

## Cultural psychology of inequality: Current and future directions

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The current special issue reports seven empirical articles on diverse areas of inequality, ranging from the perception of economic inequality (who are concerned, what cues people use to perceive inequality in everyday life), the educational origin of income inequality, to the role of inequality in luxury consumption, prosocial behaviour, life satisfaction, and beliefs in upward and downward economic mobility. We first comment on these articles, then briefly review the current state of the psychology of inequality and point to future directions. Finally, we point out that a cultural psychological perspective is missing from the extant literature on the psychology of inequality. Namely, it is important to document how current systems of inequality are maintained and transmitted across generations in specific sociocultural contexts.

*Keywords:* culture, inequality, institution.

### The Psychology of Inequality: Current and Future Directions

Economic inequality, the degree to which societal wealth is concentrated in one segment of the population, has become a major political and moral issue in much of the world today. The gap between the rich and the poor has grown in the United States, Europe, and Asia for the last few decades, although it has decreased in Latin America (historically an extremely high inequality world region). Economists typically considered economic inequality a necessary phase of economic development (Kuznets, 1955). When a nation is in the early phases of economic development, a few on top will benefit first. As the economy matures, however, wealth will be distributed more evenly to workers and the rest of society. Unfortunately, this textbook picture of economic development and inequality does not fit the reality today. For instance, in the United States, wages for the average worker have stagnated over the last few decades, while compensation for specialized fields of finance and others skyrocketed (Piketty, 2014). The recent pandemic has brought this dynamic into even starker contrast, with the wealth of America's billionaires increasing 62% in the 17 months following the onset of the pandemic (Collins, 2021), while current wages for the average worker largely mirror those at the beginning of 2020 (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021).

The seven articles included in this special issue have addressed many important issues related to income

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inequality ranging from the perception of economic inequality to the educational origin of income inequality, the role of inequality in luxury consumption, prosocial behaviour, life satisfaction, and beliefs in upward and downward economic mobility. First, we will comment on these articles. Second, we will situate these articles within the broad literature on the psychology of inequality. Finally, we will discuss the future directions of the psychology of inequality.

### The Perceptions of Inequality

Income inequality has been a popular topic of news outlets and social media since well before the Occupy Wall Street movement hit the headlines in 2011. Given the coverage of the Occupy movement and incessant gossip about the ultra-wealthy such as Jeff Bezos, it is surprising that ordinary Americans vastly underestimate the magnitude of income inequality in the United States (Norton & Ariely, 2011). For instance, American consumers estimated the ratio of CEO pay to the average unskilled worker pay to be 10 to 1; in reality, it is roughly 331 to 1 (Kiatpongson & Norton, 2014; see also Jackson & Payne, 2021).

García-Castro et al. (2021, this issue) argue that the vast underestimation of actual income inequality in the previous research occurred in part because the chart depicted in the original study (Norton & Ariely, 2011) did not capture the everyday experience of inequality. The authors' argument is that ordinary people are not used to estimating the distribution of the national wealth, and that unfamiliarity and artificiality of the estimation task used in Norton and Ariely (2011) might be a cause for general underestimation of inequality. García-Castro et al. instead asked participants to think of their richest friends and poorest friends, then to describe how

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financial resources influence their friends' everyday lives. Participants were well aware of the gap between the richest and the poorest of their friends, mentioning not only differences in consumption habits but also in opportunities and mental health. Their qualitative method also allowed them to capture the subtle justification of inequality.

Similarly, Sánchez-Rodríguez and Moreno-Bella (2021, this issue) investigated the perception of income inequality, using Google Trends and Twitter data. They found that residents of U.S. states with greater income inequality search the terms "income inequality" and "economic inequality" and retweet the ones related to inequality more frequently than those living in less unequal states. These findings suggest that people who live in highly unequal U.S. states (e.g., New York, California) are aware of and concerned with everyday inequality.

Browman et al. (2021, this issue) explored the degree to which the perception of income inequality affects the perception of upward and downward social mobility. Participants who perceived a large gap between the top quintile and the rest also perceived it difficult for the people in the bottom quintile to move up the economic ladder. Likewise, they perceive it rare for the people in the top quintile to move down the economic ladder. That is, individuals who see a large gap between the richest 20% and the rest tend to see society as a whole as a fixed, non-mobile place.

Du et al. (2021, this issue) examined the role of income inequality in luxury consumption. When participants were led to believe that the city they lived in was highly economically unequal, participants from the lower social class were more interested in luxury items than when the city was described as more equal. Participants from the higher social class were not affected by the manipulation of the income distribution in the city. They were interested in luxury items even when the distribution of the income was said to be quite even. These findings suggest that social position is quite important when considering the effect of perceived inequality on consumption.

