

Higher System Justification Beliefs Predict Greater Acceptance of Economic Inequality Among University Students

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ABSTRACT. How to effectively address inequality is a prominent debate in U.S. society due to increasing wealth disparities. This divide may stem from differing economic system justification beliefs. For example, people who view society as fairly structured may be more accepting of inequality, even when the inequality is created through structural advantages rather than individual differences in traits like effort. The present study investigated the relationship between perceptions of societal fairness and evaluations of different economic inequality sources, how these perceptions relate to beliefs about how wealth is distributed in society, and whether responses differed by age, gender, and race. U.S. college students ($N = 191$, 18–23 years old) completed an 8-item scale to assess economic system justification beliefs. Participants also evaluated the acceptability of inequalities created through individual, structural, random, and hidden sources, predicted the cause of wealth and poverty, and determined the actual and most ideal wealth distribution in the United States. Participants with higher system justification beliefs rated all sources of inequality as more acceptable ($ps < .001$), with men in particular rating many sources of inequality as more acceptable ($ps \leq .05$). Those with higher system justification beliefs were also more likely to select an individual source of inequality (e.g., merit) as the cause of both wealth and poverty ($ps \leq .001$) and to believe the United States had a more egalitarian distribution ($p = .002$). These findings offer insight into how system justification beliefs influence college students' conceptualizations of economic inequality and whether they consider it a problem. This understanding is key to tackling growing societal disparities.

Keywords: economic inequality, system justification, morality, fairness, university students



Diversity badge earned for conducting research focusing on aspects of diversity.

The “American Dream” is often portrayed as achievable through individual attributes, such as hard work and intelligence (Davidai, 2018). However, national polls reveal that only 53% of American adults still believe the American Dream is possible, and less than 15% of Black adults believe that they have

achieved it (Borelli, 2024). Indeed, economic inequality—the unequal distribution of monetary and material assets—is at an all-time high in the United States (Suss et al., 2024). Economic inequalities have expansive impacts on all sectors of society, including health, educational, social, and psychological indices of well-being (Duncan

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et al., 2010; García-Sánchez et al., 2024). Yet, most U.S. adults do not consider economic inequality a top societal issue warranting immediate action (Day & Fiske, 2017). This may be because some individuals view these inequalities as justified (Napier & Jost, 2008).

Economic System Justification

Indeed, many U.S. adolescents and adults appear to prefer some level of inequality within their social system, viewing it as necessary (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Norton & Ariely, 2011). *Economic system justification* is the belief that society inherently provides equal opportunities for success and any resulting disparities are therefore legitimate (Goudarzi et al., 2020; Kay & Jost, 2003). This belief enables individuals to rationalize wealth and poverty and dulls their awareness of harmful disparities (Jost et al., 2004; Willis et al., 2022).

Adolescents and adults vastly underestimate the extent of U.S. economic inequality but prefer a more egalitarian system (Arsenio, 2018; Norton & Ariely, 2011). The discrepancy between actual and ideal U.S. wealth distributions may be related to economic system justification beliefs, as those who rationalize the status quo may underestimate or overlook existing disparities. For example, Chinese adults who regarded inequality as legitimate perceived less inequality in their community six years later (Du & King, 2022). Chinese adolescents with stronger system justification beliefs also perceived lower levels of economic inequality (Li et al., 2023). However, Arsenio and Willems (2017) found that U.S. adolescents' perceptions of societal fairness did not directly correlate with their views on wealth distribution, suggesting that the relationship between system justification and perceptions of wealth distribution may develop more prominently in young adulthood.

Social group membership and life experiences may also shape system justification beliefs. Individuals from advantaged backgrounds rationalize the system and view inequality as necessary for maintaining their access to resources (Brown et al., 2022). In contrast, experiences of inequality weaken beliefs in social mobility and upward advancement among marginalized groups (Browman et al., 2019), potentially leading them to view the system as unfair and society as more unequal. Paradoxically, there has also been evidence that those most disadvantaged by the status quo may feel a stronger psychological need to reduce ideological dissonance, making them more likely to justify the social system (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Jost et al., 2003). Across five U.S. national surveys, Jost et al. (2003) found that low-income respondents and African Americans were more likely to view economic inequality as legitimate and necessary. However, recent research has shown that disadvantaged groups may not

always justify the system; although some may support existing inequality, others express few system justifying attitudes (Kesberg et al., 2024). Overall, it remains unclear which groups are most likely to hold system justification beliefs and how this contributes to the persistence of economic inequality.

How Economic System Justification May Relate to Perceptions of the Causes of Inequality

How individuals perceive economic inequality, whether as stemming from personal effort or systemic barriers, may be related to their moral judgments about these disparities. Individuals who believe that the world is inherently fair often view inequality as more justified (García-Sánchez et al., 2022). However, it remains unclear whether they tend to attribute inequality to individual-level factors, such as merit, or structural forces, such as discriminatory policies—and which of these sources they evaluate more positively. *Individual sources of inequality* include internal variables individuals can control, such as work ethic, intelligence, and motivation, and *structural sources of inequality* refer to the barriers of a social structure that systematically limit individuals' access to resources and opportunities (Amemiya et al., 2023; Rizzo & Killen, 2020).

Perceptions of the causes of economic inequality can be shaped by factors such as age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Although scholars frequently cite structural sources as prominent contributors to social inequalities (Kamande et al., 2024), both U.S. children and adults often use individual explanations (Christiani et al., 2024; Hussak & Cimpian, 2018). Marginalized groups, such as Black and Latine adolescents, tend to increasingly adopt structural explanations for poverty and inequality as they progress through high school (Diaz et al., 2023). Conversely, there is evidence that adolescents with disadvantaged social statuses (e.g., lower parental education, lower community socioeconomic status) are more likely to cite individual factors, such as work ethic, whereas those with advantaged social statuses emphasize structural factors to explain the wage gap (Flanagan et al., 2014). These mixed findings suggest that although people tend to develop more nuanced views of wealth and poverty with age, minoritized individuals may either recognize systemic inequalities or lean on individual explanations as a form of psychological resilience.

