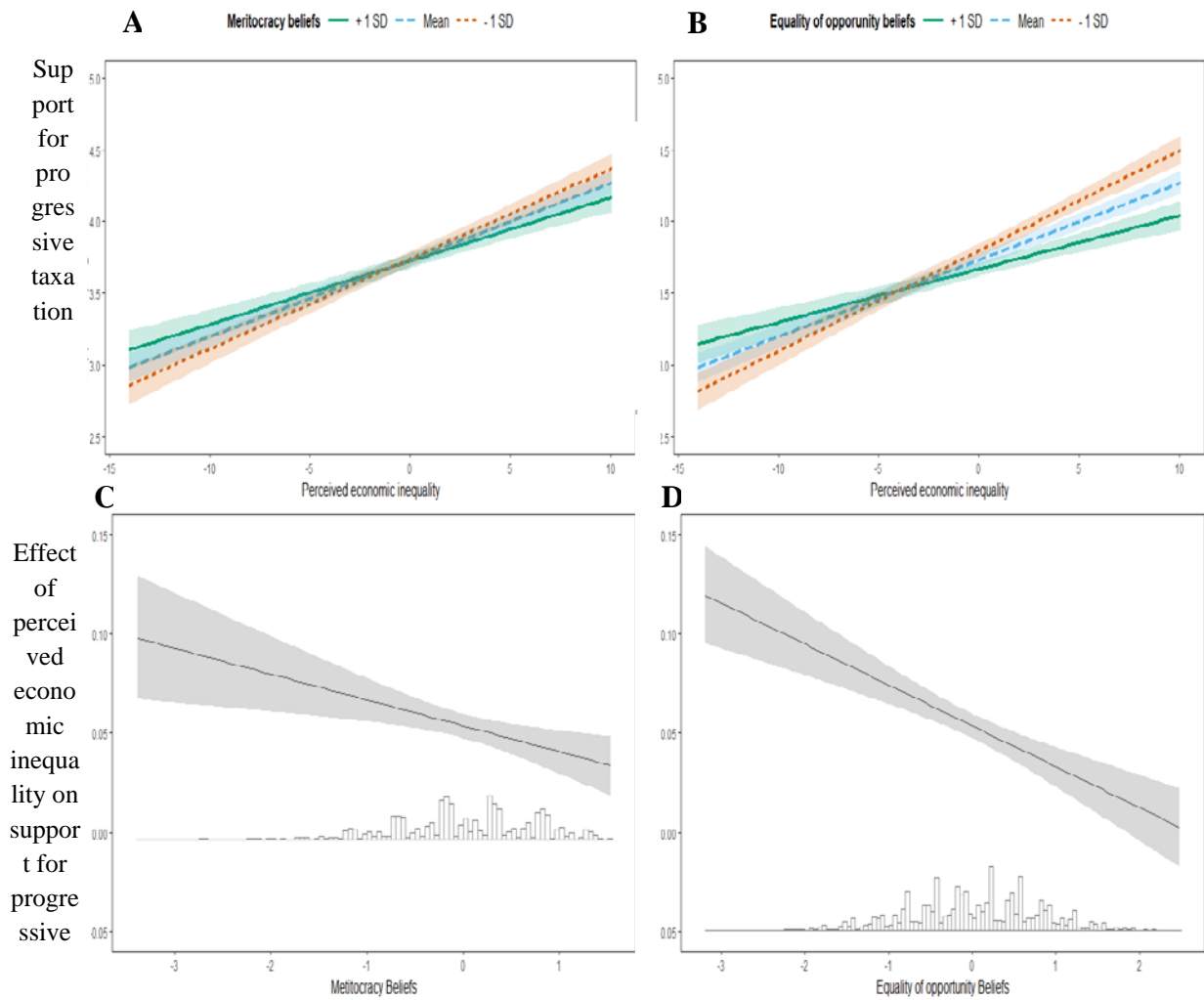
(+1SD),  $b=0.044$ ,  $se=.005$ ,  $t=9.732$ ,  $p<.001$ , compared to those who weakly endorsed this ideology (-1SD),  $b=.063$ ,  $se=.005$ ,  $t=13.915$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Figure 2, Panel B). The estimated effects of perceived economic inequality on support for progressive taxation as a function of meritocracy and equality of opportunities beliefs are displayed in Figure 2, Panel C and D, respectively.

Finally, we examined the possibility that between-country differences could explain away our individual-level effects. To these ends, the results displayed in Model 3 of Table 2 show that the inclusion of the country-level variables did not substantively alter the individual-level parameter estimates obtained in Model 2. Some country-level variables did, however, correlate with individual-level support for progressive taxes. Consistent with H2, country-level perceptions of inequality correlated positively with support for redistribution. Regarding ideologies that justify inequality, we found support for hypothesis H3a that meritocratic beliefs at the country-level (but not equality of opportunities beliefs, H3b) would reduce support for redistribution  $b=-0.244$ ,  $se=0.106$ ,  $t=-2.032$ ,  $p=.021$ . Finally, between-country differences in objective inequality (Gini index) correlated negatively with support for progressive taxes,  $b=-0.021$ ,  $se=0.005$ ,  $t=-4.183$ ,  $p<.001$ . Neither country-level perceptions of corruption, individualism, nor development (i.e., HDI) correlated with individual-level support for progressive taxation.

**Table 2.** Multilevel linear regression on support for the government responsibility to reduce income inequality: Unstandardized estimates of multilevel regression analysis with random intercepts between countries estimated by Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimator

Fixed effects	Model 0. Intercept only			Model 1. Individual variables			Model 2. Interactions between perception and beliefs of inequality			Model 3. Societal variables		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
(Intercept)	3.869**	0.063	3.745, 3.992	3.720***	0.068	3.587, 3.854	3.719***	0.068	3.586, 3.852	3.718***	0.050	3.620, 3.815
Status by education				-0.047***	0.004	-0.054, -0.039	-0.047***	0.004	-0.055, -0.039	-0.047***	0.004	-0.055, -0.039
Subjective status				-0.073***	0.003	-0.079, -0.067	-0.073***	0.003	-0.079, -0.067	-0.073***	0.003	-0.079, -0.067
Sex				0.095***	0.010	0.075, 0.114	0.095***	0.010	0.075, 0.114	0.094***	0.010	0.075, 0.114
Age				0.000	0.000	-0.000, 0.001	0.000	0.000	-0.000, 0.001	0.000	0.000	-0.000, 0.001
Perceived income inequality				0.014***	0.004	0.006, 0.022	0.014***	0.004	0.006, 0.022	0.014**	0.004	0.006, 0.022
Meritocracy Beliefs				0.002	0.007	-0.011, 0.016	0.002	0.007	-0.011, 0.016	0.002	0.007	-0.011, 0.016
Equality of opportunity beliefs				-0.180***	0.006	-0.192, -0.168	-0.179***	0.006	-0.191, -0.168	-0.179***	0.006	-0.191, -0.167
Perceived income inequality x Meritocracy Beliefs							-0.019***	0.006	-0.030, -0.007	-0.019***	0.006	-0.030, -0.007
Perceived income inequality x Equality of opportunity beliefs							-0.020***	0.005	-0.030, -0.010	-0.020***	0.005	-0.030, -0.010
Perceived income inequality (L-2)										-0.168	0.111	-0.386, 0.050
Meritocracy Beliefs (L-2)										-0.249	0.191	-0.623, 0.125
Equality of opportunity beliefs (L-2)										-0.866***	0.246	-1.349, -0.384
Corruption perception index (L-2)										-0.011	0.041	-0.092, 0.070
Individualism (L-2)										-0.004	0.003	-0.010, 0.001
Gini index (L-2)										-0.012	0.009	-0.029, 0.005
Human Development Index (L-2)										0.351	1.455	-2.500, 3.203
<b>Random Effects</b>												
Individual variance (within-group)		1.023			0.999			0.999			0.999	
Intercept variance (between-group)		0.166			0.175			0.174			0.084	
ICC		0.140			0.149			0.149			0.078	
N (L-1)		54.400			42.759			42.759			42.759	
N (L-2)		42			42			42			42	
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>		0.000 / 0.140			0.045 / 0.187			0.045 / 0.187			0.130 / 0.198	
Deviance		155839.036			121541.318			121514.691			121477.460	
AIC		155848.722			121631.486			121626.045			121631.517	

Note: \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001; ICC = Intraclass correlation; Marginal R<sup>2</sup> is the proportion of variance explained by the fixed effects, and the Conditional R<sup>2</sup> is the proportion of explained variance by both the fixed and random effects (Nakagawa et al., 2017).



**Figure 2.** Slopes of perceived income inequality on support for progressive taxation at different levels (+/- 1 SD) of meritocracy (Panel A), and equality of opportunity beliefs (Panel B), as well as the estimated effect of perceived economic inequality on support for progressive taxation moderated by meritocracy beliefs (Panel C) and equality of opportunities beliefs (Panel D).

**Table 3.** Unstandardized estimates of multilevel regression analysis with random intercepts between countries for support for progressive taxation estimated by Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimator

Fixed effects	Model 0. Intercept only			Model 1. Individual variables			Model 2. Interactions between perception and beliefs of inequality			Model 3. Societal variables		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
(Intercept)	3.722***	0.037	3.650, 3.795	3.536***	0.040	3.456, 3.615	3.534***	0.040	3.455, 3.613	3.513***	0.030	3.454, 3.572
Status by education				-0.003	0.003	-0.009, 0.003	-0.003	0.003	-0.009, 0.003	-0.003	0.003	-0.009, 0.003
Subjective status				-0.064***	0.002	-0.069, -0.059	-0.064***	0.002	-0.069, -0.059	-0.064***	0.002	-0.069, -0.059
Sex				0.005	0.007	-0.009, 0.020	0.005	0.007	-0.009, 0.020	0.005	0.007	-0.009, 0.020
Age				0.004***	0.000	0.004, 0.005	0.004***	0.000	0.004, 0.005	0.004***	0.000	0.004, 0.005
Perceived income inequality				0.054***	0.003	0.048, 0.061	0.054***	0.003	0.048, 0.060	0.054***	0.003	0.048, 0.060
Meritocracy Beliefs				-0.011*	0.005	-0.021, -0.001	-0.011*	0.005	-0.021, -0.000	-0.011*	0.005	-0.021, -0.000
Equality of opportunity beliefs				-0.081***	0.005	-0.090, -0.072	-0.080***	0.005	-0.089, -0.071	-0.080***	0.005	-0.089, -0.071
Perceived income inequality x Meritocracy Beliefs							-0.013**	0.005	-0.022, -0.004	-0.013**	0.005	-0.022, -0.004
Perceived income inequality x Equality of opportunity beliefs							-0.021***	0.004	-0.028, -0.013	-0.021***	0.004	-0.028, -0.013
Perceived income inequality (L-2)										0.161**	0.061	0.041, 0.281
Meritocracy Beliefs (L-2)										-0.244*	0.106	-0.452, -0.036
Equality of opportunity beliefs (L-2)										-0.124	0.141	-0.401, 0.153
Corruption perception index (L-2)										-0.026	0.023	-0.072, 0.019
Individualism (L-2)										-0.002	0.002	-0.005, 0.001
Gini index (L-2)										-0.021**	0.005	-0.031, -0.011
Human Development Index (L-2)										-0.347	0.948	-2.204, 1.510
<b>Random Effects</b>												
Individual variance (within-group)		0.533			0.496			0.496			0.496	
Intercept variance (between-group)		0.054			0.055			0.054			0.02	
ICC		0.091			0.099			0.099			0.024	
N (L-1)		45138			36382			36382			36382	
N (L-2)		40			40			40			40	
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>		0.000 / 0.140			0.179 / 0.317			0.179 / 0.317			0.288 / 0.320	
Deviance		99836.915			77937.130			77900.106			77861.034	
AIC		99847.675			78032.083			78017.292			78028.516	

Note: \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001; ICC = Intraclass correlation; Marginal R<sup>2</sup> is the proportion of variance explained by the fixed effects, and the Conditional R<sup>2</sup> is the proportion of explained variance by both the fixed and random effects (Nakagawa et al., 2017).

## Discussion

According to the Meltzer-Richard Hypothesis (Meltzer & Richard, 1981), economic inequality should motivate people to demand economic redistribution. Support for this seemingly intuitive hypothesis, however, has been mixed. Accordingly, we examined whether the association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution vary by beliefs that justify inequality. Because meritocratic and equality of opportunity beliefs operate as inequality-justifying ideologies (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), attitudes toward redistribution might be undermined by such beliefs (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall, 2013). Thus, we hypothesized that the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and support for economic redistribution would be weaker among those who endorse (vs. reject) these ideologies. Additionally, given that redistribution can occur through distinct processes, we tested our hypotheses by using two different indicators of resource redistribution: believing that the government has the responsibility to reduce inequality, and supporting progressive taxation. Finally, we assessed our hypotheses after accounting for numerous relevant covariates at the individual- and country-level.

Our results were largely consistent with our hypotheses. Indeed, endorsing beliefs that justify inequality undermined support for redistribution. Likewise, meritocracy and equality of opportunities beliefs moderated the association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. Specifically, perceptions of economic inequality correlated positively with support for the role of the government to reduce inequality, but only among those who rejected the ideas that hard work leads to success and that there are equal opportunities to get ahead in life. Similarly, the positive correlation between perceptions of economic inequality and support for progressive taxes was weaker among those who endorsed (vs. rejected) both sets of economic-justifying beliefs.

Notably, our results are consistent with Alesina and Angeletos' (2005) model and highlight the role of ideologies in legitimating inequality and influencing public policy support. Indeed, ideological beliefs contribute to misperceptions of economic inequality. For instance, liberals overestimate the rise of inequality when compared to conservatives (Chambers et al., 2014), and people who endorse ideologies that reinforce group-based hierarchies perceive less inequality between groups than do those who reject them (Kteily et al., 2017). In this sense, the ideologies that people endorse not only help to explain economic inequality, but also shape how people think inequality should be addressed. Hence, narratives that promote individualism (e.g., individual control, effort, work, etc.)

and downplay circumstantial factors (e.g., social background, luck, structure of the system, etc.) could neutralize the moral outrage people might feel when perceiving large income inequalities (see Weiner, Osborne, & Rudolph, 2011). In other words, popular “rags-to-riches” stories designed to motivate people to work hard also justify economic inequality, despite the fact that people usually desire lower levels of inequality.

Although it is important to correct misconceptions about the size of the income gap, our results suggest that it will not be enough to move people in favour of redistribution. Indeed, one must also consider whether or not these differences are considered fair and legitimate. Consistent with Frank et al. (2015), our results indicate that beliefs that justify the current state of affairs undermine support for redistribution. We also found that the belief that hard work and ambition are important to success correlated negatively with support for redistribution (also see Corneo & Grüner, 2002). Thus, although necessary, solely informing the public about the actual level of economic inequality in society may be ineffective when it comes to shaping attitudes toward public policies. Indeed, the impact of information about the income gap on eliciting support for redistribution depends upon the beliefs that people use to judge and evaluate the fairness of such disparities. Believing in both meritocracy and equality of opportunities provide people with an ideological framework that attributes success to individual (vs. contextual) factors and ultimately frames economic inequality as deserved and desired.

Similar to Duman (2013), we also found that the normative climate of the country correlated with support for redistribution in several ways. First, individuals expressed less support for the role of the government to reduce inequality in countries where the belief in equality of opportunities was high. Likewise, people were less supportive of progressive taxation in countries where meritocracy beliefs were high. Thus, the normative climate at the country level might trigger different social psychological processes in relation to individuals’ support for redistribution. On the one hand, the general perception that there are unequal opportunities may motivate individuals to compensate for their lack of personal control by demanding the government takes a stronger role in redressing inequality (Goode & Keefer, 2016). On the other hand, individuals were less supportive of progressive taxation in more meritocratic countries, which might indicate that taxes are perceived as taking money away from people who deserve their wealth. Collectively, these findings suggest that there are different ways to operationalize support for redistribution: one approach focuses on who is responsible for reducing inequality (i.e., the government), whereas the other approach assesses strategies that might be implemented to reduce



inequality. This distinction is also supported by our data, as individuals expressed more support for the government to reduce inequality than they did for progressive taxation. Additional research should investigate the dimensionality of support for redistribution in order to obtain consistent indicators that avoid confounding different constructs (i.e., support for welfare systems) or dimensions (i.e., who is responsible vs. the appropriate strategies for redistribution).

Though related, the differences in supporting progressive taxes and the government's approach to inequality could reflect different socio-psychological processes. On the one hand, Kuziemko and colleagues (2015) found that perceiving more inequality was weakly associated with support for redistribution due to a lack of trust in the government. Considering the variety of countries included in our sample—and the high levels of perceived government illegitimacy in many of these countries—it is plausible that people fail to connect the need to redress inequality with increasing the government's power because it is seen as untrustworthy. Although the amount of corruption perceived within a country did not correlate with support for redistribution in our data, the PCI is composed by expert judgments rather than individuals' perceptions and may miss this important nuance. On the other hand, support for progressive taxing is framed in terms of the fairness of implementing heavier taxation on the wealthy. Thus, although assessing support for the government to reduce inequality is a common measure of support for redistribution, it might become abstract when it comes to specifying how to do so. In contrast, support for progressive taxation describes a concrete policy aimed to reduce inequality.

Perceiving an unfair tax structure in a given country may facilitate support for progressive taxation, whereas the legitimacy of the system may predict support for the government to redistribute wealth. As such, support for redistribution depends not only on perceptions and beliefs about inequality, but also on how redistribution is framed (i.e., taking from the rich or giving to the poor). Further research should clarify the mechanisms behind such differentiated support for redistributive public policies that aim to reduce inequality.

Our findings also demonstrated that contextual factors matter when it comes to individual support for redistribution. In line with Brown-iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, and Payne (2015), we found that objective socioeconomic status correlated negatively with support for redistribution, but the effect of subjective socioeconomic status was even stronger. These differential associations highlight important differences between measures,

as objective socioeconomic status captures material conditions, whereas subjective status taps into the relative deprivation perceived by individuals.

Finally, our data reveal that individuals were less supportive of progressive taxation in countries with high objective economic inequality (Gini index). This somewhat unexpected association might be a by-product of individual levels of perceived corruption in these countries that prevent people from trusting the government to implement more taxes (Kuziemko et al., 2015). Although we controlled for perceived corruption index, such variable is an indicator at the country-level and reflect experts (rather than participants) views, so we could not discard the possibility that individuals' perception of government illegitimacy undermines support for redistribution. Alternatively, economic inequality can distort how people connect public policies aimed at reducing inequality with their perceptions, beliefs, and support for such policies (Kulin & Svallfors, 2013). All in all, it is important to disentangle the relationships between how much inequality is perceived and how much is justified, while also accounting for the situations, and conditions under which individuals are willing to support more redistribution in favour of a more egalitarian world (Robinson & Bell, 1978). The integration of mechanisms both at the individual and societal level will certainly provide a better understanding of political behaviour (Osborne, García-Sánchez, & Sibley, in press).

### **Conclusion**

Although the perception of inequality should intuitively correlate positively with support for economic redistribution, research has found mixed evidence in this regard. We contribute to this discussion by showing that the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution depends on beliefs that justify inequality, as well as the way in which the redistribution process is framed. As hypothesized, beliefs that justify inequality attenuated the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. Such interplay between perceptions of, and beliefs about, inequality on people's attitudes toward redistribution held even after controlling for contextual factors both at the individual- and country-level. Additionally, the normative climate was associated with support for redistribution, such that more meritocratic environments were associated with less support for progressive taxes, and countries where people believe that there are equality of opportunities demanded a weaker role of the government in redressing inequality. Thus, framing support for redistribution through different policies might trigger different socio-psychological mechanisms that motivate people to endorse (or reject) economic redistribution. In this sense, favouring redistribution is not a typical/intuitive

## *Chapter 4*

response to inequality, but rather, the result of a complex interplay between how people want to achieve the redistribution of resources (e.g., taxes, social spending, equalizing opportunities), as well as how much inequality is perceived (e.g., income gaps) and justified (e.g., ideologies).

Supplementary material

**Table S1.** Reliability measures for computed variables: Chronbach's alpha for equality of opportunity beliefs, and zero-order correlations support for progressive taxes, and Meritocratic Beliefs

Country	Support of progressive taxes	Cronbach's alpha for Equality of opportunity Beliefs	Correlation between items related to Meritocratic Beliefs
AR-Argentina	.264**	0.578	.380**
AT-Austria	.327**	0.664	.688**
AU-Australia	.549**	0.699	.448**
BE-Belgium	.524**	0.437	.357**
BG-Bulgaria	.185**	0.651	.694**
CH-Switzerland	.337**	0.539	.401**
CL-Chile	.232**	0.636	.331**
CN-China	.292**	0.333	.521**
CY-Cyprus	.077*	0.389	.375**
CZ-Czech Republic	.523**	0.529	.541**
DE-Germany	.335**	0.548	.532**
DK-Denmark	.506**	0.562	.457**
EE-Estonia	.510**	0.525	.186**
ES-Spain	.199**	0.592	.382**
FI-Finland	.553**	0.700	.422**
FR-France	.487**	0.574	.287**
GB-Great Britain / United Kingdom	.404**	0.644	.534**
HR-Croatia	.368**	0.539	.445**
HU-Hungary	.442**	0.297	.475**
IL-Israel	.256**	0.474	.500**
IS-Iceland	.522**	0.506	.418**
IT-Italy	.241**	0.597	.230**
JP-Japan	.470**	0.606	.327**
KR-South Korea	.402**	0.417	.385**
LT-Lithuania	.392**	0.544	.387**
LV-Latvia	.653**	0.418	.168**
NO-Norway	.539**	0.605	.450**
NZ-New Zealand	.461**	0.57	.485**
PH-Philippines	-.129**	0.355	.396**
PL-Poland	.424**	0.589	.384**
PT-Portugal	.192**	0.459	.458**
RU-Russia	.448*	0.557	.416**
SE-Sweden	.603**	0.651	.586**

Continued

**Table S1.** (Continued)

<b>Country</b>	<b>Support of progressive taxes</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha for Equality of opportunity Beliefs</b>	<b>Correlation between items related to Meritocratic Beliefs</b>
SI-Slovenia	.381**	0.639	.539**
SK-Slovakia	.544**	0.636	.408**
TR-Turkey	.102**	0.370	.337**
TW-Taiwan	.340**	0.326	.358**
UA-Ukraine	.358**	0.399	.329**
US-United States	.434**	0.504	.483**
VE-Venezuela	.067*	0.642	.311**
ZA-South Africa	.007 <sup>n.s.</sup>	0.602	.426**

\*\* p &lt; .001

**Table S2.** Aggregated Means (standard deviation in parenthesis) for 41 Countries Participating in the IV Social Inequality Module of the International Social Survey Programme (2009)

Country	Government responsibility toward redistribution			Support for progressive taxation		Perceived economic inequality		Meritocracy beliefs		Equality of opportunity belief		Status by educational degree		Subjective status		Sex		Age		HDI (2009)	Gini index (2009)	GDP (PPP)	PCI	Ind.
	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	M	M	M	M
AR-Argentina	1133	4.063	.846	3.644	.715	1.810	.823	3.628	.818	3.410	.809	2.321	1.461	4.959	1.544	1.504	.500	47	17	.799	45	16618.12	2.900	46
AU-Australia	1525	3.309	1.236	3.605	.764	3.619	1.330	4.223	.637	3.424	.925	3.465	1.635	5.839	1.552	1.567	.496	53	17	.921	36	40282.31	8.700	90
AT-Austria	1019	3.885	1.049	3.635	.722	2.677	1.062	3.859	.760	3.579	.888	2.430	1.227	6.006	1.372	1.526	.500	45	17	.886	32	40704.41	7.900	55
BU-Bulgaria	1000	4.194	.950	3.812	.873	1.800	.718	4.313	.737	3.258	.889	3.406	1.244	4.886	2.164	1.578	.494	49	17	.774	34	14132.99	3.800	30
CL-Chile	1505	3.828	.884	3.499	.738	3.581	1.313	3.666	.864	3.068	.845	2.528	1.429	4.026	1.660	1.582	.493	47	18	.804	52	16267.46	6.700	23
CN-China	3010	4.027	.797	3.652	.659	2.464	1.431	4.120	.687	3.096	.657	2.179	1.307	4.602	1.961	1.522	.500	43	14	.694	43	8374.43	3.600	20
Taiwan	2026	3.604	1.060	3.942	.652	3.864	1.735	4.224	.617	3.440	.670	2.949	1.513	4.262	1.629	1.481	.500	45	17	.932	32	34526.29	5.600	17
HR-Croatia	1201	4.279	.843	3.932	.614	2.268	.661	4.187	.706	3.159	.860	2.715	1.276	4.623	1.682	1.570	.495	46	18	.802	33	1947.59	4.100	33
CY-Cyprus	1000	3.706	1.022	3.482	.663	1.780	.378	4.184	.609	3.572	.645	3.068	1.394	5.497	1.542	1.506	.500	43	15	.856	32	33922.67	6.600	35
CZ-Czech Republic	1205	3.696	1.180	3.705	.752	2.238	.711	3.996	.807	3.101	.829	2.568	1.085	4.866	1.557	1.553	.497	47	17	.857	26	27567.20	4.900	58
DK-Denmark	1518	3.297	1.412	3.384	.744	1.408	1.045	3.617	.747	4.195	.822	3.375	1.150	5.767	1.589	1.530	.499	50	17	.906	29	4038.94	9.300	74
EE-Estonia	1005	4.098	1.049	3.826	.690	2.193	.804	3.631	.707	3.123	.882	3.236	1.130	4.943	1.753	1.648	.478	51	19	.839	32	20523.35	6.600	60
FI-Finland	880	3.925	1.053	3.874	.729	2.222	.938	3.576	.736	3.877	.798	3.018	1.527	6.035	1.728	1.545	.498	48	16	.899	28	37868.72	8.900	63
FR-France	2817	4.155	1.063	3.992	.714	3.283	1.317	3.696	.767	2.843	.896	2.830	1.535	4.890	1.629	1.515	.500	55	16	.878	33	34767.15	6.900	71
HU-Hungary	1010	4.350	.847	3.904	.770	3.014	.828	4.042	.773	2.897	.706	2.480	1.239	4.041	1.510	1.543	.498	46	16	.818	27	20573.38	5.100	80
IS-Iceland	947	3.850	.995	3.592	.698	1.865	.625	4.387	.570	3.766	.685	2.845	1.617	5.865	1.551	1.522	.500	46	17	.890	29	41063.73	8.700	60
IL-Israel	1193	4.129	.996	3.295	.696	1.971	.755	3.993	.737	3.301	.749	3.089	1.332	5.417	1.933	1.528	.499	43	18	.882	43	27578.43	6.100	54
IT-Italy	1084	4.351	.885	3.647	.881	2.757	1.172	3.773	.764	3.371	.801	2.988	1.259	4.606	1.701	1.543	.498	48	17	.868	34	34549.28	4.300	76
JP-Japan	1296	3.545	1.196	3.894	.763	2.488	1.028	3.612	.772	3.670	.977	3.201	1.314	4.651	1.588	1.534	.499	49	18	.880	32	33099.27	7.700	46
KR-South Korea	1599	3.917	.963	4.154	.678	3.991	1.990	4.104	.677	2.929	.805	3.389	1.346	4.509	1.574	1.519	.500	44	15	.869	31	28642.84	5.500	18
LV-Latvia	1069	4.264	.818	4.035	.650	2.245	.976	3.858	.709	3.098	.763	3.073	1.236	4.466	1.711	1.609	.488	44	17	.818	35	16889.04	4.500	70
LT-Lithuania	1023	4.265	.741	4.016	.710	2.459	.969	3.745	.771	3.123	.764	3.242	1.340	4.249	1.751	1.664	.473	51	18	.822	37	18164.40	4.900	60
NZ-New Zealand	935	3.103	1.189	3.223	.733	2.282	1.020	4.313	.641	3.753	.738	3.269	1.640	5.943	1.617	1.555	.497	51	17	.898	32	30699.30	9.400	79
NO-Norway	1246	3.356	1.035	3.482	.718	1.549	1.014	4.181	.648	4.022	.651	3.583	1.302	6.122	1.484	1.511	.500	48	15	.938	26	55459.99	8.600	69
PH-Philippines	1200	3.357	1.213	3.110	.670	1.657	1.263	4.284	.627	3.445	.823	2.607	1.417	4.497	1.822	1.500	.500	42	16	.659	43	5115.48	2.400	32

Continued...

Table S2. *Continued*

Country	N	Government responsibility toward redistribution		Support for progressive taxation		Perceived economic inequality		Meritocracy beliefs		Equality of opportunity belief		Status by educational degree		Subjective status		Sex		Age		HDI (2009)	Gini index (2009)	GDP (PPP)	PCI	Ind.
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	M	M	M	M	M	
RU-Russia	1603	4.398	.787	4.056	.783	3.098	1.230	3.730	.842	2.757	.845	3.467	1.182	4.656	1.900	1.640	.480	47	18	.771	40	19386.58	2.200	39
SK-Slovakia	1159	4.020	.995	3.766	.801	2.042	.747	4.030	.741	3.259	.883	2.731	1.166	4.862	1.577	1.602	.490	46	16	.824	26	23082.79	4.500	52
SI-Slovenia	1065	4.348	.754	3.931	.683	2.689	.708	3.936	.784	3.499	.798	2.658	1.378	4.930	1.534	1.546	.498	47	18	.878	25	27504.07	6.600	27
ZA-South Africa	3305	3.788	1.100	3.106	.621	2.753	1.210	4.183	.688	2.975	.919	2.132	1.586	4.898	1.975	1.597	.491	39	16	.642	63	11462.61	4.700	65
ES-Spain	1215	3.961	.890	3.646	.703	1.995	.751	3.719	.782	3.500	.812	2.569	1.371	4.985	1.411	1.513	.500	47	18	.858	35	32423.60	6.100	51
SE-Sweden	1137	3.545	1.131	3.598	.782	1.604	.919	3.997	.638	3.786	.779	3.011	1.481	5.893	1.532	1.522	.500	48	16	.899	27	39693.33	9.200	71
CH-Switzerland	1229	3.502	1.113	3.929	.628	2.727	1.200	3.748	.694	3.441	.753	2.618	1.283	5.709	1.557	1.554	.497	50	18	.927	33	51632.65	9.000	68
TR-Turkey	1569	4.350	.703	3.781	.777	2.081	.828	3.749	.733	2.849	.783	1.773	1.384	4.233	1.863	1.527	.499	41	15	.718	39	15501.85	4.400	37
UA-Ukraine	2012	4.515	.756	4.151	.790	2.527	1.142	3.655	.858	2.523	.753	3.561	1.039	3.739	1.678	1.654	.476	48	18	.727	25	7239.62	2.200	25
US-United States	1581	2.694	1.256	3.562	.794	3.605	1.833	4.343	.548	3.515	.770	3.652	1.142	5.791	1.601	1.547	.498	50	17	.910	41	47001.56	7.500	91
VE-Venezuela	969	3.452	1.133	3.343	.594	1.586	.989	3.467	.900	3.570	.868	2.713	1.326	5.428	1.900	1.490	.500	37	15	.753	47	16507.34	1.900	12
BE-Belgium	1115	3.796	1.014	3.528	.831	1.668	.738	3.700	.673	3.327	.718	2.910	1.165	5.858	1.526	1.507	.500	49	18	.899	29	38047.68	7.100	75
DE-Germany	1395	3.680	1.189	3.798	.737	3.163	1.539	3.890	.646	3.160	.883	2.245	1.375	5.698	1.527	1.496	.500	50	18	.917	32	3708.31	8.000	67
GB-Great Britain United Kingdom	958	3.564	1.067	3.566	.716	2.708	1.316	4.025	.675	3.270	.821	2.428	1.843	5.238	1.704	1.558	.497	50	17	.899	35	34402.96	7.700	89

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; PPP= power purchase parity; HDI = Human Development Index; GDP – PPP = Gross Domestic Product by Power Purchase Parity; Indiv= Individualism

**Antecedents of perceived economic inequality and beliefs about inequality**

We estimated preliminary alternative multilevel models investigating the antecedents of perceived economic inequality and beliefs that justify inequality (Table S3). These analyses revealed that perceived economic inequality correlated positively with objective status (i.e., education),  $b = 0.088$ ,  $t(43361) = 19.482$ ,  $p < .001$ , but negatively with subjective status,  $b = -0.018$ ,  $t(43361) = -5.187$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, perceived economic inequality correlated positively with meritocracy,  $b = 0.026$ ,  $t(43361) = 3.257$ ,  $p < .001$ , but negatively with believing in equality of opportunity,  $b = -0.024$ ,  $t(43361) = -3.443$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moreover, individuals tended to perceive more economic inequality in countries with higher economic inequality,  $b = 0.039$ ,  $t(43361) = 3.459$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , and greater development (i.e., HDI),  $b = 7.293$ ,  $t(43361) = 4.044$ ,  $p < .001$ , but less endorsement of beliefs in equality of opportunities,  $b = -1.631$ ,  $t(43361) = -6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As for inequality-justifying beliefs, both objective and subjective socioeconomic status correlated positively with endorsement of meritocracy and equality of opportunities beliefs. Furthermore, country-level perceptions of economic inequality correlated positively with meritocracy,  $b = .190$ ,  $t(43361) = 2.019$ ,  $p < .043$ , but negatively with beliefs in equality of opportunities,  $b = -0.333$ ,  $t(43361) = -6.349$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, individuals believed less in equality of opportunities in countries with higher levels of corruption,  $b = 0.063$ ,  $t(43361) = 2.336$ ,  $p < .020$ , higher economic inequality,  $b = .014$ ,  $t(43361) = 2.559$ ,  $p < .011$ , and higher human development,  $b = 2.935$ ,  $t(43361) = 3.282$ ,  $p < .001$ .



**Table S3.** Unstandardized estimates of multilevel regression analysis with random intercepts between countries for support for Perceived economic inequality, meritocracy and equality of opportunity beliefs.

Fixed effects	Perceived economic inequality				Meritocracy Beliefs				Equality of opportunity beliefs			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	2.308	0.072	2.166 – 2.450	<.001	4.029	0.043	3.945 – 4.112	<.001	3.362	0.036	3.293 – 3.432	<.001
Status by education	0.088	0.004	0.079 – 0.096	<.001	0.014	0.003	0.009 – 0.020	<.001	0.058	0.003	0.052 – 0.064	<.001
Subjective status	-0.018	0.004	-0.025 – 0.011	<.001	0.021	0.002	0.016 – 0.025	<.001	0.054	0.002	0.049 – 0.059	<.001
Sex	-0.157	0.011	-0.179 – 0.135	<.001	-0.007	0.007	-0.021 – 0.006	.275	0.046	0.008	0.031 – 0.061	<.001
Age	0.009	0.000	0.008 – 0.010	<.001	-0.001	0.000	-0.002 – 0.001	<.001	-0.003	0.000	-0.003 – 0.002	<.001
Meritocracy Beliefs	0.026	0.008	0.010 – 0.041	.001					0.024	0.005	0.013 – 0.035	<.001
Equality of opportunity beliefs	-0.024	0.007	-0.038 – 0.010	.001	0.019	0.004	0.011 – 0.027	<.001				
Perceived income inequality					0.010	0.003	0.004 – 0.015	.001	-0.011	0.003	-0.018 – 0.005	.001
Meritocracy Beliefs (L-2)	0.529	0.276	-0.012 – 1.069	.055					0.201	0.130	-0.053 – 0.456	.121
Equality of opportunity beliefs (L-2)	-1.631	0.250	-2.121 – 1.141	<.001	0.361	0.211	-0.053 – 0.775	.087				
Perceived income inequality (L-2)					0.190	0.094	0.006 – 0.374	.043	-0.333	0.052	-0.435 – 0.230	<.001
Corruption perception index (L-2)	0.064	0.062	-0.057 – 0.185	.300	0.012	0.037	-0.059 – 0.084	.736	0.063	0.027	0.010 – 0.115	.020
Individualism (L-2)	-0.008	0.004	-0.015 – 0.000	.052	0.002	0.002	-0.003 – 0.006	.476	-0.003	0.002	-0.007 – 0.001	.100
Gini index (L-2)	0.039	0.011	0.017 – 0.062	.001	-0.010	0.008	-0.025 – 0.005	.188	0.014	0.006	0.003 – 0.025	.011
Human Development Index (L-2)	7.294	1.804	3.759 – 10.829	<.001	-2.205	1.241	-4.637 – 0.227	.076	2.935	0.894	1.182 – 4.687	.001
<b>Random Effects</b>												
Intercept variance (between-group)			1.356				0.501				0.629	
Individual variance (within-group)			0.194				0.066				0.041	
ICC			0.125				0.117				0.062	
N (L-1)			43376				43376				43376	
N (L-2)			42				42				42	
Marginal R <sup>2</sup> / Conditional R <sup>2</sup>			0.176 / 0.279				0.020 / 0.135				0.145 / 0.198	
Deviance			136491.561				93320.024				103167.224	
AIC			136601.200				93445.221				103294.590	

Note: Multilevel linear regression was conducted by using Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimator.

# *CHAPTER 5.*

## Perceptions of Economic Inequality and Support for Redistribution: The role of Existential and Utopian Standards



Perceptions of Economic Inequality and Support for Redistribution: The role of Existential and  
Utopian Standards

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## Abstract

Perceived greater economic inequality is supposedly associated with higher demand for redistribution. However, the findings in the literature are mixed in this regard, with some researchers providing evidence in favour of this association and some findings evidence against it. Given that perceived economic inequality and endorsement of system-justifying beliefs are related to inequality acceptance, we explore the interplay between them in relation to support for redistribution. This study is intended to shed light on the role of utopian standards (ideal estimates about what ought to be) as one mechanism that affects the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. Based on correlational data ( $N = 794$ ), we conducted a conditional process analysis and found that perceived greater inequality displayed a negative indirect effect on support for redistribution, through acceptance of ideal level of economic inequality: Perception of higher inequality was related to increased ideal levels of inequality and thus with lower support for redistribution. In addition, we found that economic system-justifying beliefs conditioned the effect of perceived economic inequality in two ways: First, perceived economic inequality was positively associated with higher acceptance of inequality, and this association was stronger for those that justified the economic system more, and perceived greater inequality was associated with higher support for redistribution—but only for those who endorsed lower levels of economic system justification beliefs. These findings provide evidence that perceived greater economic inequality does not directly lead to a push for more redistribution; rather, utopian standards such as ideal estimates of economic inequality (conditioned by system-justifying ideologies) do.

**Keywords:** existential and utopian standards, perception, economic inequality, ideology, redistribution



## **Introduction**

The 2018 World Inequality Report confirmed that economic inequality has been increasing around the world in recent decades (Alvaredo et al., 2018). This increasing inequality is associated with pernicious effects on the well-being of individuals (e.g., poor health, unhappiness, and lack of social cohesion; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017) and of society (e.g., distrust, poor social mobility, and violence; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). Given that economic inequality is a matter of wealth being concentrated among relatively few people, one of the mechanisms to deal with this problem is to better allocate wealth among citizens—that is, to implement redistributive policies (Atkinson, 2015).