Likewise, Rao et al. (2021, this issue) found that participants from the lower social class were more willing to help friends if they perceived society to be mobile than if they perceived society to be fixed; participants from the higher social class did not differ in their intention to help friends whether they perceived society to be mobile or not. This is consistent with previous work suggesting that lower social class status is related to increased prosociality compared to higher status (Piff et al., 2010, 2012), and finding that this pattern holds under the high upward social mobility condition (but not in the low mobility condition).

Tang and Tan (2021, this issue) tested whether subjective social class would be associated with life satisfaction differently, depending on the objective social class (measured by educational attainment and income). They found that subjective social class was more strongly positively associated with life satisfaction among objectively high social class individuals than among objectively low social class individuals. In other words, among low social class individuals, even those who see themselves relatively better off were no more satisfied with their lives than those who see themselves worse off.

Wen et al. (2021, this issue) was the only article that explored social class differences in educational performance. Specifically, they analysed 4th graders' language test scores in diverse schools and districts. In general, students' parental social class mattered for children's language performance more in wealthy schools than less wealthy schools. Furthermore, when they looked at students in the wealthy school districts, students' parental social class mattered more in less wealthy schools than wealthy schools, whereas in the poor school districts, parental social class mattered more in wealthier schools than in less wealthy schools.

Together, these seven articles shed new light on complex relations among economic inequality, one's social position within a given context of economic inequality, and various behavioural, attitudinal, and affective outcomes. Next, we will discuss these findings in the context of the broader literature on the psychology of inequality.

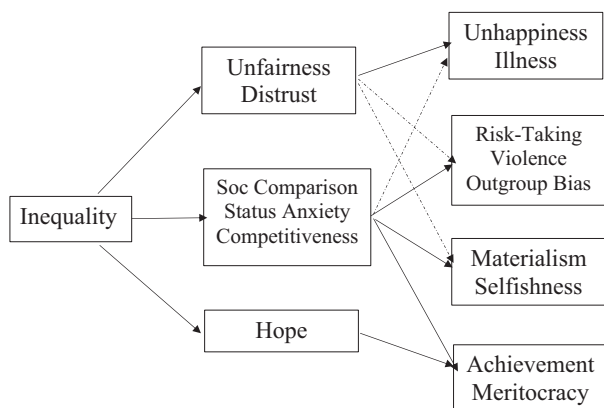
## The Perception of Inequality

Whereas most of the earlier studies on income inequality utilized an objective distribution-bias index of income inequality such as the Gini coefficient (Bobak et al., 2000; Crystal & Waehrer, 1996) and the Robin Hood index (Kawachi et al., 1997; Wilkinson et al., 1998), most studies included in this issue relied on the subjective perception of income inequality. While earlier work also emphasized misperception and underestimation of income inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011), some of the papers in this special issue showed some accuracy in the perception of income inequality. For instance, Sommet et al. (2019) compared participants' ratings on items such as "In my town/city, there is a huge gap between rich and poor" with zip code-based Gini coefficients taken from U.S. Census data. In three well-powered studies ( $Ns > 670$ ), the correlation between perceived inequality and zip code-level Gini was .19, .28, and .29.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Sommet et al. (2019) showed that participants who lived in high Gini zip codes reported perceiving higher levels of competition than those who live in low Gini zip codes. Their perception of income

inequality was also positively correlated with perceived competition. This finding is consistent with previous work showing that inequality exacerbates perceptions of individualism and competitiveness (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, et al., 2019). Their multiple regression analyses showed that perceived levels of income inequality were more strongly associated with various motivation measures (e.g., approach goals, need for achievement) than the objective measure of income inequality. Their path analyses showed that the objective measure of income inequality was associated with perceived competition, which in turn was associated with the need for achievement. Studies like this illuminate the role of objective and subjective inequality in psychological processes. Although the perception of income inequality is more proximal to psychological outcome measures, the association between them could be driven by some method variance (most notably self-reports). Thus, it is ideal to include both objective and subjective measures of income inequality in future research.