Moral reasoning helps individuals determine whether an inequality is justified by considering the reason why the inequality was formed (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Those assuming inequalities are due to individual differences tend to justify disparities as fair rewards for hard work, whereas structural inequalities, seen as

externally imposed and discriminatory, are more likely to be viewed as unfair (Burkholder et al., 2024). In fact, a stronger endorsement of individual causes of inequality is linked to greater satisfaction with one's own economic situation (Jost et al., 2003). Children also display greater support for disparities when they are framed in terms of individual rather than structural factors (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015). This propensity to evaluate some sources of inequality favorably and view society as fair may generate greater support for an unequal distribution of wealth. Indeed, adults with higher system justification beliefs are less likely to express negative emotions when confronted with homelessness and may be less willing to help those in need (Goudarzi et al., 2020; Park et al., 2024).

Present Study

The present study investigated the relationship between university students' economic system justification beliefs and their moral evaluations of economic inequality, perceptions of how wealth and poverty are formed, and expectations of how wealth is distributed within the United States. Consistent with previous research (Burkholder et al., 2024), participants evaluated economic inequalities created through multiple sources. As most societal level inequalities are hidden (in that they are not explicitly defined), participants evaluated a hidden inequality with no associated cause to establish their baseline assessment of inequality (Burkholder et al., 2024). Then, in a random order, participants evaluated additional inequalities with explicit causes: (a) structural inequalities constructed through external forces like unequal opportunities or inheritance (Amemiya et al., 2023), (b) individual inequalities created through personality trait differences like work ethic or intelligence (Rizzo & Killen, 2020), and (c) a random inequality attributed to luck (Burkholder et al., 2024).

This study included university students; higher education environments deepen students' understanding of societal structures (Schofer et al., 2021). As young adults prepare to enter a society marked by increasing social stratification, their attitudes about social inequalities are crucial to investigate, as they may influence policy change and implementation. This developmental stage is particularly significant for shaping views on economic inequality, as many university students have gained some economic independence from their family but have not yet fully entered the workforce (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). As a result, they may begin to attend to societal economic issues. In fact, one study found that young adults in Germany were more optimistic about upward social mobility than older adults (Weiss et al., 2022). Thus, the university years represent an ideal period to examine system justification beliefs.

Hypotheses

We expected that participants would evaluate individual and random inequalities positively, structural inequalities negatively, and hidden inequalities neutrally (H1). We also hypothesized that participants' evaluations would be related to their system justification beliefs; those with higher system justifying beliefs would view all inequalities as more acceptable, regardless of cause (H1.1). Finally, we predicted that participants' social group memberships would influence their evaluations; participants with historically higher status social group memberships (men, White) would evaluate inequalities more positively than those with historically lower status social group memberships (women, participants of color; H1.2).

Consistent with previous research on expectations about the causes of wealth and poverty (Burkholder et al., 2024), we expected that participants would primarily attribute poverty to structural sources while being divided on whether wealth is due to individual or structural sources (H2). Additionally, participants with higher system justification beliefs would be increasingly likely to endorse an individual source of inequality rather than a structural source as the most important cause of wealth and poverty (H2.1). We also expected these endorsements to change by group membership, such that participants with historically higher status social group memberships (men, White) would be more likely to select an individual cause compared to those with historically lower status social group memberships (women, participants of color; H2.2).

For participants' expectations for how wealth is and should be distributed, in line with previous research, we expected participants would believe that the actual wealth distribution in the U.S. is more unequal than their ideal wealth distribution (H3). Additionally, those with higher system justification beliefs would choose a more egalitarian distribution to represent the current wealth distribution in U.S. society—and endorse a less egalitarian distribution as their ideal—than would those with lower system justification beliefs (H3.1). We also expected that participants with historically higher status social group memberships (men, White) would view society as more egalitarian and prefer the distribution to be less egalitarian than their peers who hold historically lower status social group memberships (women, participants of color; H3.2).

Method

Participants

The present study included 191 university students (18–23 years old, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.01$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.02$) attending a small liberal arts university in the Southeastern United

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States. There were 115 (60.2%) women, 74 (38.7%) men, 1 (0.5%) questioning gender, and 1 (0.5%) who preferred not to list their gender. Racial composition of the sample was reported by participants as follows: 20 (10.5%) were Black or African American, 140 (73.3%) were White or European American, 8 (4.2%) were Asian American or Pacific Islander, 1 (0.5%) was Native American or Alaska Native, 13 (6.8%) were multiracial, 5 (2.6%) identified as another race not listed, and 4 (2.1%) preferred not to respond. For ethnic composition of the sample, 20 (10.5%) of participants self-identified as Latine.

Design and Procedure

The data were collected between October 2023 and April 2024, and the project was approved by Furman University's institutional review board, "Introduction to Psychology Online Survey." Participants were recruited through a convenience sample from all the university's Introduction to Psychology courses offered in the 2023–2024 academic year. This study was one of several research study options for students to fulfill the Introduction to Psychology research participation requirement. Students who did not want to participate in a research study could complete an alternative assignment (a written summary of an empirical research article). 77.64% of eligible students completed the survey. Surveys were administered on an online survey platform (Qualtrics) as part of a larger project, and participants were expected to complete this portion of the survey in about five minutes. As beliefs about economic inequality may change over time due to external events, this study employed a cross-sectional design to capture university students' beliefs during one academic year. The assessments of participants' judgments were the following: (a) economic system justification beliefs; (b) evaluations of different sources of inequality (hidden, individual, structural, random); (c) the most important reason for wealth and poverty, respectively (individual, structural, random); and (d) perceptions of actual and ideal U.S. wealth distributions. Additionally, participants reported their race, gender, and age.

Measures

Economic System Justification

Participants completed an established eight-item measure to examine their economic system justification beliefs (Kay & Jost, 2003). For each item (e.g., "In general, I find society to be fair"), they indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statement on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). In line with previous research, items 3 and 7 were reverse-coded and a composite was made by averaging scores across the eight items; higher scores represented

higher system justification beliefs. The scale was highly reliable in this sample ($\alpha = .85$) and was consistent with Kay & Jost's (2003) use of the measure ($\alpha = .87$).