Redistribution is broadly defined as the use of tax and transfer policies to reduce income inequality (Luebker, 2014). For social policies in the ideal ethos of democratic systems, redistribution would be an expected response to citizens' concerns, interests, and motivations regarding how to drive their societies (Brooks & Manza, 2013). However, despite individuals' desire for lower levels of economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011), redistribution is still unpopular, particularly among those who are well-off (Bartels, 2005; Durante et al., 2014; Fong, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Preferences for redistribution are not only modelled by self-interest or by socioeconomic conditions, but also by individuals' judgments about how economic resources should be distributed. This is a normative model, where justice and fairness standards determine the way how redistribution should be implemented (Dimick, Rueda, & Stegmueller, 2018). Thus, one of the mechanism that might explain support for redistribution are the utopian standards, which represent the ideals of how resources should be distributed, and are related to beliefs regarding how the world should work (Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). What is more, utopian standards are fuelled by beliefs aimed to justify the *status quo*. Indeed, individuals might reject redistribution and support inequality when they believe those are fair, correct, and proper (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009; Jasso, 2009). Therefore, perceptions of economic fairness related to system-justifying beliefs based on individual merit or deservingness rationalise inequalities and reduce support for social-welfare policies (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009; Benabou & Tirole, 2006).

However, utopian standards are also influenced by existential standards, that is, by the perception of the current state of affairs. In other words, the perception of what currently is a referent point to construe the standards of what should be (Kay et al., 2009; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). This is a motivated process where people make inferences about the desirable state of affairs, based on their current reality (Friesen et al., 2018). In this



regard, researchers have shown that perceived greater economic inequality is associated with increased acceptance of that inequality (Castillo, 2011, 2012; Hadler, 2005; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Trump, 2018; Verwiebe & Wegener, 2000), which accordingly is related to lower support for redistributive policies (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Ho et al., 2015).

The fact that perceptions of greater inequality are not always associated with increased demand for redistribution raises the question of which mechanisms actually condition this relationship. In this study, we examined the role of utopian standards as a potential mechanism that might explain the relationship between perceptions of inequality and support for redistribution. Thus, we propose that perceived economic inequality—an existential standard—is positively associated with ideal levels of inequality—a utopian standard—which would therefore discourage people from supporting redistribution. In addition, given that the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality is also a motivated process, ideology should moderate such association. Thus, people endorsing system justifying beliefs will be more prone to accept economic inequality and to demand less redistributive policies. We argued that perceived greater economic inequality influences people to have increased demand for policies that reduce inequality, but that utopian standards and ideologies that justify inequality are minimizing such relationship.

### **Perceptions of Economic Inequality and Support for Redistribution**

The relationship between economic inequality and redistribution has been usually described as a self-interest issue. In this regard, the Meltzer-Richard model states that greater economic inequality is associated with higher demands for redistribution (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). However, researchers have provided mixed findings regarding this idea; some authors have found a positive link between inequality and redistribution (Borge & Rattsø, 2004; Finseraas, 2009; Schmidt-Catran, 2014), but others have not found a relevant relationship between these variables (Georgiadis & Manning, 2012; Kenworthy & McCall, 2008; Luebker, 2014).

The relationship between inequality and redistribution is better explained when accounting for perceptions of inequality rather than for direct consequences of objective economic inequality indicators. In this regard, Dimick et al. (2018) posit that the mere self-interest model—where objective economic inequality should motivate people to demand for redistribution—does not directly influence support for redistribution, but it is shaped by other individual motivations. Indeed, economic inequality is a social phenomenon that can be perceived and experienced in so many ways, such that individual perceptions might better capture the impact of economic inequality than objective economic indicators. For

instance, Binelli and Loveless (2016) found that people with higher incomes perceived less inequality, but only in urban areas; which indicated that the relation between objective and perceived inequality is not straightforward, but moderated by socioeconomic status and place of residence. Similarly, perceiving inequality as excessive is associated with stronger support for redistribution (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017), but also with lower levels of trust and political efficacy, regardless of individual and contextual economic factors (Loveless, 2013).

Perception of inequality, as an existential standard, influences the extent to which inequality is justified (Shamon & Dülmer, 2014; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986), which in turn is associated with the degree to which redistribution should be implemented. Previous researchers have shown that existential standards provide a reference point for estimating ideal standards about what is fair and desirable (Kay et al., 2009; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). This is known as an injunctification process, by which people perceive descriptive norms as injunctive norms, that is, the norms about what ought to be (Friesen et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2009). Thus, although people generally desire less inequality than what they perceive (Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014), there is a positive relation between the two of them (Castillo, 2011; Hadler, 2005; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). Similarly, Trump (2017) showed through several experiments that making people think about higher economic inequality tend to led them to prefer larger levels of economic inequality. As a result, descriptive—what is—and injunctive—what ought to be—norms are two related but different constructs (Cialdini et al., 1990).

However, the relationship between the perception of economic inequality and redistribution is also motivated by other variables. For instance, adjusting perceptions in accordance to social comparisons influenced support for redistribution, so that people who thought they were better off than their peers expressed greater support for redistribution after they realised their true—lower—position (Cruces et al., 2013). Similarly, providing more accurate information about inequality in itself did not lead to change attitudes towards welfare preferences for everybody, but just for those who held wrong beliefs about what cause inequality (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000). In the same way, Page and Goldstein (2016) found that perceptions of economic inequality—in terms of income dispersion—did not significantly affect political preferences towards welfare policies. Furthermore, the results of a set of survey experiments with over 10,000 participants showed that informing people about economic inequality could increase their concern about inequality, but this did not necessarily lead to higher support for

redistribution due to individuals' low trust in the government and lack of connection between social concerns and public policies (Kuziemko et al., 2015).

The association between perceived greater inequality and support for redistribution is not just the result of a rational thinking, but it is conditioned on the utopian standards. On the one hand, motivated individuals used descriptive norms to infer prescriptive norms (Friesen et al., 2018). Researchers have shown that people that perceived more inequality were also more prone to accept more inequality, which then lead them to support less redistribution (Kteily et al., 2017). From this perspective, higher acceptance of inequality—as a consequence of higher perceived inequality—could suppress the effect of perceived inequality on demand for redistribution. In other words, utopian standards, measured as the desired levels of economic inequality, thus should suppress the positive effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution. This suppressing effect is conceptualised as an indirect effect that affect the direct relationship between perceived inequality and redistribution due to a third variable. Suppression is a special case of mediation where the direct and indirect effects have opposite signs (Baron & Kenny, 1986), and the suppressor variable increase the predictive validity of the predictor variable in a given equation (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). Thus, the omission of the suppressor might depict small or nonsignificant direct effects from predictor to outcome variable (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). In these terms, we then expect that the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution is suppressed by the role of ideal inequality.

On the other hand, the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution is also conditioned by ideologies or beliefs that rationalize and justify inequality. For instance, the more people belief in upward social mobility, meritocracy or in the individuals' responsibility to succeed, did reduce support for redistribution (Alesina & Angeleto, 2005; Alesina et al., 2018; Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall et al., 2017; Page & Goldstein, 2016; Piketty, 1995; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Because ideologies shape the way people understand and react to economic inequality, we expect that ideologies also condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution.

### **Utopian Standards and the Ideological Underpinnings of Support for Redistribution**

In addition to the perception of inequality, preferences for redistribution is the result of a complex set of relationships among personal characteristics, history, culture,

ideologies, and perceptions of fairness (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009). Likewise, Loveless and Whitefield (2011) posited that the acceptance of inequality is likely to be driven by normative judgments coming from individual and cultural values. These normative evaluations are based on certain ideologies that depict how the world should work, and therefore, influence individuals' preferences towards public policies. For instance, perceived economic fairness (in terms of how resources are allocated) is negatively associated with support for redistributive social policies, as several beliefs that justify economic inequality (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Fong, 2001; Jasso, Törnblom, & Sabbagh, 2016).

Ideologies are broadly defined as sets of beliefs that explain social arrangements and that provide standards about how the world should operate (Jost, Federico, et al., 2009). Ideologies offer certainty, safety, and control over the surrounding phenomena by providing individuals with resources to understand the world (Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003). There are many beliefs associated with the legitimacy of economic inequality and that thus reduce the public's concern about increasing equality: belief that success or poverty is a product of individual characteristics, beliefs in a just world, in the value of ambition and hard work to get ahead, in the protestant work ethic, in the possibility of upward social mobility, and so on (Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCall, 2013; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007).

In this study, we particularly focused on economic-system justification beliefs through which individuals perceive economic inequality as natural, legitimate, and as a product of deservingness and hard work (Jost & Thompson, 2000). Jost and Thompson (2000) found economic-system justification to be positively related to political conservatism and to the opposition-to-equality subscale of the social-dominance orientation, as well as negatively associated with support for affirmative-action programmes. Likewise, economic-system justification was negatively associated with several measures of redistribution and equality-enhancing policies (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017), as well as with lower support for collective action (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost et al., 2017).

In this vein, system-justifying ideologies influence the degree of inequality that people are willing to accept, as well as the kind of inequality-related public policies that they are motivated to support. Therefore, economic-system justification beliefs might qualify the relationship between perceived inequality and redistribution in at least three ways. First, the endorsement of economic-system justification reduces the perception of inequality

(Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017) and provide a buffer against the moral outrage that people can feel due to social injustice (Wakslak et al., 2007). Second, ideology moderates the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality (Willis et al., 2015). The positive association between perceived and ideal inequality is exacerbated among those with higher adherence to system-justifying beliefs (compared to those with lower levels of it). And third, as a combination of the last two claims, the suppression effect of ideal inequality on the relationship between perceived inequality and redistribution might also be stronger for those who justify the economic system.

### **The Current Research**

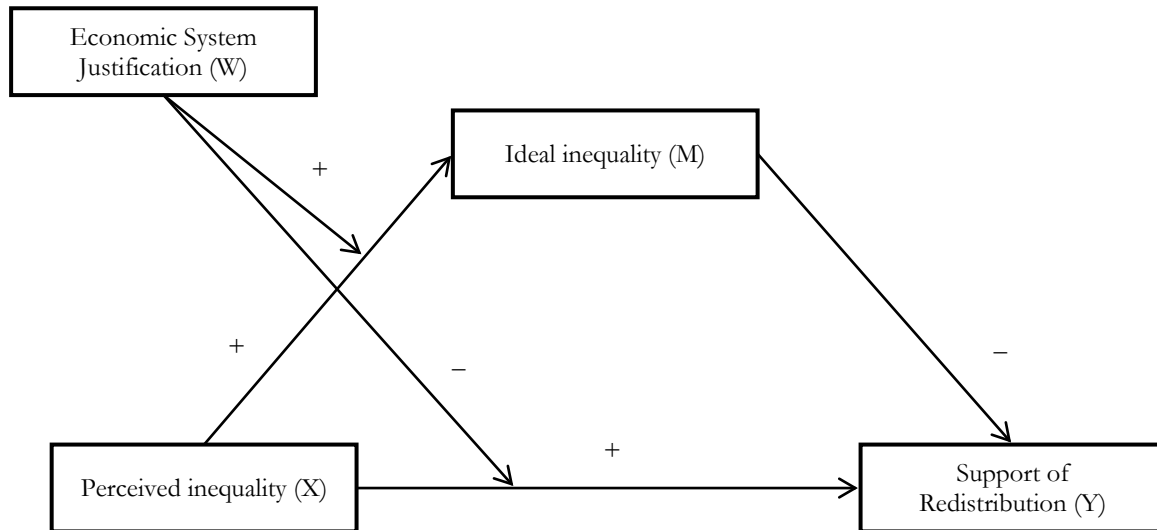
In this study, we aimed to shed light on the role that perceived inequality has on support for redistribution. On the one hand, perceived inequality leads to higher ideal inequality (Castillo, 2011; Hadler, 2005; Trump, 2018), and the latter is negatively associated with support for equality-based policies. On the other hand, perceived greater economic inequality should trigger an evaluation of unfairness—and, as a consequence, should be associated with greater support for redistribution. We integrated these bodies of research by accounting for utopian standards as a process underlying the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution.

We hypothesized that perceiving economic inequality would be positively related to support for redistribution but that this association is affected by utopian standards, that is, by individuals' estimates of ideal economic inequality. Given that perception of inequality is associated with higher ideal levels of inequality and that ideal inequality reduces support for redistribution, we expected to find that perceived inequality would have a negative indirect effect on redistribution through ideal economic inequality ( $H_1$ ). This is known as a suppressing effect—one in which a direct effect and an indirect effect have opposite signs (MacKinnon et al., 2000, p. 177). The suppressing effect of ideal inequality could help to illustrate why the relationship between perceived inequality and redistribution is not fully explained by a rational thinking approach.

Additionally, we argue that the association of perceived inequality with ideal inequality and support for redistribution is conditioned by economic-system justification beliefs. As previous researchers have shown that system-justifying ideologies moderates the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality (Willis et al., 2015), we expected to replicate this effect by finding that this association will be stronger among people that highly endorse beliefs that justify the economic system ( $H_2$ ). As a consequence, we examine whether ideologies also moderate the suppressing effect described above, such that the

indirect effect that perceived inequality has on support for redistribution through ideal inequality might be stronger among people who justify the economic system more ( $H_3$ ).

Finally, given the relevance of system-justifying ideologies to support for public policies, we expected that greater endorsement of an economic-system justification ideology would reduce the direct effect between perceived inequality and redistribution ( $H_4$ ). See Figure 1 for an overview of the hypotheses.



**Figure 1.** Path diagram of the hypothesized moderated mediation model: perceived inequality has a direct and an indirect effect on support for redistribution (through ideal income inequality) conditioned on economic-system justification.

## Method

### Participants

For this study, 794 undergraduates from six cities among two regions of Colombia (Caribbean and South West) participated in an online survey ( $M_{age} = 21.72$ ,  $SD = 4.11$ ; 70.1% female<sup>10</sup>). We recruited the participants from several faculties—psychology, management, engineering, and health sciences—by sending an online invitation to participate in a study about social and economic issues. The participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study by signing the informed consent presented at the beginning of the survey. We excluded 10 participants from the final analysis given their extreme scores in perceived and ideal inequality variables. Such decision was made on the basis of Tukey’s method by which scores that are three times lower or higher than the lower or upper bound of the interquartile range are discarded from the analyses. We used the listwise deletion method to conduct the analysis, so the final sample size for the fitted model was

<sup>10</sup> The over-representation of women in this study was due to the characteristics of our sample. Since most of the participants were enrolled in psychology and health university degrees, it is common to find a majority of women over men participants.

$N = 583$ . According to Fritz & MacKinnon (2015), with this sample size is highly likely to reach a statistical power of at least .80 to detect a small effect size in the mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2015).

### **Measures**

#### **Support for Redistribution**

We operationalized support for redistribution as the perception of the government's responsibility to take action to deal with economic inequality. We measured it through the following item: "It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes". This is a survey item widely used in the literature about support for redistribution (Dimick et al., 2018; Gonthier, 2017; Guillaud, 2013; Schmidt-Catran, 2016; Van Heuvelen, 2017). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with it on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### **Perceived Economic Inequality**

We operationalized perceived economic inequality as the individual's estimation of the gap between the earnings of those in high-status occupations versus the earnings of those in low-status occupation (Castillo, 2011; Willis et al., 2015). We asked the participants to think of the largest and most important Colombian company and to estimate how much money the people in that company's highest and lowest positions (in terms of responsibility and qualifications) would earn. We computed this variable as the logarithm of the ratio between the estimates for the earnings of the highest- and lowest-status workers in the company (Castillo, 2011; Jasso, 2009). Logarithms of ratios are common indicators in wage calculations in the literature, as they reflect relevant assumptions regarding income differences such as the aversion to deficiency, which means that a given level of deficiency is felt with more intensity than a comparable level of excess (i.e., people perceive equal differences as being more important at the bottom of the economic hierarchy than at the top). The log ratio also includes scale invariance and symmetry (Jasso et al., 2016).

#### **Ideal Economic Inequality**

We asked the participants to think of the largest company that could exist in an ideal society and had them estimate the ideal wages that those with the highest and lowest positions in that company (in terms of responsibility and qualifications) should earn. We computed this variable using the same procedure that we used for perceived economic inequality—calculating the logarithm of the ratio between the estimates for the highest- and lowest-status workers in a theoretical company.

**Economic-System Justification Beliefs**

We operationalized the economic-system justification as a system-justifying ideology through which people consider economic inequality as being natural, inevitable, and legitimate (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). We measured this concept using the short version of the economic-system justification scale that Jaume, Etchezahar, and Cervone (2012) translated into Spanish. The items used a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We computed a mean of the seven items of the scale. Some example items are “if people work hard, they almost always get what they want” and “Social class differences reflect differences in the natural order of things” ( $\alpha = .66$ ). To test the one-dimensional structure of the scale, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis and found fairly good fit indices for the model,  $\chi^2(14, n = 714) = 60.142$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.068$ ,  $SRMR = 0.042$ ,  $CFI = 0.918$ <sup>11</sup>.

**Sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables**

In order to control for individual and situational variables that might be exerting some influence on our model, we also measured socioeconomic status by household income, age and sex. Socioeconomic status was operationalised by a 7-point scale items in which participants were asked to indicate their average household income<sup>12</sup>. Taking into account that our sample came from two regions of Colombia with different socioeconomic conditions, we also controlled by the effect of the region (Caribbean = 1; South-West = 0).

**Results**

The descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations for all the variables are shown in Table 1. We conducted a conditional process analysis, which is also known as a moderated mediation model, using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, model 8 (Hayes, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, this is a saturated model composed by a predictor variable (perceived inequality) that have a direct effect on an outcome variable (support for redistribution), and an indirect effect through a third variable (ideal inequality); in which both effects are conditioned by an additional variable (system justifying ideology). We tested this model by using bootstrapping method (5,000 bootstraps) (Hayes, 2018), which is a recommendable practice in mediation analyses given it allows to build an empirical representation of confidence intervals of the indirect effect, and thus, “...better respect the irregularity of the

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<sup>11</sup> RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual, CFI = Comparative fit index.

<sup>12</sup> We used 7 ranges of household income in Colombian Pesos (COP). 1 = “\$690.000 or less”, 2 = “Between \$690.001 and \$1.500.000”, 3 = “Between \$1.500.001 and \$3.500.000”, 4 = “Between \$3.000.001 and \$5.000.000”, 5 = “Between \$5.000.001 and \$8.000.000”, 6 = “Between \$8.000.000 and \$10.000.000”, and 7 “More than \$10.000.001”



sampling distribution of  $ab$ —the indirect effect—and, as a result, yield inferences that are more likely to be accurate than the one based in the normal theory approach” (p. 98, Hayes, 2018). The number of bootstraps we used was based on Hayes (2018) suggestions, who claim that, above 5,000 bootstraps, this method tend to provide higher power than the normal theory approaches.

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables included in this study

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Perceived inequality	—							
2. Ideal inequality	.448***	—						
3. Economic system justification	.010	.179***	—					
4. Support for redistribution	.042	-.049	.112**	—				
5. Socioeconomic Status (income)	.062	.185***	.109**	-.082*	—			
6. Region (Caribbean=1)	-.066	-.013	.134***	-.031	.051	—		
7. Sex (Female=1; Male=0)	-.145***	-.169***	-.117**	-.027	.026	.065	—	
8. Age	.092*	.061	.012	.128***	.012	.187***	.028	—
<i>M</i>	2.642	1.492	3.349	3.760	3.210	.427	.70	21.72
<i>SD</i>	1.274	.915	.712	1.080	1.421	.495	.458	4.116

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

We additionally included socioeconomic status by household income, age and sex as covariates to test their influence on ideal inequality and support for redistribution; and also added the fixed effects for region, so we can control for any contextual influence. The unstandardized ordinary-least-squares regression coefficients are shown in Table 2. All supplementary material for this study—including the data, tables, plots, code, and outputs—is publicly available at: <https://goo.gl/LysNoP>.

In Table 2 we report the unstandardized regression coefficient independently for each outcome variables specified in our model, namely, Ideal inequality and Support for Redistribution. As can be seen in the table, perceived inequality ( $b = .312$ ,  $SE = .027$ ,  $p < .001$ ), economic-system justification ( $b = .245$ ,  $SE = .049$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and socioeconomic status by income ( $b = .081$ ,  $SE = .024$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were positively associated with ideal inequality, while Female were less prompted to desired more inequality ( $b = -.172$ ,  $SE = .073$ ,  $p = .018$ ). On the other hand, the higher socioeconomic status by income ( $b = -.083$ ,  $SE = .032$ ,  $p = .009$ ) was associated with lower support for redistribution, whereas higher economic-system justification was associated with higher redistributive preferences ( $b = .215$ ,  $SE = .065$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Although perceived inequality ( $b = .068$ ,  $SE = .039$ ,  $p = .088$ ) and ideal inequality ( $b = -.108$ ,  $SE = .055$ ,  $p = .052$ ) did not reach

statistical significance under a  $p < .05$ , both predictors were related to support for redistribution in the expected direction: support for redistribution increase when perceived inequality increase and ideal inequality decrease.

**Table 2.**

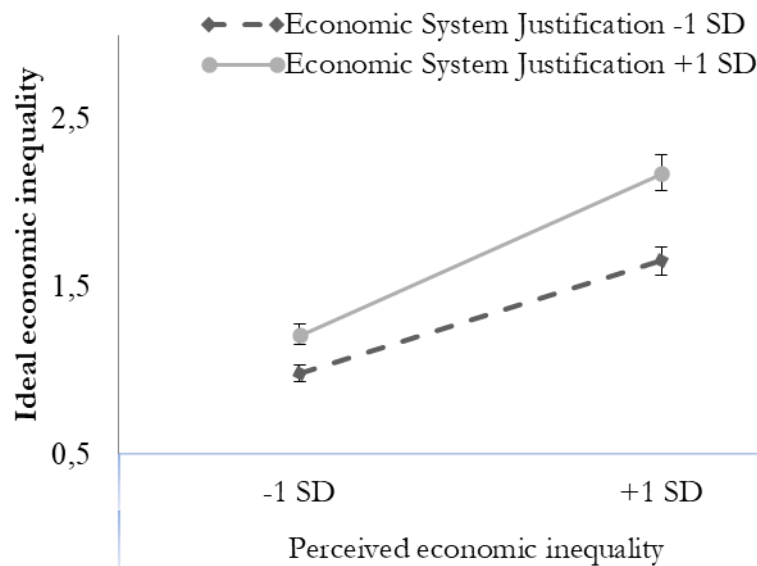
Unstandardized OLS regressions coefficients with confidence intervals (standard error in parentheses) estimating ideal inequality and support for redistribution.

	Ideal inequality (M)		Support for redistribution (Y)	
	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI
Perceived inequality (PIneq)	.312*** (.027)	[.875, 1.671]	.068+ (.039)	[-.010, .145]
Economic system justification (ESJ)	.245*** (.049)	[.149, .340]	.215** (.065)	[.086, .344]
Ideal inequality (IdIneq)	—	—	-.108+ (.055)	[-.216, .001]
Pineq x ESJ	.079* (.037)	[.006, .153]	-.089+ (.050)	[-.187, .009]
Socioeconomic status (income)	.081*** (.024)	[.035, .127]	-.083** (.031)	[-.145, -.020]
Region (Caribbean = 1)	-.097 (.068)	[-.144, .125]	-.005 (.091)	[-.184, .173]
Sex (Female = 1)	-.172* (.073)	[-.315, -.029]	-.009 (.097)	[-.199, .182]
Age	.004 (.008)	[-.011, .019]	.029** (.011)	[.008, .049]
Constant	1.273*** (.202)	[.875, 1.671]	3.584*** (.278)	[3.037, 4.13]
	R <sup>2</sup> =.269		R <sup>2</sup> =.056	
	F(7, 575)=30.23, $p < .001$		F(8, 574)=4.243, $p < .001$	

Note: + $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , SE = Standard Error. The product of the interaction term was mean centred.

The first hypothesis was that ideal economic inequality would display a suppressing effect in the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. We found that perceived inequality had a negative indirect effect on support for redistribution via ideal inequality,  $b = -.034$ ,  $SE = -.018$ ,  $95\% CI [-.072, -.002]$ .

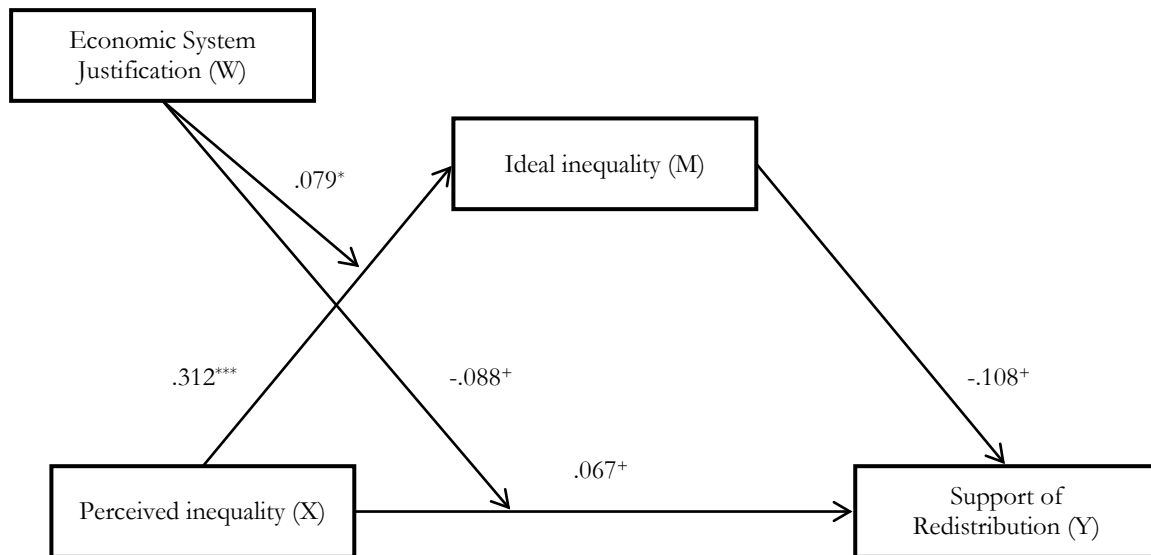
In accordance with the second hypothesis, we confirmed that the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality was moderated by economic-system justification,  $b = .079$ ,  $SE = .037$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $95\% CI [.005, .153]$ . Simple slopes analysis show that the effect of perceived ideal inequality was higher for those who justified the economic system more,  $b = .364$ ,  $t(575) = 9.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $95\% CI [.289, .438]$ , than for those who justified it less,  $b = .262$ ,  $t(575) = 7.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $95\% CI [.195, .329]$  (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Interaction between perceived inequality and economic system justification on the estimates of ideal economic inequality.

Additionally, our third hypothesis posited that the indirect effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution through ideal inequality would vary with economic-system justification. We did not find support for this hypothesis, since the indirect effect between those at lower values ( $-1$  SD) of economic system justification,  $b = -.028$ ,  $SE = -.015$ ,  $95\% CI [-.060, -.002]$ , and those at higher values ( $+1$  SD),  $b = -.039$ ,  $SE = -.021$ ,  $95\% CI [-.083, -.002]$ ; was not statistically different from zero, *index of moderated mediation*  $= -.008$ ,  $SE = .006$ ,  $95\% CI [-.0242, .0004]$  (Hayes, 2018). Figure 3 shows a path diagram (with estimated coefficients) for this study's model.

Finally, in our fourth hypothesis, we expected that the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution was moderated by economic-system justification. We partially found support for this hypothesis, since the interaction term was marginally significant,  $b = -.088$ ,  $SE = .050$ ,  $p = .077$ ,  $95\% CI = [-.186, .009]$ . However, examining the simple slopes of perceived economic inequality at different values of economic system justification, showed that perceived economic inequality was positively associated with support for redistribution among those who had low scores ( $-1$  SD) on the economic-system justification scale,  $b = .124$ ,  $SE = .048$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $95\% CI = [.030, .217]$ , but not for those with higher scores ( $+1$  SD),  $b = -.010$ ,  $SE = .054$ ,  $p = .853$ ,  $95\% CI [-.096, .116]$ .



**Figure 3.** Path diagram for the conditional process analysis of perceived inequality on support for redistribution conditioned by economic-system justification.

### Discussion

Despite the overall desire for lower levels of economic inequality, perceived greater inequality does not directly translate into increased demand for redistribution (Cruces et al., 2013; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Kuziemko et al., 2015). Indeed, researchers have shown mixed results in this regard, reporting positive, negative, and null associations. In this study, we examined the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality and support for redistribution, thus shedding light on one process that could condition that relationship: the utopian standards (ideal levels of inequality).

Researchers have shown that existential standards influence utopian standards, so that people make inferences of the desirable state of affairs, from the current state of affairs. In addition, endorsing system-justifying ideologies exacerbate such relationship. We built on two bodies of literature: on the one hand, utopian standards provide a normative framework to judge ideal levels of inequality; and on the other, system-justifying beliefs are indicators of individual motivations to justify the *status quo*. Given that the perception of economic inequality are positively associated with the estimation of ideal levels of inequality (Castillo, 2012; Hadler, 2005; Shepelak & Alwin, 1986), we explored whether the ideal estimations of inequality suppressed the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution. Additionally, considering the role that ideologies play in legitimating inequalities, we also tested whether economic-system justification beliefs condition the effect that perceiving economic inequality has on redistribution, both directly and indirectly.

We found support for our first hypothesis that perceived greater inequality had a negative indirect effect on preferences for redistribution through ideal estimations of economic inequality. In other words, perceived greater inequality was positively associated with acceptance for inequality, and the latter, was negatively linked to demand for redistribution. This negative indirect effect is also known as a suppressing effect, since it has opposite sign from the direct effect and adds additional explained variance to the model (MacKinnon et al., 2000; Rucker et al., 2011). This hypothesis was supported even after controlling for economic system-justifying beliefs, socioeconomic status by income, age, sex and region of origin.

We also found support for our second hypothesis that economic-system justifying beliefs conditioned the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality. In this regard, the positive relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality was stronger among individuals who highly endorsed economic-system justifying beliefs. This finding has been shown by Willis and colleagues (2015), whom demonstrated that opposition to equality beliefs, strengthen the perceived–ideal inequality relationship; and by other researchers that show the same moderating effect in a diverse set of countries (García-Sánchez, van der Toorn, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2018). For this study, we conceptually replicated the same idea with a different—non-European—sample using a different indicator of system justifying beliefs and integrating these findings with some potential implications for individuals' support for redistribution.

In this vein, this study's findings supported the idea that the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution is affected by utopian standards. We showed that perceiving economic inequality positively relates to ideal inequality, and as a consequence, has an indirect negative effect on redistributive preferences. This might provide evidence of the injunctification process, which posit that people are motivated to evaluate utopian standards based on the existential ones (Friesen et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2009), which, at the same time, have implications on people attitudes toward public policies. Additionally, we provided additional evidence that ideological motivations could exacerbate (or attenuate) such relationship between existential standards—what is—and utopian standards—what ought to be.

As for our third hypothesis, we did not find enough evidence supporting that the negative indirect effect was also moderated by economic-system justifying beliefs. Although we found that the indirect effect was stronger on those people that highly endorsed economic-system justifying beliefs, compared to those that endorse lower levels

of the same beliefs; the test of the differences between those effects was not statistically significant. Thus we disconfirmed our third hypothesis. However, given the small effect sizes we are dealing with in our fitted model, it might be plausible that bigger sample size and better measurements for redistributive preferences could help to shed light to this idea. Further research might explore how utopian standards, as a mechanism that affect the association between perceived inequality and support for redistribution, is conditioned by ideologies that justify inequality.

In relation to our fourth hypothesis, we found some support for the conditioning role of economic system-justifying ideologies on the association between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. Indeed, we found a marginally significant interaction between perceived inequality and economic-system justifying beliefs, such that: when people perceived more inequality, they demanded more redistribution, but only among those who engage in relatively little justification of the economic system. Thus, to believe in a fair and legitimate economic system overrides the effect that perceived economic inequality has on the demand for redistribution. In the same vein, previous researchers have shown that system-justifying ideologies lead people to overlook inequality (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017), dampen their unfairness-triggered moral outrage and support for equality-based policies (Wakslak et al., 2007), and demotivate them from engaging in collective action (Jost et al., 2017). In this regard, the effect that perception of inequality has on support for redistribution is conditioned on people belief systems that justify inequality. System-justifying ideologies could thus mask the moral outrage or mobilisation that perceived inequality is expected to trigger. In other words, the motivation to seek greater equality is not just a matter of fixing misperceptions of inequality; but also a matter of how such inequality is explained and justified. Thus, alternative narratives that challenge inequality and that promote equality-based values, can be powerful mechanisms that neutralize the pernicious effects of the existential standards that are in the service of maintaining the *status quo*

As most of studies, ours presents some limitations. First, since we used correlational data from a convenient sample of undergraduates, we cannot claim strong causality conclusions, nor generalize our results to the population. Instead, we modelled the relationships between the variables based on the theory and evidence derived from previous research—both correlational and experimental—, so that we are replicating a model in which perceived inequality is an antecedent of ideal inequality, as well as for preferences for redistribution. Similarly, we argue that both perceptions and system-

justifying beliefs interact between them, in order to guide political behaviour, as for the particular case of support for redistributive policies. Second, we operationalized redistribution as the government's responsibility in reducing economic inequality, but this solely indicator did not say anything about how such redistribution should be done. Despite the usefulness of this indicator as a proxy for redistributive preference, there are many other ways to engage in redistribution that might be driven by different motivations: regulating the market economy, implementing progressive taxes, strengthening social services, adjusting the public budget, providing more resources for the disadvantaged, setting equality-of-opportunity policies, and so on (Atkinson, 2015). Future research should examine people's responses to different redistribution measures, as those responses might be related to different sociological and psychological mechanisms (e.g., attributions of poverty/wealth, distributive or procedural justice). Third, in addition to system-justifying ideologies, there are other processes at the service of the *status quo*, such as cognitive biases and heuristics that facilitates the acceptance of inequality (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014; Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Hussak & Cimpian, 2015). Thus, in accordance with this study's findings, future researchers could consider how both motivations and cognitive biases can be complementary mechanisms aimed to legitimate the *status quo*. Finally, despite we did not find any effects of the region of residence on individuals support for redistribution, it is important to analyse the influence of redistributive policies of the places where people live in, on individuals' preferences toward redistribution. Since individuals tend to rationalize the current state of affairs, accounting for current redistributive policies might help to shed light about how normative standards of redistribution exert influence on individual attitudes toward public policies.

### Conclusion

In light of the mixed results regarding the association between perceptions of economic inequality and support for redistribution, this study's findings provide evidence of the utopian standards as a socio psychological mechanism that mediate such relationship. On the one hand, perceiving greater inequality influences people to be more willing to accept more inequality and thus reduces support for redistribution. On the other hand, system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived inequality on both acceptance of inequality and support for redistribution. In all, perceptions or concerns about economic inequality are important elements in raising awareness about inequality; but are not enough by themselves to translate into support for redistributive policies. Instead, to promote support for redistribution it seems to be necessary to work on

the utopian standards, which are affected by narratives, beliefs and worldviews that explain inequalities and that promote a more egalitarian world.

**Ethical approval:** All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Vicerectory of Research and Scientific Policy of the University of Granada approved by the Ethics Committee for Research of the University of Granada (No 170/CEIH/2016) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments of comparable ethical standards. All participants were informed in writing about the objectives of the study, and signed their consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Once the study was concluded, we provided feedback to all respondents regarding the research findings.

**Research Data Statement:** Raw data, code and outputs for all findings reported in this study is publicly available at the Open Science Framework: <https://goo.gl/LysNoP>

**Author contributions:** EG-S, GW, and RR-B contributed conception and design of the study. JP-S, JP, and ER-P contributed with data collection. EG-S coordinated data collection, performed analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors made contributions to manuscript revision, read and approved the submitted version.



## Supplementary material

**Table S1.**  
Descriptive statistics for the variables included in the model

Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness	Kurtosis	Std. Error of Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles			N	
										25	50	75	Valid	Missing
Support for redistribution	3.760	4.000	1.080	-.772	.094	-.042	.187	1	5	3.00	4.00	5.00	680	104
Perceived income gap	2.642	2.669	1.274	.338	.093	1.513	.186	-2.37	8.60	1.8326	2.6688	3.4265	688	96
Ideal income gap	1.492	1.386	.915	.621	.095	.675	.190	-.53	5.70	.7806	1.3863	2.1203	661	123
Economic system justification	3.349	3.429	.712	-.386	.090	.094	.180	1.00	5.00	2.8571	3.4286	3.8571	736	48
Socioeconomic status by household income	3.210	3.000	1.421	.695	.097	.171	.193	1	7	2.00	3.00	4.00	639	145
Edad	21.718	21.000	4.116	2.098	.098	5.732	.195	16	44	19.00	21.00	23.00	627	157
Sex (Female = 1, Male = 0)	.701	1.000	.458	-.881	.097	-1.227	.194	0	1	.00	1.00	1.00	636	148
Region (Caribbean =1, Southwest = 0)	.427	.000	.495	.295	.087	-1.918	.174	.00	1.00	.0000	.0000	1.0000	784	0

**Table S2.**

Unstandardized OLS regressions coefficients with confidence intervals (standard error in parentheses) estimating ideal inequality and support for redistribution conducted as in the original analysis (previous to peer review)

	Ideal inequality (M)		Support for redistribution (Y)	
	Coeff.	95% CI	Coeff.	95% CI
Perceived inequality (PIneq)	.324*** (.027)	[.272,.377]	.065* (.029)	[.008, .123]
Economic system justification (ESJ)	.269*** (.047)	[.176 .363]	.068 (.048)	[-.026, .162]
Ideal inequality (IdIneq)	—	—	-.086* (.041)	[-.165, -.006]
Pineq x ESJ	.083* (.036)	[.012, .154]	-.109** (.036)	[-.179, -.039]
Constant	1.537***(.073)	[1.177, 1.896]	3.759*** (.189)	[3.388, .132]
Sex (Female = 1)	-.152* (.073)	[-.296, -.008]	.064 (.072)	[-.077, .205]
Age	.004 (.008)	[-.012, .019]	.007 (.008)	[-.008, .022]
	R <sup>2</sup> =.255		R <sup>2</sup> = .036	
	F(5, 580)=39.76, p<.001		F(6, 579)=3.561, p=.002	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Product was mean centred

**Table S3.**

Direct and indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on redistribution conditioned by economic system justification as in the original analysis (previous to peer review)

Economic system justification (W)	Indirect effect		Direct effect	
	Coeff. (SE)	95% bootstrap CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% bootstrap CI
- 1 SD	-.023 (.012)	[-.048, -.002]	.142 (.036)	[.071, .213]
Mean	-.028 (.014)	[-.057, -.003]	.065 (.029)	[.008, .123]
+ 1 SD	-.033 (.016)	[-.067, -.004]	-.012 (.041)	[-.092, .068]



## *CHAPTER 6.*

**Perceived and ideal  
economic inequality as  
a linking mechanism  
between  
socioeconomic status  
and support for  
redistribution**



Perceived and ideal economic inequality as linking mechanisms between socioeconomic status  
and support for redistribution

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## Abstract

Support for redistribution is often associated with self-interest motivation, such that high SES individuals tend to oppose to redistributive policies because they think they will not benefit from such policies, and that many resources will be taken away from them. In addition to self-interest, we propose that perceived and ideal economic inequality work in tandem as a mechanism that might explain individuals' willingness to support redistribution. In the current research, we hypothesized that SES will be negatively associated with support for redistribution via perceived and ideal economic inequality. In three correlational studies ( $N_{Studies1-3} = 1,211$ ), we observed that socioeconomic status had a negative indirect effect on support for redistribution through greater perception and acceptance of economic inequality (Studies 1 and 3). Thus, socioeconomic status was positively associated with perceived economic inequality (Studies 1 and 3); perceived economic inequality was positively associated with ideal economic inequality (Studies 1 to 3); and in turn, this ideal level of economic inequality, was negatively associated with attitudes toward redistribution (Studies 1 to 3). The indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution holds independently of its direct effect, and after controlling for concerns about economic inequality (Study 3). These findings provide evidence on the role of perception and acceptance of economic inequality as mechanism that link SES and support for redistribution.