Moral Evaluations of Different Sources of Inequality

Adapted from Burkholder et al. (2024), participants evaluated six distinct sources of economic inequality ("How okay is it that some people are rich and some people are poor?") on 6-point scales from 1 (*really not okay*) to 6 (*really okay*). The six sources were as follows: hidden (no additional reason provided); individual (work ethic): "Let's say that some people worked hard and became rich and some people were lazy and became poor."; individual (intelligence): "Let's say that some people were smart so they became rich and some people were not smart so they became poor."; structural (unequal opportunities): "Let's say that some people were given good opportunities and became rich and some people were not given good opportunities and became poor."; structural (inheritance): "Let's say that some people were born into families with a lot of money and stayed rich, and some people were born into families with a little bit of money and stayed poor."; random (luck): "Let's say that some people were lucky so they became rich and some people were not so lucky so they became poor." In line with previous use of this measure (Burkholder et al., 2024), each item was analyzed separately to determine whether participants' evaluations differed between the sources of inequality.

Expectations of the Sources of Wealth and Poverty

To test whether participants expected individual, structural, or random sources of economic inequality to be the main cause of wealth and poverty, participants were presented with two prompts: (1) "In general, what is the most important reason for why people are poor?"; and (2) "In general, what is the most important reason for why people are rich?" Participants selected one response for each prompt out of the following five statements: individual (work ethic): "Because they [did not work/worked] hard"; individual (intelligence): "Because they [were not so/were] smart"; structural (inheritance): "Because they were born into families with [a little bit/a lot] of money"; structural (unequal opportunities): "Because they [didn't receive many/received many] opportunities"; and random (luck): "Because they [were not so/were] lucky." Responses were categorically recorded as 0 (a structural source selected), 1 (an individual source selected), or 2 (a random source selected).

Perceptions of United States Wealth Distribution

To measure participants' perceptions of the actual U.S. wealth distribution (Arsenio & Willems, 2017), participants were shown five drawings representing potential wealth distributions (Figure 1) and read the following instructions:

Not all countries are the same. Some countries might have a few rich people at the top with a lot of poor people at the bottom and not too many people in the middle. Other countries might have a lot of rich people, only a few poor people, and many people in the middle. Please look at the drawings below and check the bubble of the country that looks the most like the United States of America.

Participants indicated their response by selecting one of five options, each correlating with a drawing labeled alphabetically, with 1 (“Country A”) representing the most unequal distribution and 5 (“Country E”) representing the most egalitarian distribution (see Figure 1).

To measure participants’ perceptions of their ideal U.S. wealth distribution, participants were shown the same five drawings (Figure 1) and read the following prompt:

Previously, we had you consider what drawing you think best represents the United States of America. Now, we want you to consider what you think the United States of America should look like. Please look at the drawings below and check the bubble of the country that you think the United States of America should look like.

Participants again indicated their response by selecting one of five options.

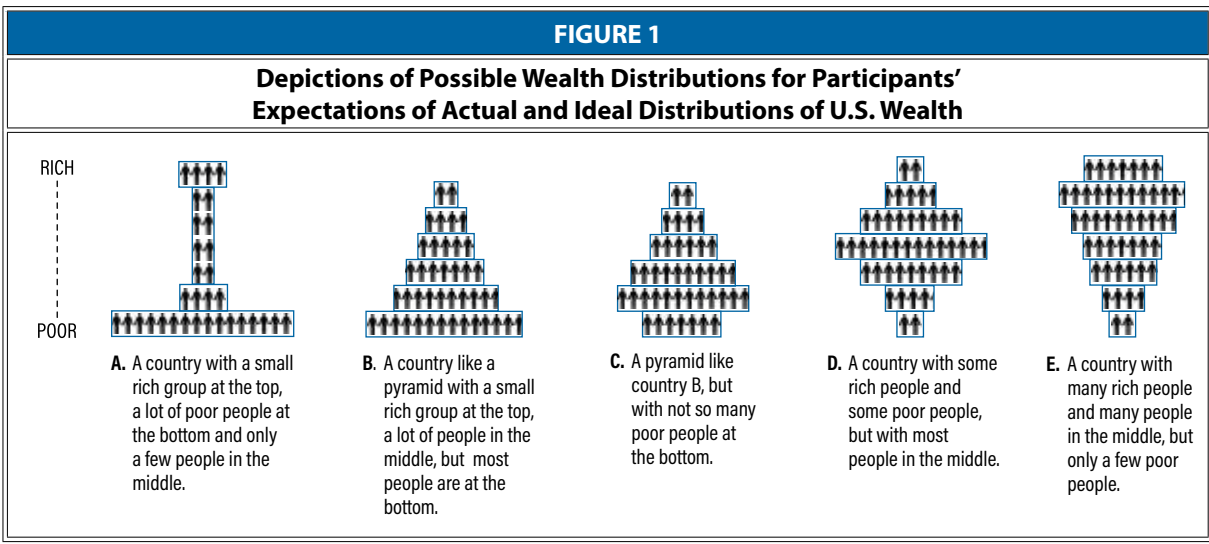
Data Analytic Plan

Analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 28 and missing data were removed through listwise deletion. First, we explored how age, race, and gender relate to participants’ social mobility beliefs by conducting a multiple linear

regression with gender (female = 0, male = 1), race (person of color = 0, White = 1), and age as predictors. Multiple linear regression allowed for the examination of multiple predictors while controlling for shared variance.

Then, to test whether participants evaluated each source of inequality as acceptable or unacceptable, we conducted separate one sample *t* tests against a neutral response (3.5) for each inequality source evaluation (hidden, opportunities, inheritance, work ethic, intelligence, and luck). One sample *t* tests were used to determine whether participants’ evaluations significantly differed from neutral, indicating either rejection or acceptance of the inequality source. To investigate whether system justification beliefs and participant social statuses impacted inequality evaluations (controlling for participant age), we conducted multiple linear regressions with system justification, gender (female = 0, male = 1), race (person of color = 0, White = 1), and age as predictors of each inequality source evaluation. Multiple regression was used to determine the explained variance of these predictors on evaluations while controlling for age.

To examine whether participants expected wealth and poverty to be caused through structural or individual sources, we conducted binomial proportion tests against a neutral response (.5). These tests evaluated whether the proportion of structural versus individual attributions significantly differed from chance, reflecting a meaningful preference for one type of explanation. To investigate whether system justification beliefs and participant social status influenced their selection of an individual (0) or structural (1) source, we conducted logistic regressions with system justification beliefs, gender (female = 0, male = 1), race (person of color = 0, White = 1), and age as predictors of the acquisition



of wealth and poverty. This test was appropriate given the dichotomous outcome variable, assessing the likelihood of structural attribution (compared to selecting an individual attribution) as a function of the predictors.

To determine whether participants' perceptions of the actual U.S. wealth distribution differed from their ideal distribution, we conducted a paired samples *t* test. This test was selected to compare two within-subjects measurements (actual vs. ideal), revealing whether participants'

ideals deviated from their perceptions of reality. To investigate whether system justification and participant demographics influenced perceptions of societal wealth distribution, we conducted multiple linear regressions with system justification, gender (female = 0, male = 1), race (person of color = 0, White = 1), and age as predictors of participants' actual and ideal perceptions of the U.S. wealth distribution. This approach identifies which factors predicted variance in distribution perceptions, controlling for the explained variance of all predictors.

Results

Correlations between all study variables are reported in Table 1. In general, university students viewed the system as unfair, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.04$, $t(183) = -8.88$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$. The model testing whether age, gender, and race influenced system justification beliefs was significant, $F(3, 176) = 6.61$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .10$, with all model predictors explaining 10% of the variance in system justification. When accounting for all other variables in the model, male participants ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.68$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 1.00$, $M_{\text{female}} = 3.11$, $SD_{\text{female}} = 1.00$, $B = 0.61$, $SE = .15$, $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and White participants ($M_{\text{White}} = 3.41$, $SD_{\text{White}} = 1.07$, $M_{\text{PoC}} = 3.09$, $SD_{\text{PoC}} = 0.97$, $B = 0.39$, $SE = .17$, $\beta = .17$, $p = .02$) had greater system justification beliefs. However, age did not influence system justification beliefs ($B = -0.08$, $SE = .07$, $\beta = -.08$, $p = .26$).

Moral Evaluations of Different Sources of Wealth Inequality

Overall, one sample *t* tests revealed that participants evaluated a hidden source of inequality positively ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.42$, $t(188) = 2.13$, $p = .02$, $d = 1.42$), and also evaluated both individual sources of inequality positively (Work Ethic: $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.11$, $t(188) = 18.33$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$; Intelligence: $M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(189) = 3.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.36$). In contrast, participants evaluated structural sources of inequality negatively (Opportunities: $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.18$, $t(188) = -9.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$; Inheritance: $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.32$, $t(188) = -6.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.32$), and also negatively evaluated the random inequality (luck), $M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.37$, $t(188) = -3.03$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.37$.

How System Justification and Status Predict Moral Evaluation of a Hidden Inequality

Unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients are reported in Table 2. For the regression testing participants' evaluations of a hidden inequality, $F(4, 173) = 18.16$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$, participants with greater system justification beliefs evaluated a hidden inequality more positively, $p < .001$. Male participants ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.29$) also evaluated the hidden inequality more favorably than

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Male	-												
2. White	.01	-											
3. Age	.13	.05	-										
4. System Justification	.27***	-.11	-.03	-									
5. Evaluation: Hidden	.30***	-.01	.10	.50***	-								
6. Evaluation: Work Ethic	.10	.03	.08	.38***	.64***	-							
7. Evaluation: Intelligence	.24***	-.09	-.03	.39***	.60***	.47***	-						
8. Evaluation: Opportunities	.29***	-.14	.10	.58***	.61***	.40***	.48***	-					
9. Evaluation: Inheritance	.26***	-.10	-.04	.60***	.64***	.41***	.60***	.66***	-				
10. Evaluation: Luck	.26***	-.14	.11	.47***	.59***	.46***	.61***	.62***	.68***	-			
11. Cause of Wealth	.08	.10	-.10	.38***	.27***	.26***	.23**	.29***	.34***	.22**	-		
12. Cause of Poverty	.15*	-.06	-.08	.28***	.28***	.24***	.25***	.23**	.28***	.19*	.54***	-	
13. Actual Wealth Dist.	.01	-.03	.08	.19*	.16*	.19*	.04	.02	.07	.05	.11	.07	-
14. Ideal Wealth Dist.	.01	.02	-.01	-.11	-.07	-.07	-.06	-.16*	-.10	-.08	-.15	-.08	.15*

Note. Significant values are denoted with * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$. "Male" represents the dichotomous gender variable (0 = Female, 1 = Male). "White" represents the dichotomous race variable (0 = participant of color, 1 = White).

TABLE 2

Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Evaluations of Different Sources of Inequality

Inequality Source	Hidden		Opportunities		Inheritance		Work Ethic		Intelligence		Luck	
	B(SE)	β	B(SE)	β	B(SE)	β	B(SE)	β	B(SE)	β	B(SE)	β
System Justification	.59 (.09)	.44***	0.62 (.07)	.54***	0.73 (.08)	.58***	0.42 (.08)	.40***	0.41 (.10)	.31***	0.56 (.09)	.42***
Male	0.58 (.19)	.20***	0.36 (.16)	.15*	0.27 (.17)	.10	0.08 (.16)	.04	0.52 (.20)	.19*	0.38 (.19)	.14*
White	0.08 (.20)	.03	0.17 (.16)	.06	0.01 (.18)	.004	-0.25 (.17)	-.11	0.07 (.21)	.03	0.16 (.20)	.05
Age	0.10 (.09)	.07	0.10 (.07)	.09	-0.19 (.08)	-.02	0.05 (.07)	.04	-0.08 (.09)	-.06	0.13 (.09)	.10

Note. Table reports unstandardized regression coefficients with standard error estimates and standardized regression coefficients. Significant values are denoted with * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$. "Male" represents the dichotomous gender variable (0 = Female, 1 = Male). "White" represents the dichotomous race variable (0 = participant of color, 1 = White).

did female participants ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.38$), $p = .003$. However, there was no difference in evaluations by race ($p = .70$) or age ($p = .26$) when accounting for the other variables in the model. Therefore, partially consistent with our hypotheses, participants with higher system justification beliefs (H1.1) and men (H1.2) viewed hidden inequalities as more acceptable.