**Key words:** Support for redistribution; perception of inequality; self-interest; system justification; legitimacy.





## **Introduction**

Even though people express their desire for less unequal societies (Arsenio, 2018; Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011), policies aiming at reducing reduce inequality are not overwhelmingly popular among them (Bartels, 2005; Fong, 2001). One of the mechanisms that explain people attitudes toward redistributive policies is economic self-interest, which is often operationalized as socioeconomic status. Thus, high SES individuals would be less motivated to support redistribution because they would have to contribute a bigger portion of their resources (e.g., progressive taxes), think they would not benefit from the welfare system (e.g., receiving subsidies), and might lose their privileged position (e.g., equalizing opportunities to others) (Bullock, 2017). However, SES is not delimited to self-interest, but instead it is associated with a wide range of structural and social psychological processes that shape political attitudes (Kraus & Park, 2017; Piff et al., 2018). We thus argue that the relationship between SES and support for redistribution can be explained by a complementary mechanism: perceived economic inequality and its effects on individuals' ideal levels of inequality.

In short, we maintain that high SES individuals tend to have more information about the incomes at the top than their low SES counterparts, which lead them to—accurately—perceive higher income gaps (Castillo, 2011, 2012; Verwiebe & Wegener, 2000). This perceived economic inequality is positively related to the acceptance of economic inequality, such that perceive greater inequality is used as a reference point to estimate higher ideal levels of economic inequality—desirable income gaps that people consider should exist in society (García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2015). And greater acceptance of economic inequality is therefore related to less support for redistribution and policies against inequality (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2015; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Taking all this into consideration, we propose that the relationship between SES and attitudes toward redistribution is explained, at least in part, by the perception and acceptance of economic inequality: SES would be negatively associated with support for redistribution through the perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality.

### **Socioeconomic status, perception of economic inequality and support for redistribution**

Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as the social standing that individuals or groups hold in the social structure in terms of their access to material resources (e.g., wealth), prestige, and power (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2018; Stephens, Markus, &

Phillips, 2014). As such, SES conditions individuals' decisions, preferences, and attitudes toward public policies. For instance, high SES individuals tends to be less supportive of redistribution than the low SES (Alesina & Giuliano, 2009; Dimick et al., 2018; Rueda & Pontusson, 2010). From a self-interest perspective, individuals that expect to lose resources as the result of redistribution, tend to oppose more to redistribution and progressive taxation (Jaime-Castillo & Sáez-Lozano, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2018).

The negative relation between SES and attitudes towards redistribution has been mainly explained by self-interest motives, by which individuals are willing to maximize their gains and to avoid risks (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This self-interest motivation relies on the assumption that people have accurate information about what would be beneficial for them, but this is not always the case. Indeed, individuals that perceive they belong to higher SES were less supportive of redistributive policies, regardless their objective SES (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Karadja, Möllerström, & Seim, 2017). Similarly, people that expect an increase in their incomes above the average, endorsed less redistributive preferences, above and beyond their absolute incomes (Mérola & Helgason, 2016). Thus, the influence of SES on political attitudes could be explained by people perceptions of social reality and their position in the social structure relative to others.

In this vein, there could be alternative mechanisms that explain the relationship between SES and support for redistribution that are not accounted by self-interest motives. As such, in this paper we argue that SES influences perceived inequality, which in turn influences the ideal level of inequality. Both variables would mediate the effect of SES on attitudes towards redistribution. First, we argue that high SES influences perceived inequality. Although most of the people underestimate the earnings of those at the top (Weakliem & Biggert, 2013), high SES moves in affluence environments that allow them to have more accurate information of high salaries (Castillo, 2011, 2012). This makes high SES to perceive greater—more accurate—income gap.

Second, perceived inequality set existential standards (i.e., based on the current state of affairs) that are used as a reference points to make judgments about the ideal state of affairs. In fact, researchers have consistently found across different samples and contexts that perceiving more economic inequality is related to greater acceptance of economic inequality (Castillo, 2012a; García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Hadler, 2005; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Trump, 2007; Willis et al., 2015). Such association might be due to heuristics that favour the *status quo* (see Eidelman & Crandall, 2012; Hussak & Cimpian,

2015), so that individuals anchor their judgments in accordance to available information coming from the context (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974); or it might also be caused by motivational processes by which individuals tend to justify the current state of affairs by perceiving what is as what ought to be (Friesen et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2009). As shown in the literature, both process seem to work in tandem, since the positive relationship between perceived and acceptance of economic inequality is exacerbated by individuals' endorsement of ideologies that justify inequality (García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2015)

Third, perceived economic inequality is negatively related to support for redistribution via ideal economic inequality (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018). Whereas it could be argued that when individuals perceive greater levels of economic inequality they demand greater redistribution (Meltzer & Richard, 1981; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, & Ho, 2017), perceiving more economic inequality in itself does not directly lead to more support for redistribution (Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2015). García-Sánchez, Willis, et al., (2018) argue that desiring more economic inequality suppress the relation between perceived inequality and attitudes towards redistribution. That is, ideal levels of economic inequality acts as a third (suppressor) variable that counteract the relationship between perceived inequality and attitudes toward redistribution.

### **The present research**

The aim of this research is to evaluate the role of perceived and ideal economic inequality on the relationship between SES and support for redistribution. We argue that SES is indirectly related to support for redistribution via perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality. Although high SES is linked to less support for redistribution, such association may well be mediated by perceived economic inequality (Evans & Kelley, 2018). These findings have overlooked the association between perceived and ideal economic inequality (Castillo, 2011; García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2015), which could suppress the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018). Altogether, perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality accounts for a tendency to see what is and what ought, favouring the justification of the current state of affairs.

We hypothesize that upper social classes are better informed about the higher levels of inequality, and thus SES will be positively related to perceived income gap ( $H_1$ ); that individuals use existential standards to make judgments about ideal standards, so that

perceived inequality will be positively related to the ideal estimation of income gap ( $H_2$ ); and that desiring wider income gaps depicts an individual willingness to justify the *status quo*, such that higher ideal levels of economic inequality will be related to less support for redistribution ( $H_3$ ). Taking all this into consideration, we suggest that there will be a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution via perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality, independently of the main effect of SES on individuals support for redistribution ( $H_4$ ).

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three correlational studies using different samples and indicators of SES and support for redistribution. In study 1, participants reported their household income, how much economic inequality they perceived and desired, and standard survey questions about support for redistribution, such as the government's responsibility to reduce economic inequality and support for progressive taxation. In Study 2, we replicated the previous study, but adding additional indicators of support for redistribution, focusing not only on imposing progressive taxes, but also by supporting social spending. Finally, giving the limitations of Studies 1 and 2 that relied on undergraduate samples and few-indicators measures of support for redistribution, in Study 3 we replicated the same conceptual model with a sample of workers using different indicators of SES and support for redistribution at the workplace. The raw data, scripts to conduct analysis, tables and figures are publicly available in the supplementary material of this manuscript at: <https://goo.gl/bcyihM>.

### Study 1

We conducted a correlational study with undergraduates to test our hypotheses. In this study, participants filled a questionnaire about current social issues in Colombia, in which we included indicators of perceived and ideal income gap, support for redistribution, and SES.

#### Method

##### Participants

We interviewed four hundred and eighteen undergraduates from different disciplines (humanities, art, natural and social sciences, engineering and health) at a Public university in Cali, Colombia ( $M_{age}=20.25$ ,  $SD=3.62$ ; 53.4% Female). Participants were contacted directly in different places at the university buildings (library, classrooms and study halls). All participants signed an informed consent and were provided general

information about the study (e.g., information about researchers, confidentiality, anonymity, etc.).

### **Materials and procedure**

**Support for redistribution:** We computed the mean score of the following two items: “The government should reduce the income differences between people with high income and people with low income”, and “The government should tax heavier people with higher incomes”,  $r(413)=.351$ ,  $p<.001$ . Participants indicated their agreement with each statement in a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**SES:** We asked participants for their overall household income in Colombian pesos (COP). To do so, they were given the following 10-point scale (the percentage of participants in each category is shown in parentheses): 1=“up to \$781,242” (15.6%), 2=“Between 781,242-1,560,000” (38.5%), 3=“1,561,000-2,340,000 COP” (14.9%), 4=“Between 2,341,000-3,120,000 COP” (13.3%), 5=“Between 3,121,000-3,900,000” (5.6%), 6=“Between 3,901,000-4,680,000” (4.2%), 7=“Between 4,681,000-5,460,000” (3.4%), 8=“Between 5,461,000-6,240,000” (1.3%), 9=“Between 6,241,000-7,020,000” (0.8%), and 10 = “More than 7,021,000” (2.4%).

**Perceived income gap:** This variable refers to the ratio of the perceived income between the highest and lowest occupational status in a large company (Castillo, 2011; Willis et al., 2015). Participants were asked to think of the largest Colombian company, and to estimate the amount of money that earns the person at the position with the most (and less) responsibility, qualification and prestige in such company. As suggested in the literature, we log-transformed this ratio in order to take care of deficiency aversion, scale invariance and symmetry related to the estimation of income gaps (Jasso, 2009; Jasso et al., 2016).

**Ideal income gap:** Is the ratio of the ideal income that participants reported should earn a person in the position with the most and least responsibility, qualification and prestige in the largest company they can think of. We log-transformed this ratio following the same procedure we used for computing perceived economic inequality.

### **Results and discussion**

*Preliminary Analysis:* As can be seen in Table 1, support for redistribution was negatively associated with SES and ideal income gap, and positively related to perceived income gap. Thus, people with higher SES desired wider income gaps and were less likely to support redistribution; whereas people that perceived more inequality supported more redistribution.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between the variables included in Study 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Support for redistribution	—					
2. SES	-.129*	—				
3. Perceived income gap	.103*	.184***	—			
4. Ideal income gap	-.103*	.278***	.489***	—		
5. Sex (Female = 1, Male = 0)	.011	.010	-.017	-.149**	—	
6. Age	.113*	.080	.131*	.068	.016	—
Mean	5.170	3.093	2.423	1.338	.464	20.26
Standard Deviation	1.366	2.022	1.563	1.064	.499	3.605
N	417	377	377	366	390	352

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , bivariate correlations were conducted by applying pair-wise deletion.

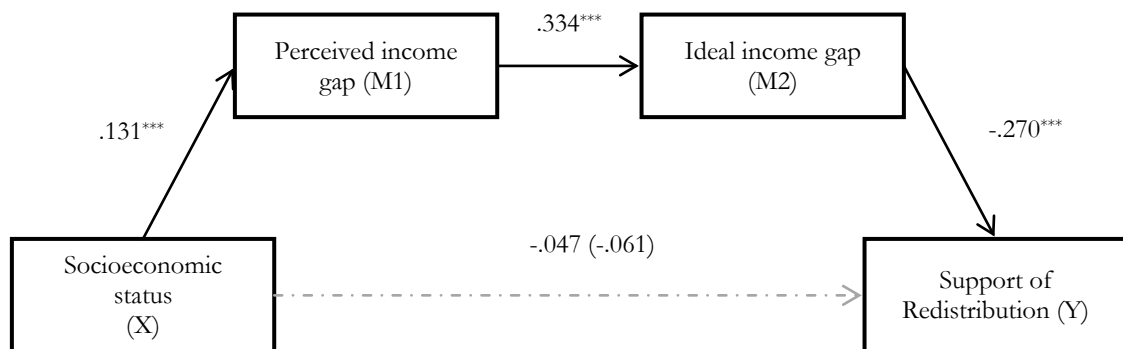
*Main Analysis:* We conducted linear regression analyses to test the main effect of SES on perceived income gap ( $H_1$ ); of perceived income gap on ideal income gap ( $H_2$ ); and ideal income gap on support for redistribution ( $H_3$ ). We additionally estimated a sequential mediation model to test the indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution through perceived and ideal inequality ( $H_4$ ). To estimate this model, we used the PROCESS 3.1 macro for SPSS (version 24), specifying a bootstrapping method of 5000 resamples as suggested by Hayes (2018). We used bootstrapping method because it outperforms normal theories approaches when it comes to account for the irregularity of sampling distribution, as well as it yields more accurate estimates (Hayes, 2018).

As hypothesized, we confirmed that higher SES was associated with higher perceived income gap ( $H_1$ ); that perceived income gap was positively associated with ideal income gap ( $H_2$ ), and that more ideal levels of income gaps were associated with less support for redistribution ( $H_3$ ) (see Table 2 for detailed regression coefficients). In addition, we found support for  $H_4$ , such that there is a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution, via perceived and ideal inequality,  $b = -.012$ ,  $SE = .006$ , 95% CI  $[-.027, -.003]$ . Thus, the higher the SES, the less support for redistribution as a result of the relationship between perceived and ideal income gap (see Figure 1 for the path diagram). In addition, SES was negatively associated with support for redistribution, but this effect was not statistically significant once we controlled for perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality.

**Table 2.** Unstandardized Ordinary Least Squares regressions coefficients (standard error in parentheses) with confidence intervals estimating perceived income gap, ideal income gap, and support for redistribution.

	Perceived income gap (M1)		Ideal income gap (M2)		Support for redistribution (Y)	
	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI
1. SES (X)	.131*** (.039)	[.053, .209]	.097*** (.024)	[.049, .146]	-.047 (.035)	[-.116, .021]
2. Perceived income gap (M1)			.334*** (.033)	[.268, .399]	.191*** (.053)	[.087, .295]
3. Ideal income gap (M2)					-.270*** (.076)	[-.420, -.121]
Constant	2.024*** (.146)	[1.736, 2.312]	.236* (.112)	[.016, .457]	5.335*** (.156)	[5.027, 5.643]
	R <sup>2</sup> =.032		R <sup>2</sup> =.288		R <sup>2</sup> =.009	
	F(1, 334)=11.127, p<.001		F(2, 333)=67.407, p<.001		F(1, 334)=3.172, p=.075	

Note: + < .10, \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, SE = Standard Error.



**Figure 1.** Path diagram of the relationship between socioeconomic status and support for redistribution, via perceived and ideal income gap. Note: Coefficients are unstandardized, and non-significant estimates are depicted in dotted-grey lines.

Study 1 shed some light on how the socioeconomic inequality is linked to redistributive preferences through the association between perceived and ideal gap. Although zero-order correlations showed that high SES individuals support less redistribution, once we controlled for perceived and ideal inequality, we found that such association was no longer statistically significant. Instead, we found a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution, through the relationship between perceived and ideal income gaps. Thus, this study provides preliminary evidence that perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality can link SES to redistributive preferences.

However, support for redistribution depends on the kind of redistributive policies, since people might agree on reducing economic inequality but disagree on how to do so. For instance, regardless individuals positioning in the social rank, there is a general aversion to taxes (McCaffery & Baron, 2005; McCaffery & Baron, 2006) to the extent that



individuals usually disapprove increasing taxes, even for those at the top of the hierarchy (Bartels, 2005). Hence, in Study 2 we tried to replicate our conceptual model by using different indicators of support for redistribution: the government's role to reduce economic inequality via progressive taxation or social spending.

## Study 2

In Study 2 we added some measures of support for redistribution. Kenworthy & Mccall (2008) showed that people's responses towards support for redistribution can be oriented toward taxes transferences or by increasing social spending. Thus, in addition to the items used in Study 1 to measure people's support for progressive taxation, we also added a measure of people's support for social spending.

### Method

#### Participants

We surveyed three hundred ninety four undergraduates from different university programmes (humanities, art, natural and social sciences, engineering and health) at a Public university in Cali, Colombia ( $M_{age} = 20.30$ ,  $SD_{age} = 3.57$ ; 48% females). The procedure for contacting and conducting the study was the same as in Study 1.

#### Materials and procedure

**Support for redistribution:** We operationalized this variable in two different but complementary ways. First, the role of the government to reduce inequality and implement progressive taxes; and second, individuals' support for social spending (Kenworthy & Mccall, 2008). Support for progressive taxation was measured with the same items of support for redistribution employed in Study 1,  $r(388) = .294$ ,  $p < .001$ . Support for social spending has to do with measures aimed at providing more opportunities for the disadvantage, and was composed as the mean of the following two items: "The government should increase social spending in assistance for people in need", and "The government should supply of places at the university for people coming from vulnerable communities",  $r(387) = .241$ ,  $p < .001$ . In all cases, participants should indicate their extent of agreement with each statement in a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree).

**SES, Perceived income gap, and Ideal income gap** were operationalized in the same way as in Study 1. The distribution of SES for the Study 2 sample was: 1=14.7%, 2=33.6%, 3=16.1%, 4=13.3%, 5=6.7%, 6= 6.1%, 7=1.9%, 8=3.1%, 9=1.4%, and 10=3.1%.

## Results and discussion

*Preliminary Analysis:* Using a paired-samples *t*-test we assessed whether there were differences in the measurements of support for redistribution. Consistent with the literature (Bartels, 2005; Edlund, 2003; Mccaffery & Baron, 2005), people were less supportive of the implementation of heavier taxation and government regulations ( $M=5.149$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ), than for providing more opportunities and assistance of disadvantaged people ( $M=5.445$ ,  $SD=1.293$ ),  $t(382) = -3.684$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.224$ . In addition, we found a positive correlation between these two measures of support for redistribution, but such association was not extremely high to affirm that they are the same (see Table 3); such that, both indicators may well represent different dimensions of the same construct (McCall & Kenworthy, 2009).

Exploring the bivariate correlations of the variables, we found that both measures of support for redistribution were negatively associated with SES, and positively associated with ideal estimates of income gap. Thus, people high in SES and desiring higher income gaps were less supportive of redistribution. Notably in this study, perceived income gap was not associated with people's redistributive preferences.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between the variables included in Study 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Progressive taxation	—						
2. Social spending	.286***	—					
3. SES	-.142**	-.132*	—				
4. Perceived income gap	.001	-.041	.006	—			
5. Ideal income gap	-.156**	-.147**	.119*	.522***	—		
6. Sex (Female = 1, Male = 0)	-.042	.110*	.072	-.142**	-.227***	—	
7. Age	.119*	.117*	-.128*	.011	.019	-.054	—
Mean	5.155	5.447	3.347	2.568	1.307	.520	20.32
Standard Deviation	1.345	1.287	2.200	1.364	1.114	.500	3.583
N	388	387	360	364	360	373	328

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Main Analysis:* We estimated a sequential mediation analysis as described in Study 1, but this time we included the two measures of support for redistribution simultaneously. Analyses were supported by the lavaan package implemented in R software version 3.5.1 (Rosseel, 2012). We followed the bootstrapping method (5000 resamples), and controlled for the covariance between the support for progressive taxation and social spending.

As shown in Table 4, we did not find support for  $H_1$ , that is, SES was not associated with perceived income gap. However, we confirmed  $H_2$  that perceived income

inequality was positively related to ideal inequality; and H<sub>3</sub> that ideal income gaps were associated with less preferences for redistribution, both by supporting progressive taxes, and social spending. We did not find supporting evidence in favour of H<sub>4</sub>, such that SES did not have an indirect effect on support for redistribution, via the perceived and ideal income gap relationship, neither for implementing progressive taxation,  $b = -.002$ ,  $SE = -.004$ ,  $95\% CI [-.012, .006]$ ; nor for favouring social spending,  $b = -.002$ ,  $SE = -.004$ ,  $95\% CI [-.001, .005]$ . In addition, SES seemed to be negatively associated with both indicators of support for redistribution, but such results were not statistically significant.

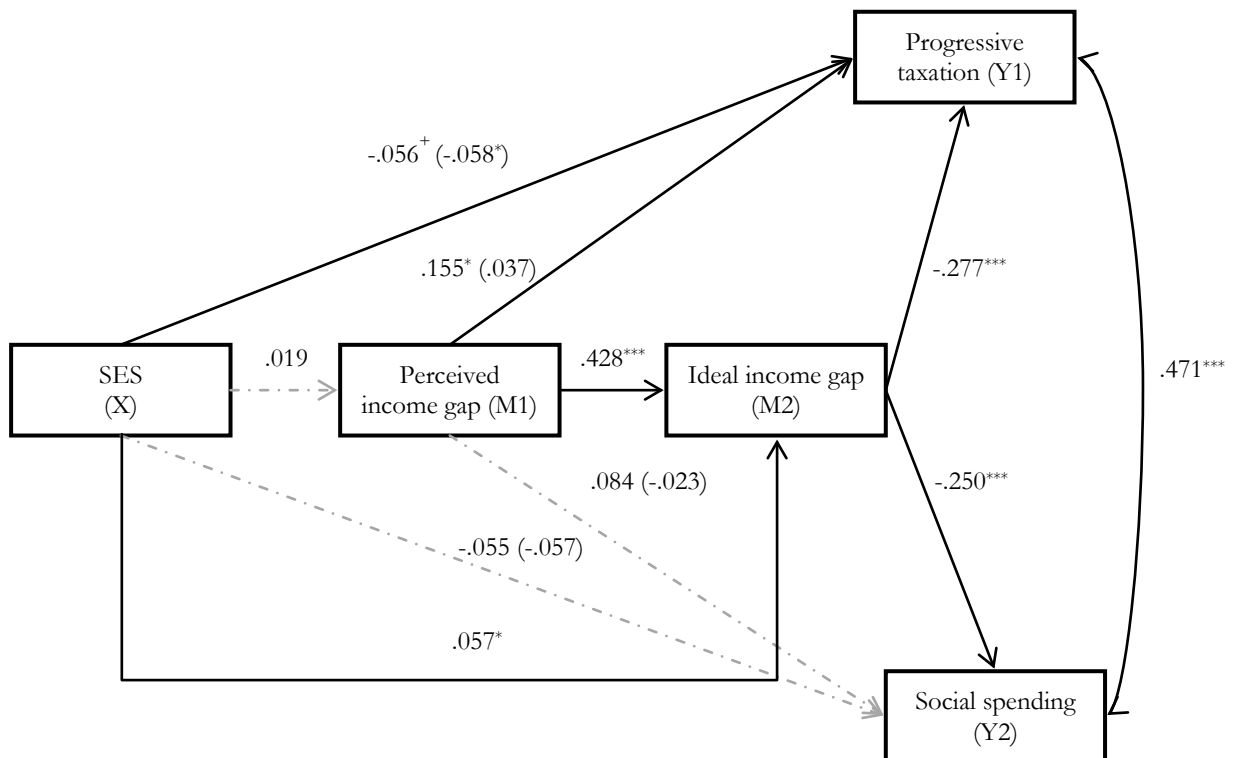
Notwithstanding the above, we explored whether ideal income gap was mediating the effect of SES and perceived income gap on support for redistribution. We found a negative indirect effect of SES, via ideal income gap, on support for the role of the government to implement progressive taxes,  $b = -.016$ ,  $SE = .008$ ,  $p = .044$ ,  $95\% CI [-.033, -.002]$ ; and on support for social spending,  $b = -.014$ ,  $SE = .007$ ,  $p = .051$ ,  $95\% CI [-.030, -.002]$ . These results indicated that the more SES, the more ideal income gap, which in turns was associated with less support for redistribution: both for implementing progressive taxes, as well as for endorsing social spending (see Table 4 for regression coefficients in each path of the fitted model). On the other hand, ideal income gap also mediated the effect of perceived income gap on support for progressive taxation,  $b = -.119$ ,  $SE = .040$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $95\% CI [-.210, -.055]$ ; and on support for social spending,  $b = -.107$ ,  $SE = .034$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $95\% CI [-.183, -.047]$ . As such, these latter findings replicate what other researchers found regarding the role of ideal economic inequality on counteracting the effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018).

In Study 2 we partially replicated the model we tested in Study 1. Although we did not find evidence for the positive association between SES and perceived income gap (H<sub>1</sub>), just as there we did not find any indirect effect of SES on redistributive preferences through perceived-ideal economic inequality (H<sub>4</sub>); we did find that higher SES was linked to more acceptance of inequality (H<sub>2</sub>), and that greater levels of ideal inequality were linked to less support of both measures of support for redistribution (H<sub>3</sub>).

**Table 4.** Standardized estimates (standard error in parentheses) and confidence intervals in the prediction of support for redistribution by imposing progressive taxes (Y1), and by providing opportunities (Y2)

	Perceived inequality (M1)		Ideal inequality (M2)		Progressive taxation (Y1)		Social spending (Y2)	
	Coeff.(SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI
SES (X)	.019 (.033)	-0.049, 0.083	.057* (.023)	0.010, 0.102	-.056 <sup>+</sup> (.029)	-0.112, 0.003	-.055 (.038)	-0.133, 0.020
Perceived income gap (M1)			.428*** (.066)	0.304, 0.566	.155* (.065)	0.039, 0.293	.084 (.058)	-0.034, 0.195
Ideal income gap (M2)					-.277*** (.076)	-0.438, -0.139	-.250*** (.073)	-0.403, -0.113
Indirect SES->Perc.Inc. ->Ideal.Inc.					-.002 (.004)	-0.011, 0.006	-.002 (.004)	-0.010, 0.005
Indirect SES ->Ideal.Inc					-.016* (-.008)	-0.033, -0.002	-.014 <sup>+</sup> (.007)	-.030, -.002
Indirect Perc.Inc ->Ideal.Inc.					-.119** (.040)	-0.210, -0.055	-.107** (.034)	-0.183, -0.047
Total SES					-.058* (.029)	-0.113, 0.000	-.057 (.039)	-0.135, 0.018
Total Perc.Ineq					.037 (.051)	-0.064, 0.140	-.023 (.051)	-0.131, 0.069

Note: <sup>+</sup>< .10, \**p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, \*\*\* *p* < .001, SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence interval.



**Figure 2.** Path diagram of the indirect effect of socioeconomic status on support for progressive taxation (Y1) and social spending (Y2), via perceived and ideal income gap.

We also found that perceived income gap positively predicted support for the role of the government to reduce inequality and implement progressive taxation (see Table 4), but this association was non-significant when it comes to support social spending. This latter finding confirms that measures of redistribution might be driven by different social psychological processes: While supporting the government responsibility for reducing inequalities might be driven by an overall concern about economic inequality, social spending might be driven by prejudice toward the poor, stereotypes, or attributions of poverty/wealth. We also found that the positive relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution become non-significant when we controlled for ideal levels of economic inequality. This finding replicates the suppressing effect that ideal economic inequality has on the association between perceived inequality and support for redistribution (García-Sánchez, Willis et al., 2018).

Since SES did not predict perceived economic inequality, but it did predict ideal economic inequality, Study 2 findings raise two important issues. First, yet the seeming disconnection between SES and perceived economic inequality might reflect the expected variability yielded in the Null Hypotheses Significance Testing that might legitimately include large  $p$  values (Cumming, 2014); it also could be the by-product of other antecedents of perceived economic inequality that are not captured by SES, such as ideologies or personal experiences (e.g., Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2015; García-Castro, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2018; García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018). Second, considering that ideal economic inequality mediated the effect of SES and perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution, this finding highlights the prominence of utopian standards on the elaboration of social judgments about fairness in earnings and policy preferences (Shamon & Dülmer, 2014).

Considering that Study 2 did not fully replicate the findings obtained in Study 1, and that Studies 1 and 2 present some limitations due to the sample characteristics (undergraduates with no work experiences) and operationalization of the measures (few-items indicators); we conducted Study 3 in order to overcome some of these shortcomings.

### Study 3

In Study 3 we aim to replicate our hypothesized model with a sample of workers (non-undergraduates), and used a different operationalization of redistribution in the workplace. We recruited individuals with a university degree who were currently working and asked them about their perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality, as well as for their support for redistribution in their workplace. In contrast to undergraduates, workers

are directly exposed to disparities present in the wage structure of the country, and therefore, their perception of economic inequality should be different from the ones held by undergraduates. Since the association between perceived and ideal economic inequality might be driven by individuals' overall tolerance of economic inequality, we conducted our analysis by controlling for individual's concerns about economic inequality.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Four hundred forty participants that had obtained a degree from a public University in Cali, Colombia, responded to an online survey about professional employability. This study was delivered by the University Alumni Office of a Public University in Cali, Colombia, which used a mailing list of people that had graduated from this university over the last five years. We selected participants who were currently enrolled in any paid job. Thus, our final sample was composed by three hundred ninety nine workers ( $M_{age}=27.82$ ,  $SD_{age}=4.79$ ,  $Min_{age}=21$ ,  $Max_{age}=65$ , 49.1% Female). Participants should sign an informed consent and were provided with the general information of the study before taking the survey.

### **Materials and procedure**

**Support for redistribution in the workplace:** In line with McCall, Burk, Laperrière, & Richeson, (2017), we adapted six items aimed to capture individuals support for the companies role to reduce economic inequality in the workplace. Participants should indicate the extent they agree with each statement in a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree); and we computed an average score of all items ( $\alpha=.734$ ). The wording of the items were: "Organisations have the responsibility to reduce the income differences between those with higher incomes and those with lower incomes", "Organisations should reduce the income of people that earn more in order to rise the income of people that earn too little", "There is a great need of reducing income differences in the organisations between those at the top and those at the bottom", "Organisations should reserve jobs for people with low qualifications", "Organisations should increase the salary of lower qualified workers", and "Organisations should have a maximum wage for people with highest income" (see the Spanish version in the supplementary material).

**SES:** We asked participants for their net income in a 6-point scale, according to how many legal minimum wages (LMW) they were currently earning in their job. They were given the following options (in parentheses are the proportion of participants in each

group): 1=“Up to 1 LMW” (17.5%), 2=“from 1 to 2 LMW” (39.3%), 3=“From 3 to 4 LMW” (35.1%), 4=“from 5 to 7 LMW” (7%), 5 = “from 8 to 10 LMW” (0.8%), and 6 = “More than 10 LMW” (0.3%).

**Concerns about economic inequality:** This variable refers to an overall judgments about the fairness of the current economic inequality (Kenworthy & Mccall, 2008). We operationalized it as the mean score of the following three items ( $\alpha = .648$ ): “Differences in incomes in Colombia are too large”, “Incomes in my professional field of work are too large”, and “Income differences in the organization I work on are too large”. All items were rated in a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree). Higher values mean more concerns about economic inequality.

Perceived and Ideal income gap were operationalized in the same way that in Study 1 and 2.

### Results and discussion

*Preliminary Analysis:* We conducted independent samples t-test to examine whether samples across studies differ in their levels of perceived and ideal income gap. As expected, the sample of workers perceived less income gaps and did so with smaller variability ( $M=15.61$ ,  $SD=26.97$ ), than samples of undergraduates from Study 1 ( $M=21.80$ ,  $SD=30.23$ ),  $t(642)= 2.306$ ,  $95\% CI= [-10.719, -1.660]$   $p=.007$ ; and from Study 2, ( $M=24.71$ ,  $SD=45.57$ ),  $t(628)=2.927$ ,  $95\% CI=[-15.209, -2.991]$ ,  $p=.007$ . Differences in perceived income gap between samples of undergraduates were not statistically different from zero,  $t(728)=1.020$ ,  $95\% CI=[-8.514, 2.694]$ ,  $p =.307$ . On the other hand, the sample of workers in Study 3 desired higher income gaps ( $M=10.05$ ,  $SD=11.42$ ) than samples of undergraduates from Study 1 ( $M=5.92$ ,  $SD=7.19$ ),  $t(643)=5.603$ ,  $95\% CI=[2.682, 5.578]$ ,  $p<.001$ ; and from Study 2 ( $M=6.66$ ,  $SD=11.53$ ),  $t(637)= 3.701$ ,  $95\% CI=[1.594, 5.186]$ ,  $p<.001$ . Again, there were no differences between ideal income gaps estimated between samples of undergraduates,  $t(714)=1.032$ ,  $95\% CI=[-2.148, 0.668]$ ,  $p=.717$ .

Additionally, zero-order correlations showed that support for redistribution at work was negatively associated with ideal income gap and concerns about economic inequality; whereas it was not associated with SES and perceived income inequality (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables included in Study 3

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Support for redistribution at work	—						
2. SES	-.043	—					
3. Perceived income gap	.001	.242***	—				
4. Ideal income gap	-.145*	.253***	.799***	—			
5. Concerns about economic inequality	.242***	-.044	-.033	-.088	—		
6. Age	.136*	.129*	-.129*	-.142*	-.049	—	
7. Sex (Female = 1, Male = 0)	-.028	-.255***	-.170*	-.149*	.077	-.120**	—
Mean	4.310	2.350	2.204	1.896	7.217	27.77	.500
Standard Deviation	1.760	.892	.952	.890	1.521	4.813	.501
N	304	399	291	284	306	430	435

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

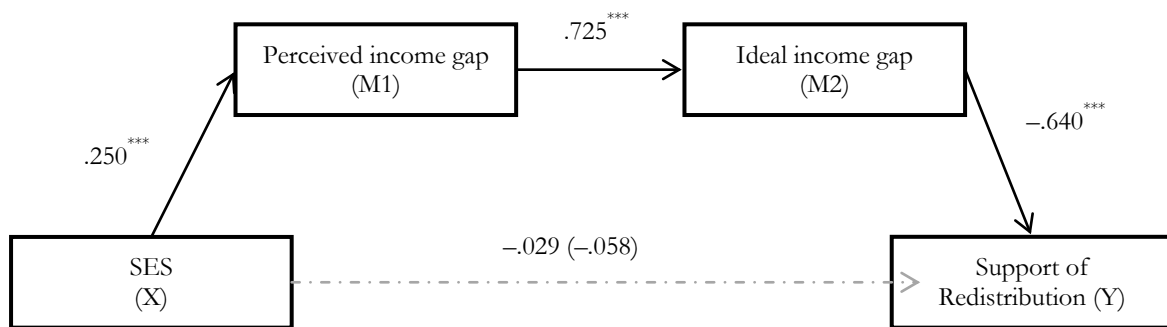
*Main Analysis:* As we did in Study 1, we conducted linear regression analyses on each outcome variable; and estimated a sequential mediation model by using PROCESS 3.1 macro for SPSS (version 24) to test whether SES was linked to support for redistribution in the workplace via perceived and ideal income gap. As expected, we confirmed that the higher SES, the more perceived income inequality ( $H_1$ ); that perceived greater income inequality was associated with higher ideal levels of income inequality ( $H_2$ ); and that the more ideal levels of economic inequality, the less they support for redistribution in the workplace ( $H_3$ ). We also found support for  $H_4$ , such that there was a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution through the relationship between perceived and ideal income gap,  $b = -.116$ ,  $SE = .055$ ,  $95\% CI [-.247, -.034]$ . Thus, the higher the personal income, the more perceived income gap, which was linked to greater ideal income gaps and, therefore, the less support for redistribution. As can be seen in Table 6, SES did not directly predict support for redistribution; whereas perceived income gap and concerns about inequality were positively related to support for redistribution in the workplace. Conversely, the more ideal economic inequality, the less individuals supported redistribution.



**Table 6.** Unstandardized Ordinary Least Squares regressions coefficients (standard error in parentheses) and confidence intervals estimating perceived income gap, ideal income gap, and support for redistribution in the workplace (N = 262)

	Perceived income gap (M1)		Ideal income gap (M2)		Support for redistribution in the workplace (Y)	
	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Coeff. (SE)	95% CI
1. SES (X)	.250*** (.065)	[0.122, 0.378]	.064+ (.038)	[-0.011, 0.139]	-.029 (.118)	[-0.261, 0.204]
2. Perceived income gap (M1)			.725*** (.036)	[0.655, 0.795]	.512** (.177)	[0.164, 0.861]
3. Ideal income gap (M2)					-.640*** (.192)	[-1.018, - .263]
4. Concerns about economic inequality	.013(.041)	[-0.066, 0.093]	-.038+ (.023)	[-0.088, 0.006]	.251*** (.072)	[.110, .392]
Constant	1.513*** (.341)	[0.840, 2.185]	.431* (.203)	[-0.007, 0.084]	2.683*** (.630)	[1.442, 3.923]
	R <sup>2</sup> =.054		R <sup>2</sup> =.642		R <sup>2</sup> =.094	
	F(1, 259)=7.424, p<.001		F(3, 258)=154.01, p<.001		F(4, 257)=6.699, p<.001	

Note: + < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001, SE = Standard Error.



**Figure 3.** Path diagram of the relationship between socioeconomic status and support for redistribution in the workplace, via perceived and ideal income gap.

The results of Study 3 were in line with the ones in Studies 1 and 2, and showed that SES positively predicts perceived income gap, which is positively related to ideal income gap, and therefore, with lower support for redistribution. As such, Study 3 confirmed that there is a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution through perceived and ideal economic inequality. We also found that SES did not directly predict support for redistribution, once accounted for perceived and ideal economic inequality. This finding indicates that the main effect of SES on support for redistribution is blurred by the influence of perceiving and accepting more inequality.

On the other hand, Study 3 sample (workers) notably perceived less and desired more income gaps than samples of undergraduates. Since most of the workers in our sample earned between two and four minimum legal wages, the underestimation of economic inequality by workers (compared to undergraduates) might indicate the influence

of the information available in their surroundings to estimate income gaps. In other words, workers may base their perceptions on what they see, whereas undergraduates made estimates on the basis of what they believe. It is worthwhile to take care of the particular features and existential standards of the samples when it comes to study of perception and acceptance of inequality.

### **General Discussion**

We examined the relationship between SES and support for redistribution by accounting for the perception and acceptance of economic inequality. According to the self-interest approach, individuals are motivated to maximize their gains and to avoid risks. Therefore, high SES individuals would be less motivated to support redistributive policies because they mainly believe that they would not benefit from such policies. However, the association between SES and support for redistribution is not fully captured by self-interest motives; but instead, it may well be explained by other social psychological processes related to how much inequality individuals perceive and desire. In this regard, we argue that the association between what is and what ought to be are—partially—explaining the association between SES and redistributive preferences.

As expected, we found a negative indirect effect of SES on support for redistribution via perceptions and acceptance of economic inequality (Study 1 and 3). Such effect can be explained by a three-forge process. First, there is an informational component coming from individuals' SES. Thus, higher status individuals may have more information about salaries at the top and income differences, which lead them to perceive larger income gaps (Study 1 and 3). Second, since individuals are motivated—to some extent—to see the current state of affairs as a desirable scenario, individuals that perceive more inequality are also more willing to desire higher levels of inequality (Studies 1 to 3). Third, acceptance of inequality is negatively related to support for redistribution, such that individuals who desire larger income gaps would be less motivated to support redistributive policies to tackle economic inequality (Studies 1 to 3). When all these components are combined in a single model, we found (across three studies with different indicators and samples) that the main effect of SES on support for redistribution was dramatically lessen (or suppressed) as a consequence of perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality. Given that the effect of SES on support for redistribution through perceived and ideal economic inequality was held even after controlling for the main effect of SES and concerns about inequality (study 3); we argue that the association SES and support for redistribution might be explained—partially—by the motivation to see what is as what ought to be.

The association between SES and support for redistribution via perceived and ideal economic inequality might be explained both by cognitive and motivational processes. On the one hand, individuals use existential standards to adjust their ideal standards (Shepelak & Alwin, 1986), so that individuals judge what is fair on the basis of what they currently perceive. Indeed, perceiving greater economic inequality is related to more willingness to accept economic inequality (Castillo, 2011; García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Hadler, 2005; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Willis et al., 2015), and therefore, with lower support for redistribution (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, Palacio Sañudo, et al., 2018). In this vein, researchers have shown that perceived income gaps can provide reference points that anchor individuals judgments of ideal levels of economic inequality (Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). On the other hand, researchers have shown that those cognitive processes are also motivated. Particularly, have shown that cognitive mechanisms (i.e. anchoring effect, ratio bias, framing) involved in individuals' judgments about the fairness of income differences are shaped by ideologies (Pedersen & Larsen, 2018; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). Similarly, perceived and ideal economic inequality was stronger when individuals were more motivated to justify the system, well by endorsing system-justifying ideologies (García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2015), or by feeling system dependence (Trump, 2018). Since individuals are subject to cognitive biases that favour *status quo* (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012), as well as are motivated to justify and rationalize the system (Friesen et al., 2018; Jost, 2018; Jost & Banaji, 1994); the individuals' usage of their current perceptions to make judgments about what ought to be may well be an expression of both mechanisms working in tandem to legitimate economic inequality.

Considering that research on attitudes toward redistribution and perceptions of economic inequality has been mainly conducted from a rational perspective, and that self-interest approaches are quite compelling in explaining the effect of social class on social policy preferences; to the best of our knowledge, this paper shed lights on perceived-ideal economic inequality, as a social psychological mechanism that connects individuals SES and attitudes toward redistribution. In line with the inequality maintenance model of social class (Piff et al., 2018), not only SES shapes individuals perceptions, ideologies and motivations which influence individuals to support or challenge the *status quo*, but also trigger a set of socio-psychological processes based in core psychological needs and motivations that contribute to reinforce inequality.

Our findings are not without its limitations. First, measures of attitudes toward redistribution are adapted indicators of standard survey items available in the literature

rather than scales with proper psychometric standards. This is a general shortcoming that has the research on redistribution as a whole, since support for redistribution has been mainly studied in large scale surveys with limited space and few-items indicators. Thus, we tried to use different indicators of support for redistribution. As shown in study 2, support for redistribution might reflect a dimension focused on the providers side (who and how individuals should contribute), and other focused on the targets side (who and how individuals will benefit). Both operationalisations of redistribution might trigger different social psychological processes such as prejudice toward the poor, prosocial behaviour, altruism, etc. Future research might try to extend these findings by exploring how SES are related to different strategies aimed to reduce economic inequality and their associated psychological mechanisms.

A second limitation of our study has to do with the nature of our data and research designs. All three studies were correlational, and thus causal assumptions should still be made with caution. Although SES by income is a situational variable, and therefore, an antecedent of perceived inequality and attitudes toward public policy; the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality, and support for redistribution, can be modelled in alternative ways. However, we built our model upon conceptual and empirical models that argue that attitudes toward public policy are usually the by-product of individual perceptions and beliefs. In consequence, further research should include experimental designs that isolate as much as possible each individual motivation related to support for redistribution. This way, it could be clarified what is accounted by self-interest, social norms, altruism, cognitive biases, when it comes to explain individuals' willingness to support or change the system.

A third concern in our research is related to the characteristics of the samples. As posited by system justification theory, motivations to justify the *status quo* are contingent on situational and dispositional features. Undergraduate samples are in a relatively safer context, whereas workers samples have to deal with more uncertainty and threat coming from the competitiveness of the labour market that might motivate them to justify the *status quo*. We found consistent evidence with this idea, since workers accepted higher levels of economic inequality than undergraduate samples. On the other hand, undergraduates perceived far more inequality than workers, which seem to indicate that workers based their perceptions on the available information in their contexts (middle-income jobs), whereas students make estimates based on their beliefs.

### Conclusion

The increasing levels of economic inequality all around the world highlights the need to understand the willingness to support measures aimed to reduce inequality, such as redistributive policies. To this end, throughout three correlational studies we showed that SES is negative and indirectly related to support for redistribution via perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality: high SES is related to greater perceived economic inequality, which is associated with higher ideal economic inequality, and the latter in turn was linked to less support for redistribution. Since the direct association between SES and support for redistribution was marginally significant (or suppressed) once we accounted for perceived and ideal economic inequality. Therefore, we argue that the relationship between perception and acceptance of economic inequality is a mechanism that links SES to redistributive policies. This mechanism may well represent both a cognitive and a motivational mechanism through which individuals engage in the justification of economic inequality. In sum, this paper helps to identify other social psychological processes, different from the mere self-interest, by which individuals are motivated to support redistribution and challenge the *status quo*. The comprehension of psychological mechanisms associated to attitudes toward public policies might thus help us to design social interventions that focus on breaking the vicious cycle of social class and inequality by envisioning and believing in more equal and fair realities.

### **Supplementary material**

Spanish version of support for redistribution in the workplace:

- Las empresas deberían reservar trabajos para dárselos a las personas menos cualificadas
- Las empresas deberían incrementar el salario de los trabajadores menos cualificados
- Las empresas tienen la responsabilidad de reducir las diferencias de ingresos entre los que tienen altos ingresos económicos y los que tienen bajos ingresos económicos.
- Las empresas deberían reducir los ingresos de las personas que ganan más dinero para poder subir los ingresos de los que ganan muy poco
- En las empresas existe una gran necesidad de reducir las diferencias salariales entre los que ganan más y los que ganan menos
- Las empresas deberían fijar un ingreso máximo que limite la cantidad de dinero que reciban las personas con mayores ingresos



# *CHAPTER 7.*

Perceptions of  
economic inequality in  
Colombian daily life:  
More than unequal  
distribution of  
economic resources





Perceptions of economic inequality in Colombian daily life: More than unequal distribution of economic resources\*

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## **Abstract**

Research on perceptions of economic inequality focuses on estimations of the distribution of financial resources, such as perceived income gaps or wealth distribution. However, we argue that perceiving inequality is not limited to an economic idea but also includes other dimensions related to people's daily life. We explored this idea by conducting an online survey (N=601) in Colombia, where participants responded to an open-ended question regarding how they perceived economic inequality. We performed a content analysis of 1,624 responses to identify relevant topics and used network analysis tools to explore how such topics were interrelated. We found that perceived economic inequality is mainly represented by identifying social classes (e.g. the elites vs. the poor), intergroup relations based on discrimination and social exclusion, public spaces (e.g. beggars on streets, spatial segregation), and some dynamics about the distribution of economic resources and the quality of work (e.g. income inequality, precarious jobs). We discuss how different perceptions of economic inequality may frame how people understand and respond to inequality.

**Key words:** Perceptions, Economic Inequality, Framing, Content Analysis, Colombia



## **Introduction**

Despite the significant increase of economic inequality all over the world, people usually overlooked the income gaps between the haves and the have-nots (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011). The lack of accuracy with which people perceive economic disparities is usually associated with lack of information about how economic resources are distributed in society, or even with poor awareness or concern about inequality (Castillo, 2012; Kelley & Evans, 1993). From this perspective, perceived economic inequality is constrained to how individuals estimate income disparities. Indeed, the study of perceived economic inequality has mainly focused on the estimations of income/wealth gaps or on the beliefs associated to how resources are allocated (Janmaat 2014). However, perceiving economic inequality implies more sophisticated views entrenched in people's daily life according to their biographical, historical, and contextual repertoires (Irwin, 2018). Considering this, the aim of this study was to analyze how people perceive economic inequality on the basis of their own experience and immediate context. To do so, we intended to identify the topics used by individuals when they perceive economic inequality. Such everyday perceptions have relevant implications on how people understand inequality and respond to it.

We conducted an online survey among university undergraduates to collect open-ended responses regarding how they perceived economic inequality in their daily life. We combined content analysis and network analysis techniques to identify the most salient topics and the relationships between them. Specifically, we combined a hermeneutic approach to interpret all the elements embedded in participants' responses with quantitative techniques from the field of network analysis to analyze how the main topics create clusters of meaning that have not been sufficiently covered in previous research about perceptions of economic inequality.

### **Perceived economic inequality: More than income/wealth estimates**

Perceived economic inequality refers to how individuals see income distribution, focusing on the subjective magnitude of differences in financial resources (Engelhardt & Wagener, 2014). A systematic review about perceptions of inequality has shown that research on this topic has been focused on a) its distributional representation, which is based on the estimation of income/wealth gaps; b) beliefs to explain or justify inequality; and c) judgments about the fairness of such disparities (Janmaat 2014). In this framework, people are usually asked how much inequality they perceive or accept, what they think about it, or how they judge and evaluate income/wealth disparities. In all these cases,

perceived economic inequality is framed as a distributional issue. Thus, people are driven to think about economic resources by being asked to estimate or judge about how such resources are allocated.

From this perspective, it has been found that people tend to underestimate the income gaps that exist around them, so that their perceptions do not mirror the true levels of economic inequality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014). Although such misperceptions can be due to lack of information or awareness of economic inequality (Castillo, 2012; Kelley & Evans, 1993); people have difficulties being attuned to general or broader societal concepts, so they use their immediate social environments as reference points instead (Galesic et al., 2012). For instance, the wealthy, who move in affluent circles, extrapolate their affluent reality to society as a whole when estimating general levels of wealth (Dawtry et al., 2015). Thus, the study of perceived inequality should also include the analysis of how people use the information available on their social environments.

Additionally, perceived economic inequality is also biased by the ideological climate, social norms, and individual beliefs. Previous research has shown that adherence to liberal political ideologies—compared to conservative ones—can lead individuals to estimate higher levels of inequality (Chambers et al., 2014). What is more, there are other socio-psychological mechanisms through which people overlook and legitimate inequality, such as the beliefs in upward social mobility (Shariff & Akin, 2016), the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), and the promotion of meritocratic discourses (Mijs, 2016). Therefore, perceived economic inequality is not only an estimation issue, but rather the result of individual repertoires, socio-psychological processes, and contextual issues.

Perceived economic inequality is more than calculating income gaps or wealth distribution; instead, it is a phenomenon that can be perceived and experienced in many different ways that are not exclusive to the economic arena. Rather than abstract and conceptual definitions of economic inequality, people tend to use biographical references to talk about inequality and position themselves in such represented social structure (Irwin, 2018). Hence, when studying perceptions of inequality by just asking for how resources are distributed, researchers are leaving behind other indicators about how people understand such inequality, which might have different implications on how people respond to inequality.

### **Frames of perceived economic inequality**

The concept of framing refers to how descriptions of reality are made from particular perspectives interpretative guidelines (Goffman, 1975). Framing implies the selection and salience of particular aspects of reality in order to promote specific elements to understand, evaluate, and react to it (Entman, 1993). Insofar as framing focuses on certain attributes while ignoring others, it can shape people's beliefs, motivations, and preferences (Lakoff, 2006). In this regard, seminal research by Kahneman and Tversky (1981, 1983) demonstrated that the formulation of logically equivalent problems (e.g. presenting problems in terms of gains or losses) highly influences individuals' decision-making process.

Framing concepts and phenomena can lead to different social judgments about politics (Druckman & Nelson 2003; Lee et al. 2008; Sides 2016). For instance, research has shown that framing groups of people as victims (Moscovici & Pérez, 2007), as underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007), or as people in need (Shnabel et al., 2016) led dominant groups to be more willing to support them in several ways. In such cases, framing triggered guilt, empathy, or compassion among individuals, eliciting pro-social behaviour among them even at expense of their own self-interest (Lowery & Wout, 2010).

Although economic inequality involves both the haves and the have nots, it can be framed by emphasizing either the advantaged or the disadvantaged side (Wänke & Reutner 2010). Focusing on one side or another has different effects on how people understand and react to inequality. For instance, framing economic inequality as people having more than the average (e.g. the rich have more than...) led conservatives to support heavier taxation for the rich (Chow & Galak, 2012), average individuals to delegitimize economic inequality (Bruckmüller et al., 2017) and support measures that take more resources from the rich (Lowery, Chow, & Crosby, 2009).

Kahnemann and Tversky (1983) posited that the frames used to perceive and assess some issues can be seen as different perspectives with which the same reality can be approached. Based on this, the distributional way to frame inequality—"having more than" or "having less than"—is just one of the perspectives but cannot delimit the whole phenomenon. Experiments on framing inequality are useful to analyze this specific perspective; but such frames mostly represent the distributional idea, and do not include the complex network of ideas and experiences that people might have in mind when they think about economic inequality in their real life. Indeed, people are not constantly exposed to frames about "having more/less than". Instead, individuals navigate through their daily



life while trying to make sense of their realities according to their experiences and the context that surrounds them. Therefore, focusing on how people perceive inequality on a daily basis is likely to provide other ways to frame it, contributing to a better understanding of what people are paying greater attention to and how they react to this issue. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, these alternative frames of economic inequality have not been covered enough in the empirical literature. Our research was intended to bridge this gap by exploring the different frames associated with perceived economic inequality and setting a starting point for future research to explore its potential implications.

In this vein, the aim of this study was to identify how people perceive economic inequality in their daily life. We propose that perceived economic inequality covers a broad variety of dimensions of individuals' daily life rather than only the estimation, belief, or judgment about how economic resources are distributed. This was intended to shed light on the various frames usually used by people when perceiving economic inequality. Thus, this research contributes to the literature in the field by showing that economic inequality is perceived beyond the economic resources dimension; by illustrating how network analysis techniques can boost qualitative data analysis; and by providing a public data corpus about perceptions of inequality in Colombia that can be used to answer further research questions.

## Methods

### Participants and data corpus

We invited undergraduates in twelve Colombian universities to participate in an online opinion survey about social and economic issues. The sample was composed of 601 undergraduates<sup>13</sup> ( $M_{age}=21.71$ ,  $SD=4.11$ ; 65.56% female, 29.62% male, 4.82% unreported), who successfully answered the following open-ended question: “*How do you perceive economic inequality in Colombia? Please write down up to 3 responses*”. Although participants were undergraduates, they reported being from diverse social and economic backgrounds: A total of 62.91% were enrolled at a private university, and 37.09% at a public university; universities were located in five cities (Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Cali, and Palmira) from two different regions of Colombia (South-west and Caribbean), yet participants reported to live in 19 cities along those regions, under different socioeconomic strata<sup>14</sup> (14.69% in strata 1, 21.70% in strata 2, 37.40% in strata 3, 13.02% in strata 4, 8.35%

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<sup>13</sup> Out of 794 participants who replied to the call.

<sup>14</sup> Colombia has an official socioeconomic stratification system that categorized public spaces ranging from 1 “low-low” to 6 “high-high” according to households purchasing power and value of property. For more

in strata 5, and 3.67% in strata 6), and along different household incomes (7.81% up to the one Legal Minimum Wage (LMW), 25.35% between one to two LMW, 30.03% between three to five LMW, 19.10% between five to seven LMW, 9.38% between seven to nine LMW, 4.86% between ten to twelve LMW, and 3.47% more than twelve LMW). There were three open calls to participate in the study, one every week. Data collection took place between 20 September and 26 November 2016.

We obtained an average response rate of 2.7 answers per participant, and our final set of data was composed of 1,624 responses, resulting in a data corpus of 21,968 words<sup>15</sup>. Participants were enrolled in various schools, including those of psychology, management, engineering, and health sciences. Data were processed by using content analysis techniques based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given that we had no previous categorical framework available beforehand, we built categories directly from participants' responses. Our categorical framework was composed of different *topics* that were related to various subjects or contents (e.g. social actors, basic services, work). We also included a category to mention the *sense* in which the topics were being used. Specifically, people can mention the same topic (e.g. health) but in different senses (e.g. lack of access = just the disadvantaged; or unequal access = both the advantaged and disadvantaged) (see Table 1 for the categorical framework).

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information see <http://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/69-espanol/geoestadistica/estratificacion/468-estratificacion-socioeconomica>

<sup>15</sup> The whole data corpus is available at: <https://goo.gl/gZeHeh>

**Table 1.**

Categorical framework\*

<b>Category (with definition)</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>
<b>Basic services:</b> Primary services to survive and have a dignified life	• Access to basic services (general)
	• Food
	• Health
	• Public transport
	• Housing
<b>Living conditions:</b> Physical characteristics, conditions, or any material/social elements that define a way of living	• Economic resources concentration
	• Living conditions (general)
	• Criminality or insecurity
	• Forced displacement
	• Public space
	• Social stratification
	• Pensions
	• Income
	• Predatory loans (banking or not)
	• Rural sector
• Social subsidies	
<b>Poverty:</b> State of having little, too few or any money, goods, or means to live; also considered as not having enough of anything that is considered as necessary	• Begging
	• Homeless people
	• Poverty (general)
<b>Affluence:</b> Having abundance of money and material goods	• Affluence or opulence (general)
	• use of expensive goods and services
<b>Opportunities:</b> Conditions to do or achieve something, it includes opinions regarding getting ahead in life.	• Education
	• Meritocratic beliefs
	• Inequality of opportunities (general)
	• Opportunities in life (general)
<b>Consumption:</b> Use, buy, or just have access to certain products or services	• Saving
	• Consume products or services
	• Queues to have access to services
	• Leisure
<b>Work:</b> Any economic productive activity through which people make a living. It includes both employments as other forms of work (cooperative, informal, independent, etc.)	• Economic migration
	• Child labour
	• Informal work
	• Career
	• Unemployment
	• Access to work
	• Work (general)
	• Precarious work
<b>Institutional issues:</b> Related to social, economic, or political institutions. Not as actors (e.g. politicians), but as the system that represents	• Taxes
	• Public investment
	• Justice
	• Media
	• Political system

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued)

**Categorical framework**

Category	Subcategory
<p><b>Interpersonal relationships:</b> Focused on how people relate to each other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treatment of people</li> <li>• Social comparisons</li> <li>• Social conflicts</li> <li>• Ethnic or cultural issues</li> <li>• Family</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social actors:</b> People, groups, organisations, institutions, or any social category that represent a figure with a specific role in the social dynamic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older people</li> <li>• Banks</li> <li>• Peasants</li> <li>• Social classes (general)</li> <li>• Directives, Chiefs, Bosses, supervisors</li> <li>• Elites</li> <li>• Enterprises</li> <li>• Private entities</li> <li>• Public entities</li> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Public servants</li> <li>• Government</li> <li>• Youth people</li> <li>• Women</li> <li>• Children</li> <li>• Poor</li> <li>• Police</li> <li>• Society (general)</li> <li>• Workers</li> <li>• University</li> <li>• Private university</li> </ul>
<p><b>Senses:</b> Way to use the topics identified. The senses try to identify the intention attributed to each category (when possible)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic activity</li> <li>• Corruption</li> <li>• Unequal access</li> <li>• Inequality of physical conditions according to zones</li> <li>• Inequality in living expenses</li> <li>• Gender inequality</li> <li>• Income inequalities</li> <li>• Misinformation</li> <li>• Lack or difficulties to access</li> <li>• Mobility difficulty</li> <li>• Lack of economic resources</li> <li>• Privatization</li> <li>• Spatial segregation</li> <li>• Discrimination</li> </ul>

\*Detailed indicators per subcategory can be found in supplementary material Table S1.

### Procedure

We used content analysis due to its usefulness to identify and systematize structures embedded in the language (Bardin, 2002). Our recording unit—the minimum part of our body of data with meaning—was each single *response*. The enumeration rules used for processing the data were *frequency*—amount of times that each category appeared in the data corpus—and *co-occurrence*, that is, the presence of two or more categories in the same recording unit. The coding process was supported by Atlas.ti 7.5.18 software and network analysis techniques were conducted with Gephi 0.9.2 software. Network analysis provides a set of techniques to understand relationships among, between, and within people, groups, or as in our case, concepts (Hanneman & Riddle 2005). We examined the configuration of the overall relationships between all the topics and identified several clusters of meaning. In this sense, we combine a hermeneutic approach by interpreting each response; and a quantitative approach to identify prevalent topics and to disentangle how all topics were associated among them.

Five coders classified the responses through a four-stage process. First, we carried out three training sessions to code the responses of 30 participants by coding part of the information together and leaving individual coding work to be discussed during the training sessions. Second, once we had obtained a set of preliminary categories, the main researcher coded all the data and ended with a more specific categorical framework (see Table 1). Third, all the coded data were divided among coders to review the coding. Here the focus was on finding ambiguities, missing or excessive coding. The fourth step was to resolve the issues raised in the reviewing process by reaching agreements between researchers on each coded response. Because of the purpose of this research was exploratory, we did not have a pre-established categorical framework to do the coding, but we construed it during the research. Therefore, the reliability of the coding is based on the deliberative agreement among researchers, instead of statistical measures of inter-rater reliability. This means that every piece of coded information was reviewed several times by at least two researchers, which allowed us to control for potential biases coming from a single coder.

The coding was done taking into account the following statements: 1) All the categories present in each response had to be identified; 2) coding should be based on literal text, avoiding an over-interpretation of responses; 3) the reviewer should explicitly find the reason why a response was coded in a specific category, otherwise such coding would be dismissed; and 4) potential ambiguities in the coding would be solved by reaching

intersubjective agreement on the basis of explicit responses. Table 2 illustrates how each response was treated.

**Table 2.**

Example of the coding exercise

Quotation 31:3	Coding
<i>In the mall and other commercial establishments</i>	Conditions: Public space Interpersonal: Treatment of people Senses: Discrimination Actors: Social classes, Poor
<i>there is a higher predisposition against</i>	
<i>the people of low status</i>	

### Results

This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we present a frequency analysis of the main contents observed in our data corpus, which enabled us to identify common and specific topics used when people perceive economic inequality. In the second part, we do a co-occurrence analysis by using network analysis tools to depict the relationship between categories.

#### **Perceptions of economic inequality: A matter of social classes, public spaces, and work**

As shown in Table 3, the most frequent topics were *education*, *social classes* (including both “the elites” and “the poor”), *income*, *health*, and *unequal* and *lack of access to some goods and services*. These topics confirm the results of previous studies (Flanagan et al., 2014; Smart, 2012) that have shown the central role of social categories based on socioeconomic status, such as “rich” and “poor”. However, such distinction is not based exclusively on the concentration of wealth (*income*), but also on the possibility of having access to better educational and health services. Individuals particularly denoted that such disparities are due to an unfair system that favors one group (e.g. *elites*) while excluding and discriminating the other (e.g. *poor*).

*Low-strata people do not have access to high quality education, while people who have money can afford the best schools (82:2<sup>16</sup>)*

*Only the rich can have access to high quality health and education (642:2)*

Another topic frequently used was *public spaces*, which indicates the place where people see and experience economic inequality. The main public spaces mentioned by respondents were the streets, avenues and the city center, where they usually see beggars,

<sup>16</sup> Numbers identify the participant and his/her response number.

informal workers, and homeless people. Neighborhoods were also relevant places where individuals recognized economic inequality but, in this case, they pointed out the *spatial segregation*, noting that some neighborhoods have optimal living conditions (e.g. parks, roads, cleaning services), whereas others do not. In addition, malls, parks, shops, and other commercial hubs were depicted as places where people can consume goods or services according to their wealth, that is, some have access to leisure activities and fancy items, while others do not have access to food, clothing, or shelter.

*The difference between neighbourhoods (...); high-strata neighbourhoods are idyllic places, everything is beautiful, nice streets, mansions, lakes, trees, restaurants, shops, malls; but in the same city there are also low-strata places that are full of burglars, sicarios [hitman], physically and mentally sick people, prostitutes, drug dealers, it's such a terrible area (...) (745: 3)*

Other relevant topics were related to the world of work: *workers, income inequalities, discrimination, and precarious work*. These topics highlight the role of work as an activity associated with social inclusion/exclusion. In fact, work is a productive economic activity by means of which people can obtain decent living conditions not only through their earnings but also through decent working conditions. *Precarious work* refers to poor working conditions (i.e. unfair salaries, high income gaps, long working hours, and various types of labor exploitation) that prevent individuals from having a decent life through having access to social protection and prospects of personal development.

*The salary of a domestic worker [female] is too low compared to that of a professional and, honestly, the former works much harder than the latter (57:1)*

*Congressmen earn more than 25 million pesos just for sitting in Congress and people working in the streets under the sun and harsher conditions hardly earn the minimum wage (82:1)*

**Table 3.**

Frequencies and percentages of responses coded in each category

Category	Frequency*	Percentage**
Opportunities: Education	304	18.72
Actors: Social classes (include elites and poor)	274	16.87
Living conditions: Income	267	16.44
Basic services: Health	257	15.83
Senses: Unequal access	216	13.30
Senses: Lack or difficulties to access	192	11.82
Actors: Workers	179	11.02
Living conditions: Public space	163	10.04
Senses: Discrimination	150	9.24
Actors: Elites	139	8.56
Senses: Income inequalities	121	7.45
Work: Precarious work	119	7.33
Actors: Poor	96	5.91
Interpersonal: Social comparisons	95	5.85
Interpersonal: Treatment of people	94	5.79
Living conditions: Socioeconomic stratification	89	5.48
Work: Work (general)	85	5.23
Senses: Corruption	83	5.11
Actors: University	82	5.05

Note: We set an arbitrary cut-off point at appearance frequency of 5%, but full information can be found in supplementary material Table S2.

\*Number of responses coded in each category.

\*\*Percentage is computed on the basis of total responses of our data corpus (N = 1624).

### Clusters of meaning about perceived economic inequality

We used network analysis tools to explore the relationship between the different categories coded in our data corpus. Given that simple co-occurrence analyses only allowed us to see one-to-one relationships, it makes difficult to handle large amount of co-occurrences. Thus, we decided to take advantage of network analysis tools to depict all the relationships at the same time. Thus, using the co-occurrence matrix, we created a list with each combination of two categories and the number of responses that it contained. This information enabled us to analyze and visualize the relationships by using a set of graphs, including the quantitative metrics commonly used by network analysis techniques.

Graphs are created on the basis of matrix theory principles (Diestel 2010), and are made up of two main components: nodes, which represent each category, and edges, which show the type of relationship between nodes. In our case, the edges were the amount of responses that contained each pair of categories, so that higher values meant higher co-occurrence. Whereas frequency analysis gave us an idea of the most common topics



mentioned in our corpus, network analysis provided a different perspective by depicting how those categories were interconnected.

To analyze such networks, we focused on two centrality metrics. One of them was the *degree of centrality*, that is, the amount of relationships that each node has with other nodes. Thus, a higher degree of centrality indicates more relationships with other nodes, and therefore, more relevance in the network (Brandes & Patrick Kenis, 2005). Another metric we used was betweenness centrality, which represents the extent to which a node lies along the shortest path connecting others in the network (Park & Leydesdorff, 2013). In other terms, the degree of centrality tell us what are the more connected nodes; and betweenness centrality helps to identify the most influential nodes in the network.

The final network included 84 nodes, matched in 908 one-to-one relationships, which ranged from 1 to 139 times of appearance. We obtained a thick network (*density*<sup>17</sup>=0.26), which indicates that the categories were highly interconnected. To visualize the data, we used the layout proposed by Fruchterman and Reingold, which is a spring-embedded algorithm based on the gravitation of nodes according to the attraction or repulsion to other nodes. The result is a force-directed network where the most relevant nodes are bigger in size (higher degree of centrality); the most strategic nodes are placed in more central positions; the most related nodes are closer to each other (betweenness centrality); and the thickness of the links reflects the strength of each relationship (amount of times that such relationship appeared in our corpus) (Cherven, 2015). In order to identify clusters of meaning in this graph, we applied a modularity class algorithm available in Gephi software (Emmons, Kobourov, Gallant, & Börner, 2016), which is based on a modularity statistic that identifies different groups of nodes according to the strength of their relationships (Cherven, 2015). In our graph, we visualized the identified clusters by colors. Due to the high density of the graph, we plotted all the nodes, but only showing relationships above 14 co-occurrence times<sup>18</sup> to facilitate the interpretation. Figure 1 presents the whole graph; full network metrics are available on Table S3 of the supplementary material.

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<sup>17</sup> Graph density is a measure of how interconnected a network is, calculated as the ratio between the edges displayed in the network and the total of all possible connections (Cherven, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> This is an arbitrary cut-off point based on 10% of the maximum co-occurrence limit.



living conditions, and how corruption leads privileged groups to discriminate the disadvantaged because of their social background.

The *public space* is another linking category that brings together concepts such as *socioeconomic stratification*, *spatial segregation*, and the prevalence of *informal work(ers)* on the streets. Again, economic inequality was placed in the public arena of daily life, where social comparisons can be particularly salient, stressing intergroup tensions. Though present, mentions of *wealth concentration*, extreme affluence, or any other abstract meaning of inequality were barely mentioned when compared with other codes.

In addition, the modularity class algorithm we used in network analysis let us identified four clusters of categories that we labelled according to the centrality of its nodes: social class and intergroup relations, public space and social exclusion, lack or unequal access to opportunities, and economic resources and work. These clusters are not mutually exclusive, but rather the opposite they were highly intertwined; such that the more central nodes in each cluster were highly associated between them. However, the cluster related to economic resources and work (in orange color) set apart from the others. This distinction seems to represent two different domains regarding how economic inequality can be perceived: based on how economic resources are distributed, or as daily life experiences.

### ***Social class and intergroup relations***

The first cluster grouped 29.76% of the nodes and was centered on the *social class* category, which refers to the *elites* and the *poor*. These social actors are mainly associated with intergroup categories, such as the *treatment of people*, *social comparisons*, and *discrimination*. Economic inequality seems to trigger the idea of intergroup relations that underline the differences and discrimination between groups based on status indicators. Particularly, such social comparisons and discrimination are made in terms of having —or not having— access to basic services, such as health or education. Discrimination of the disadvantaged and favoring of the advantaged is linked to corrupt practices that are overtly institutionalized by the system. In fact, individuals recognize a system that maintains and reproduces inequalities by providing social services according to people's socioeconomic background.

*In a hospital, if low-strata and high-strata patients arrive at the same time, most of the time they take care of high-strata ones first (139:1)*

*In the social strata, people with money discriminate the poor just because they do not have money, without knowing anything about their situation (330:3)*

***Public space and social exclusion***

The second cluster grouped 25% of the nodes and focused on public space, which was seen as the main scenario where participants could witness economic inequality. This cluster was mainly related to the places and situations where economic inequality takes place, such as spatial segregation, socioeconomic stratification, informal work, and overt poverty, begging, and homeless people living on the streets.

It is worth noting that Colombia has an official division of the public space into socioeconomic strata. Urban spaces are classified according to the accessibility to certain public services, the quality of overall living conditions and therefore the purchasing power of the people who live there (socioeconomic strata range from 0 to 6). This public policy was designed to charge public services according to the purchasing power of citizens. However, that distinction has become a social category, so people use it as an identity reference (e.g. “I’m strata...”). In fact, people use a spatial label to categorize both themselves and the others. The mention of socioeconomic strata also is related to a spatial segregation system, given that some people have access to better living conditions (e.g. roads, schools, security) just because they are part of an elite, by contrast, people at the bottom hardly have decent living conditions. These perceptions increase the discrimination shown in intergroup relations and recognize broader institutionalized practices of exclusion.

*Inequality of strata; the best is for super rich people; even though we have the best attitude, the doors are closed to us (345:3)*

*In the neighborhoods of Cali, because people are categorized as rich or poor according to the area where they are living in (527:3)*

*Informal work* is associated with people performing different types of economic activities in the public space (e.g. street vendors) without any type of benefits (e.g. health, pension). This topic is intrinsically related to poverty representations, where individuals highlighted the lack of economic resources to have a decent job and life. In this cluster, respondents focused on the disadvantaged side of inequality, downplaying the social comparisons with advantaged groups. Economic inequality was perceived as not having enough, instead of on the unequal distribution of money, goods, and services; this is a perspective that can easily downplay the role of other groups and institutions that contribute to inequality dynamics.

*When I go to the university and find adults, adolescents and kids in the streets, cleaning windshields or selling candies instead of working in companies with fair salaries or getting an education (514:1)*

*The amount of poverty that can be seen in the streets, people begging, kids working in the streets, homeless people (634:3)*

***Lack or unequal access to opportunities: education, health and living conditions***

The third cluster grouped 25% of all the graph nodes and was based on *unequal* and *lack of access* to goods or services. We distinguish between these two categories because each of them represents a different way of framing inequality. Unequal access implies a relational issue, whereby some people can get what they need/want, while others cannot; by contrast, *poor access* focuses on one side of the relationship, namely on those who cannot have it. These two senses were mainly associated with *education, health, food, housing, and mobility*. All these elements represent the lack of opportunities in getting the resources needed to get ahead in life. When perceiving economic inequalities, participants were quite sensitive to the relevance of the cultural capital in sharpening intergroup differences. We found that people were aware of the link between different socioeconomic backgrounds and access to social resources (e.g. education, health, mobility) to achieve their goals.

*EDUCATION: In Colombia not all of us have the opportunity to reach the same education level; when we finish high school the vast majority of young people are left behind because of not having any opportunities... In Colombia you don't study what you want, but what little the State can offer you (60:1)*

***Economic resources and work: income inequality and precarious work***

This cluster grouped 19.05% of all nodes, was the smallest one found in the whole graph (19.4% of all nodes) and obtained the lowest centrality measurements when compared to the other clusters. This cluster was mainly related to lack of or unequal access to economic resources, and work precariousness. Thus, respondents particularly highlighted how workers perform their work under precarious conditions, such as low wages, large income gaps, long working hours, among other ways of labor exploitation. The category workers was highly mentioned (179 times) in the whole graph, and used to make an argument about *workers* in badly-paid jobs in a context of large income inequalities. *Companies* and *managers* were depicted as relevant factors that determine such precarious work conditions. In addition, people also perceived large gender inequalities, with women being a highly vulnerable social group. Although participants recognized income gaps as an

important issue when thinking about economic inequality, this idea was more linked to precariousness at work than to the systemic unequal distribution of economic resources in general.

*Breadwinning mothers have several part-time jobs, and even adding up all their earnings they are not enough to have a decent life or to satisfy their basic needs and those of their families (102:2)*

*Income inequality between men and women in many organizations; women are usually paid much less (273:3)*

The seemingly lower appearance of the distributional frame of economic inequality is consistent with previous studies that have found that people use closer and daily life references to understand abstract phenomena (Imhoff & Brussino, 2015). In fact, people bear in mind more vivid images of such inequalities at the expense of omitting other aspects related to systemic economic inequality, such as wealth concentration and income disparities.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to examine the perceived economic inequality in the daily life of a sample of undergraduates in Colombia. Based on a data corpus extracted from open-ended responses, we analyzed the topics individuals mentioned when perceiving economic inequality. We found that rather than explicit perceptions associated with income gaps and unequal wealth distribution, participants were more focused on a wide variety of ideas related to intergroup, institutional, and spatial dynamics. Thus, perceptions of economic inequality are not just related to the conceptual definition associated to the distribution of economic resources, but are a complex phenomenon entrenched in people's daily life (Irwin, 2018).

We found that perceptions of inequality were mainly associated with intergroup and interpersonal dynamics. Participants focused on several social actors (e.g. social classes, elites, the poor, workers) based on socioeconomic status indicators. They also provided recurring examples of discrimination towards the poor, social exclusion and deprivation of decent living standards. Participants also recognized how inequality is reproduced by social institutions such as the health and education services, by favoring high-status people at the expense of others.

The clusters identified in the network analysis complement the idea of economic inequality as something broader than a mere distributional and monetary issue. Social classes and intergroup relations, public space, social exclusion, unequal opportunities, and work(ers) and income inequality, as a whole, are a richer discursive repertoire through

which people perceive and make sense of such a complex phenomenon. Since most research on perceived economic inequality concentrates on how resources are allocated, we contribute to recognizing the other ways in which people spontaneously perceive and frame economic inequality based on their own experiences.

Our findings contribute to the research on perceptions of inequality in at least three ways: First, perceived inequality does not rely exclusively on a rational thinking process (e.g. gap estimations), but also on social comparison processes (e.g. relationship with their immediate contexts). Second, we provide empirical evidence of other dimensions of perceived inequality that have been overlooked in the literature. And third, though we did not pretend to generalize our findings to other contexts, we consider that the topics we identified might not be constrained to the Colombian context. Indeed, participants' perceptions mirrored the consequences of widespread neoliberal policies implemented worldwide (e.g. social spending reduction, privatization of health and education services, work precariousness). However, more research should deepen about how perceptions of inequality vary along different contexts, and what might be the implications of such perceptions on people responses to inequality.

Considering the relevance of the context for perceived economic inequality, it is worth noting that the current research was conducted in Colombia, which is one of the most unequal countries in the world. This provides a special case of study due to its long-lasting unequal distribution of income, wealth, land ownership, gender inequality, racial discrimination, and spatial segregation (Acosta, 2013; Salazar, 2009; Valencia & Cuartas, 2009). Moreover, the Colombian context is characterized by a progressive system of privatization of public services as a result of neoliberal policies (Rivillas García, Mesa Lopera, & Ospina Martínez, 2014; Rodríguez, 2016). It has an official socioeconomic stratification of society (Alzate, 2006; Rosero, 2004) and high rates of people at risk of social exclusion (Valencia & Cuartas, 2009; Vargas, Lo, Rohde, & Howes, 2016). Given such a context, social inequalities tend to be represented as factual and isolated images, without a clear integration with more abstract societal issues (Amar, Abello, Denegri, & Llanos, 2006; Amar, Llanos, Denegri, Llanos, & Jiménez, 2001); our findings corroborate this idea, so that perceived economic inequality is based on daily life experiences rather than on an abstract/technical definition of unequal distribution of resources.

Additionally to contextual factors, participants' background is also relevant to how economic inequality is perceived. For instance, is likely that undergraduates have a political socialization that makes them more aware of the inequality of opportunities; whereas the

general population might be more sensitive to economic and work issues. Although we cannot generalize our findings to the general population, we consider that our sample is not restricted to a privileged group, but it was diverse enough to represent a wide variety of groups of the Colombian society. Indeed, participants reported coming from different socioeconomic, cultural and geographical backgrounds. This has been possible due to policies offering forgivable loans to disadvantaged communities for accessing to higher education (e.g. “Ser pilo paga” program [being-smart-pays-off]). Further research should explore if the dimensions of perceived inequality we showed in this research are more salient for some individuals according to their social or ideological backgrounds.

Perceived economic inequality in distributional terms is not usually linked to what should be done (mainly in terms of support for public policies) to handle it. As shown in previous research, the mere perception of income inequality does not translate into higher support for policies aimed to reduce it (i.e. progressive taxation, social insurance, regulating economic markets) (Bartels, 2005; Kuziemko et al., 2015). Such seeming disconnection between perceived income gaps and support for redistribution is not just due to people misperceptions—lack of accuracy or concern of inequality—but because of either a poor understanding of how inequality works (Bartels 2005); or by how such inequality is perceived. Research has demonstrated the focusing on the haves led people to support measurements that take away resources from the rich; whereas focusing in the have-nots was related to providing the poor (Chow & Galak, 2012; Lowery et al., 2009). Thus, responses to inequality are not only a matter of how much inequality is perceived (size) but how it is perceived or framed in peoples’ mind.

Perceived economic inequality can have different implications depending on how people understand it in everyday life. Our findings raise some questions about the potential implications of daily-life frames of economic inequality. First, the proximity to inequality in daily life can trigger negative emotions (e.g. moral outrage, anger, unhappiness) that can lead individuals to engage in collective actions (Tausch et al., 2011). The fact of perceiving inequality in the closest social circles might help individuals recognize all the diverse ways in which inequality is reflected in daily life and, as a result, raise awareness about the problem and motivates people to mobilize against inequality. However, if such vivid perceptions are framed in terms of not having enough, addressing inequality would be a matter of providing more to people in need rather than redistributing resources in the whole society. By contrast, if economic inequality is framed in terms of distribution of economic resources, it might create a greater psychological distance from the phenomenon,



becoming something either too abstract or uncommon for people's reality; which is likely to lead to disengagement from these topics (Lieberman & Trope, 2014). In this regard, framing social phenomena in such a way that elicits the unfairness linked to other structural factors is likely to motivate people to engage in collective action (Sabucedo et al. 2017).