How System Justification and Status Predict Moral Evaluations of Individual Inequalities

We tested how system justification relates to evaluations of two individual sources of inequality: work ethic and intelligence. As shown in Table 2, when evaluating an inequality due to work ethic, $F(4, 172) = 8.81, p < .001, R^2 = .17$, greater system justification beliefs predicted more acceptable evaluations of inequality, $p < .001$. However, there was no difference in evaluations by gender ($p = .63$), race ($p = .14$) or age ($p = .54$) when accounting for the other variables in the model. When evaluating an inequality due to intelligence, $F(4, 173) = 8.75, p < .001, R^2 = .17$, participants with greater system justification beliefs ($p < .001$) and men ($M_{male} = 4.27, SD_{male} = 1.23, M_{female} = 3.62, SD_{female} = 1.35, p = .01$) evaluated the inequality more favorably. There were no differences in evaluations by race ($p = .73$) or age ($p = .40$) with other variables in the model. Therefore, partially consistent with our hypotheses, higher system justification beliefs predicted more acceptance of individual inequalities (H1.1), and men viewed inequalities created through differences in intelligence more acceptably than did women (H1.2).

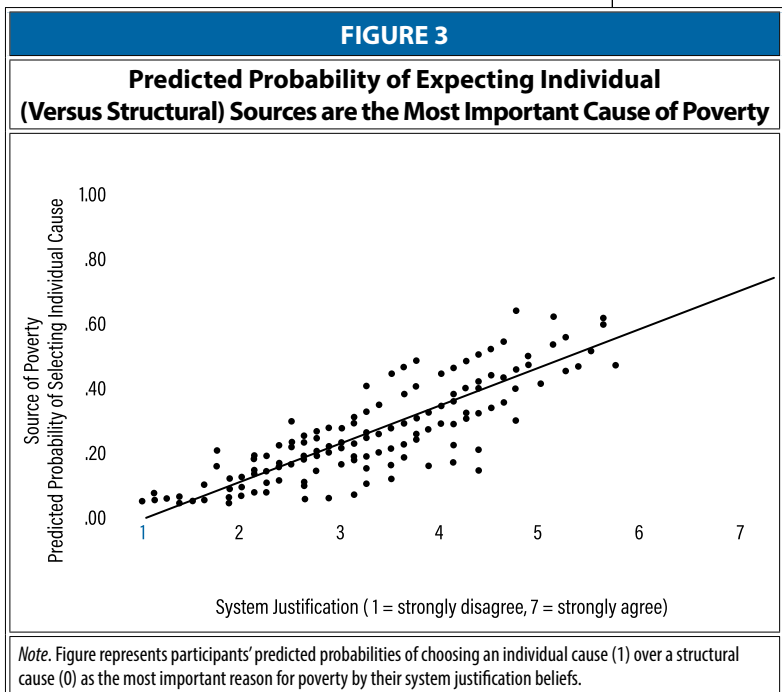
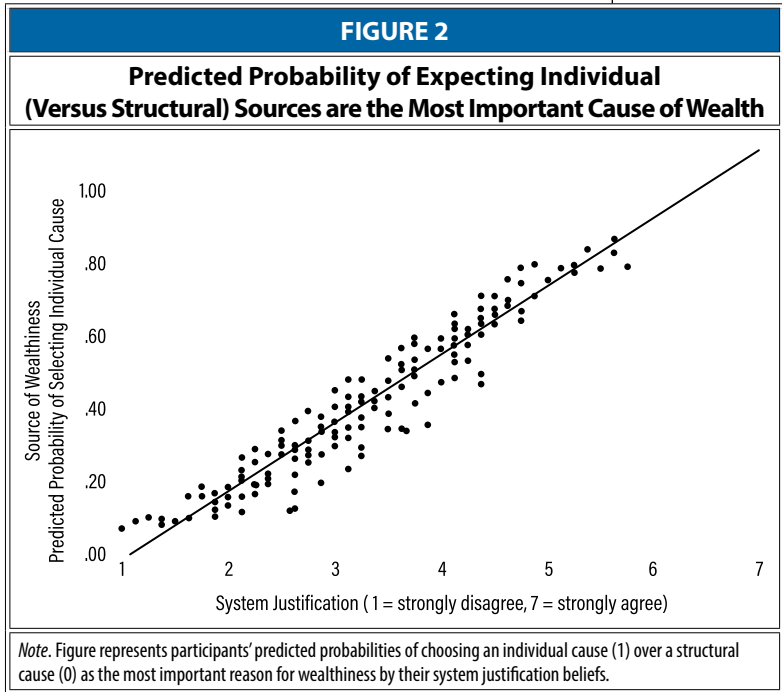
How System Justification and Status Predict Moral Evaluations of Structural Inequalities

We investigated the influence of system justification on two structural sources of inequality: unequal opportunities and inheritance. As reported in Table 2, when evaluating an inequality due to unequal opportunities, $F(4, 173) = 25.82, p < .001, R^2 = .37$, participants with greater system justification beliefs ($p < .001$) and male participants ($M_{male} = 3.08, SD_{male} = 1.30, M_{female} = 2.39, SD_{female} = 1.00, p = .02$) viewed the inequality as more acceptable. However, race ($p = .31$) and age ($p = .16$) did not significantly predict evaluations when accounting for the other variables in the model. When evaluating an inequality due to unequal inheritance (Table 2), $F(4, 172) = 26.25, p < .001, R^2 = .38$, participants with greater system justification beliefs ($p < .001$) viewed the inequality as more acceptable. However, there were no differences in evaluations by gender ($p = .11$), race ($p = .95$) or age ($p = .81$) when accounting for the other variables in the model. Therefore, partially consistent with our hypotheses, participants with higher system justification beliefs viewed structural inequalities as

more acceptable (H1.1). Men also viewed structural inequalities due to unequal opportunities as more acceptable than did women (H1.2).

How System Justification and Status Predict Moral Evaluation of a Random Inequality

When evaluating a random inequality created through luck (Table 2), $F(4, 173) = 20.51, p < .001, R^2 = .25$,



participants with greater system justification beliefs ($p < .001$) and male participants ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.65, SD_{\text{male}} = 1.43, M_{\text{female}} = 2.94, SD_{\text{female}} = 1.24, p = .05$) evaluated the inequality more favorably. There were no differences in evaluations by race ($p = .43$) or age ($p = .13$) when accounting for the other variables in the model. Therefore, partially consistent with our hypotheses, participants with higher system justification beliefs (H1.1) and men (H1.2) viewed random inequalities as more acceptable.