Therefore, instead of favoring some inequality frames over others, we argue that it would be necessary to pursue a better integration between the way individuals represent the distribution of economic resources, and their daily-life perceptions of inequality. This might help people to connect their immediate situation with broader social, political, and economic factors. If people can link their daily-life perceptions of inequality to more structural dimensions, they are likely to be able to make better political decisions to tackle this problem (e.g. support for redistributive policies, progressive taxation). However, the analysis of the implications of such different ways of perceiving economic inequality on political decision is out of the scope of this paper and should be addressed in future research. It would be important to provide better evidence about how to improve the impact of social campaigning and engage policymakers and citizens to tackle this topic both in their daily life and in the broader political arena.

**Authors Contributions:** This research has been conducted as a team. Particularly, EGS, GW, RR contributed conception and design of the study; JPS, JP, ER contributed with data collection; EGS and JGC processed data; EGS coordinated data collection, performed analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors made substantial contributions to manuscript revision, read and approved the submitted version.

**Ethics statements:** This study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines stated by the Vicerectory of Research and Scientific Policy of the University of Granada, fulfilling the requirements of informed consent and data protection stated by the Spanish Organic Law 15/1999. The protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research of the University of Granada (No 170/CEIH/2016). This study was conducted using an online platform. Hence, all participants were informed in writing about the objectives of the study, and signed their consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Once the study was concluded, we provided feedback to all respondents regarding the research findings.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Both the raw dataset generated for this study, and processed data for frequency and network analysis are publicly available in the Open Science Framework platform: <https://goo.gl/gZeHeh>

Supplementary material

**Table S1.**

Categorical framework with subcategories and indicators

Category	Subcategories	Indicators
<b>Social actors:</b> Mention to groups, organisations, or institutions that represent any figure with a specific role in the social dynamics	Older people	Mentions to old people, senior, old-age, ancient
	Banks	banks, commercial banks, credit union, lending institutions
	Peasants	Farmers, people that work in agriculture
	Social classes (general)	Mention to social classes, social categories based on status, affluence, poverty, work, etc.
	Directives, Chiefs, Bosses, supervisors	People that perform roles of power inside an organisation of work
	Elites	High social class, privileged groups, people or groups with more economic, social, and cultural resources. Also people with role of power, such as politicians
	Enterprises	organisations of work, public or private, that plays a role in the society
	Private entities	Mention to private organisations
	Public entities	Mention to public organisations
	Students	People that are in formal education process
	Public servants	People that work for the State or that performs in the official public sector. This is different from the politics mention in the elites categories.
	Government	Mention to government entities or to the government as a whole.
	Youth people	Young people, adolescent, young adults, etc.
	Women	Women in general or in particular
	Children	Children, kids, infants, etc.
	Poor	Low social class, disadvantage groups, defined by the lack of optimal living conditions
	Police	Mention to police, both at the societal level, as well as the public servants
	Society (general)	Mention to society in general terms
	Workers	People that live from their work, no matter if they are into a formal employment or with different work modalities.
	University	Higher education system, universities
Private university	Private universities or private higher education organisations	

(Continued)

**Table S1.** (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Indicators
<b>Living conditions:</b> Mention to characteristics, conditions, or any material or social characteristic that define a way of living	Economic resources concentration	Mention to wealth concentration, action to hoard many economic resources
	Living conditions (general)	General mention to living conditions without specifying anything
	Criminality or insecurity	References to crime, victimization rates,, insecurity, or any other illegal action
	Forced displacement	Fact of people that need to flee their homes because of security or conflict reasons
	Public space	Any reference to public spaces, such as streets, parks, avenues, outside supermarkets, malls, entertainment and cultural centres, or any other space that can be used by the people.
	Social stratification	Direct reference to the Colombian socioeconomic stratification system.
	Pensions	Pensions, old age benefits, subsidy for older people, retirement income, etc.
	Income	Income, earnings, wages, salaries, or any other economic resource obtained due to the work.
	Predatory loans (banking or not)	loans given by the financial system that are considered as abusive, excessive, unfair, exorbitant, etc.
	Rural sector	Mentions to rural areas, the fields, the country side, etc.
<b>Consuming:</b> To have access to certain products or services	Social subsidies	any government subsidies to fund or help disadvantage groups
	Saving	The action of saving money
	Consume products or services	Consume any products or services, the fact of consume in itself
	Queues to have access to services	Related to the way how people get access to certain products or services, the queue for getting access
	Leisure	consume of leisure activities, entertainment, free time, etc.
	Taxes	Taxation system, fact of paying taxes
	Public investment	How the government or the political system is distributing the public budget among the people, regions, activities, etc.
	Justice	Justice system, how justice is managed in some places or cases; we also considered the responses where justice was used as a moral code or as personal judgments about fairness.
	Media	Any media, their role on the information of the different situations of the country
	Political system	In general, the whole political system, applies also when not specific institution is mention but make a response about the role of the system.

(Continued)

**Table S1.** (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Indicators
<b>Interpersonal relationships:</b> Focus on how people relate to each other	Treatment of people	Any kind of interpersonal relations that might well be related to customer service or daily life interactions
	Social comparisons	Explicit comparisons between groups; use of social categories assigned to certain groups to evaluate and compare groups.
	Social conflictiveness	Social problems, coexistence inconvenient, violation of human rights, or any other action that reflects conflicts among people or groups.
	Ethnic or cultural issues	Ethnic, cultural, minority groups, such as indigenous, afro, gypsies, etc.
	Family	Familiar relationships
Opportunities: Favourable or good conditions to do something. It can be states or situations that provides good position for success	Education	Any reference to the education system or the fact of study
	Meritocracy beliefs	Endorse the idea that effort and hard work are enough to get ahead in life
	Inequality of opportunities	Direct mentions of having unequal access to different opportunities that allow/obstacle the achievement of goals
	Opportunities in life (general)	General mention to opportunities without specifying what kind of opportunities.
Poverty: State of having little or no money, goods, or means of support, or simply, not having enough of anything that is considered as necessary	Begging	References to people or to the fact of ask for money on the streets.
	Homeless people	People who lives on the streets because having nowhere to live.
	Poverty (general)	General mention to poverty without specifying any particular aspect
Affluence: Having abundance of money and material goods	Affluence or opulence (general)	State of having abundance of money or material goods, which might well be used to accomplish excessive desires
	use of expensive goods and services	State or condition of appearing very wealthy by the use of goods and services that highlight the social status

(Continued)

**Table S1.** (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Indicators
Direction or senses: Subsidiary category to qualify the topics or categories identified. Thus, direction or senses try to complement the intention attributed to each category (when possible)	Economic activity	General mention to the economy of a region, city or any other place
	Corruption	lack of transparency, mismanagement of resources, influence peddling, act out of the law, prioritise private interests over the public ones
	Unequal access	Relevant differences in the quantity and quality of access to goods, services or any other things. Focus on the contrast of one group to another in relation to the things or services that can be accessed or used.
	Inequality of physical conditions according to zones	Differences in the living conditions according to the socioeconomic stratification
	Inequality in living expenses	Living expenses variations from one side to another according to the sector of the city
	Gender inequality	Any reference to unequal power relationships between men and women, as well as any other difference just because of gender reasons.
	Income inequalities	Unequal monetary payment received for goods or services offered as part of an economic productive activity.
	Misinformation	False information deliberately given for any media source; generally refers to misleading information
	Lack or difficulties to access	Not having the possibility to get access to goods or services; focus on the idea of lack, absence, or not enough of something. Different from the Unequal access where the idea is centred on the contrast or comparison
	Mobility difficulty	Struggling to ascend in the social ladder, difficulties to upward social mobility
	Lack of economic resources	Not having enough money, cash, or economic resources in general
	Privatization	References to the fact of privatize organisations, or to mention the role of private entities
	Space segregation	Imposition of a separation of one group from the society; the fact to set apart groups in certain spaces
Discrimination	Prejudge people by making negative attribution on the basis of the group or social category to which people belongs.	

*(Continued)*

**Table S1.** (Continued)

Category	Subcategories	Indicators
Basic services: Main services that people should have in order to have a dignified life	Access to basic services (general)	General mention to minimum conditions to have a dignified life without specifying any particular service or good
	Food	Aspects related to food security, decent access to a normal feeding
	Health	Any mention to physical or mental health, also the health services, assistance to people regarding their health situation
	Public transport	Mobility in the city means of transportation, not only public transport but any means to navigate through the physical space of the cities.
	Housing	Housing, types of housing, physical space to live
Work: Related to the any economic productive activity through which people make a living. It includes both employment as other forms of work (cooperative, informal, independent, etc.)	Economic migration	Go abroad to look for better labour opportunities
	Child labour	Economic activities that involved children or teenagers
	Informal work	Economic activities out of the formality of employment, such as street vendor or any other expression of informal trade.
	Career	Expectancies to advance in the professional career, or improve the occupational situation.
	Unemployment	References to people or to the situation of not having employment.
	Access to work	Related to the fact to get a job, or get access to any way of work (not only employment)
	Work (general)	General mention to work without specifying anything in particular
Precarious work	Poor work conditions due to extended schedules, labour exploitation, low wages, or low occupational profile.	
Free nodes: Free topics that raised during the analysis	Status anxiety	Feelings of anxiety regarding the expectancies of getting ahead in life
	Evictions	To expel or force out a persona from a house, building, or similar.
	Disability	Mentions to the lack of adequate ability to do something, anything that disables a persona at a disadvantage
	Frequency perceiving inequality	Affirmation about the high prevalence of inequality
	Motivation to get ahead in life	Desire, expectations, of achieving success in life
	Life projects	The idea of having projects or dreams to achieve

**Table S2.**  
Frequencies and percentages of responses coded in each category

Category	Frequency (Count)*	Percentage (%)**
Opportunities: Education	304	18.72
Actors: Social classes (includes elites and poor)	274	16.87
Living conditions: Income	267	16.44
Basic services: Health	257	15.83
Senses: Unequal access	216	13.30
Senses: Lack or difficulties to access	192	11.82
Actors: Workers	179	11.02
Living conditions: Public space	163	10.04
Senses: Discrimination	150	9.24
Actors: Elites	139	8.56
Senses: Income inequalities	121	7.45
Work: Precarious work	119	7.33
Actors: Poor	96	5.91
Interpersonal: Social comparisons	95	5.85
Interpersonal: Treatment of people	94	5.79
Living conditions: Socioeconomic stratification	89	5.48
Work: Work (general)	85	5.23
Senses: Corruption	83	5.11
Actors: University	82	5.05
Opportunities: Inequality of opportunities	80	4.93
Consuming: Consume products or services	72	4.43
Actors: Enterprises	69	4.25
Basic services: Mobility and transport	68	4.19
Senses: Lack of economic resources	65	4.00
Work: Informal work	63	3.88
Basic services: Food	53	3.26
Affluence: Affluence or opulence (general)	52	3.20
Work: Access to work	48	2.96
Senses: Space segregation	44	2.71
Actors: Children	42	2.59
Actors: Public entities	41	2.52
Actors: Public servants	40	2.46
Poverty: Begging	39	2.40
Basic services: Housing	38	2.34
Actors: Women	37	2.28
Senses: Privatization	37	2.28
Actors: Private entities	36	2.22
Actors: Directives, Chiefs, Bosses, supervisors	31	1.91

(Continued)

**Table S2.** (continued)

Category	Frequency (Count)	Percentage (%)
Poverty: Homeless people	31	1.91
Consuming: Leisure	30	1.85
Senses: Inequality of physical conditions according to zones	30	1.85
Actors: Government	29	1.79
Living conditions: Living conditions (general)	27	1.66
Institutional: Public investment	27	1.66
Living conditions: Social subsidies	22	1.35
Institutional: Political system	22	1.35
Basic services: Access to basic services (general)	22	1.35
Poverty: Poverty (general)	21	1.29
Senses: Gender inequality	21	1.29
Living conditions: Criminality or insecurity	20	1.23
Work: Child labour	20	1.23
Work: Unemployment	19	1.17
Actors: Youth people	18	1.11
Interpersonal: Family	18	1.11
Senses: Mobility difficulty	16	0.99
Consuming: Queues to have access to services	15	0.92
Institutional: Taxes	15	0.92
Free nodes: Frequency perceiving inequality	14	0.86
Institutional: Justice	13	0.80
Actors: Peasants	11	0.68
Interpersonal: Social conflictiveness	11	0.68
Interpersonal: Ethnic or cultural issues	11	0.68
Opportunities: Meritocracy beliefs	10	0.62
Actors: Police	9	0.55
Actors: Banks	8	0.49
Living conditions: Economic resources concentration	8	0.49
Senses: Inequality in living expenses	8	0.49
Actors: Private university	7	0.43
Living conditions: Forced displacement	7	0.43
Senses: Economic activity	7	0.43
Actors: Older people	6	0.37
Actors: Students	6	0.37
Living conditions: Predatory loans (banking or not)	6	0.37
Work: Career	6	0.37
Free nodes: Life projects	5	0.31
Living conditions: Pensions	4	0.25
Actors: Society (general)	3	0.18
Institutional: Media	3	0.18
Consuming: Saving	2	0.12
Free nodes: Disability	2	0.12

(Continued)



**Table S2.** (continued)

Category	Frequency (Count)	Percentage (%)
Work: Economic migration	2	0.12
Living conditions: Rural sector	1	0.06
Free nodes: Status anxiety	1	0.06
Free nodes: Motivation to get ahead in life	1	0.06
Opportunities: Opportunities in life (general)	1	0.06
Affluence: use of expensive goods and services	1	0.06

\* These counts are based on the number of responses that contain the indicated category

\*\* Percentage is computed based on the total amount of responses of our data corpus (N = 1624)

**Table S3.**

Network centrality measurements

Category	Subcategory	Degree Centrality	Betweenness centrality	Modularity class
Actors	social classes	61	169.30	1
Actors	poor	49	72.41	1
Senses	discrimination	45	83.93	1
Actors	elites	44	58.07	1
Interpersonal	social comparison	44	41.21	1
Senses	corruption	37	27.10	1
Interpersonal	treatment of people	34	25.87	1
Affluence	Wealth or opulence access to basic	31	14.18	1
Basic services	services	31	12.62	1
Actors	government	27	9.70	1
Institutional	public investment	24	6.22	1
Institutional	political system	20	8.39	1
Work	access to work	20	12.61	1
Consumo	leisure	19	1.60	1
Institutional	justice	18	4.02	1
Interpersonal	ethnicity or culture	18	2.95	1
Interpersonal	social conflicts	16	5.68	1
Living cond.	wealth concentration	15	2.64	1
Institutional	taxes	15	1.82	1
Consumo	queues to access services	14	3.27	1
Senses	economic activity	14	2.84	1
Opportunities	meritocracy	13	1.55	1
Actors	banks	8	0.37	1
Affluence	use of expensive devices	5	0	1
Free nodes	disability	3	0	1

*(Continued)*

**Table S3.** (Continued)

Network centrality measurements

Category	Subcategory	Degree Centrality	Betweenness centrality	Modularity class
Living cond.	public space	44	65.92	2
Living cond.	socioeconomic stratification	43	63.16	2
Actors	childhood	35	23.84	2
Work	informal work	35	37.86	2
Senses	spatial segregation	32	16.16	2
Senses	inequality between strata	30	9.84	2
Consumption	consuming products or services	28	22.31	2
Poverty	poverty	27	16.24	2
Poverty	begging	26	8.76	2
Free nodes	inequality perception	23	5.76	2
Living cond.	insecurity or criminality	22	6.94	2
Interpersonal	family	22	3.55	2
Poverty	Homeless	21	6.82	2
Work	child labour	17	1.43	2
Senses	inequality living costs	14	0.89	2
Work	unemployment	13	4.02	2
Living cond.	forced displacement	11	1.40	2
Free nodes	get ahead in life	11	0	2
Institutional	media	10	0.65	2
Actors	elderly	8	0.36	2
Free nodes	status anxiety	3	0	2
Consumo	saving	2	0	2

(Continued)

**Table S3.** (Continued)

Network centrality measurements

Category	Subcategory	Degree Centrality	Betweenness centrality	Modularity class
Senses	lack/poor access	59	217.53	3
Senses	unequal access	56	109.17	3
Opportunities	education	45	64.18	3
Opportunities	Unequal opportunities	43	44.74	3
Basic services	health	37	27.75	3
Basic services	food	36	33.73	3
Living cond.	living conditions	34	24.30	3
Actors	university	33	17.74	3
Basic services	housing	28	8.73	3
Actors	public entities	27	12.75	3
Basic services	public transport	27	7.14	3
Senses	privatization	25	9.06	3
Actors	youth	24	8.45	3
Actors	private entities	22	5.54	3
Living cond.	social subsidies	18	3.11	3
Senses	mobility difficulties	15	1.53	3
Actors	students	13	0.77	3
Living cond.	predatory loans	12	1.08	3
Actors	private university	11	0.13	3
Free nodes	life projects	9	0.25	3
Living cond.	pensions	6	0.06	3

(Continued)

**Table S3.** (Continued)

Network centrality measurements

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Degree Centrality</b>	<b>Betweenness centrality</b>	<b>Modularity class</b>
Senses	income inequalities	13	6.52	4
Living cond.	economic resources	13	6.52	4
Work	precarious work	12	16.92	4
Actors	workers	12	4.52	4
Actors	enterprises	12	4.22	4
Work	work	11	2.55	4
Senses	lack economic resources	11	15.29	4
Actors	women	9	0.83	4
Actors	managers	9	0.83	4
Actors	public servants	8	0.80	4
Work	career or mobility	6	0	4
Senses	gender inequality	6	0	4
Actors	police	5	0	4
Actors	peasants	5	0	4
Work	work migration	1	0	4
Opportunities	opportunities in life	1	0	4

Note: Modularity class correspond to:

1 = Social classes and intergroup relations

2 = Public space and social exclusion

3 = Inequality of opportunities

4= Work and income inequalities

## *CHAPTER 8.*

**La percepción de la  
desigualdad  
económica en España:  
entre la vida cotidiana  
y la ideología política**



La percepción de la desigualdad económica en España: entre la vida cotidiana y la ideología política\*

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## Resumen

La percepción de la desigualdad económica se concibe como la representación subjetiva de la distribución de recursos económicos. Sin embargo, esta representación no se hace en abstracto, sino que depende del contexto e ideologías de las personas. En este estudio ( $N = 290$ ) analizamos cómo se percibe la desigualdad económica en España y cómo estas percepciones varían según la ideología política. Analizamos un total de 705 respuestas (10626 palabras) mediante la técnica de análisis de contenido y usamos análisis de redes para determinar las relaciones entre los temas. Encontramos que la desigualdad económica en España se percibe principalmente en términos de la comparación social y privación relativa entre personas y/o grupos. Adicionalmente, estas percepciones se agruparon en cuatro dimensiones: desigualdad de oportunidades, desigualdad entre clases sociales, desigualdad de ingresos y condiciones de trabajo, y desigualdad entre grupos sociales específicos. Aunque nuestros resultados sugieren que las respuestas de personas que se identificaron a la izquierda (vs. a la derecha) del espectro político estuvieron relacionadas más con temas de justicia social, estas diferencias no fueron suficientemente robustas. Discutimos cómo la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un fenómeno multidimensional situada en la vida cotidiana e influenciado por las ideologías.

**Palabras clave:** percepción de la desigualdad, ideología política, análisis de redes, desigualdad económica.

## Abstract

Perception of economic inequality is defined as the subjective representation of economic resources. However, this representation is not abstract, but it is contingent on the individuals' context and ideologies. The aim of the study ( $N = 290$ ) is to analyse how economic inequality is perceived in Spain, and how such perceptions vary according to individuals' political ideology. We analysed 705 responses (10626 words) by using content analysis and network analysis techniques, in order to figure out the network of topics associated with perceiving economic inequality. We found that economic inequality in Spain is mainly perceived by processes of social comparison and relative deprivation between individuals and groups. We also found that perceptions of economic inequality were clustered in four groups: inequality of opportunities, inequality between social classes, income inequality and work conditions, and inequality between specific social groups. Although our findings suggest that individuals in the left side (vs. in the right) of the political spectrum mentioned topics about social justice, such differences were not robust enough. We discuss how the perception of economic inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon, placed in the people's daily-life and influenced by ideologies.

**Key words:** Perception of inequality, political ideology, network analysis, economic inequality.

## Introducción

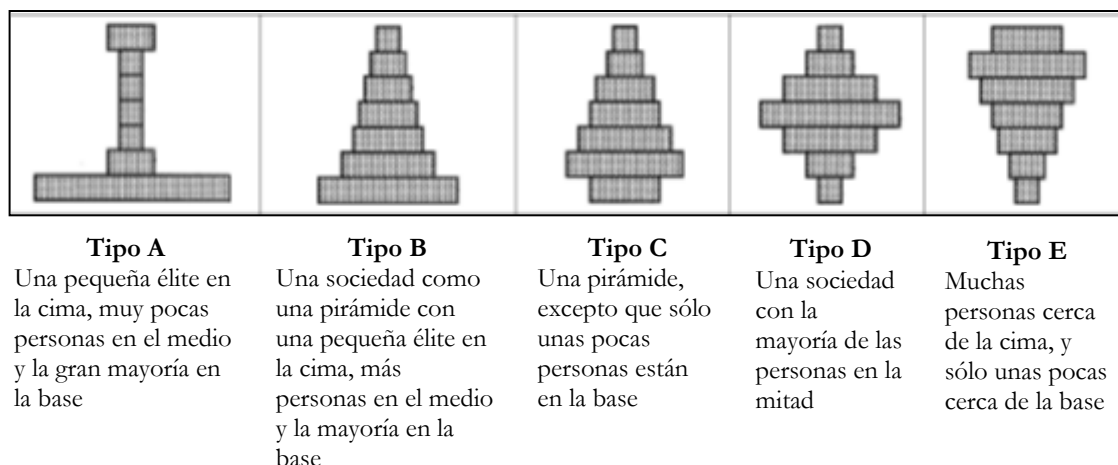
Las sociedades actuales se caracterizan por una alta y creciente desigualdad económica. Particularmente, en España el 1% de la población que más tiene acumula la cuarta parte de la riqueza del país y es el tercero con mayor desigualdad económica de la Unión Europea (OXFAM, 2018). Sin embargo, a pesar del incremento de la desigualdad económica a lo largo de los últimos años (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, y Zucman, 2018; Piketty, 2014), las personas tienden a percibir mucha menos desigualdad de la que realmente existe (Kiatpongsan y Norton, 2014; Norton y Ariely, 2011; Norton, Neal, Govan, Ariely, y Holland, 2014). Esta diferencia entre la desigualdad económica objetiva y la percepción subjetiva de tal desigualdad se debe tanto al contexto económico objetivo (Finseraas, 2009; Schmidt-Catran, 2016), al acceso que tienen las personas a la información sobre distribución de ingresos económicos o a las ideologías o sistemas de creencias que justifican la desigualdad que apoyan (Chambers, Swan, y Heesacker, 2014; Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017; Shariff y Akinin, 2016). En este artículo proponemos que la percepción de la desigualdad económica también depende del contexto cotidiano de las personas.

La percepción de la desigualdad económica suele hacerse en términos de la estimación subjetiva de la distribución de recursos económicos monetarios (e.g., brechas salariales, medidas pictóricas, distribución de riqueza, etc.) (Castillo, Miranda, & Carrasco, 2012). Sin embargo, estas medidas sobre percepción de la desigualdad inducen algunos sesgos en las respuestas de los participantes, tales como el efecto de anclaje (*anchoring effect*), el sesgo de razón (*ratio bias*) y el encuadre (*framing*) (Eriksson y Simpson, 2012; Pedersen y Larsen, 2018; Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). Además, la percepción de la desigualdad económica no se reduce exclusivamente a una representación abstracta de la distribución de recursos (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018), sino que se percibe desde el contexto más cercano a los individuos (e.g. Minkoff y Lyons, 2019; Newman, Shah, y Lauterbach, 2018; Xu y Garand, 2010) y las experiencias en la vida cotidiana (García-Castro, Willis, y Rodríguez-Bailón, 2018) e ideologías de las personas. Por tanto, el objetivo de la presente investigación es aportar evidencia empírica sobre la percepción de la desigualdad económica como un constructo multidimensional que no se reduce a la estimación de diferencias de ingresos económicos monetarios. En este artículo indagamos cómo las personas comprenden y experimentan la desigualdad económica en su contexto cotidiano; así como también, exploramos si la ideología política condiciona la forma cómo se percibe tal desigualdad.

### **Percepción de la desigualdad económica**

La percepción de desigualdad económica puede definirse como la forma en que las personas ven la distribución de ingresos, bien estimando las diferencias de recursos económicos entre grupos o individuos, o evaluando la distribución general de la riqueza (Bruckmüller, Reese, y Martiny, 2017; Engelhardt y Wagener, 2014; Kim, Huh, Choi, y Lee, 2017). Esta forma de definir la desigualdad en términos distributivos está vinculada a definiciones planteadas desde la economía o la sociología, donde el eje central está en la distribución inequitativa de recursos económicos (especialmente de dinero y riqueza) entre los miembros de una sociedad determinada (Peterson, 2017). Esta percepción implica además la posición relativa de las personas (o grupos) en relación con otras personas (o grupos) en función del acceso a recursos económicos. Desde esta perspectiva, la percepción de la desigualdad económica se centra en la representación individual de la distribución de recursos económicos en un contexto específico, omitiendo otras formas de comprender y experimentar esa desigualdad en su vida cotidiana.

La percepción de la desigualdad económica se ha estudiado principalmente desde una perspectiva distributiva basada en la estimación de brechas de ingresos (o riqueza) entre personas o grupos (Han, Janmaat, Hoskins, y Green, 2012; Janmaat, 2014). Al medir esta variable se suelen usar al menos tres indicadores (Castillo, Miranda, y Carrasco, 2011): a) Una representación diagramática de la distribución de recursos económicos según diferentes grupos de la sociedad (ver Figura 1); b) un indicador sobre la percepción general de la desigualdad —a veces también denominada como tolerancia o preocupación hacia la desigualdad— medido con el ítem “la desigualdad de ingresos económicos en <país/contexto> es demasiado grande”; y c) una estimación de las brechas salariales entre personas con ocupaciones de alto y bajo estatus. Sin embargo, la representación diagramática, la percepción general y la brechas salariales no siempre están consistentemente correlacionadas entre sí, por lo que sugieren que esos indicadores podrían captar diferentes dimensiones del constructo (Castillo et al., 2012). Adicionalmente, otros autores usan la distribución de recursos entre grupos sociales (e.g. quintiles) como una forma alternativa de medir la percepción de la desigualdad económica (Norton y Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014).



**Figura 1.** Medida diagramática de la percepción de la desigualdad económica (ISSP Reserch Group, 2017)

Sin embargo, medir la percepción de la desigualdad económica a través de indicadores numéricos y monetarios (e.g., brechas, quintiles, porcentajes, ratios) presenta algunos desafíos, debido a que estas estimaciones presentan cierta dificultad de comprensión y abstracción para los participantes. Por ejemplo, usar la distribución de ingresos por quintiles induce a los participantes a percibir menos desigualdad que cuando se usan valores netos de ingresos (Eriksson y Simpson, 2012, 2013). Las personas (sub)estiman las brechas en función de la disponibilidad de información que tienen a su alrededor: las personas de menor estatus suelen percibir menor desigualdad económica que las personas de mayor estatus debido a que no suelen tener información sobre la cantidad de ingresos económicos que pueden llegar a tener las personas con mayores recursos (Castillo et al., 2012). Además, la estimación de la desigualdad económica percibida y la deseada suele estar condicionada por un efecto de anclaje y un sesgo en el cálculo de los ratios (Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). Por una parte, cuando las personas reciben información previa sobre desigualdad económica, usan esta información como un referente para realizar sus estimaciones sobre la desigualdad económica; y por otra parte, los individuos perciben menos desigualdad cuando se pregunta por la cantidad de ingresos netos que reciben las personas (en dólares), que cuando se indaga por la ratio de ingresos (cuántas veces más tienen unos/as respecto a otros/as) (Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). Esto no quiere decir que las medidas numéricas sobre percepción de la desigualdad sean inválidas para reflejar cuestiones actitudinales sobre la desigualdad, sino más bien advierte de la necesidad de considerar algunas de sus limitaciones para captar la complejidad del constructo (Pedersen y Larsen, 2018).

### **La percepción de la desigualdad económica como un constructo situado y motivado**

La desigualdad económica puede ser percibida de diferentes formas según las experiencias, creencias y posicionamientos individuales ante este fenómeno (Irwin, 2018). Binelli y Loveless (2016) encontraron que la percepción de la desigualdad en contextos urbanos es mayor que en contextos rurales, debido a la saliencia de diversos indicadores de estatus propios de las ciudades. De forma similar, Dawtry, Sutton, y Sibley (2015) encontraron que las personas que interactuaban con grupos más privilegiados tendieron a percibir mayor riqueza en la sociedad y por tanto oponerse más a la redistribución de recursos. Así, las personas tienen más facilidad para observar la desigualdad económica en su contexto más inmediato, que en niveles más abstractos y generales (Minkoff y Lyons, 2019; Newman et al., 2018). Por otra parte, García-Sánchez y colaboradores (2018) mostraron que la desigualdad económica no se percibe prioritariamente como la diferencia de ingresos, sino más bien en términos de la desigualdad de oportunidades y de acceso a bienes o servicios importantes (e.g., salud, educación, consumo, etc.) propios de la cotidianidad de las personas. De hecho, la percepción de la desigualdad económica en la vida cotidiana está asociada a un mayor rechazo a la desigualdad, por encima de la percepción de la desigualdad en términos salariales (García-Castro et al., 2018). La percepción de la desigualdad económica es, por tanto, un constructo entrelazado con las experiencias de las personas. Esto indica que está situado y depende del contexto de quienes la perciban.

Por otro lado, la percepción de la desigualdad económica también está afectada por las motivaciones, ideologías o sistemas de creencias de las personas. Por ejemplo, Niehues (2014) encontró que en Estados Unidos la percepción de la desigualdad económica fue menor (comparada con otros países), debido a las creencias en la movilidad social y/o meritocracia propias del *ethos* estadounidense. Del mismo modo, se percibe menos desigualdad cuando las personas se adhieren más a ideologías que justifican tal desigualdad (Rodríguez-Bailon et al., 2017), cuando se identifican con una ideología política conservadora (Chambers et al., 2014), o cuando creen que el sistema es correcto, apropiado y justo (Jost y Thompson, 2000). Las ideologías juegan un papel clave en la forma de percibir y legitimar la desigualdad económica (Jost y Hunyady, 2005), en la medida en que promueven el razonamiento motivado (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, y Sulloway, 2003) y satisfacen necesidades epistémicas para explicar y comprender el sistema (Jost et al., 2009; Jost y van der Toorn, 2012).

En este orden de ideas, la desigualdad económica se percibe de forma diferente en función del contexto y las ideologías. Por tanto, aunque la distribución inequitativa de recursos es un fenómeno objetivo, éste puede percibirse y experimentarse de formas muy diferentes según los elementos más salientes en cada situación y las motivaciones más relevantes para cada persona. El contexto y las motivaciones ligadas a la percepción de la desigualdad económica promueven un encuadre particular de este fenómeno. Este encuadre puede promover ciertas formas de entender, evaluar e incluso de reaccionar ante un fenómeno específico (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1975). Por ejemplo, percibir la desigualdad en función de los que tienen más recursos, conlleva a considerar la desigualdad económica como más ilegítima (Bruckmüller et al., 2017) y a apoyar más las medidas redistributivas (Chow y Galak, 2012; Lowery, Chow, y Crosby, 2009).

### **La presente investigación**

Esta investigación tiene dos objetivos. El primero es describir cómo se percibe la desigualdad económica en España desde la perspectiva de la vida cotidiana de un grupo de personas de la ciudad de Granada. Para tal fin, utilizamos el marco categorial de García-Sánchez et al. (2018) sobre percepciones de la desigualdad económica para realizar la codificación de los temas que los/as participantes asociaron con la desigualdad económica en España. El segundo objetivo es explorar si las percepciones de la desigualdad económica varían según la ideología política. Teniendo en cuenta que las percepciones de la realidad social están motivadas por sistemas de creencias o ideologías (Chambers et al., 2014; Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017), es posible que las personas que se posicionan a la izquierda (vs. a la derecha) del espectro político hagan mayor alusión a tópicos sobre justicia e igualdad social (e.g. grupos desaventajados). Teniendo en cuenta que la percepción de la desigualdad económica se representa en diferentes dimensiones de las vidas de las personas, la presente investigación contribuye a comprender de qué forma se percibe esa desigualdad económica y cómo esto cambia en función de su ideología política. Esta perspectiva permite avanzar en el estudio de la percepción de la desigualdad económica en una dimensión más cercana a la realidad de las personas.



## Método

### Participantes

En el estudio participaron 290 personas ( $M_{edad} = 21.54$  años,  $DE_{edad} = 5.39$  años, 65.72% mujeres, 33.92% hombres y 0.35% otro género); 79.32% fueron estudiantes universitarios de diferentes titulaciones (trabajo social, psicología, ciencias del trabajo, antropología, educación) y 20.68% fueron de la población general, todos residentes en la provincia de Granada, España. Los participantes se auto-posicionaron en el espectro político de izquierda a derecha, en una escala de 1 “Extremadamente de Izquierda” a 7 “Extremadamente de derecha”. Para realizar los análisis por ideología política, decidimos agrupar las personas que se identificaron a la izquierda (54.51%) y a la derecha (15.52%) del espectro político. El 29.96% de los participantes se identificó como de centro. En cuanto al estatus socioeconómico, el 3.2% de los participantes reportó tener ingresos mensuales por debajo de los €650, el 21.1% entre €651 y €1300, el 26.1% entre €1301 y €1950, el 17.5% entre €1951 y €2600, el 13.6% entre €2601 y €3250, el 7.1% entre €3251 y €3900, el 4.6% entre €3901 y €4550, el 2.9% entre €4551 y €5200, y el 0.7% más de €5800.

### Marco categorial

Para codificar las respuestas utilizamos el marco categorial desarrollado por Garcia-Sanchez et al. (2018). Este marco categorial se compone de 10 categorías temáticas (pobreza, riqueza, actores sociales, relaciones interpersonales, trabajo, instituciones, consumo, condiciones de vida, servicios básicos, oportunidades) y una categoría genérica sobre sentidos o formas de usar las temáticas anteriores (e.g., falta de acceso, desigualdad de acceso, desigualdad de género, etc.). Aunque este marco categorial fue desarrollado en un contexto de mayor desigualdad económica como el caso Colombiano, consideramos que recoge categorías lo suficientemente genéricas e incluyentes para dar cuenta de una amplia diversidad de formas de percibir la desigualdad económica. La codificación tuvo en cuenta la posibilidad de incluir categorías emergentes que fueron propias del contexto Español como los desahucios o los grupos sociales específicos (e.g., personas de etnia gitana). Además, consideramos que usar el mismo sistema categorial facilita la comparación de las percepciones de la desigualdad en distintos contextos. En la Tabla S1 del material suplementario se presenta el marco categorial completo, con las definiciones e indicadores operacionales de cada categoría.

## Procedimiento

La recolección de los datos provenientes de los/as estudiantes universitarios/as fue realizada de forma escrita a través de cuestionarios en papel en aulas de las facultades en las que se imparten las distintas titulaciones. Los datos de la población general se recolectaron de forma virtual mediante un cuestionario en línea y fueron invitados a participar a través de la técnica de “bola de nieve” en redes sociales. En ambos casos, los participantes recibieron un consentimiento informado sobre las condiciones de anonimato y confidencialidad de la información. En el cuestionario se hizo la siguiente pregunta abierta: “¿Cómo puedes observar la desigualdad económica en España? Por favor menciona algún(os) ejemplos (situaciones, momentos, escenarios, espacios, etc.)”. Las personas podían escribir hasta tres respuestas. La recolección de información tuvo lugar entre los meses de mayo y junio de 2017. El corpus de datos estuvo compuesto por 705 respuestas, equivalentes a un total de 10626 palabras. La tasa de respuesta promedio fue de 2.43 respuestas por participante.

Para el análisis de la información usamos la técnica de análisis de contenido y el software de análisis cualitativo Atlas.ti 7. La técnica de análisis de contenido permite identificar y sistematizar las estructuras, temas y relaciones que están presentes en el lenguaje, incluyendo tanto contenidos manifiestos enmarcados en las respuestas textuales de los/as participantes, así como contenidos latentes derivados de las interpretaciones de los codificadores (Bardin, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004). En esta investigación nos centramos en los contenidos manifiestos de las respuestas, con el fin de codificar fragmentos de texto que pudieran reflejar de la forma más explícita posible los indicadores aportados en el marco categorial de referencia. La unidad mínima de análisis o unidad de registro que seleccionamos en este estudio fue cada una de las respuestas de los/as participantes. La información se codificó de forma independiente por dos codificadores expertos en la temática y con entrenamiento en el uso del marco categorial de referencia. La fiabilidad interjueces según el índice Kappa de Cohen fue 0.71, lo cual se evalúa como un nivel de acuerdo considerable (*Substantial*) según los criterios de Landis y Koch (1977). El análisis de fiabilidad interjueces general y el grado de acuerdo por cada categoría se encuentra disponible en la Tabla S2 del material suplementario. Los desacuerdos en la codificación fueron resueltos llegando a un acuerdo entre los codificadores, lo cual dio lugar a la base de datos final del estudio.

Para el análisis de las categorías usamos el análisis de frecuencias (cantidad de veces de aparición de cada categoría) y la co-ocurrencia (cantidad de veces que aparecen dos categorías en la misma unidad de registro). Debido a que las tablas de co-ocurrencia son

matrices que sólo pueden describir relaciones uno-a-uno, decidimos analizar las relaciones entre las categorías usando técnicas de análisis de redes. Los análisis de redes permiten analizar las relaciones que existen entre todas las categorías, permitiendo calcular métricas que describen las propiedades de la red y visualizar todas las conexiones en un grafo. Las métricas que utilizamos fueron el grado de centralidad (*degree of centrality*) y de interconectividad (*betweenness centrality*). El grado de centralidad es la cantidad de relaciones que tiene cada una de las categorías (o nodos), de modo que mayores valores indican mayor prevalencia de esa categoría en la red (Brandes y Patrick Kenis, 2005); y el grado de interconectividad representa el grado en que la categoría o nodo traza el camino más corto entre los nodos que están conectados, es decir, identifica las categorías más influyentes que conectan las diferentes partes de la red (Park y Leydesdorff, 2013).

Para realizar el análisis de redes transformamos la matriz de co-ocurrencia que arroja relaciones bivariadas entre categorías (uno-a-uno) (ver ejemplo en la Figura 2, Panel A), en una lista con las combinaciones por pares de categorías y su respectiva frecuencia de aparición (ver Figura 2, Panel B). Posteriormente, utilizamos el software Gephi 0.9.2 para calcular las métricas de la red y visualizarla en forma de grafo. Finalmente, realizamos un análisis de chi cuadrado ( $\chi^2$ ) para examinar la asociación entre la ideología política de los/as participantes y la mención a ciertas categorías.

El corpus de datos bruto, material suplementario y archivos usados para realizar el procesamiento y análisis de la información se encuentran disponibles públicamente en el siguiente enlace: <https://goo.gl/3PXMtQ>.

Panel				Panel		
	Categoría 1	Categoría 2	Categoría 3	Categoría A	Categoría B	Co-ocurrencia
Categoría 1	—	—	—	Categoría 1	Categoría 2	5
Categoría 2	5	—	—	Categoría 1	Categoría 3	12
Categoría 3	12	3	—	Categoría 2	Categoría 3	3

**Figura 2.** Tabla de co-ocurrencia en formato de matriz (Panel A); y Tabla de co-ocurrencia en formato listo (Panel B).