Perceptions of the Cause of Wealth and Poverty

In line with our expectations (H2), significantly more participants selected a structural cause ($n = 134, 74\%$) than an individual cause ($n = 48, 26\%$) as the most important reason for why people were poor, $p < .001$. Only marginally more participants selected a structural cause ($n = 103, 57\%$) versus an individual cause ($n = 77, 43\%$) as the most important reason for why people were rich, $p = .06$.

How System Justification and Status Predict Perceptions of the Cause of Wealth

For predicting why people become wealthy, $LR \chi^2(4) = 30.01$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .22, p < .001$, system justification was significant (Figure 2), $B = 0.43, SE = .20, t = 21.55, p < .001, \text{Exp}(B) = 2.55, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.72, 3.79]$. Gender, $B = -0.11, SE = .38, t = 0.10, p = .76, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.89, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.44, 1.83]$, race, $B = -0.36, SE = .40, t = 0.83, p = .36, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.70, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.32, 1.51]$, and age, $B = -0.19, SE = .17, t = 1.18, p = .28, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.83, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.59, 1.16]$, did not significantly predict participants' perceptions of the cause of wealthiness when controlling for the other variables in the model.

How System Justification and Status Predict Perceptions of the Cause of Poverty

For predicting why people become poor, $LR \chi^2(4) = 18.20$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .15, p = .001$, system justification was significant (Figure 3), $B = 0.63, SE = 0.20, t = 10.14, p = .001, \text{Exp}(B) = 1.88, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.27, 2.77]$. Gender, $B = 0.42, SE = 0.38, t = 1.22, p = .27, \text{Exp}(B) = 1.53, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.72, 3.23]$, race, $B = -0.32, SE = 0.41, t = 0.60, p = .44, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.73, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.32, 1.63]$, and age, $B = -0.33, SE = 0.20, t = 2.78, p = .10, \text{Exp}(B) = 0.72, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.48, 1.06]$, did not significantly predict participants' perceptions of the cause of poverty when controlling for the other variables in the model.

Thus, consistent with our hypothesis (H2), participants who held higher system justification beliefs were more likely to select an individual source of inequality as the cause of both wealth and poverty. However, contrary to our beliefs, gender and racial status did not influence participants' perceptions (H2.1).

Perceptions of the United States Wealth Distribution

Supporting our hypothesis (H3), participants expected that the actual U.S. wealth distribution ($M = 2.82, SD = .94$) was more unequal than what participants considered their ideal distribution ($M = 4.04, SD = .81$), $t(183) = -14.49, p < .001, d = -1.07$. Although participants thought the U.S. had an unequal wealth distribution, they preferred a more egalitarian distribution.

How System Justification and Status Predict Perceptions of the Actual Distribution of Wealth

For participants' perceptions of the actual U.S. wealth distribution (Table 3) $F(4,171) = 4.46, p < .001, R^2 = .09$, participants with greater system justification beliefs ($p = .002$) and participants of color ($M_{\text{PoC}} = 3.10, SD_{\text{PoC}} = 0.86, M_{\text{White}} = 2.73, SD_{\text{White}} = 0.96, p = .002$) viewed the wealth distribution as more egalitarian. However, gender ($p = .39$) and age ($p = .15$) did not significantly predict perceptions when accounting for the other variables in the model. Therefore, consistent with our hypothesis (H3.1), higher system justification beliefs were associated with rating the U.S. wealth distribution as more egalitarian. However, contrary to our expectations (H3.2), when controlling for system justification beliefs, participants of color viewed the actual U.S. wealth distribution as more egalitarian than did White participants.

How System Justification and Status Predict Perceptions of the Ideal Distribution of Wealth

For participants' perceptions of the ideal U.S. wealth distribution (Table 3), $F(4,171) = 4.46, p = .43, R^2 = .02$, although there was a trend toward participants with

TABLE 3						
Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Perceptions of the United States Wealth Distribution						
Wealth Distribution	Actual			Ideal		
	B	(SE)	β	B	(SE)	β
System Justification	0.23	(.07)	.25**	-0.11	(.06)	-.14
Male	-0.13	(.15)	-.07	0.04	(.13)	.03
White	-0.50	(.16)	-.24**	0.15	(.14)	.09
Age	0.10	(.07)	.11	-0.01	(.06)	-.01

Note. Table reports unstandardized regression coefficients with standard error estimates and standardized regression coefficients. Significant values are denoted with ** = $p < .01$. "Male" represents the dichotomous gender variable (0 = Female, 1 = Male). "White" represents the dichotomous race variable (0 = participant of color, 1 = White).

greater system justification beliefs choosing a more unequal ideal distribution, it was not significant, $p = .07$. There were also no differences by gender ($p = .75$), race ($p = .28$), or age ($p = .88$) when accounting for the other variables in the model. Therefore, inconsistent with our hypotheses, participants' perceptions of the ideal U.S. wealth distribution did not differ by system justification beliefs (H3.1) or gender and racial status (H3.2).

Discussion

The present study investigated the relationships between system justification beliefs and university students' moral evaluations of economic inequality, perceptions of how wealth and poverty are formed, and ideas of how wealth is and should be distributed in the U.S. Overall, students with higher system justification beliefs viewed all sources of economic inequality (hidden, random, structural, individual) as more acceptable, and were also more likely to attribute wealth and poverty to individual sources. Additionally, those with higher system justification beliefs perceived the current distribution as more egalitarian and were trending toward believing the U.S. should have a less egalitarian distribution. This suggests that emerging adults' perceptions and moral judgments of economic inequality, as well as how they think wealth is distributed in society, are related to their perceptions of system fairness. Men and White participants also reported higher system justification beliefs, and men believed that many sources of inequality (i.e., the hidden source, the random source, unequal opportunities, and intelligence) were more acceptable than did women. Thus, individuals with higher-status group memberships may be more likely to justify the system, and men specifically may be less perturbed by some types of inequality.

University Students Who Justify the System Are More Accepting of Economic Inequality

To our knowledge, our findings are among the first to examine how system justification beliefs relate to moral evaluations of economic inequality in a sample of emerging adults. Most research on system justification beliefs and perceptions of inequality have focused on child or adult samples exclusively, and fewer have addressed how moral reasoning shifts by the source of inequality. As an educational setting largely comprised of young adults, higher education is a particularly influential environment for shaping perspectives on the U.S. social system (Bročić & Miles, 2021). In addition, issues related to the current economic system may be especially salient for university students who have the opportunity to practice self-sufficiency while not entirely achieving financial independence from their families (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

University students in this study viewed the existing system as unfair. Their overall attitude supports previous literature displaying that Americans generally recognize significant wealth inequality, even though they tend to underestimate its full magnitude (Norton & Ariely, 2011). This finding also aligns with developmental research indicating that, with age, individuals increasingly recognize and critically evaluate existing social systems (Arsenio et al., 2012).