## Resultados

Los resultados de esta investigación se presentan en tres apartados. El primero de ellos corresponde al análisis de frecuencias de aparición de temas que fueron mencionados por los/as participantes. El segundo presenta la forma cómo las categorías de análisis estuvieron asociadas entre ellas. Y el tercero, consiste en las diferencias en las percepciones de la desigualdad económica según la ideología política de los participantes.

### *La percepción de la desigualdad económica en España*

La frecuencia de aparición de las categorías permitió observar una amplia diversidad de temas relacionados con la forma de percibir la desigualdad económica en España. Como se puede observar en la Tabla 1, el 25.25% de las respuestas de los/as participantes mencionaron la *comparación social entre personas o grupos de personas* de acuerdo a la cantidad de recursos económicos entre grupos, su capacidad de consumo y la probabilidad de ser víctimas de prejuicio y discriminación. La desigualdad económica es percibida principalmente desde una perspectiva intergrupual en cuanto a las condiciones materiales de vida de las personas, así como por la valoración social que tienen los grupos dentro de la sociedad.

*El trato y prejuicio hacia las familias de bajo poder adquisitivo es mucho mayor que para los de alto poder adquisitivo (185:2)<sup>19</sup>*

*Los clientes que salen y entran de forma masiva de los supermercados y hay un mendigo o mendiga pidiendo ayuda en la puerta (siendo invisibles a éstos) (16:1)*

*Cuando las clases sociales altas miran por encima del hombro a los demás y gozan de privilegios menospreciando el resto de personas (24:2)*

De forma similar, el 24.26% de los/as participantes mencionó la categoría de *ingresos económicos*, refiriéndose de forma especial a las desigualdades salariales entre personas (particularmente brechas salariales por género), la falta de dinero debido al desempleo y la falta de recursos para tener unas condiciones de vida dignas. En este sentido, la distribución inequitativa de recursos económicos cobra particular importancia en la percepción de la desigualdad.

*En la importante brecha salarial que aparece entre hombres y mujeres que desempeñan exactamente el mismo cargo (121:1)*

*Jugadores de fútbol millonarios vs. médicos con salarios ridículos (93:3)*

*El gran salario que cobran políticos, presidente, ministros, en comparación con los demás salarios de los demás profesionales (129:3)*

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<sup>19</sup> El código de cada cita representa el número del participante y el número de la respuesta.

*La desigualdad también se ve a través del paro, con la gran cantidad de paro, mucha gente no puede acceder a un trabajo y no puede ganar dinero (173:2)*

Adicionalmente se hizo referencia a las *clases sociales* (18.44%), haciendo especial énfasis sobre las *élites*, entendidas como grupos o personas ricas y poderosas (e.g., políticos/as, millonarios/as, ricos/as, etc.) (16.60%). No obstante, la descripción de las élites se hizo en torno a la excesiva acumulación de riqueza, el abuso de poder y la corrupción, lo cual parece indicar un cuestionamiento moral hacia ese grupo de personas.

*Políticos con ropa, lujos y seguridad, así como viajes pagados y un sueldo de por vida, por encima del promedio salarial de cualquier trabajo y por muchas menos horas de trabajo (58:1)*

*En estos momentos de crisis se ve como los más ricos han incrementado su capital y el número de pobres cada vez aumenta más en la sociedad (135:1)*

*Corrupción de altos cargos políticos y despilfarro de dinero público frente a desahucios (28:3)*

El *espacio público* también fue otra de las categorías mayormente mencionadas por los/as participantes (14.89%). Dentro del espacio público se incluyen referencias a la calle, los barrios, así como a los sitios públicos donde las personas interactúan, especialmente relaciones mediadas por el consumo de bienes o servicios (e.g., restaurantes, centros comerciales, etc.). Las menciones al espacio público se caracterizaron por los contrastes sociales, bien entre grupos sociales por motivos de sus ingresos económicos o prestigio, o por las diferencias en las condiciones de vida de las personas en función del lugar en el que viven.

*Paseando por una calle que sea muy transitada, se verá el ejemplo de persona importante de negocios trajeada y veras la otra cara de persona pidiendo para comer (172:1)*

*Al ir por la calle, por el centro más concretamente, hay gente con mucho dinero comprando cosas caras en tiendas de lujo, mientras que en la puerta hay personas pidiendo ayuda para comer solamente y son ignoradas al tiempo que los supermercados y restaurantes (260:1)*

*Por ejemplo en los barrios, hay algunos en los que se nota el bajo poder adquisitivo de las familias (tipo de edificio, tipo de comercio que se encuentra alrededor, etc.) y otros en los que se nota que tienen un alto poder adquisitivo (189:1)*

Adicionalmente se mencionaron otras categorías tales como la dificultad o deficiencia de acceso a la sanidad, la educación, a una alimentación y vivienda digna, incluyendo también la capacidad de consumo en cuestiones de ocio y tiempo libre, tales como las vacaciones, la ropa, coches, así como otros accesorios asociados al estatus.

**Tabla 1.**

Frecuencia de aparición de categorías asociadas a la percepción de la desigualdad económica en España

Categoría	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Interpersonales: comparación social	178	25.25
Condiciones: Ingresos económicos	171	24.26
Actores: Clases sociales	130	18.44
Actores: Élités	117	16.60
Condiciones: Espacio público	105	14.89
S. Desigualdades salariales	96	13.62
S. Dificultad Deficiencias acceso	81	11.49
Oportunidades: Educación	75	10.64
S. Desigualdad acceso	74	10.50
Trabajo: Trabajo precario	65	9.22
S. Corrupción	57	8.09
Consumo: Consumo productos o servicios	55	7.80
Pobreza: Mendicidad	55	7.80
Actores: Trabajadores	52	7.38
S. Insuficiencia recursos económicos	43	6.10
Riqueza: Riqueza u Opulencia	42	5.96
Pobreza: Personas sin hogar	41	5.82
S. Trato diferenciado o Discriminación	41	5.82
Actores: Mujeres	37	5.25
S. Desigualdad de género	36	5.11

*Nota:* El porcentaje representa la proporción de respuestas codificadas dentro de cada categoría sobre el número total de respuestas ( $N=705$ ). En la tabla se presentan los valores superiores a un 5%. Para consultar la tabla completa remitirse a la Tabla S3 en el material suplementario.

### ***Dimensiones de la percepción de la desigualdad económica en España***

La red de relaciones estuvo compuesta por 77 categorías (nodos) y 748 relaciones entre categorías, dando como resultado una red considerablemente interconectada (*densidad* = .256). La co-ocurrencia de categorías osciló entre 1 y 111 veces. Para visualizar esta red se creó un grafo (ver Figura 2), en donde los nodos representan las categorías que tuvieron mayor cantidad de relaciones (grado de centralidad); y las líneas que unen los nodos representan la intensidad de la relación (co-ocurrencia), de manera que cuanto más gruesa es la línea, mayor es la relación entre esas categorías. La ubicación de los nodos indican su grado de centralidad e inter-conexión con los demás nodos de la red de acuerdo con el algoritmo Fruchterman-Reingold que se basa en la gravitación de los nodos según la atracción y repulsión entre ellos (Cherven, 2015). El color representa los grupos de categorías que tienen mayor probabilidad de estar asociados entre ellas, el cual estimamos a

través de un algoritmo de segmentación por clases implementado en el software Gephi (Emmons, Kobourov, Gallant, y Börner, 2016). Este algoritmo usa un estadístico de modularidad que identifica grupos de nodos en función de la intensidad de las relaciones entre sí (Cherven, 2015). Debido a la alta densidad de relaciones entre las categorías, y con el objetivo de facilitar la lectura, el grafo presenta sólo las relaciones que aparecieron más de 10 veces. Las métricas de la red (grado de centralidad y de inter-conectividad) están disponibles en la Tabla S4 del material suplementario.

Las categorías se agruparon en cuatro dimensiones según la intensidad de las relaciones entre ellas. El primer grupo estuvo compuesto por el 46.75% de los nodos y hace referencia a la desigualdad de oportunidades; el segundo grupo incluyó el 23.38% de los nodos y está relacionado con la desigualdad entre clases sociales; el tercero concentró el 16.88% de los nodos y concierne a la desigualdad de ingresos económicos y trabajo; y el cuarto bloque, compuesto por el 11.69% de los nodos, giró en torno a la desigualdad entre grupos sociales específicos, tales como personas de etnia gitana, inmigrantes, en situación de discapacidad, u otros grupos discriminados o en riesgo de exclusión social. Los nombres de los grupos de categorías corresponden a nuestra conceptualización de los tópicos relacionados.

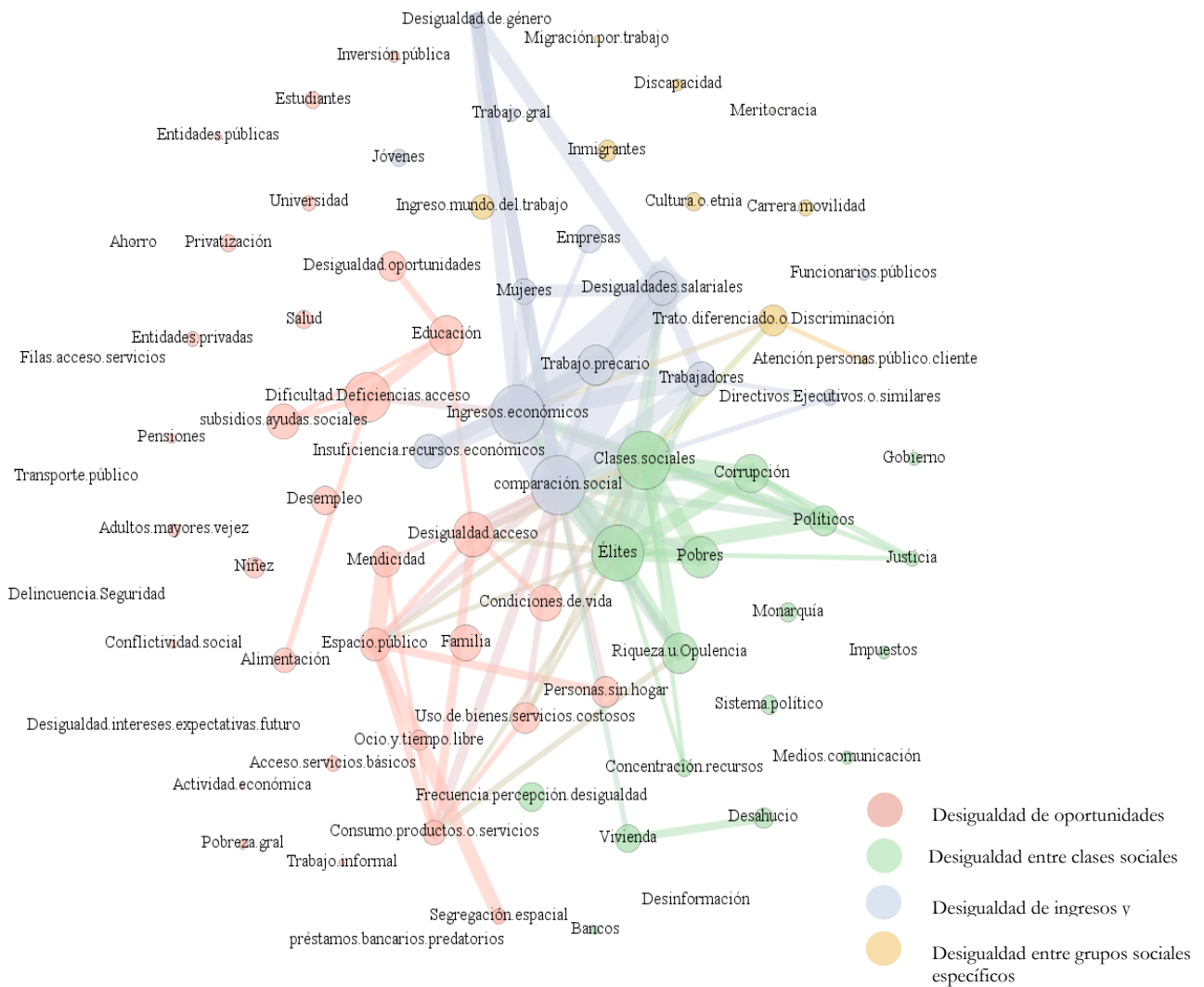


Figura 3. Grafo de las relaciones entre categorías de análisis sobre percepciones de la desigualdad en España.

### *Desigualdad de oportunidades*

Esta dimensión concentró la mayor cantidad de nodos de la red y hace referencia a una amplia diversidad de temas asociados con la desigualdad de oportunidades, condiciones de vida dignas, acceso a servicios básicos y de consumo. Así, la desigualdad de oportunidades se presenta como todas aquellas dificultades o desigualdades en el acceso a servicios públicos básicos como la sanidad, la educación, la vivienda, la calefacción, la alimentación, entre otros. En este sentido, la desigualdad de oportunidades, desde el enfoque de las capacidades, se puede definir como todas las condiciones y recursos (no necesariamente económicos) que permiten a las personas desarrollar su máximo potencial (Nussbaum, 2012). Esta dimensión hace énfasis más bien en las implicaciones materiales y psicosociales que tienen las desigualdades económicas en la vida cotidiana de las personas.



La desigualdad de oportunidades también tiene que ver con las condiciones de vida dignas, la cual depende de la capacidad de consumo de productos o servicios. Así, además de la sanidad y la educación, la desigualdad se percibe por medio de la comparación entre grupos de personas que pueden acceder a productos o servicios de mejor calidad o relacionados con el lujo, el ocio, el tiempo libre, etc. Este tipo de escenarios se comparan con las personas que no tienen hogar, en situación de pobreza o mendicidad, e incluso, con quienes han sido víctimas de desahucios. En este sentido, se pone la mirada sobre los que tienen una mejor calidad de vida en términos de bienes y servicios, comparados con los que apenas tienen para sobrevivir.

*En el caso de estudiantes, conozco a gente que aun no teniendo mucha vocación por su carrera, la han tenido que dejar por no poder pagarla, en cambio gente que le sobra dinero siguen cursándola sin vocación ninguna o yéndose a privadas (162:3)*

*Por cuestiones económicas, una persona de familia obrera tiene muchas menos posibilidades de adquirir cultura (teatro, libros, cine) y por tanto puede desarrollar menos sus intereses o su intelecto (252:3)*

*En la sanidad hay personas que se pueden permitir ir a clínicas privadas pero otras muchas tienen que ir a lo público y pueden llegar a esperar meses para que les atiendan (128:3)*

### ***Desigualdad entre clases sociales***

Esta dimensión se refiere a la comparación social entre grupos en función de su clase social, incluyendo, por un lado, a los grupos ricos y poderosos, y por el otro, a los grupos más pobres, vulnerables y desaventajados. Aunque en estas comparaciones sociales suelen mencionar tanto a las élites como a los pobres, el grado de centralidad y de interconectividad de la categoría *Élites* fue mucho mayor que la categoría *Pobres*. Esto indica que la idea de los grupos ricos y poderosos se encuentra presente con mayor intensidad y con mayor relación con otras categorías, que la idea de la pobreza. Adicionalmente, la relación entre clases sociales en esta dimensión se encuentra marcada por los actos de corrupción que los grupos más aventajados (políticos, monarquía, millonarios) cometen, afectando de forma generalizada a toda la ciudadanía. Esta relación entre riqueza y corrupción resaltan las injusticias que se observan a través del abuso y excesos de unos grupos en detrimento de otros.

*La gran cantidad de desahucios que se producen debido a la falta de recursos, mientras que muchos mandatarios que nos gobiernan se llenan las arcas a nuestra costa, cosas del capitalismo (190:3)*

*Gente que hoy día ha sido desahuciada mientras que hay gente comprándose coches de alta gama (214:2)*

*Como un alto cargo roba mucho dinero a toda España y ni siquiera ingresa a la cárcel, sin embargo una persona pobre roba algo de comida para poder vivir e inmediatamente es ingresada en la cárcel (216:1)*

### **Desigualdad de recursos económicos y trabajo**

En esta dimensión se incluyen los temas directamente relacionados con los recursos económicos y las dinámicas del trabajo como actividad económico-productiva. Aquí observamos que hay una comparación entre grupos que ganan mucho dinero o con muy buenas condiciones de trabajo, con grupos que ganan muy poco y en condiciones precarias de trabajo. Particularmente, se hizo mención a las brechas salariales o desigualdades de ingresos económicos entre hombres y mujeres, directivos y trabajadores, y entre trabajadores formales e informales. La mención a la precariedad del trabajo estuvo asociada con las desigualdades salariales y las pésimas condiciones de trabajo en términos de remuneraciones muy bajas, largas jornadas de trabajo y el desempeño de actividades que no corresponden a los perfiles profesionales de las personas.

*Comparando el sueldo mensual de una mujer y un hombre de la misma empresa (32:1)*

*Se puede ver la desigualdad económica a través de los sueldos de ministros, banqueros, etc., comparados con los de personas trabajadoras (empresarios, empleados, etc.) (173:1)*

*En las personas que viven en la calle o se ven sometidas a empleos precarios y arriesgados que les proporciona gente que cobra 10 veces lo que ofrece a sus trabajadores (121:3)*

### **Desigualdad entre grupos sociales específicos**

Este grupo de categorías describe las dinámicas de discriminación y exclusión en el trabajo y el acceso a recursos económicos para grupos específicos, tales como personas con bajos recursos económicos, grupos étnicos (especialmente de etnia gitana), colectivos de inmigrantes y personas en situación de discapacidad. Las respuestas resaltaron prácticas que perpetúan la situación de desventaja y riesgo de exclusión social de algunos colectivos vulnerables a través de prácticas de explotación y pauperización laboral. Este tipo de prácticas son formas de discriminación de los grupos que es facilitada por el prejuicio que se tiene hacia ellos.

*En trabajo poco remunerados y "apetecibles" como recolector de frutas o aceitunas, se contratan a inmigrantes por 50 Euros al mes (vivido en mi pueblo) porque si se contratan españoles de aquí, hay que pagarles una cantidad digna (139:3)*

*Las personas con una raza diferente suelen trabajar por una cantidad de dinero inferior, realizando el mismo trabajo que otra persona de distinta etnia (179:2)*

*Discriminación a la hora de ofrecer puestos de trabajo a ciertas etnias, como gitanos (178:2)*

*Ideología política y percepciones de la desigualdad económica en España*

En términos generales encontramos que las percepciones de la desigualdad económica fueron similares entre las personas que se posicionaron a la izquierda y a la derecha del espectro político. En la Figura 4 presentamos las categorías que tuvieron mayor cantidad de alusiones en función de la ideología política (izquierda-derecha) de los participantes (ver la Tabla S5 para examinar las respuestas para todas las categorías).

Los resultados sugieren que las personas que se auto-posicionaron a la izquierda del espectro político (en comparación con los que se auto-posicionaron a la derecha) mencionan en mayor medida temas como: clases sociales,  $\chi^2(1, N=488)=6.23, p=.013$ ; élites,  $\chi^2(1, N=488)=6.97, p=.008$ ; corrupción,  $\chi^2(1, N=488)=5.95, p=.015$ ; vivienda,  $\chi^2(1, N=488)=3.79, p=.051$ ; y desahucios,  $\chi^2(1, N=488)=3.94, p=.047$ . Sin embargo, considerando la necesidad de corregir el valor p por múltiples comparaciones y atendiendo a las recomendaciones de reducir el p valor a .005 cuando se exploran efectos (Benjamin et al., 2018), nuestra evidencia no es suficientemente robusta para afirmar que hay diferencia entre los grupos de izquierda y derecha. Por tanto, estos resultados deben ser interpretados como sugerentes y necesitan de replicación. La tabla de contingencia de estas pruebas  $\chi^2$  está disponible en la Tabla S6 del material suplementario.

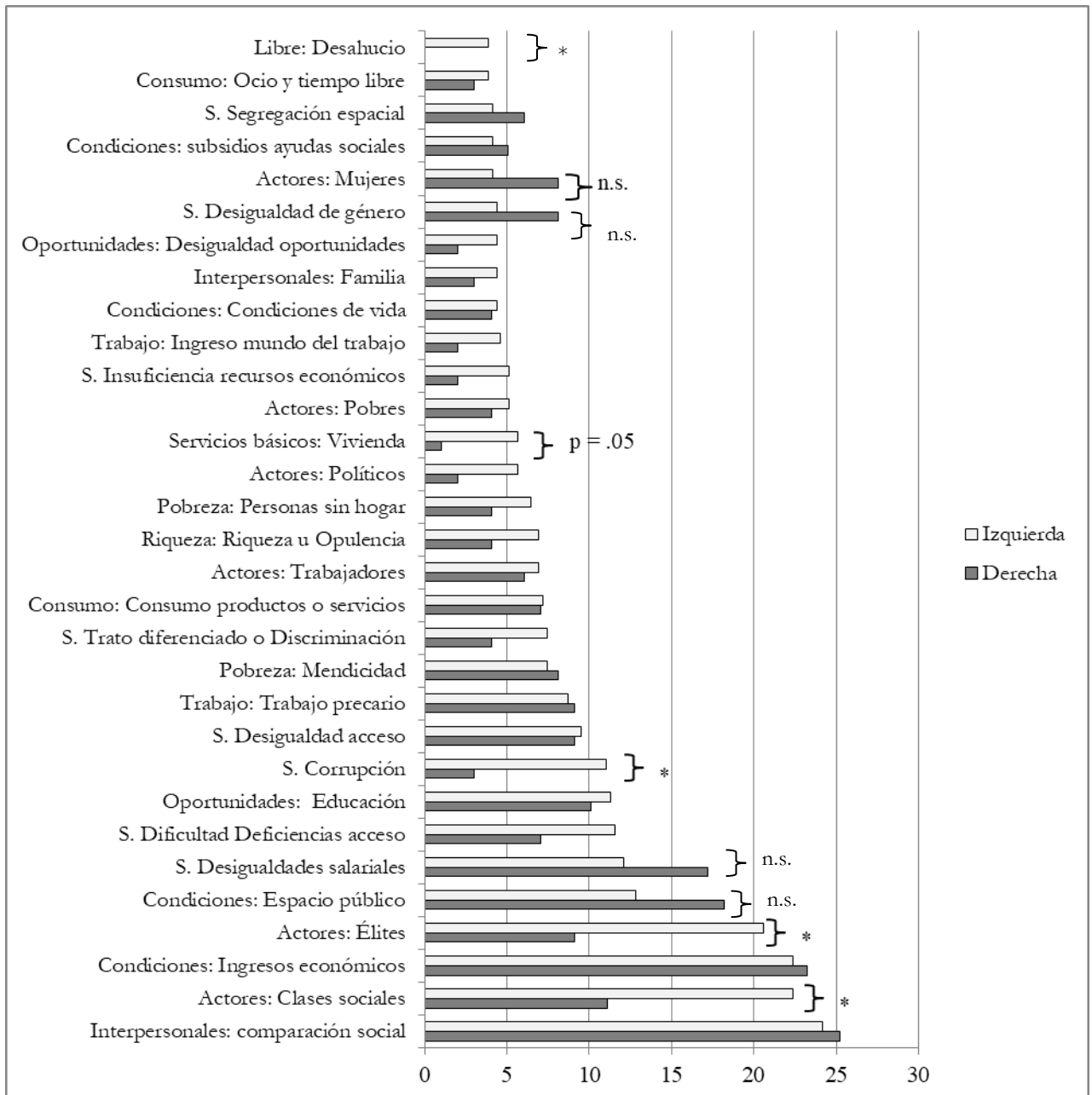


Figura 4. Porcentaje de respuestas de cada categoría dentro de las personas que se identifican como de izquierda y derecha. Nota: \*  $p < .05$

### Discusión

La percepción de la desigualdad económica se ha estudiado principalmente como la estimación subjetiva de la forma en que se distribuyen los recursos económicos entre personas o grupos en una sociedad (Bruckmüller et al., 2017; Engelhardt y Wagener, 2014; Kim et al., 2017). Sin embargo, estas percepciones subjetivas subestiman en gran medida las desigualdades económicas reales (Kiatpongsan y Norton, 2014; Norton y Ariely, 2011; Norton et al., 2014), debido a algunos sesgos inducidos por la forma de medir la percepción de la desigualdad económica en términos de la distribución de recursos

económicos (Arsenio, 2018; Eriksson y Simpson, 2012, 2013; Pedersen y Mutz, 2018). De hecho, medir la desigualdad económica en términos abstractos puede acarrear dificultades a la hora de realizar estimaciones precisas o acertadas; al igual que no tiene en cuenta otras formas de percibir, experimentar y posicionarse ante la desigualdad económica (Irwin, 2018).

En este sentido, la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un constructo multidimensional, situado y motivado: Multidimensional porque incluye ámbitos diversos y diferentes de lo económico (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018); situado, porque depende del contexto y experiencias de la vida cotidiana de las personas (García-Castro et al., 2018; García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018); y motivado, puesto que las ideologías pueden influenciar la forma cómo se percibe la desigualdades (Chambers et al., 2014; Jost y Hunyady, 2005; Rodríguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Por tanto, en la presente investigación profundizamos la percepción de la desigualdad económica en España desde la perspectiva de la vida cotidiana de las personas y examinamos si habían diferencias en función de la ideología política de los/as participantes.

En cuando a la descripción de las percepciones de la desigualdad económica en España, encontramos que las personas se refirieron particularmente a la comparación social entre clases sociales (grupos élite y grupos empobrecidos), sus ingresos económicos y capacidad de consumo de bienes o servicios deseables (educación, ocio, salud, alimentación, etc.). Así, la desigualdad económica se plantea como una comparación social entre personas o grupos, en los que cada uno ocupa una posición relativa frente a los demás según sus recursos disponibles (Peterson, 2017). Por tal motivo, la percepción de la desigualdad económica puede conllevar de forma conexas la noción de privación relativa (Runcinam, 1966), promoviendo la comparación social entre personas/grupos en función de sus recursos, la competitividad, la motivación por el estatus, entre otros (Sommet, Elliot, Jamieson, y Butera, 2018). En esta línea, la comparación entre grupos (e.g., prestar atención a los que están por encima o por debajo de), tiene diferentes implicaciones en cómo se comprende el fenómeno y se responde ante él (Chow y Galak, 2012; Lowery et al., 2009; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, y Unzueta, 2012; Quiroga-Garza, García-Sánchez, Treviño-Elizondo, y Willis, 2018). La percepción de la desigualdad económica hace particularmente saliente la comparación social y privación relativa, lo cual a su vez es uno de los mecanismos por los cuales se afecta el bienestar individual (Buttrick, Heintzleman, y Oishi, 2017; Buttrick y Oishi, 2017).

Adicionalmente, encontramos que la percepción de la desigualdad económica se estructuró en cuatro dimensiones: 1) la desigualdad de acceso a oportunidades y condiciones de vida que facilitan el desarrollo y bienestar de las personas (e.g., educación, alimentación, vivienda, ocio, etc.); 2) la desigualdad entre clases sociales, particularmente, la comparación entre los grupos de élite (grupos ricos y poderosos) asociadas a la corrupción y los grupos más desfavorecidos; 3) la desigualdad de ingresos económicos y condiciones de trabajo, siendo especialmente saliente la pauperización del trabajo y las diferencias salariales por cuestiones de género; y 4) la desigualdad entre grupos específicos, como colectivos étnicos o de inmigrantes, quienes son víctimas de prejuicio y discriminación. En este sentido, nuestros resultados apuntan a que la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un fenómeno multidimensional que no se reduce a la distribución de recursos económicos, sino más bien, está intrínsecamente relacionado con los contextos y vida cotidiana de las personas (García-Castro et al., 2018; García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018). Identificar las diferentes dimensiones asociadas a la percepción de la desigualdad económica es un elemento clave para comprender cómo las personas representan subjetivamente este fenómeno y cómo podrían responder ante el mismo (Moscovici, 1984). Así, además de los procesos cognitivos-motivacionales asociados a la estimación de la redistribución de recursos económicos, los contenidos específicos identificados en este estudio ofrecen indicios importantes sobre otros procesos psicosociales asociados a la percepción subjetiva de la desigualdad.

En cuanto al segundo objetivo, nuestros resultados sugieren que las respuestas ofrecidas por las personas de izquierda (comparadas con las de derecha) hicieron más énfasis en las categorías de clase social, élites, corrupción, vivienda y desahucios. Sin embargo, estos resultados no fueron suficientemente robustos una vez controlamos por un valor  $p$  menor de .005. Nuestros resultados podrían indicar que las diferencias ideológicas no se deben tanto a una tendencia general a resistir al cambio y legitimar la desigualdad, sino más bien a los contenidos específicos sobre qué tipo de cambio y políticas se apoyan (Proch, Elad- Strenger, & Kessler, 2018). Por tanto, es importante explorar en futuros estudios si los temas asociados a la percepción de la desigualdad económica en la vida cotidiana difieren entre grupos ideológicos, siendo las personas posicionadas a la izquierda más sensibles a cuestiones de igualdad y justicia social, que las personas posicionadas a la derecha.

Nuestro estudio presenta algunas limitaciones relacionadas con la representatividad de nuestros resultados debido a la influencia del contexto y orientación política de nuestros

participantes. Por un lado, aunque tuvimos participación de un grupo de la población general, la mayoría de nuestros participantes fueron estudiantes universitarios en una ciudad específica de España. Por tanto, las experiencias y percepciones de la desigualdad económica están supeditadas a las condiciones de un grupo de personas con cierto grado de homogeneidad social y política entre ellas. Además, la orientación política de los estudiantes universitarios suele situarse en el espectro de la izquierda, con lo cual hace falta incluir una mayor representatividad de personas posicionadas a la derecha del espectro político para realizar comparaciones más robustas. Por tal motivo, nuestros resultados no pueden ser generalizables a otros contextos y grupos sociales en España. Sin embargo, nuestros hallazgos son consistentes con resultados previos que ratifican que las personas perciben la desigualdad en términos de la privación relativa y basada en experiencias más cotidianas más que en estimaciones económicas abstractas (García-Sánchez, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, García-Castro, et al., 2018; Kraus, Park, & Tan, 2017; Minkoff & Lyons, 2019). Además, las categorías temáticas y dimensiones que encontramos reflejan algunas cuestiones propias del discurso general sobre la desigualdad en España difundidos en medios de comunicación, tales como el desempleo, la corrupción, los desahucios, o la discriminación, entre otros. Teniendo en cuenta que las personas se preocupan más por la desigualdad económica cuando los medios de comunicación han tenido una mayor cobertura de estos temas (McCall, 2013), sería importante explorar en futuros estudios de qué forma los medios de comunicación moldean las percepciones de la desigualdad en España.

Finalmente, consideramos importante seguir explorando sobre la multidimensionalidad de la percepción de la desigualdad económica. Nuestro estudio aporta una base de información cualitativa única para elaborar un banco de ítems y construir instrumentos de medición que contemplen diferentes dimensiones del constructo. Igualmente, podrían realizarse análisis de texto sobre nuestros datos brutos con el fin de otras preguntas de investigación relacionadas con la valencia del discurso, los actores sociales mencionados, las situaciones concretas, etc. Adicionalmente, se podrían explorar las implicaciones de estas percepciones de la desigualdad económica sobre el apoyo a políticas públicas, la movilización social, el apoyo al cambio social, entre otros. Para ello sería clave complementar los resultados obtenidos con otros extraídos con metodología correlacional y experimental, así como también, procurar diversificar más la muestra de participantes.

## **Conclusiones**

La percepción de desigualdad económica suelen medirse a través de las estimaciones subjetivas sobre cómo se distribuyen los recursos económicos entre personas o grupos dentro de una sociedad. Sin embargo, este constructo está sujeto a diferentes sesgos de medida que dificultan captar su complejidad. Por tanto, en este trabajo proponemos que la percepción de la desigualdad económica en la vida cotidiana capta diferentes dimensiones de la desigualdad que no se reduce a la estimación de las diferencias de ingresos económicos en términos monetarios. En nuestro trabajo evidenciamos que las personas perciben la desigualdad económica en términos de la comparación social entre grupos y abarcan una amplia diversidad de temas asociados con las desigualdades sociales (e.g., oportunidades y condiciones de vida). Adicionalmente, nuestros resultados no logran encontrar evidencia suficiente para afirmar que la percepción de la desigualdad varía en función de la ideología política, aunque los resultados son sugerentes de que las personas situadas a la izquierda del espectro político perciben en mayor medida temas asociados a la justicia social. Finalmente, con este trabajo presentamos una descripción detallada de la forma cómo se percibe la desigualdad económica en España con el propósito de aportar información empírica que contribuya, por un lado, a desafiar nociones tradicionales ligadas con la medición numérica de la distribución inequitativa de recursos económicos; y por otro, a comprender mejor la multidimensionalidad de este constructo que puede estar asociada a la (des)legitimación de la desigualdad y la motivación por el cambio social.

**Declaración de disponibilidad de datos:** El material suplementario, datos brutos y demás archivos utilizados para el procesamiento de la información se encuentran disponibles de forma pública y abierta en la plataforma Open Science Framework, en el siguiente enlace: <https://goo.gl/3PXMtQ>

**Declaración de contribución de los autores:** EG-S, GW, and RR-B contribuyeron a la concepción y diseño del estudio. EG-S y JG-C realizaron la codificación de la información. EG-S llevó a cabo la recolección, procesamiento y análisis de la información, y escribió el primer borrador del manuscrito. Todos los autores realizaron contribuciones al manuscrito, leyeron y aprobaron la versión final sometida a la revista.



### **Material suplementario**

El material complementario de este proyecto, incluido los datos brutos, la unidad hermnéutica de Atlas.ti y el Grafo en formato Gephi, están disponibles en: <https://goo.gl/3PXMtQ>.

**Tabla S1.**

Marco categorial de referencia según García-Sánchez et al. (2018)

Categoría	Subcategoría	Indicadores
Actores sociales: Menciones a grupos, organizaciones o instituciones que representen cualquier figura con un rol específico en las dinámicas sociales	Adultos mayores	Menciones adultos mayores, ancianos, vejez, etc.
	Bancos	Bancos, entidades financieras, entidades de préstamos, etc.
	Campesinos	Campesinos, granjeros, personas que se dedican a la agricultura
	Clases sociales (general)	Menciones a las clases sociales, categorías sociales basadas en el estatus, riqueza, pobreza, trabajo, etc.
	Directivos/as, jefes, supervisores/as	Personas que desempeñan roles de poder, supervisión, dirección, etc., dentro de una organización de trabajo
	Élites	Clases sociales altas, grupos privilegiados y poderosos, tanto a nivel político, social o económico (ej. ricos, políticos, personas adineradas, etc.)
	Empresas	Organizaciones de trabajo, públicas o privadas, que tienen un papel económico productivo en la sociedad
	Entidades privadas	Menciones a organizaciones privadas
	Entidades públicas	Menciones a organizaciones públicas
	Estudiantes	Personas que están en proceso de educación formal institucionalizada
	Servidores/as públicos	Personas que trabajan para el estado o que desempeñan algún trabajo en el sector público, y que son diferentes de los políticos que se definen dentro de la categoría de poderosos.
	Gobierno	Menciones a entidades gubernamentales o al gobierno en general.
	Personas jóvenes, adolescentes	Personas jóvenes, adolescentes, adultos jóvenes, etc.
	Mujeres	Mujeres en general o menciones a mujeres en particular tales como ejemplos o en situaciones específicas.
	Niños/as	Niños, infantes, menores de edad, etc.
	Pobres	Clase social baja, sin dinero, sin recursos o grupos desaventajados por la ausencia de condiciones de vida.
	Policía	Menciones a la policía, tanto a nivel general, como a nivel de trabajadores que se desempeñan como tal
Sociedad (general)	Menciones a la sociedad en términos generales	
Trabajadores/as	Personas que viven del trabajo, no importa en qué tipo de actividad se desempeñen o qué tipo de trabajo posean.	
Universidad	Sistemas de educación superior, universidades, etc.	
Universidad privada	Universidades privadas, o instituciones privadas de educación superior.	
Universidad pública	Universidades públicas o instituciones públicas de educación superior.	

*(Continúa)*

Tabla S1. (Continúa)

Categoría	Subcategoría	Indicadores
Condiciones de vida: Menciones a las condiciones o características materiales o sociales propias del estilo de vida de las personas.	Concentración recursos económicos	Concentración de la riqueza, acciones de acumular muchos recursos económicos
	Condiciones de vida (general)	Mención general a las condiciones de vida sin especificar detalles en particular (ej. estilos de vida)
	Criminalidad o inseguridad	Referencias al crimen, tasas de victimización, inseguridad, o cualquier otro tipo de acciones ilegales, delictivas o criminales.
	Desplazamiento forzado	Personas que han tenido que huir de sus hogares o territorios por motivos de seguridad o conflictos
	Espacio público	Cualquier referencia a espacios públicos tales como calles, parques, avenidas, supermercados, centros comerciales, o lugares de entretenimiento, o cualquier otro lugar en el que las personas pueden interactuar de forma pública
	Estratificación social	Referencia directa al sistema de estratificación socioeconómica colombiana
	Pensiones	Pensiones, beneficios para las personas mayores, subsidios, ingresos de retiro, etc.
	Ingresos económicos	Ingresos, salarios, sueldos, o cualquier otro tipo de ingreso económico obtenido por el trabajo
	Créditos predatorios	Préstamos otorgados por el sistema financiero o no, que se consideren como abusivos, excesivos, injustos, exorbitantes, etc.
Consumo: Tener acceso a servicios o productos	Sector rural	Menciones a áreas rurales, el campo, las zonas de producción agrícola, etc.
	Subsidios sociales	Cualquier subsidio del gobierno que financie o ayude a los grupos más desfavorecidos
	Ahorros	Ahorrar dinero de cualquier modo
	Consumo de productos o servicios.	Consumir cualquier producto o servicio, el hecho de consumir en sí mismo.
Institucional. Relacionado con instituciones sociales, políticas, económicas, etc. Se concibe como aspectos que reflejan el sistema, no cómo actores sociales individuales.	Filas para el acceso a servicios	Relacionado con la forma como las personas acceden a ciertos productos o servicios, el hecho de hacer colas para tener acceso
	Ocio	Consumo de actividades de ocio, entretenimiento, ocupación del tiempo libre, etc.
	Impuestos	Sistema de impuestos, pagar impuestos, referencias a los impuestos como tal
	Inversión pública	La forma como el gobierno o el sistema político distribuye el presupuesto público entre las personas, las regiones, etc.
	Justicia	Sistema de justicia, como la justicia gestiona algunos casos; también la mención a lo que se considera como justo a nivel de situaciones o experiencias.
	Medios de comunicación	Cualquier medio de comunicación, su rol en la información de la ciudadanía
	Sistema político	En general, el sistema político en general; también aplica cuando se habla del sistema en general.

(Continúa)

Tabla S1. (Continúa)

Categoría	Subcategoría	Indicadores
Relaciones intergrupales: Relaciones entre grupos, da cuenta del tipo de interacciones entre ellos.	Trato entre personas	Cualquier tipo de relaciones interpersonales que puedan estar relacionadas con la atención al cliente o las interacciones del día a día entre grupos o personas
	Comparación social	Comparación explícita entre grupos, el uso de categorías sociales para comparar y evaluar grupos.
	Conflictividad social	Problemáticas sociales en general, problemas de convivencia, violación de derechos humanos, o cualquier otra acción que refleja conflictos entre grupos o personas.
	Etnia o cultura	Grupos étnicos, culturales, minoritario, tales como indígenas, afrodescendientes, gitanos, etc.
Oportunidades: Condiciones favorables o adecuadas para desarrollar capacidades individuales; puede referirse a estados o situaciones que permiten lograr el éxito o el desarrollo individual	Familia	Relaciones familiares
	Educación	Cualquier referencia al sistema de educación o el hecho de estudiar en el sistema formal
	Meritocracia	Refiere a la idea de que el éxito se consigue a través del trabajo duro, esfuerzo y determinación individual
	Desigualdad de oportunidades	Menciones directas a tener un acceso desigual a oportunidades de vida que favorecen u obstaculizan el logro de objetivos o desarrollo personal.
Pobreza: Estado de tener poco o no tener dinero, medios de apoyo, o simplemente, no tener lo suficiente de lo que se considera necesario para sobrevivir.	Oportunidades de vida (general)	Mención general a las oportunidades sin especificar qué tipo de oportunidades
	Mendicidad	Referencias a las personas que piden dinero en la calle o a la actividad general de pedir dinero en la calle.
	Habitantes de calle	Personas que viven en las calles porque no tienen una vivienda fija o específica.
Riqueza: Tener abundancia de dinero y bienes materiales	Pobreza (general)	Mención general a la pobreza sin especificar ningún aspecto en particular
	Riqueza (general)	Estado de tener abundancia de dinero, bienes materiales, recursos económicos, etc.
	Uso de bienes o servicios costosos	Uso o consumo de productos que resaltan el estatus de las personas y las hacen aparecer muy ricos, adinerados, aventajados, etc.

(Continúa)

Tabla S1. (Continúa)

Categoría	Subcategoría	Indicadores
Sentidos: Categoría complementaria que califica las demás categorías temáticas; permite identificar en qué contexto se plantean algunas temáticas.	Actividad económica	Menciones generales a la economía de la región, la ciudad o de algún otro lugar.
	Corrupción	Falta de transparencia, desvío de recursos, influencia para subvertir los procedimientos legales, sobreponer los intereses individuales sobre los generales
	Desigualdad de acceso	Diferencias relevantes en la cantidad y calidad de acceso a bienes, servicios y cualquier otro recurso. Se concentra en el contraste de unos grupos que tienen vs. Otros grupos que no tienen acceso.
	Desigualdad de condiciones físicas de vida	Diferencias en las condiciones de vida de acuerdo con la estratificación socioeconómica.
	Desigualdad de costos de vida	Variaciones en las condiciones de vida de un lugar a otro según los sectores del espacio público, la ciudad.
	Desigualdad de género	Cualquier referencia a las relaciones asimétricas de poder y desigualdad entre hombres y mujeres, así cualquier otro tipo de diferencias debidas al género.
	Desigualdad de ingresos	Desigualdad en la cantidad de ingresos económicos que se perciben por alguna actividad económica productiva.
	Desinformación	Información falsa ofrecida de forma deliberada por cualquier medio de comunicación, bulos, o estrategias de desinformación de los medios de comunicación.
	Carencia o dificultad de acceso	No tener la posibilidad de tener acceso a bienes o servicios, enfocado a la carencia, ausencia, o no tener suficiente de algunos bienes, servicios o productos de cualquier cosa (ej. sanidad, educación, dinero, etc.) Esta categoría es diferente de la desigualdad de acceso, la cual se enfoca en la comparación de unos grupos que tienen mientras que otros tienen mucho.
	Dificultad en la movilidad	Dificultades para ascender en la escalera social, problemas u obstáculos para el ascenso social.
	Carencia de recursos económicos	No tener suficiente dinero, efectivo, o recursos económicos en general.
	Privatización	Referencias al hecho de privatizar organizaciones, o mención al rol de entidades privadas en general
	Segregación espacial	Imposición de la separación entre grupos de la sociedad por cuestiones del uso del espacio público, apartar unos grupos de otros mediante barreras geográficas, o límites espaciales que dividen los grupos sociales.
Discriminación	Acciones de excluir a otros por sus características de grupo o categorías sociales a las cuales pertenecen; también se incluyen prejuicios o actitudes negativas hacia otros grupos sociales.	

(Continúa)

Tabla S1. (Continúa)

Categoría	Subcategoría	Indicadores
Servicios básicos: Principales servicios para tener una vida digna	Acceso de servicios básicos (general)	Menciones generales a las condiciones mínimas de vida digna, sin especificar ningún producto o servicio en particular.
	Alimentación	Aspectos relacionados con la seguridad alimentaria, tener acceso a una alimentación balanceada o apropiada
	Salud	Cualquier mención a la salud física o mental, los servicios sanitarios, la asistencia de las personas en cuestiones de salud
	Transporte público	Movilidad en la ciudad, medios de transporte, no sólo el transporte público, sino también otros medios de circular por el espacio físico de las ciudades.
	Vivienda	Vivienda, tipos de vivienda, espacios físicos en que se reside
	Desahucios	El hecho de expulsar a las personas de su vivienda por no poder asumir las deudas con alguna entidad financiera.
Trabajo: Relacionado con cualquier actividad económico-productiva a través de la cual las personas tienen ingresos económicos. Incluye diversas formas de trabajo diferentes al empleo formal, tales como el trabajo independiente, informal, cooperativo, etc.	Migración económica	Viajar al extranjero o a otros sitios para buscar mejores oportunidades de trabajo o para obtener ingresos económicos
	Trabajo infantil	Actividades económicas desarrolladas por niños, niñas y/o adolescentes
	Trabajo informal	Actividades económicas fuera del ámbito formal del empleo, tales como ventas ambulantes o actividades económicas sin ningún tipo de filiación institucional oficial.
	Carrera	Expectativas de desarrollo profesional, bien para mejorar opciones laborales, profesionales u ocupacionales.
	Desempleo	Referencias al paro, el desempleo, o a las personas en paro o que no realizan ninguna actividad económico productiva
	Acceso al trabajo	Relacionada a la acción de conseguir un trabajo, buscar ingresar a cualquier tipo de trabajo (no sólo el empleo)
	Trabajo (general)	Menciones generales al trabajo, sin especificar ninguna dimensión en particular
Trabajo precario	Condiciones de trabajo precarias o mediocres relacionadas con bajos salarios, jornadas extendidas, bajos perfiles ocupacionales, etc.	

**Tabla S2.** Análisis de fiabilidad interjueces a nivel general y por categoría de análisis

<b>Categoría</b>	<b>Eval_1</b>	<b>Eval_2</b>	<b>Acuerdo exacto</b>	<b>Kappa</b>
Actores: Élités	71	56	46	0.57
Actores: Adultos mayores vejez	2	2	2	1.00
Actores: Bancos	1	1	1	1.00
Actores: Clases sociales	83	100	66	0.56
Actores: Directivos Ejecutivos o similares	14	10	9	0.60
Actores: Empresas	17	22	16	0.70
Actores: Entidades públicas	2	3	2	0.67
Actores: Entidades privadas	6	8	6	0.75
Actores: Estudiantes	3	4	3	0.75
Actores: Funcionarios públicos	4	4	4	1.00
Actores: Gobierno	4	9	4	0.44
Actores: Inmigrantes	9	11	9	0.82
Actores: Jóvenes	9	10	9	0.90
Actores: Monarquía	3	3	3	1.00
Actores: Mujeres	24	25	23	0.88
Actores: Niñez	5	5	5	1.00
Actores: Pobres	24	14	12	0.46
Actores: Políticos	17	17	17	1.00
Actores: Trabajadores	38	46	32	0.62
Actores: Universidad	4	6	4	0.67
Actores: Universidad Privada	1	1	1	1.00
Condiciones: Concentración recursos	11	12	9	0.64
Condiciones: Condiciones de vida	6	4	3	0.43
Condiciones: Delincuencia Seguridad	1	1	1	1.00
Condiciones: Espacio público	46	46	42	0.84
Condiciones: Ingresos económicos	116	108	95	0.74
Condiciones: Pensiones	2	2	2	1.00
Condiciones: subsidios ayudas sociales	12	11	10	0.77
Consumo: Consumo productos o servicios	20	13	10	0.43
Consumo: Ocio y tiempo libre	10	9	7	0.58
Institucional: Impuestos	5	6	5	0.83
Institucional: Inversión pública	1	1	1	1.00
Institucional: Justicia	11	8	8	0.73
Institucional: Medios comunicación	3	4	3	0.75
Institucional: Sistema político	7	4	3	0.38
Interpersonales: Atención personas público cliente	8	4	4	0.50
Interpersonales: comparación social	121	122	104	0.75
Interpersonales: Conflictividad social	2	1	1	0.50
Interpersonales: Cultura o etnia	13	7	7	0.54
Interpersonales: Familia	5	13	4	0.29

*(Continúa)*

Tabla S2. (Continúa)

Categoría	Eval_1	Eval_2	Acuerdo exacto	Kappa
Libre: Desahucio	6	6	6	1.00
Libre: Discapacidad	3	3	3	1.00
Oportunidades: Educación	20	22	16	0.62
Oportunidades: Meritocracia	3	1	1	0.33
Oportunidades: Desigualdad oportunidades	15	12	11	0.69
Oportunidades: Oportunidades de vida	1	1	1	1.00
Pobreza: Mendicidad	19	17	16	0.80
Pobreza: Personas sin hogar	10	9	9	0.90
Pobreza: Pobreza gran	4	6	4	0.67
Riqueza: Riqueza u Opulencia	24	16	9	0.29
Riqueza: Uso de bienes/servicios costosos	15	20	15	0.75
S. Actividad económica	2	1	1	0.50
S. Corrupción	34	23	23	0.68
S. Desigualdad acceso	23	5	4	0.17
S. Desigualdad de género	28	27	26	0.90
S. Desigualdades salariales	73	68	64	0.83
S. Desinformación	1	1	1	1.00
S. Dificultad Deficiencias acceso	23	10	5	0.18
S. Dificultad movilidad	1	1	1	1.00
S. Insuficiencia recursos económicos	29	11	7	0.21
S. Privatización	6	5	5	0.83
S. Segregación espacial	20	28	17	0.55
S. Trato diferenciado o Discriminación	35	35	27	0.63
Servicios básicos: Acceso servicios básicos	1	1	1	1.00
Servicios básicos: Alimentación	5	11	4	0.33
Servicios básicos: Salud	1	1	1	1.00
Servicios básicos: Vivienda	11	12	11	0.92
Trabajo: Migración por trabajo	4	4	4	1.00
Trabajo: Trabajo informal	2	2	2	1.00
Trabajo: Carrera movilidad	7	2	2	0.29
Trabajo: Desempleo	11	11	9	0.69
Trabajo: Ingreso mundo del trabajo	22	20	17	0.68
Trabajo: Trabajo gran	7	12	6	0.46
Trabajo: Trabajo precario	42	32	30	0.68
<b>Total</b>	<b>1249</b>	<b>1169</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>0.71</b>

Nota: Eval\_1 = Evaluador 1; y Eval\_2 = Evaluador 2; Este análisis de fiabilidad se realizó usando la plataforma Coding Analysis Toolkit implementado para soportar los datos de codificación derivados del software Atlas.ti 7.



**Tabla S3.**

Frecuencia de aparición de categorías asociadas a la percepción de la desigualdad económica en España

Categoría	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Interpersonales: comparación social	178	25.25
Condiciones: Ingresos económicos	171	24.26
Actores: Clases sociales	130	18.44
Actores: Élités	117	16.60
Condiciones: Espacio público	105	14.89
S. Desigualdades salariales	96	13.62
S. Dificultad Deficiencias acceso	81	11.49
Oportunidades: Educación	75	10.64
S. Desigualdad acceso	74	10.50
Trabajo: Trabajo precario	65	9.22
S. Corrupción	57	8.09
Consumo: Consumo productos o servicios	55	7.80
Pobreza: Mendicidad	55	7.80
Actores: Trabajadores	52	7.38
S. Insuficiencia recursos económicos	43	6.10
Riqueza: Riqueza u Opulencia	42	5.96
Pobreza: Personas sin hogar	41	5.82
S. Trato diferenciado o Discriminación	41	5.82
Actores: Mujeres	37	5.25
S. Desigualdad de género	36	5.11
Actores: Pobres	34	4.82
Actores: Políticos	33	4.68
Condiciones: subsidios ayudas sociales	33	4.68
Condiciones: Condiciones de vida	31	4.40
S. Segregación espacial	30	4.26
Servicios básicos: Vivienda	30	4.26
Riqueza: Uso de bienes/servicios costosos	26	3.69
Servicios básicos: Alimentación	24	3.40
Trabajo: Ingreso mundo del trabajo	24	3.40
Actores: Empresas	23	3.26
Libre: Frecuencia percepción desigualdad	23	3.26
Trabajo: Desempleo	23	3.26
Consumo: Ocio y tiempo libre	22	3.12
Interpersonales: Familia	22	3.12
Oportunidades: Desigualdad oportunidades	22	3.12
Libre: Desahucio	19	2.70
Servicios básicos: Salud	18	2.55
Institucional: Justicia	16	2.27
Interpersonales: Cultura o etnia	15	2.13
Actores: Directivos Ejecutivos o similares	14	1.99
Actores: Jóvenes	14	1.99
Actores: Inmigrantes	13	1.84
Actores: Niñez	13	1.84

*(Continúa)*

Tabla S3. (Continúa)

Categoría	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Trabajo: Trabajo Gral.	13	1.84
Condiciones: Concentración recursos	12	1.70
S. Privatización	12	1.70
Servicios básicos: Acceso servicios básicos	12	1.70
Institucional: Impuestos	11	1.56
Institucional: Sistema político	11	1.56
Actores: Entidades privadas	10	1.42
Actores: Estudiantes	10	1.42
Actores: Universidad	10	1.42
Condiciones: Pensiones	10	1.42
Interpersonales: Atención personas público cliente	10	1.42
Actores: Adultos mayores vejez	9	1.28
Actores: Gobierno	8	1.13
Actores: Monarquía	7	0.99
Pobreza: Pobreza Gral.	7	0.99
Trabajo: Carrera movilidad	7	0.99
Actores: Funcionarios públicos	6	0.85
Institucional: Medios comunicación	6	0.85
Interpersonales: Conflictividad social	6	0.85
Trabajo: Migración por trabajo	6	0.85
Institucional: Inversión pública	5	0.71
S. Actividad económica	4	0.57
Trabajo: Trabajo informal	4	0.57
Actores: Bancos	3	0.43
Libre: Discapacidad	3	0.43
Actores: Entidades públicas	2	0.28
S. Desinformación	2	0.28
Condiciones: Delincuencia Seguridad	1	0.14
Condiciones: préstamos bancarios predatorios	1	0.14
Consumo: Ahorro	1	0.14
Consumo: Filas acceso servicios	1	0.14
Oportunidades: Meritocracia	1	0.14
S. Desigualdad intereses expectativas futuro	1	0.14
Servicios básicos: Transporte público	1	0.14

*Nota:* El porcentaje representa la proporción de respuestas codificadas dentro de cada categoría sobre el número total de respuestas (N=705)

Chapter 8

**Tabla S4.** Medidas de centralidad de la red de categorías analizadas

Desigualdad de oportunidades			Desigualdad entre clases sociales			Desigualdad de ingresos y trabajo			Desigualdad entre grupos sociales específicos		
<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Grado de centralidad</i>	<i>Centralidad de inter-conectividad</i>	<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Grado de centralidad</i>	<i>Centralidad de inter-conectividad</i>	<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Grado de centralidad</i>	<i>Centralidad de inter-conectividad</i>	<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Grado de centralidad</i>	<i>Centralidad de inter-conectividad</i>
Dificultad acceso	45	203.95	Clases sociales	53	148.41	comparación social	54	169.39	Trato diferenciado o Discriminación	28	46.03
Desigualdad acceso	40	159.44	Élites	51	133.18	Ingresos económicos	53	207.91	Ingreso mundo del trabajo	22	14.04
Educación	35	59.19	Pobres	37	56.08	Trabajo precario	36	72.05	Inmigrantes	18	10.57
Condiciones de vida	33	42.15	Riqueza u Opulencia	36	52.19	Insuficiencia recursos económicos	31	46.51	Cultura o etnia	16	4.96
subsidios ayudas sociales	32	106.25	Corrupción	35	60.04	Trabajadores	30	32.41	Carrera movilidad	14	76.87
Familia	32	71.73	Políticos	27	22.82	Desigualdades salariales	30	29.51	Discapacidad	10	2.06
Espacio público	30	73.12	Frecuencia percepción desigualdad	26	26.66	Empresas	25	59.95	Atención personas público cliente	6	0.06
Mendicidad	28	89.28	Vivienda	25	16.15	Mujeres	23	14.25	Migración por trabajo	5	0.27
Uso de bienes servicios costosos	28	15.45	Desahucio	18	5.54	Jóvenes	15	8.92	Meritocracia	1	0.00
Desigualdad oportunidades	27	26.66	Monarquía	17	2.95	Directivos Ejecutivos o similares	14	1.35			
Personas sin hogar	27	93.78	Sistema político	16	4.40	Desigualdad de género	12	4.26			
Desempleo	25	33.09	Concentración recursos	14	1.83	Trabajo Gral.	11	2.69			
Consumo productoso servicios	22	6.68	Justicia	13	4.60	Funcionarios públicos	10	0.10			

(continúa)

Tabla S4. (continúa)

Desigualdad de oportunidades			Desigualdad entre clases sociales								
Categoría	Grado de centralidad	Centralidad de inter-conectividad	Categoría	Grado de centralidad	Centralidad de inter-conectividad	Categoría	Grado de centralidad	Centralidad de inter-conectividad	Categoría	Grado de centralidad	Centralidad de inter-conectividad
Alimentación	22	10.37	Gobierno	11	0.61						
Niñez	18	10.78	Impuestos	11	1.19						
Ocio y tiempo libre	18	2.93	Medios comunicación	11	17.13						
Salud	16	7.40	Bancos	7	0.00						
Estudiantes	15	5.25	Desinformación	2	0.00						
Privatización	15	11.53									
Universidad	13	7.45									
Segregación espacial	13	3.03									
Acceso servicios básicos	13	8.21									
Entidades privadas	12	12.93									
Adultos mayores vejez	11	1.76									
Inversión pública	10	1.55									
Pensiones	8	0.16									
Pobreza Gral.	8	5.70									
Conflictividad social	7	75.35									
Entidades públicas	6	0.31									
Trabajo informal	5	0.09									
Actividad económica	3	0.48									
Delincuencia Seguridad	1	0.00									

**Tabla S5.** Proporción de respuestas por categoría discriminado por la ideología política de los/as participantes.

<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Izquierda (%)</i>	<i>Derecha (%)</i>
Interpersonales: comparación social	24.16	25.25
Actores: Clases sociales	22.37	11.11
Condiciones: Ingresos económicos	22.37	23.23
Actores: Élite	20.57	9.09
Condiciones: Espacio público	12.85	18.18
S. Desigualdades salariales	12.08	17.17
S. Dificultad Deficiencias acceso	11.57	7.07
Oportunidades: Educación	11.31	10.10
S. Corrupción	11.05	3.03
S. Desigualdad acceso	9.51	9.09
Trabajo: Trabajo precario	8.74	9.09
Pobreza: Mendicidad	7.46	8.08
S. Trato diferenciado o Discriminación	7.46	4.04
Consumo: Consumo productos o servicios	7.20	7.07
Actores: Trabajadores	6.94	6.06
Riqueza: Riqueza u Opulencia	6.94	4.04
Pobreza: Personas sin hogar	6.43	4.04
Actores: Políticos	5.66	2.02
Servicios básicos: Vivienda	5.66	1.01
Actores: Pobres	5.14	4.04
S. Insuficiencia recursos económicos	5.14	2.02
Trabajo: Ingreso mundo del trabajo	4.63	2.02
Condiciones: Condiciones de vida	4.37	4.04
Interpersonales: Familia	4.37	3.03
Oportunidades: Desigualdad oportunidades	4.37	2.02
S. Desigualdad de género	4.37	8.08
Actores: Mujeres	4.11	8.08
Condiciones: subsidios ayudas sociales	4.11	5.05
S. Segregación espacial	4.11	6.06
Consumo: Ocio y tiempo libre	3.86	3.03
Libre: Desahucio	3.86	0.00
Libre: Frecuencia percepción desigualdad	3.86	3.03
Servicios básicos: Alimentación	3.60	3.03
Trabajo: Desempleo	3.60	3.03
Institucional: Justicia	3.08	1.01
Interpersonales: Cultura o etnia	3.08	2.02
Riqueza: Uso de bienes/servicios costosos	3.08	3.03
Actores: Empresas	2.83	5.05
Actores: Inmigrantes	2.31	1.01
Servicios básicos: Salud	2.31	4.04
Trabajo: Trabajo gral	2.31	3.03
Condiciones: Concentración recursos	2.06	0.00
Institucional: Impuestos	2.06	0.00

*(Continúa)*

Tabla S5. (Continúa)

<i>Categoría</i>	<i>Izquierda (%)</i>	<i>Derecha (%)</i>
Institucional: Sistema político	2.06	0.00
Actores: Jóvenes	1.80	2.02
Actores: Universidad	1.80	1.01
Condiciones: Pensiones	1.80	0.00
Interpersonales: Atención personas público cliente	1.80	0.00
Actores: Adultos mayores vejez	1.54	0.00
Actores: Entidades privadas	1.54	2.02
Actores: Monarquía	1.54	0.00
S. Privatización	1.54	4.04
Actores: Gobierno	1.29	0.00
Pobreza: Pobreza gral	1.29	2.02
Trabajo: Carrera movilidad	1.29	1.01
Actores: Directivos Ejecutivos o similares	1.03	2.02
Actores: Estudiantes	1.03	0.00
Actores: Niñez	1.03	3.03
Institucional: Inversión pública	1.03	1.01
Institucional: Medios comunicación	1.03	0.00
Servicios básicos: Acceso servicios básicos	1.03	1.01
Actores: Bancos	0.77	0.00
Trabajo: Migración por trabajo	0.77	0.00
Actores: Entidades públicas	0.51	0.00
Actores: Funcionarios públicos	0.51	1.01
Interpersonales: Conflictividad social	0.51	2.02
Condiciones: Delincuencia Seguridad	0.26	0.00
Condiciones: préstamos bancarios predatorios	0.26	0.00
Consumo: Filas acceso servicios	0.26	0.00
Libre: Discapacidad	0.26	1.01
Oportunidades: Meritocracia	0.26	0.00
S. Actividad económica	0.26	0.00
Trabajo: Trabajo informal	0.26	1.01

*Nota:* el porcentaje de cada columna se calculó con base en el total de respuestas dentro de cada una de ellas ( $N_{Izquierda} = 389$ ;  $N_{Derecha} = 99$ ). Las categorías que no aparecen en el listado corresponden a aquellas que no tuvieron ninguna mención.

**Tabla S6.** Tabla de contingencia de las categorías de análisis por ideología política de los participantes

Categoría		Ideología política		
		Izquierda	Derecha	Total (categoría)
Actores: Clases sociales	No	302	88	390
	Si	87	11	98
Actores: Élités	No	309	90	399
	Si	80	9	89
S. Corrupción	No	346	96	442
	Si	43	3	46
Servicios básicos: Vivienda	No	367	98	465
	Si	22	1	23
Libre: Desahucio	No	374	99	473
	Si	15	0	15
Espacio público	No	339	81	420
	Si	50	18	68
S. Desigualdad salarial	No	389	99	424
	Si	342	82	64
S. Desigualdad de género	No	47	17	463
	Si	389	99	25
Mujeres	No	372	91	464
	Si	17	8	24
Total (ideología)		389	99	488

*CHAPTER 9.*

**GENERAL  
DISCUSSION**





This doctoral thesis has been mainly motivated by the widespread legitimation of economic inequality that is currently observed in our societies. Although several organizations have made important efforts to raise concerns about this issue (e.g. Oxfam intermon, United Nations, the OECD, research groups in universities, etc.), and that social movements worldwide have played a pivotal role leading actions to reduce inequality, the overall citizen still legitimize inequality and struggle to challenge the *status quo*. In this thesis we therefore analysed why and under which circumstances people legitimate economic inequality. Particularly, we claim that, above and beyond objective economic indicators, subjective perception of economic inequality performs a crucial role on the legitimization of inequality.

Perceived inequality encloses some paradoxes that could obfuscate people's understanding of economic inequality; and, as a consequence, influence individuals' responses toward it. We have identified three paradoxes of perceived economic inequality that could lead to greater legitimation of inequality: first, the existential and ideal standards paradox (the more perceived economic inequality, the greater acceptance of inequality); second, the perceived inequality and political attitudes paradox (perceiving greater economic inequality, does not necessarily translate into more support for redistribution); and third, the underestimation of inequality paradox (people tend to overlook economic inequality, in spite of the high levels of inequality).

With the current research we aimed to shed light on some psychosocial processes related to these three paradoxes. Particularly, we focused on the implications of perceiving economic inequality and endorsing system-justifying ideologies on the acceptance of inequality and support for redistribution. We argued that system-justifying ideologies, such as meritocracy and equality of opportunities, condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and 1) the levels of economic inequality that individuals are willing to accept; and 2) people's support for redistributive measures.

Our findings corroborated these predictions: endorsing system-justifying ideologies exacerbated the positive relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality; and attenuated the positive relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. In addition, we found that the acceptance of inequality suppressed the effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution. Finally, considering that perceived economic inequality has an important role on the -acceptance of economic inequality, we examined in depth how it was perceived by the people on their daily-basis. We thus found that economic inequality is perceived far beyond the numeric

representation of how resources are distributed; and instead, such views of inequality are entrenched in the individuals' experiences of interpersonal and intergroup relations. Then, the underestimation paradox might be just capturing one side of the perception of economic inequality —numeric and distributive— of a phenomenon that is also represented by individuals' experiences.

In the following sections, we rely on our empirical findings to respond each of the guiding questions we raised when outlined this dissertation in Chapter 2. We firstly summarize the main empirical evidence that supports our arguments, and then discuss the contributions and implications of our findings. We then also acknowledge the limitations of our studies, and highlight some issues for improving the research field. Finally, we conclude this general discussion by drawing some considerations for social psychological interventions aimed at reducing inequality, as well as some future lines of research.

### **Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality?**

In Chapter 3, we studied whether the relationship between the amounts of economic inequality that people perceive and the amount of inequality that they are willing to accept, was exacerbated by individuals' endorsement of system justifying ideologies, such as meritocracy and equality of opportunities. We tested this idea by using survey data coming from the Social Inequality module subscribed to the International Social Survey Programme, and conducted a set of multilevel analyses with more than 40,000 participants over 41 countries around the globe. This analytical technique allowed us to test the influence of system-justifying ideologies, both at the individual- and societal-level, on the individuals' acceptance of economic inequality. We also controlled for other societal variables that might influence individuals' acceptance of inequality, such as the gross domestic product, objective levels of economic inequality, and societal beliefs about meritocracy and equality of opportunities.

We found that system-justifying ideologies exacerbated the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality. As such, we found a positive association between how much economic inequality is perceived and desired, and that this relationship was particularly stronger among those individuals who endorsed more (vs. less) meritocratic and equality of opportunities beliefs. We also found that the role of system-justifying ideologies was held both at the individual and societal level. That is, the positive association between perceived and ideal economic inequality was stronger both, for those individuals who believed more in meritocracy and equality of opportunities, and also, for

individuals living in countries with higher credence that everyone has an equal chance to get ahead in life. The societal beliefs in meritocracy, however, did not have a conditioning effect on the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality.

Although cognitive biases and heuristics could influence perceptions and acceptance of inequality (Pedersen & Larsen, 2018; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018), our findings provide further evidence about the motivational underpinnings of the relationship between perceived and ideal inequality. Indeed, previous research have shown that individuals tend to use what they currently perceive, as a reference point to judge what would be the desirable state of affairs (Cialdini et al., 1990; Friesen et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2009). This motivation to use descriptive perceptions of inequality (what is) to determine prescriptive ideas about inequality (what ought to be) is, furthermore, boosted by system-justifying ideologies. This pattern has been shown previously by researchers who experimentally showed that perceiving more economic inequality is associated to greater acceptance of inequality when individuals were motivated to justify the system (Trump, 2018; Willis et al., 2015). We extend these findings in at least two ways. First, our study relied on representative samples across 41 countries, so that they provide compelling evidence in favour of the external validity of such pattern. Second, system-justifying ideologies operate both at the individual and societal level, which indicates that the motivation to justify the system is not only driven by peoples' own beliefs, but also by the ideological climate surrounding them.

In addition to the ideal levels of economic inequality suggested by the people, redistributive preferences constitute a different way to operationalize people's legitimation of inequality. Thus, the interplay between perceived economic inequality and system-justifying beliefs should also have an influence on individuals' attitudes toward measures aimed at reducing inequality. Specifically, system-justifying ideologies should discourage people to redress economic inequality, and therefore, the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution should be stronger for those who do not justify the system.

### **Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?**

In Chapter 4 we analysed the interactive effect of perception of economic inequality and system-justifying ideologies on individuals' support for redistribution. We followed a similar approach to the one used in Chapter 3, but instead of using the individuals' levels of acceptance of economic inequality, we observed individuals' support

for redistribution of resources. We used the data available in the International Social Survey Programme to provide some evidence that shed light about such relationship. We argued that system justifying beliefs should attenuate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistributive measures. We also introduced additional specifications to our tested model. First, we used two different indicators of support for redistribution: one focused on the governments' role to reduce economic inequality, and second, individual's support for progressive taxation. Since redistributive preferences might be motivated by different social psychological processes (e.g., tax aversion, perceived corruption of the government), we decided to separate both indicators of support for redistribution and fit a multilevel model per each of them. Second, we included additional indicators at the societal level that could influence individuals' political attitudes. Particularly, we used some objective economic inequality indexes as the Gini, the Human Development Index, the Corruption Perceived Index, the Individualism-Collectivism scores per country, and the aggregated values of each individual-level variable.

We found that, endorsing system-justifying ideologies, such as meritocracy and equality of opportunities, weakened the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. Specifically, perceiving more economic inequality was associated with more support for the role of the government to take actions against inequality, among those people who did not believe in meritocracy and equality of opportunities; whereas it was non-significant for the people who believe in such system-justifying ideologies. In the same vein, greater perceived economic inequality tended to be associated with stronger support of progressive taxation, but this pattern was weaker among people who endorsed system-justifying ideologies. These findings were held after controlling for economic and cultural variables at the societal level. Furthermore, we found that people were less supportive to the role of the government to reduce economic inequality in countries with an overall belief that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed. Similarly, people were less supportive of progressive taxation systems in countries with higher objective economic inequality, and with a general belief that working hard and having ambition lead to success.

In short, we found that ideologies that rationalize and justify the *status quo* could neutralize the potential moral outrage triggered by perceiving unfairness and inequality. Therefore, perceiving economic inequality is not enough to move people toward supporting public policies that address inequality. Instead, our findings suggest that is necessary to join perceptions of inequality and ideologies both at the individual and at the

societal level, in order to mobilize individuals to support public policies aimed at reducing inequality. Another contribution of this chapter is the differentiation between indicators of support for redistribution. We showed that both indicators of redistribution were correlated, but each of them might be influenced by different social psychological and cultural factors. Thus, despite individuals' general desire for reducing inequality, they might be reluctant to support policies aimed at reducing it. We then suggest that in addition to perceptions and ideologies about inequality, the framing of public policies could also be a factor influencing people's responses toward inequality.

Although Chapters 3 and 4 revealed consistent findings about the role of system-justifying ideologies to boost the legitimacy of economic inequality, they also show a seeming inconsistency in how people respond to inequality. On the one hand, Chapter 3 show that perceiving higher economic inequality is associated with greater acceptance of inequality; but, on the other hand, perceived economic inequality is associated with more support for policies aimed at reducing inequality. To understand this seeming contradiction, in the following chapters we decided to integrate these variables into a single model.

### **Do ideal levels of economic inequality suppress the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?**

In Chapters 5 and 6, we aimed to replicate the findings we obtained in Chapter 3 and 4 and tried to extend our previous findings by including other variables and integrating them into a single model. Thus, considering that 1) perceived economic inequality is associated with greater acceptance of inequality, but at the same time with stronger support for redistribution; and 2) that higher acceptance of inequality is usually associated with less support for redistribution; then 3) the acceptance of inequality might suppress the relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. To test these ideas, in Chapter 5 we conducted a correlational study, in which we also accounted for the role of economic-system justification as an ideology that should moderate those associations. Particularly, we claimed that perceived economic inequality was positively associated with ideal economic inequality, and that such association was stronger for those that justified more the economic system. We also suggested that perceived economic inequality would be linked to more support for redistribution, particularly among those who do not justify the system. In addition, we claimed that ideal levels of economic inequality would suppress the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution. Similarly, in Chapter 6 we conducted a set of three studies with

samples of undergraduates and general population in Colombia. These studies extended the previous claims by accounting for socioeconomic status. We proposed that higher socioeconomic status should be related to less support for redistribution, but that such association might be driven by perception and acceptance of economic inequality.

Our findings supported most of our claims. We replicated the moderating role of ideologies on the relationship between perceived economic inequality and 1) acceptance of inequality, and 2) support for redistribution. In addition, the association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution became non-significant once we accounted for ideal economic inequality in the model. Thus, ideal levels of economic inequality suppressed the effect of perceived inequality on support for redistribution. This latter finding was replicated along the three studies presented in Chapter 6. Indeed, we showed that there was a negative indirect effect of objective socioeconomic status on support for redistribution through perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality. In other words, high status people perceived more economic inequality; perceived inequality was positively related to greater acceptance of inequality, which in turn was linked to less support for redistribution. The effects of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution were influenced both by system-justifying ideologies and the ideal levels of economic inequality.

In these studies we have shed some light on the question about why perceived economic inequality does not always translate into more support for redistribution, despite of individual's general desire to reduce inequality. First, system-justifying ideologies provide a whole rationalization about the causes of inequality and how to deal with it. Economic system justification, as meritocratic and equality of opportunities beliefs, compile ideas that stress internal over external attributions of the social standing, so that having more (or less) economic resources is the by-product of individual effort, rather than the outcome of having opportunities. Second, desiring higher economic inequality is consistently related to less support for policies that might change the unequal *status quo*, suppressing the influence of perceived inequality on support for redistribution. Thus, we showed that system-justifying ideologies and desiring greater levels of economic inequality are utopian standards that determine how to address inequality, above and beyond situational factors such as socioeconomic status and objective economic inequality. These utopian standards state how things should be, what the most desirable state of affairs is, and how we ought to respond to the current state of affairs. Then, the main contribution of Chapters 5 and 6 is to provide evidence arguing that utopian standards (e.g., beliefs and ideals) can lead people

to have a better understanding of inequality, to imagine different scenarios, and consequently, motivate them to support actions that could make real such ideals.

So far, we have shown that perceived economic inequality, together with ideal levels of inequality and system-justifying beliefs, play an important role on the legitimation of economic inequality. Thus, perceiving higher levels of economic inequality is needed to raise awareness and concerns about this issue, such that people can take actions to deal with inequality accordingly. However, there is a body of research showing that individuals underestimate the current levels of economic inequality (see Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011). Hence, if individuals do not perceive inequality properly, they would remain impassive to such reality. But researchers have also found that the underestimation of economic inequality might be due, partially, to the measurement scales (e.g., ratios, percentages, net income, etc.) used to operationalize this construct (see Eriksson & Simpson, 2012; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). Thus, the underestimation of economic inequality might be due to the way how inequality is subjectively represented (e.g., inferences about economic distributions), rather than a lack of concern about inequality. In the next section, we try to develop this idea by exploring how people perceive economic in their daily-life beyond the numeric estimations of income gaps.

### **How do people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life?**

We conducted two studies to explore how people perceive economic inequality in their daily-life in two different contexts: Colombia and Spain. In both studies, we followed a descriptive approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to account for individuals perceptions of economic inequality. Thus, rather than asking people to rate statements about economic inequality, we relied on individual responses to an open-ended question about how they perceive economic inequality in their daily-life. In Chapter 7, we used grounded theory to build the categorical framework to code participants' responses. In Chapter 8, we used the coding framework already developed in Chapter 7, and coded all participants' responses. We also conducted a quantitative analysis, such as frequency of appearance, co-occurrence, and used network analysis techniques to examine how categories were related between them. In Chapter 8, we additionally tested whether there were differences in perceptions of inequality according to individuals' political self-positioning (e.g. Left vs. Right).

Our findings revealed that perception of economic inequality is an individual representation that goes far beyond the numeric representation of how economic resources are distributed. Instead of the distribution of economic resources, in Chapter 7,



Colombians were particularly sensitive to the lack or unequal access to education, health and incomes as a by-product of the membership to specific social classes. Furthermore, the association between topics showed four clusters that indicated the domains by which economic inequality was perceived: social class and intergroup relations, the lack or unequal access to opportunities, social exclusion and public space, and economic resources and work. Similarly, in Chapter 8, we found that Spaniards tended to perceive economic inequality, mainly, by making social comparisons among people because of their incomes, social class, public space usage, consumption capacity, and access to opportunities for personal development. We also observed that the Spanish sample perceived economic inequality in terms of: inequality of opportunities, inequality between social classes, incomes and work inequalities, and disparities between specific social groups (e.g., gypsies, immigrants). Findings from Chapter 8 also suggest that perceptions of economic inequality are ideologically motivated. Particularly, we found that people who positioned themselves at the left (vs. right) of the political spectrum seemed to be more sensitive to categories such as social classes, elites, corruption, housing, and evictions of people in debt.

Given that research on perception of economic inequality is mainly driven by measuring numeric estimations of distribution of resources, our findings call attention on other dimensions of the construct that are usually overlooked in the literature. Therefore, although individuals might underestimate economic inequality in terms of ratios or percentages, people were well aware of economic inequalities in their daily life. As such, in both contexts, Colombia and Spain, participants did not struggle to provide a large amount of examples of economic inequality which were not reduced to incomes or wealth disparities. The topics mentioned across contexts showed some similarities and differences. On the one hand, economic inequality in both countries was mainly represented by social classes (e.g., the rich and the poor) and social comparison (having more vs. less than). Therefore, perception of economic inequality seems to be intrinsically relational, so that individuals need to compare people (and themselves) with someone else, and in relation to something. This might activate other social psychological processes related to relative deprivation or subjective socioeconomic status. Thus, perceived economic inequality works in tandem with other processes that should be taken into account in this research agenda.

On the other hand, differences between contexts showed that participants in Colombia, as a more unequal country than Spain, were more prone in mentioning inequality of opportunities and living conditions (e.g., education, health service, pensions, informal work, etc.); participants in Spain reported more incomes and wealth disparities.

Hence, although individuals could make equal estimates of incomes differences, they might perceive inequality in quite different ways (e.g., looking at the rich or at the poor), or rationalize it using different arguments (e.g., using different system-justifying ideologies). In sum, we draw attention to the need of acknowledging that perceived economic inequality seems to be a multidimensional phenomenon motivated by ideologies and locally situated in people's daily-life.

At this point, we have provided empirical evidence and theoretical explanations that help us to answer each one of the questions that guided this thesis. We particularly addressed how perceived economic inequality affects the acceptance of inequality and support for redistribution; we showed how ideologies condition the influence of perceived economic inequality; and finally, we tried to expand our understanding of perceptions of economic inequality beyond the monetary dimension, and include a wide variety of economic and social resources. In Table 1 we summarise the guiding questions and main findings of this dissertation.