Despite recognizing that the existing system is unfair, university students positively evaluated the hidden inequality and both individual inequalities. This may be due to the belief that meritorious work makes some more deserving of monetary benefits than others (Burkholder et al., 2024). Both children and adults often view individual inequalities as fairer (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015; Jost et al., 2003); therefore, it is possible that the participants in this sample also viewed these sources as warranted. Support for the hidden source may be attributable to a broader belief in a just world, which could influence the endorsement of inequality as a necessary part of the economic system even if its source is unclear (García-Sánchez et al., 2022).

Conversely, university students evaluated a random source (luck) and both structural sources of inequality negatively. This may be because they viewed a random source such as luck as an unpredictable method of socioeconomic movement that is not openly offered or achievable by individual striving. This sample's negative evaluation of luck differed from children and younger adolescents who evaluated this source positively, suggesting there may be a developmental shift in understanding of random inequalities during the university years (Burkholder et al., 2024). In addition, this study emphasizes that most individuals hold negative views of structural inequalities, as they may recognize them as oppressive and unaffected by personal merit (Kay et al., 2008). These findings suggest that students evaluate different sources of economic inequality in distinct ways, irrespective of their perception of system fairness.

One key finding was that university students with higher system justification beliefs evaluated all sources of economic inequality more favorably. Previous literature has demonstrated the propensity of system justifiers to view individual sources of inequality as necessary and acceptable (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015). However, endorsement of structural inequalities in the present study suggests that system justification beliefs may lead to rationalizing inequalities that are not directly under individual control, such as those due to systemic constraints or luck. Indeed, U.S. adults hold similar beliefs about the possibility of individual social mobility as their European peers; however, U.S. adults are overall more accepting of inequality (Day &

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Fiske, 2017). It may be that belief in a just system overrides contrary evidence of system unfairness.

It is also possible that individuals with higher system justification beliefs may perceive overall inequality as more acceptable because they are less likely to assume those at the lower end of the hierarchy are harmed. For example, one study found that adults exhibited higher system justification beliefs after being exposed to a “poor but happy” stereotype (Kay & Jost, 2003). Therefore, it may be that those with higher system justification beliefs are less inclined to view any source of inequality as detrimental to those who are poor. This cultural theme may be compounded with the American “bootstraps” narrative, in which even those who come from humble beginnings can become successful through hard work and individual merit (Davidai, 2018). From this perspective, the societal structure is assumed to be inherently fair, placing the responsibility on individuals and their own capabilities to improve their status. However, it remains unclear what additional mechanisms might underlie the positive association between system justification beliefs and evaluations of structural sources of inequality. This presents an interesting direction for future research.

Prior research suggests that social status plays a role in the development of societal fairness perceptions and evaluations. The current study found that system justification beliefs differed as a function of gender and race; male and White participants had higher system justification beliefs, indicating that members of advantaged groups may be more likely to engage in such thinking. This supports the widely held belief among social dominance theorists that members of higher-status groups tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward maintaining social order compared to those from low-status groups (Schmitt et al., 2003). However, other studies have suggested that those who suffer the most from the system may have the greatest need to justify it to reduce cognitive dissonance (Jost et al., 2003). Our findings were inconsistent with this perspective, suggesting that disadvantaged individuals may be more likely to reject the status quo than advantaged individuals. Another possible reason that students of higher social status had higher system justification beliefs may be a function of our sample, which was collected from a predominantly White liberal arts university. It is possible that a more diverse sample in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status would reflect more disadvantaged individuals who support the system.

Men were also generally more likely than women to find certain sources of inequality more acceptable, including the hidden source, the random source (i.e., luck), unequal opportunities, and intelligence. It is

possible that men viewed these sources of inequality as more acceptable than women because of their advantaged social position, which systemically provides them with more opportunities and reduces their personal experience with inequality.

System Justification Beliefs Relate to University Students' Ideas of What Causes Wealth and Poverty

Overall, more university students believed that structural factors, over individual factors, were the primary causes of poverty, and marginally more students thought a structural factor was the most important cause of acquiring wealth. This aligns with previous research highlighting adolescents' emerging concern about structural inequalities and their support for efforts to reduce them (Elenbaas, 2019). As individuals age, their economic awareness may continue to increase (Weiss et al., 2022). Further, as economic inequality rises, people increasingly attribute economic success and failure to external factors beyond an individual's control (Davidai, 2018). Given the unprecedented levels of economic disparities in the U.S., it is not surprising that the present study's results reflect this perspective. Perceptions of the acquisition of wealth had more mixed perceptions, with some individuals believing that wealth was achievable through merit even while simultaneously attributing poverty to external constraints.

Students who held higher system justification beliefs were more likely to believe that individual factors were the primary causes of both wealth and poverty. This finding aligns with previous research showing that system justifiers tend to support the idea of individual merit for achieving economic advancement and attribute less fortunate circumstances to individual shortcomings (Hussak & Cimpian, 2018). The use of individual factors to explain disparities may be due to individuals' self-protective motivation to believe that economic mobility is in their control (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Thus, perceptions of economic outcomes relate to system justification beliefs; those who believe the system is inherently fair are more likely to attribute wealth and poverty to factors within an individual's control.

System Justification Predicts More Egalitarian Perceptions of the United States Wealth Distribution

Consistent with previous research, university students thought the U.S. had an unequal wealth distribution but preferred a more egalitarian distribution (Arsenio, 2018; Norton & Ariely, 2011). This suggests that young U.S. adults are aware of the state of their economic system and recognize the benefits of more egalitarian policies. Yet, those with higher system justification beliefs expected the U.S. to be more egalitarian. This is further

evidence that the relationship between system justification and perceptions of wealth distribution may develop among Americans during young adulthood rather than in adolescence (Arsenio & Willems, 2017). This finding is also consistent with previous research showing that system justifiers tend to legitimize the existing system by downplaying or overlooking evidence of inequality (Du & King, 2022; Goudarzi et al., 2020), contributing to a diminished awareness of the true extent of economic disparities. On the other hand, students with higher system justification beliefs marginally thought that the wealth distribution should be less egalitarian, which may reflect misperceptions of equality as restricting access to resources and inequality as necessary to their preservation of status (Brown et al., 2022). This partially supports previous research that many Americans may prefer some level of inequality (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Norton, & Ariely, 2011), and higher system justification may be implicated in rationalizing societal inequality. Future research should further explore the relationship between system justification and ideal distributions of societal wealth.

Contrary to our hypothesis, White participants overall viewed the U.S. as more unequally distributed than did participants of color. This finding is inconsistent with recent research showing that those from minoritized backgrounds view the system as less fair and society as more unequal due to experiences of inequality (Browman et al., 2019; García-Castro et al., 2023). However, other research has found that individuals from minoritized backgrounds, including Black and Latine individuals, support the system more than their more advantaged peers (Jost et al., 2003). It is possible that participants of color in this sample viewed society as more egalitarian as a protective factor to believe that economic mobility is in their control (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Indeed, previous research has shown that adolescents from minoritized racial and economic statuses are more likely to reference individual factors like work ethic to justify wage disparities (Flanagan et al., 2014). It is possible that this protective tendency may extend to broader expectations of how wealth is distributed in society. Interestingly, in the present study White participants reported higher system justification beliefs than did participants of color, despite assuming the U.S. wealth distribution was more unequal. This shows that recognition of inequality alone is not enough to reduce justification of the system, especially for those who may advantage from that system (Brown et al., 2022). These mixed findings from the present study and the extant literature show that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may either support or reject the system (Kesberg et al., 2024) and point to an important avenue for future research.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present study offers new insight into how university students perceive the fairness of the U.S. economic system and evaluate inequality, there are a variety of limitations and directions for future research. One main concern is the generalizability of findings due to the predominantly White U.S.-based sample collected from a private liberal arts university. This may skew the sample toward reflecting socially advantaged groups (i.e., White, affluent). Although some research has indicated that advantaged groups are more likely to justify the system and evaluate certain forms of inequality as fair (Brown et al., 2022), other studies have suggested that disadvantaged groups may have more incentive to reduce ideological dissonance and thereby legitimize the system (Flanagan et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2003). Future research should aim to recruit a more diverse sample in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and institutional context to capture a wider range of perspectives.

The use of a cross-sectional design offers both strengths and limitations for the present study. This research design enabled efficient data collection from a large sample of undergraduate students across an academic year, allowing for the timely exploration of identifying patterns and relationships among key constructs without the logistical demands of a longitudinal design. However, because data were collected at a single time point, the design does not allow for conclusions about causal directionality. Future research using longitudinal or experimental methods would help clarify causal mechanisms and more closely assess how economic beliefs develop over time.

Another area worth considering is the political affiliation of participants. In a study with adults, conservatives were more likely to justify the U.S. social system and think social inequalities were fair (Napier & Jost, 2008). Additionally, previous research has found that support for individual explanations for disparities predicts conservative ideology in both children and adults (Hussak & Cimpian, 2017). Although we did not measure political affiliation in this study, it is possible that students from more conservative backgrounds may evaluate economic inequalities more positively due to greater levels of system justifying beliefs, even when those inequalities are because of structural constraints.

Additionally, future research should investigate how participants' own economic status may influence their perceptions. Although many university students do not have direct knowledge of their family's annual income, using measures like the subjective social status (Goodman et al., 2001)—a tool capturing perceptions of familial economic status compared to the community—may illuminate whether students from

higher income backgrounds have different patterns of responses compared to their lower income peers. Indeed, in a study with children and adolescents, those who rated themselves as higher in wealth were more likely than their lower wealth peers to say wealth was caused through structural advantages (Burkholder et al., 2024).

Finally, this research may have implications for interventions and educational programs. For example, it would be interesting for future research to explore whether reducing system justification beliefs or highlighting structural sources would dampen support for economic inequality. Indeed, in a study with adults, prompting individuals to consider situational attributions for poverty increased their concerns for societal inequality (Piff et al., 2020). However, an educational curriculum intervention designed to prompt adolescents to consider structural explanations for poverty changed adolescents' endorsements of the reasons for poverty and financial success, but not their beliefs about the government's responsibility to aid the poor (Mistry et al., 2012). Therefore, the effectiveness of interventions or programs in changing psychological beliefs about economic inequality is an open area for research.

Conclusion

Economic inequality is a central problem impacting many indices of well-being (Duncan et al., 2010; García-Sánchez et al., 2024). Gaining insight into how people perceive economic inequality is essential for building a more comprehensive understanding of its causes and consequences, as well as for fostering public support for policies that promote equitable access to resources and opportunities, particularly for minoritized groups (Peters & Jetten, 2023). This study highlights how emerging adults' justification of the economic system relates to their moral evaluations of various sources of inequality and perceptions of how wealth is currently and should ideally be distributed in the U.S. Those with higher system justification beliefs found inequality to be more acceptable, regardless of its source. They also perceived the current wealth distribution as more egalitarian and felt it should be marginally less egalitarian. Together, these patterns suggest that system justifiers tend to downplay or rationalize various sources of economic inequality, underestimate true wealth disparities, and show reduced motivation to support structural changes to wealth distribution. Further, university students who were male or White had higher system justification beliefs, and men believed that some sources of inequality were more acceptable than did women. This suggests that individuals with advantaged social identities may be more inclined to justify the status quo and view certain forms of inequality as more acceptable, potentially because the existing system benefits them.

Although adolescence lays the groundwork for developing socioeconomic views, emerging adulthood in a university context introduces new cognitive and social experiences that further shape these attitudes. In a world facing increasing disparities, this research reveals that although young adults are critically engaging with questions of economic inequality, their perceptions and attitudes may be distorted by psychological motivations to preserve existing systems. These findings point to the importance of early interventions that challenge system-justifying narratives. Integrating discussions of structural inequality and social justice into civics courses may foster more critical awareness among youth. By helping students question dominant explanations for inequality and engage with the principles of equity and fairness, civics education can play a pivotal role in empowering the next generation to become informed, engaged citizens committed to promoting a more just society.

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