**Table 1.** Guiding research questions and main findings of this doctoral thesis

Research questions	Way to address the question		Response and main findings
	Aim	Studies	
Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality?	To analyse if meritocratic and equality of opportunities beliefs exacerbate the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality.	<b>Chapter 3:</b> we used survey data containing information from more than 40,000 participants across 41 countries, and conducted multilevel regression analysis. We accounted for socioeconomic status and objective economic indicators.	<b>Yes.</b> There was a positive relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality, which was particularly stronger among 1) the people that believed more in meritocracy and equality of opportunities; and 2) in countries with general beliefs that everyone has equal access to opportunities.
Do system-justifying ideologies condition the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?	To analyse if meritocratic and equality of opportunities beliefs attenuate the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution.	<b>Chapter 4:</b> we used the same survey data than in Chapter 3, accounting for other societal variables (e.g., perceived corruption, human development, individualism-collectivism, and objective economic indicators). We operationalized support for redistribution in two different ways: The role of the government to reduce inequality and support for progressive taxation.	<b>Yes.</b> There was a positive association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution among those individuals who strongly believed in meritocracy and equality of opportunities. This pattern was consistent along two different operationalization of support for redistribution, and after controlling for societal and cultural variables.
Do the ideal levels of economic inequality people desire suppress the relationship between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution?	To examine if the ideal levels of economic inequality suppresses the effect of perceived economic inequality on support for redistribution.	<b>Chapter 5:</b> we tested in one correlational study ( $N=794$ ) whether perceived inequality had a direct and indirect—via ideal economic inequality—effect on support for redistribution. <b>Chapter 6:</b> we assessed in three correlational studies ( $N=1211$ ) if socioeconomic status had a negative indirect effect on support for redistribution via perceived and ideal economic inequality.	<b>Yes.</b> There was a positive association between perceived economic inequality and support for redistribution, but such association was suppressed when accounted for the ideal levels of economic inequality. In addition, we found that socioeconomic status had a negative indirect effect on support for redistribution, via greater perceptions-acceptance of economic inequality: the higher economic standing participants had, the more perceived economic inequality, which lead to greater acceptance of inequality, and therefore, less support for redistribution.
How do people perceive economic inequality from the perspective of their context and daily-life?	Identify how individuals perceived economic inequality from the perspective of their context and daily-life experiences	<b>Chapter 7:</b> we analysed 1624 open responses given by 601 participants in Colombia about how they perceived economic inequality in their daily-life. We used grounded theory approach, and performed content and network analyses. <b>Chapter 8:</b> we analysed 705 open responses given by 290 participants in Spain about how they perceived economic inequality in their daily life. We coded information and performed the same analysis than in Chapter 7. We examined whether political ideology influenced how individuals perceived inequality.	Individuals showed a <b>multidimensional perception</b> of economic inequality that was not constrained to a numeric representation of the distribution of monetary resources. Participants mainly perceived economic inequality as social comparisons between social classes, and as the unequal access to goods and services. We found that perceived economic inequality depends on individuals' experiences, contexts and ideologies.

### Main contributions

In this dissertation we aimed to shed some light on the implications of perceived economic inequality and system-justifying ideologies on the legitimacy of economic inequality. In the introduction we posited three paradoxes by which perceiving economic inequality might contribute to maintain—rather than break—the vicious cycle of economic inequality. We proposed that economic inequality, as an objective and structural dimension, affects social psychological processes by which individuals legitimize such inequality. We then focused on the perception of economic inequality and system-justifying ideologies as two of these processes that might feed such vicious cycle. In the next paragraphs we highlight five contributions that can be extracted from this dissertation; these contributions may shed light about how to break the vicious cycle of economic inequality.

#### **Contribution 1. Perceived economic inequality is necessary, but not sufficient to delegitimize economic inequality**

In accordance to common belief, individuals should be outraged when they perceive higher levels of economic inequality, and as such, they will behave accordingly to such feelings by rejecting inequality and supporting redistribution. However, our empirical chapters showed that perceptions of economic inequality evoke different responses toward economic inequality depending on individuals' motivations. On the one hand, from a system justification perspective, people are motivated to justify the current *status quo*, so that current perception of economic inequality is highly related to the ideal levels of economic inequality. That is, perceiving more economic inequality work as an existential standard that anchor the judgments about the ideal standards. Hence, people will be more prone to legitimate higher levels of economic inequality when they indeed perceive higher economic inequality. On the other hand, perception of economic inequality creates a situation that trigger epistemic needs to explain why there is such inequality (Piff et al., 2018), and boost rationalization to make sense of the reality (Laurin, 2018). Thus, pervasive narratives at the societal level provide a repertoire of system-justifying beliefs at the individual-level that shape how individuals understand and react to inequality.

In this vein, we showed that the mere perception of economic inequality does not warrant an effective reaction against inequality, but it needs a set of beliefs-systems that explain its causes, dynamics, and consequences for people to judge it as inappropriate. Such explanations can exacerbate (or attenuate) individuals rejection of inequality and support for measures aimed at reducing social disparities. Although we found a consistent positive

relationship between perceived inequality and acceptance of economic inequality throughout this dissertation, we also found that scepticism about system-justifying ideologies minimized such association. These findings are consistent with other research showing that when focusing on the lack of opportunities and the flaws of the “American Dream” ideology of upward social mobility, people are more concerned about economic inequality and more prone to support policies aimed at redressing inequality (McCall et al., 2017). Similarly, in a set of five experiments we found some evidence suggesting that challenging the meritocratic system can demotivate people to justify economic inequality and increase support for redistribution (García-Sánchez, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Willis, in preparation).

In the light of these findings, we suggest that perceived economic inequality and system-justifying ideologies should be addressed in tandem in order to break the vicious cycle of economic inequality. On the one hand, perceiving greater economic inequality does not mean that such inequality is considered as unfair; and, on the other hand, endorsing system-justifying-ideologies does not mean that people are fully aware of economic inequality. Thus, in order to increase concerns about economic inequality and promote support for measures aimed at reducing it, we consider that would be worthwhile: 1) to provide accurate information about the current levels of economic inequality, 2) to adjust individuals’ perception of inequality to the current levels of inequality; but particularly, 3) to promote more accurate explanations about economic inequality (its nature, causes, mechanisms, how can be addressed).

**Contribution 2. Utopian standards attenuate (or boost) the influence of perceived economic inequality on the legitimacy of economic inequality**

Although perceiving greater economic inequality might motivate individuals to support measures that redress inequality, we found that such association was contingent on individuals’ utopian standards. By utopian standards we mean the ideal way in which social goods ought to be distributed, reflecting normative justice judgments about how much inequality would be acceptable and justifiable according to individuals (Shepelak & Alwin, 1986). Thus, perceived economic inequality reflects an existential standard that describe the current state of affairs, whereas the ideal level of economic inequality reflects a utopian standard that set the ideal state of affairs. Utopians standards can then be operationalized by the ideal judgments about how much inequality should exist in the society (e.g., ideal income gaps, desirable distribution of resources), or by beliefs-systems that determine how

economic inequality should operate in general (e.g., ideologies such as meritocracy, equality of opportunities, the “American dream”).

Throughout this dissertation we found evidence suggesting that utopian standards affect the role of perception of economic inequality on the acceptance of inequality and support for redistribution in several ways. These findings have several implications for understanding the vicious cycle of economic inequality and thinking about social psychological interventions looking to raise public concerns for reducing inequality. Given that a significant part of the influence exerted by perceptions of economic inequality on the legitimacy of inequality is shaped by the levels of acceptance and justification of economic inequality, we consider that more attention should be put on these utopian standards. Social campaigning related to attitudes toward economic inequality are mainly focused on delivering a wide diverse ways to perceive economic inequality. For instance, Oxfam Intermon have coined campaigns where depict economic inequality by pictures, graphics, and texts (e.g., “Richest 1 percent bagged 82 percent of wealth...”, or “Just 8 men own same wealth as half of the world”). Such campaigns certainly help to raise concern about economic inequality, and can even help people to make better and more accurate estimates of economic redistribution. However, such effects can be dampened by those utopian standards stating that such inequality is fair, that the richest persons in the world are really deserving people, or that inequality in itself is a natural state of affairs. As a consequence, we suggest that that such approach should be complemented with stronger arguments about more egalitarian utopian standards.

### **Contribution 3. Support for measures aimed at reducing inequality depend on how such policies are framed**

Another message that can be extracted from this dissertation is that support for redistribution is not a default response to the individuals’ desire for reducing economic inequality, but it also depends in how people think that inequality should be redressed. Indeed, individuals might agree that economic inequalities are too large and desire lower levels of inequality, yet they might disagree in how to deal with such inequality. Then, responses toward economic inequality might imply a desire for the government to redistribute resources among the people by means of taxes and transference policies, or by a desire for other government actions, such as social services, insurance, or opportunities (McCall & Kenworthy, 2009). Although both measures can alleviate economic inequality, individuals are more likely to reject proposals based on increasing taxation, than policies based on social spending (Bartels, 2005; Fong, 2001; Mccaffery & Baron, 2005).

In this vein, we found that there is an overall positive attitude toward the government role to reduce economic inequality, but there was less support for the implementation of progressive taxes. In this vein, reluctance to progressive taxation might be associated with loss aversion, or with the idea that is unfair to take more money from people who deserve it (the rich) (McCaffery & Baron, 2006); whereas support for social spending may well be associated with some intergroup processes, as prejudice toward the poor, and internal attribution of poverty (Fong, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Similarly, there is evidence suggesting that meritocratic beliefs were negatively associated with support for redistribution of resources, but positively associated with providing opportunities to the disadvantaged (Study 2, García-Sánchez, Castillo, Willis, Rodríguez-Bailón, in preparation). What is more, individuals might be less supportive of redistribution because of their lack of trust in the government or by their poor understanding of how redistributive policies work (Bartels, 2005; Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2015).

In this regard, support for redistribution is not just a response to perceived economic inequality or ideologies, but it also depends on the type of redistributive measure to take into account, the target of redistribution and the personal costs of redistribution, among other factors. These ideas suggest that it would be important to assess people's knowledge regarding redistributive policies, their understanding about how social policies work, and the contribution of the government and citizens to warrant the well-functioning of democratic systems.

**Contribution 4. Perceived economic inequality goes beyond the representation of monetary resources distribution, but is entrenched in people's contexts and daily-life**

Another contribution of this dissertation has to do with how people perceive economic inequality in their daily life. That is, subjective perceptions of economic inequality is something that rely more on individuals' own experiences than on the ability to make inferences about distribution of resources (Mijs, 2018a). Indeed, researchers have shown that perception of economic inequality change if people are asked about it in terms of net values, ratios, or percentages (Arsenio, 2018; Eriksson & Simpson, 2012; Pedersen & Larsen, 2018; Pedersen & Mutz, 2018). Similarly, different indicators of perceived economic inequality might even not be correlated, which indicate that the scale of measurement might capture different dimensions of the same construct (Castillo et al., 2011). In addition, perception of economic inequality can be framed in different terms (people having more than vs. less than others), yet they may well represent distributive

equivalent situations (Lowery et al., 2009, 2012). Framing inequality as people having more (vs. less) is correlated with less legitimacy of economic inequality (Bruckmüller et al., 2017), indicating that is not just how much inequality, but how such inequality is perceived.

In this vein, our findings suggest that subjective perceptions of economic inequality are entrenched in people's daily-life experiences. As such, instead of speaking about disparities in the distribution of economic resources, people were mainly focused on social comparisons between social classes, and the unequal access to opportunities, conditions, and resources that allow them to have better living conditions. Although monetary resources were also mentioned by the public, perceptions of inequality went far beyond such numeric and distributional idea. Thus, we would like to contribute with the current research to highlight that that perception of economic inequality depicts a multi-dimensional construct that includes individuals' experiences, contexts, and ideologies.

This contribution tries to introduce a different, but complementary approach to the study of perception of economic inequality. That is, we aim to include individuals' perspectives on how they see economic inequality in their context, rather than ask them to rate statements previously designed by experts. Given that perceptions of economic inequality is contingent on the scale of measure used to capture the construct, the reality of the construct is modelled by the properties of each indicator. We then propose that the perception of economic inequality is also driven by individuals' experiences, their most immediate contexts and their focus of attention (frames). Therefore, we suggest that perceptions of economic inequality should not be restrained to the scores of some measures used to capture it. If research on perceptions of economic inequality is conducted through the estimation of the distribution of monetary resources, then we would just be able to conceptualize the ability of people to make inferences about such unequal distribution, rather than capture the construct in its complexity.

In sum, we consider that perceived economic inequality, as a construct, should not be constrained to pre-determined definitions, but it would be worthwhile to let the construct to build its own theory. As was posited by Martín-Baró (1998) it is crucial to:

“...avoid that concepts summon the reality, and let the reality be the one that looks for the concepts; that the theories do not define the problems of our situation, but that those problems claims and, so to speak, demand their own theorization; in other words, we should change our traditional methodological idealism into a critical realism. (...) psychologists need a good bath of reality, but of that same reality that overwhelms and anguishes the popular majorities” (Martín-Baró, 1998).



**Contribution 5. Reconceptualization of the perception of economic inequality according to lay people: how inequality is represented, what kinds of resources are distributed, who the groups of reference are, and where inequality is situated**

Along this thesis, we have compiled ideas and empirical evidence that encourage us to propose a broader way to conceptualize (and operationalize) the construct of perceived economic inequality. Taking as a baseline the standard definition of the perception of economic inequality as the subjective representation of the distribution of economic resources, we suggest that some additional considerations should be included to clarify even more this construct. First, when we think of “subjective representation”, we should acknowledge that it involves a wide variety of ways to think of economic inequality according to each individual’s knowledge, experiences and contexts familiar to him/her. This subjective representation triggers the question about *how individuals represent such economic disparity*, which might be given in numeric terms (e.g., ratios, percentages, net incomes), statements (e.g., rating items, judging distributions, describing situations), and pictures (e.g., diagrammatic distribution of resources, images showing disparities, plots). As we have mentioned before, how individuals represent such unequal redistribution might have different implications in how people understand and respond to inequality.

Second, when we talk about “economic resources”—as is usually done in economic research—we should clarify *what kind of resources we are referring to* (e.g., net incomes, payments, wealth, incomes before/after taxes, household income, etc.). Although economic inequality is mainly associated with incomes and wealth through standardized indexes (e.g., Gini, Palma ratio, percentiles comparisons, etc.), different institutions (e.g., OECD, World Bank, United Nations, World Inequality Lab and Standardized World Income Inequality Database) also acknowledge that economic inequality is intrinsically related to inequality of opportunities. Indeed, economic inequality is also defined in terms of the uneven distribution of both, income and opportunities. This latter definition is in line with the results shown in Chapters 7 and 8, in which people tended to perceive economic inequality mainly in terms of the unequal access to opportunities, conditions and resources between groups to have a decent life. Therefore, we would consider valuable to include both kind of economic resources, monetary (e.g., income, wealth) and opportunities (e.g., education, health), when we study the perception of economic inequality.

Third, perceived economic inequality implies an uneven distribution of resources between specific groups of people or individuals. Thus, it is crucial to *know who the groups of reference are* when individuals compare such uneven distribution of resources (e.g., the well-off vs. the worst off; a white-collar vs. blue-collar worker; the top 10% vs. the bottom 10%, men vs. women, nationals vs. immigrants, etc.). Given the relevance of framing inequality on individuals' responses to inequality, we consider that we should account for the kind of social comparisons that individuals make when estimate economic inequalities. We therefore have to pay greater attention to the characteristics associated to the target groups that lay people use when thinking about inequality. In such a case, we should control for other social psychological processes (e.g., prejudice, stereotypes, internal/external attributions) that might affect how economic inequality is perceived and justified.

Fourth, the perception of economic inequality is not made in a vacuum, but instead it is situated in a wide variety of domains of the public life. Thus, when measuring the perception of economic inequality we need to ask about *where economic inequality takes place*. People see inequalities at work, at school, at the streets, when they consume goods or services, and so forth. Since there are social norms and beliefs related to specific contexts, it is important to be mindful regarding where to situate the perception of economic inequality (e.g., economic inequality could be more legitimate when comparing high vs. low qualified jobs, than when comparing men vs. women). Although we provided some insights about the potential domains used by individuals to perceive economic inequality, to our knowledge, there is little research that has assessed the multidimensionality of the construct of perception of economic inequality.

As a whole, these four considerations help us to tailor a more detailed definition of the construct: perception of economic inequality is the subjective representation of the uneven distribution of any kind of economic resources (including opportunities) between certain individuals or groups of people, in specific domains of the social life (see Figure 1 for a summary of this definition).

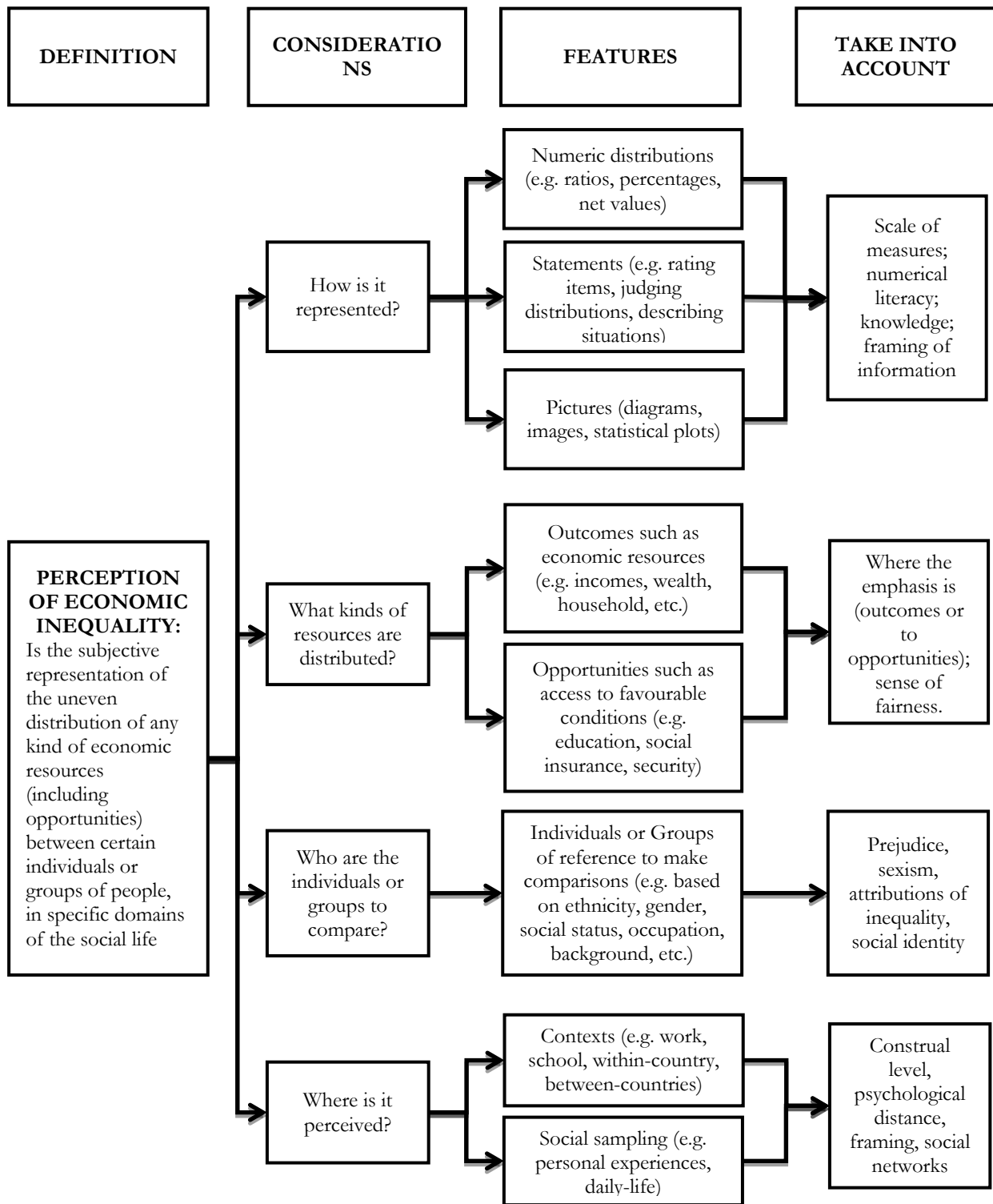


Figure 1. The construct of the perception of economic inequality according to lay people

### **Implications for designing social psychological interventions aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of economic inequality**

Interventions aimed at reducing economic inequality are commonly focused on structural dimensions at the social, political and economic levels. Indeed, reducing economic inequality could bring valuable benefits for society by implementing the right public policies and social interventions to promote redistribution of resources, such as: discouraging the accumulation of wealth; investing more in social spending; promote economic development as a way to eradicate poverty; raise the minimum wage promote better working conditions; facilitate the unionization and public participation in the making decision processes; regulate top salaries and make them open for public accountability; prevent tax evasion and fight against tax havens; promote taxation transparency and accountability; negotiation with other countries in the region to avoid organisations fleeing from some places; encourage organisational social responsibility, among others. All these strategies stress the government's responsibility to regulate the economy, which in turn, encourage social cohesion and citizens wellbeing (for more exhaustive reviews see Alvaredo et al., 2018; Atkinson, 2015; Dabla-Norris et al., 2015; Oxfam Internacional, 2018).

However, as we presented in the introduction, there is a vicious cycle by which economic inequality affects processes at different levels—political, social, and psychological—that feed the maintenance and perpetuation of economic inequality. Therefore, any intervention that looks to reduce economic inequality should account for such multilevel perspective. Since the structural-level intervention is better developed from disciplines as sociology, economy and political science, we consider that this thesis give some steps to elucidate what could be done to break the vicious cycle from a socio-psychological perspective.

The very first step to proceed with socio-psychological interventions to reduce economic inequality has to do with taking a broader approach to economic inequality. Hence, economic inequality should not be seen as an economic and political issue exclusively, but should also be acknowledge as a socio-psychological phenomenon (Manstead, 2018; Piff et al., 2018). Although economic inequality is the by-product of history, conflicts, culture, and politics, it is also the outcome of human-made decisions at different point of history. From this perspective, economic inequality is neither natural, nor predetermined by the biology of our kind (Sen, 2010; Therborn, 2015). This perspective stresses the fact that economic inequality is one scenario among many other potential

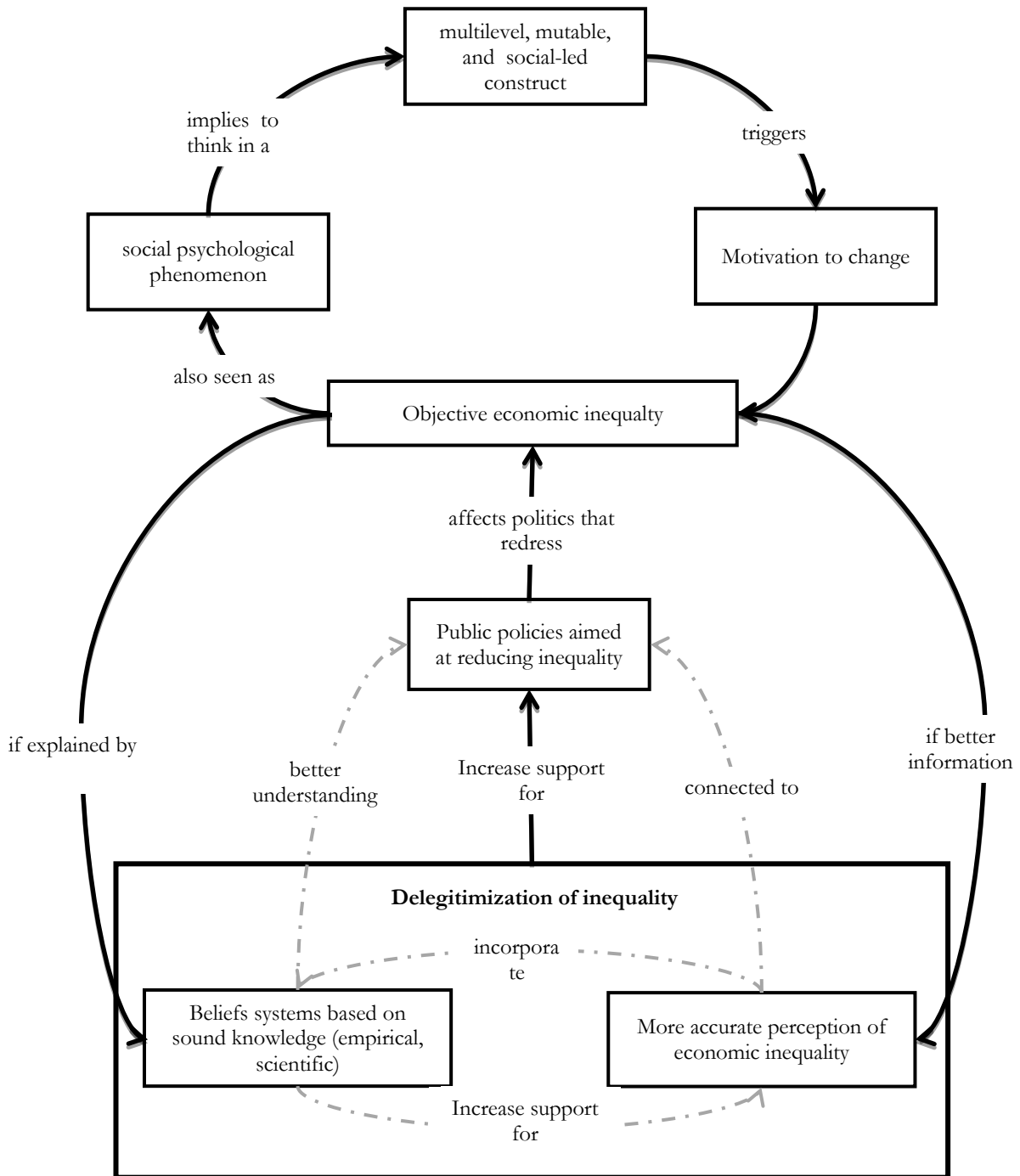
situations, and that can be changed. This approach to economic inequality also recognizes that people play a pivotal role on upholding the system. Thus, it acknowledges that there are socio psychological processes that work for the *status quo*, which are usually overlooked by other disciplines. Therefore, a socio psychological perspective for breaking the vicious cycle of economic inequality implies to get a sound understanding about the psychological mechanism by which people accept such extreme levels of economic inequality and oppose to actions aimed at reducing it.

Another social psychological contribution for breaking the vicious cycle of economic inequality is to get a better understanding of the perception of inequality. That is, individuals should be aware of the prevalence of economic inequality, and acknowledge its implications for individuals and societies wellbeing. If people are well informed about the causes and consequences they can react in consonance with their motivations to get more equal societies. This enlightenment approach requires a two-fold process: the perception of economic inequality and beliefs-systems (or ideologies). The focus on the perceptions of economic inequality proposes that economic inequality should be acknowledged in its real dimensions. Individuals should be aware of the extreme levels of economic inequality by being informed about the accurate information related to how the resources are currently distributed. Since fixing perceptions of economic inequality lead to support more redistributive policies (Cruces et al., 2013), we argue that it is quite important to keep on promoting social campaigning that help to capture the proportion of economic inequality, as well as to promote other views of economic inequality that are not reduced by numeric representations. Indeed, reducing the psychological distance to economic inequality, and recognizing it as something that directly affects each individual in society (even the well-off), might help to raise concerns about economic inequality and mobilize people to seek ways to redress it. This consideration should consider fine-grain analysis when designing communications, such as the way how inequality is represented, the kind of resources that are distributed, the targeted groups of reference, and the domain in which is contextualized.

But working on perceptions of economic inequality in solitary could even spoil the process of breaking the vicious cycle. For instance, leading people to perceive more economic inequality would led them to be more willing to accept greater economic inequality (Trump, 2018), or might trigger feelings of threat, uncertainty, lack of control, and fatalism or hopelessness, that increase individuals motivations to justify the system (Friesen et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2018). Therefore, the other side of this enlightenment approach for a socio-psychological intervention has to do with the ideologies that

rationalize economic inequality. That is, it would be needed to promote societal narratives and individual beliefs-systems that recognize the real causes, consequences, and ways to reduce economic inequality. However, this is not an “ideological approach” by which individuals just change the lenses to see the reality; nor try to mask reality by some particular ideals and values. Instead, our suggestion is that beliefs systems about inequality should be fed by knowledge grounded on empirical and scientific evidence. Thus, public discourses and lay beliefs can incorporate a repertoire of ideas related to the dynamics of economic inequality such as the real effect of meritocracy vs. access to opportunities; the internal vs. external attributions of poverty and wealth; the real chances to ascend the social ladder; the impact of inheritance on individuals success; the way how public policies can shape societies; the way taxation works for the social good; the role of every citizen and political actor may have to push for better societies. What is more, these beliefs about economic inequality not only would provide valuable information for individuals make better judgments and decisions, but also could fulfil epistemic, existential, and relational needs that prevent motivations to legitimate the *status quo*.

In sum, we propose that introducing these considerations might help to turn the vicious cycle of economic inequality into a virtuous cycle. As shown in Figure 2, thinking on economic inequality as a socio psychological phenomenon implies that individuals figure it out as something working at different levels (both societal and individual) that can be changed by means of social interventions. Such conceptualization might motivate people to seek means to achieve changes in economic inequality. In addition, if individuals have access to better information about economic inequality, they might have more accurate and diverse ways to perceive it, and it could contribute to get better explanations of causes, consequences and dynamics of inequality. Similarly, if beliefs systems that make sense of economic inequality are based on sound—scientific—knowledge, it might prevent biases in how inequality is perceived. When beliefs systems and perceptions about economic inequality work together, individuals would be more aware and concerned about this topic, and in consequence, will make judgments and decisions that favour policies aimed at reducing inequality. This support for public policies to redress inequality is then likely to affect the politics and economics in a given society, which as a result, could reduce economic inequality.



**Figure 2.** Social psychological approach for promoting a virtuous cycle against economic inequality (own elaboration)

**Limitations of the dissertation and issues for further improvement**

Besides the contributions that can be extracted from this dissertation, we also must acknowledge some limitations and caveats of our work. Although in each empirical chapter we discussed some of the weaknesses of our research, in this section we identify the core aspects of the whole dissertation that should be taken into account to properly interpret

our findings. We organize the main limitations in four categories: the scope of our research, the overarching conceptual framework, the validity of the constructs, and some other methodological issues.

As for the scope of our research, it is worth stating that this dissertation is an incomplete work, and just cover a tiny dimension of a much broader and complex phenomenon. Thus, our claims and arguments, though based on empirical evidence, are suggestions that should be confirmed and replicated in further research. This calls the attention to the need to pursue a longer research agenda in this area, such that we can figure out how our proposed mechanisms interact with other processes to (de)legitimize inequality. Our proposal about the impact of the perceptions of economic inequality and system justifying beliefs on the legitimacy of inequality is just one perspective that still needs to integrate other processes related to socioeconomic status, social networks, objective affluence and poverty, social conflict, among others. In consequence, any proposal for designing social interventions or public policies on the basis of our findings, should be taken with caution, and consider that other situational or dispositional variables can shape our proposed models.

In addition, we should acknowledge that the way we conceptualize our research questions about the paradoxes of perception of economic inequality were guided by a particular conceptual framework. On the one hand, we took a large amount of evidence coming from sociological and political science research on attitudes toward economic inequality. This perspective stresses the effect of macro-social structures on individuals' perceptions and beliefs, paying less attention to intra-individual processes. The use of such references to build up the review of the state of the questions investigated here showed the gap on this topic in psychological literature, and therefore, the challenge of trying to identify the mechanisms involve in the social psychology of economic inequality.

On the other hand, from a social psychological perspective of the issues investigated in the current research, we conceptualized the perception of economic inequality as a making-inference process (e.g., how much inequality is perceived and desired), and ideologies as motivated social cognitions (e.g. beliefs that fulfil psychological needs). This approach left out other important approaches such as the social identity model for system attitudes or for collective actions (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), which explain the legitimacy of economic inequality in terms of intergroup relations, rather than individual motivations. Likewise, we did not account for a quite important body of research regarding cognitive biases and heuristics in



favour of the *status quo*, by which the legitimacy is not the outcome of deep reasoning or motivations, but rather a kind of a default answer related to information processing (Eidelman & Crandall, 2009; 2012). As such, we consider that these approaches are not mutually exclusive with ours about individuals' motivations to justify the *status quo*. It is true that there are important differences between theories, but as a whole, they are stressing some dimensions over others, providing different resources to interpret a complex problem that could hardly be understood with a single theory. Since there is still an enlivened discussion on these different theoretical frameworks (see for instance Jost, 2018, and Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018), we suggest that more work should be done to integrate theories and methods to figure out better ways to comprehend this reality.

The diversity of theories about the perception and legitimacy of economic inequality that comes from different disciplines and schools of thought carry an important limitation about the validity of the constructs. Since economic inequality is a topic mainly driven by economists, sociologists and political scientists, the conceptualization of perception of economic inequality has been tied to such disciplines. As such, perceived economic inequality has traditionally been studied by survey research, being measured with single items that ask about the distribution of economic resources. Based on such antecedents, most of our research used numeric and monetary indicators trying to capture how distribution of resources was subjectively perceived. However, these indicators introduces important biases because of the scale of the measure, the framing of the statements, the individuals' contexts, the access to information, among other processes that impede us to capture the richness of the construct. Indeed, throughout our dissertation and other advances in this field of research, perception of economic inequality seem to be a multidimensional construct, situated in a particular context, and influenced by individuals motivations. Thus, further research should try to figure out other ways to capture the core of perception of economic inequality, while accounting for other aspects that affect it. Likewise, when we tried to measure support for redistribution, we found more or less the same than for perception of economic inequality: most of the indicators were single- of few-item questions, without enough evidence of its psychometric properties. Therefore, we should acknowledge that most of our indicators for perceptions of economic inequality, system-justifying ideologies, and support for redistribution, constitute limited ways to capture these constructs. We thus consider that one of the most important steps for further improvement in this area is to build and select the right instruments to investigate such

complex phenomenon as perception of inequality and attitudes toward economic inequality.

Additionally, there are some methodological issues that make us to be cautious about the claims derived from our research. First, most of the data we used in our dissertation was correlational. We thus followed a modelling approach to suggest the directionality of the relationship between variables, rather than rely on stronger causal assumptions coming from experimental or longitudinal designs. Yet we rely in previous empirical evidence suggesting the causal relationships between our modelled variables, such models can change dramatically in accordance to the research questions and hypotheses. Second, part of our studies was conducted with undergraduates, which are not quite a representative sample of the general population. This depicts an important caveat in social psychology research, since psychological processes are affected by a wide variety of factors, both at the social and the individual level, that are not fairly represented by homogeneous samples of students. Therefore, it is worthwhile to reach other kind of participants that help us to get a better representation of the population. Third, we consider that we are missing important descriptive data that should be considered to understand better our constructs of interests, such as who perceive more (or less) inequality, under which circumstances, how it changes across time, among others.

### **Future challenges and lines of research**

Finally, we conclude this dissertation by identifying some future challenges and lines of research that might improve our understanding of the perceptions and legitimacy of economic inequality from a social psychological approach:

First, the main challenges to be aware of is the need to raise awareness about economic inequality as a topic that has to concern everyone, not just the disadvantaged. As such, it is important to get economic inequality in the mainstream of research agenda. Thus, it would be useful to put together different disciplines, methods, ideas, etc., to research about causes, consequences, and ways to tackle economic inequality. The main outcome from this recognition of economic inequality as a core topic in the public agenda would allow us to create more comprehensive models that integrate knowledge from different disciplines (sociology, politics, economics, psychology, environmental, etc.). Thus, more diverse and coordinated network of researchers on this field would generate better data for looking at the problem in different and complementary ways. Although there are several efforts to accomplish this (e.g. World Inequality Lab, IZA labour market, centre for equality of opportunity subscribed of OCDE), it is worth noticing that the research in this

topic is still dominated by economic, political science and sociological discourses, with an underrepresentation of the social psychological approach in explaining how the economic inequalities are upheld.

Second, besides the influence of perceptions of inequality and system-justifying ideologies on the legitimacy of the economic system, there are a wide variety of side processes that should be accounted for. In this regard, future research should clarify if the influence of perceiving economic inequality on support for redistribution is because of the representation of the uneven distribution of resources, or is a matter of feeling relative deprived, the need to climb up the social ladder, or the sense of fairness related to the inequality perceptions. Similarly, it is important to isolate, as much as possible, the role of perceiving economic inequality from the format of the measures (numbers, statements, pictures). It is possible that some of our findings are driven by mere artefacts of scale measurements, or by default heuristics that induce biases in favour of the *status quo*, rather than by the real nature of the construct of interest. Hence, it would be enlightening to test together the effect of motivations (e.g., ideologies, psychological needs), cognitive biases (e.g., *status quo* bias, anchoring effect, inherent bias, etc.), and at the same time accounting for different ways to operationalize the constructs. Given the complexity of dealing with all these processes simultaneously, it would be worthwhile to focus more on experimental and longitudinal designs.

Third, most of the research on ideologies that justify economic inequality is intrinsically associated with the idea of meritocracy. Although we agree with such claim, our findings also suggest that meritocracy is just one side of the story. Meritocracy is a way of rewarding outcomes on the basis of individual talent and effort, but it also demands to level the playing field in terms of having the opportunity to develop such merit. We thus consider that research on meritocracy should also include this other side about equality of opportunity. Indeed, most of the people agree with meritocracy as a basic principle of justice (equity). However, the discourse about having the chance to develop such merit is relatively overlooked in the literature. A two-fold approach on meritocracy, as a system-justifying ideology, should then account for both individual effort and situational factors.

Fourth, as suggested by the two last empirical chapters, perceptions of economic inequality seem to be a multidimensional construct entrenched in the daily-life context of individuals. Since the way we perceive economic inequality might condition how we understand and react to it, it would be quite important to disentangle the dimensionality of perception of economic inequality. To this end, a promising research line might try to

conduct more descriptive research on this area, generate more inclusive items, design new measurements and instruments, and situate the construct in different domains.

Indeed, these proposals for the future research agenda on perceptions and legitimacy of economic inequality is an imperfect summary that should be complemented. As such, our suggestions just pretend to mention some of the most immediate needs that, to our view, might help us to enrich the public discussion on economic inequality. In all, we hope we have contributed to the overall goal of gaining a better understanding of the social psychology of economic inequality.

### **Final conclusion**

Economic inequality is a defining characteristic of our societies, which creates the conditions to self-perpetuate in a vicious cycle. The legitimation of economic inequality is one of the social psychological processes involved in the maintenance of the *status quo*. In the present dissertation we aimed to analyse the role of perceptions and ideologies of inequality on the legitimacy of economic inequality, particularly, on 1) the general acceptance of income disparities, and 2) individuals' support for redistributive policies. Throughout our empirical studies, we showed that endorsing system-justifying ideologies exacerbated the positive association between perceived and ideal levels of economic inequality; and attenuated the positive relationship between perceived inequality and support for redistribution. We additionally found that the ideal economic inequality suggested by the people can also counteract the effect of perceived inequality on redistribution; and that the relationship between perceived and ideal economic inequality is a potential mechanism linking socioeconomic status and support for redistributive policies. Furthermore, we also found that lay perception of economic inequality is a multidimensional construct, which is not reduced to standardized (numeric) estimations of the distribution of monetary resources. We posit that the maintenance of economic inequality is not only driven by structural factors, but is also upheld by social psychological processes at the individual and intergroup level. We argue that there are both cognitive and motivational underpinnings that legitimate (but also can challenge) economic inequality. Since economic inequality is a social reality shaped by individuals, we consider that a better understanding of perceptions and ideologies of inequality could help us to create a virtuous cycle that push for more egalitarian, inclusive, and just societies. Envisioning that inequality can be challenged from the basis can encourage us to continue working for getting a better world. We deserve it.



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