By now researchers have accumulated so many divergent findings regarding the perception of income inequality (see Buttrick et al., 2017; Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Wienk et al., 2021, for reviews) that it might be useful to step back and evaluate what we know so far (Figure 1). The perception of income inequality relative to equality induces heightened social comparison (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Payne et al., 2017), status seeking (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Walasek & Brown, 2015) and status anxiety among lower socioeconomic status (SES) individuals (Du et al., 2021, this issue),



**Figure 1** The psychology of inequality. Inequality induces a sense of unfairness and distrust, evokes upward social comparison, status anxiety, and perceived competitiveness, and hope which in turn give rise to complex psychological reactions, ranging from unhappiness, illness, risk-taking behaviours and negative outgroup stereotypes, to materialism, achievement motivation, and a belief in meritocracy.

zero-sum belief (Davidai, 2018), perceived competitiveness (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, et al., 2019; Sommet et al., 2019), negative attitudes toward outgroups (Gordils et al., 2020), lower perceived ingroup wealth (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Jetten, et al., 2019), constricted upward social mobility (Browman et al., 2021, this issue), risk taking behaviours (Daly & Wilson, 2001; Payne et al., 2017), perceived unfairness (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2021; Oishi et al., 2011), distrust (Nishi et al., 2015), and preferences for authoritarian leadership (Sprong et al., 2019).

Although by and large, psychological research so far has highlighted negative consequences of income inequality, there are some positive consequences as well. For instance, income inequality is associated with a higher need for achievement (Sommet et al., 2019). A higher need for achievement is known to be associated with higher earning and artistic activities as well (McClelland, 1961).

Furthermore, for some individuals, the perception of income inequality signals more opportunities and hope (Hirschman & Rothschild, 1973). Most notably, in rural China, where income was fairly evenly distributed but nobody was wealthy before the 1980s, greater income inequality of the subsequent decades indicated a sign of hope for ordinary citizens for future mobility (Cheung, 2016). Unlike the last few decades of the United States, where inequality meant the rich got richer, in rural China inequality meant some farmers or children of poor farmers got really rich. That is, the historical origin of inequality is different in different societies, and this difference could result in divergent effects of inequality (see Ngamaba et al., 2018 for the developing vs. developed countries).

There are also important individual differences in the interpretation of perceived inequality. For instance, liberal Americans see inequality as unfair, whereas politically conservative Americans see it as a fair distribution of wealth (Davidai & Ongis, 2019; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Napier & Jost, 2008). Liberal Americans see CEO’s compensation as excessive, whereas conservative Americans see it as a fair reward for hard work and talent (Gupta & Wowak, 2017). These perceptions of inequality have downstream consequences: People who are less supportive of economic inequality are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours like signing a petition to raise the minimum wage (Wiwad et al., 2019). Likewise, liberal Americans tend to attribute poverty to external factors such as the lack of opportunities and being unlucky, whereas conservative Americans tend to attribute it to internal factors such as lack of motivation and skills. Moreover, Americans tend to overestimate their chance for upward social mobility (Kraus & Tan, 2015). As such, income inequality is tolerated and

even desired as long as there is a fair chance for upward social mobility (McCoy & Major, 2007; Shariff et al., 2016). That is, individuals who see opportunities for upward social mobility are not bothered by the existence of inequality, whereas individuals who do not see much opportunity for upward social mobility are distressed by it. Likewise, people who believe in free will are more likely to accept inequality (Mercier et al., 2020). Recent work also found that manipulating the framing of inequality or attributions for poverty could shift attitudes toward inequality and redistributive policies (Dietze & Craig, 2021; Piff et al., 2020).

Finally, most research on inequality including the seven articles of this special issue has tested the role of the absolute level of inequality. Yet, changes in income inequality might be more important than the absolute levels of income inequality *per se* when considering the effect of inequality on various psychological processes. This is because people are likely to notice inequality when it is rapidly changing, compared with when it is not changing much. For instance, if inequality has been high and stable for a long period of time, residents might be used to some degree of inequality and take it for granted. In contrast, when the level of inequality changed rapidly (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic, billionaires' wealth increased substantially, while unemployment skyrocketed), residents are more likely to perceive and exaggerate inequality. Consistent with this idea, Schröder (2018) found in many sets of longitudinal data that an increase in income inequality was associated with lower levels of life satisfaction (see also Chi & Kwon, 2016). Relatedly, the visibility of inequality is important. Nishi et al. (2015) showed that the effect of inequality on distrust was present when inequality was visible, but not when invisible to group members.

In sum, it is important to measure not only perceived inequality (e.g. how large is the gap between the rich and the poor), but the degree of changes and visibility in inequality (e.g., how much inequality is increasing) and perceived reasons for an increase in inequality (e.g., are the rich are getting richer, while the poor remain poor?).

### **Inequality and the Social Position**

Most early research on inequality focused on the overall effect of inequality on a target outcome. Some research, however, showed that the effect of inequality depends on one's social position. For instance, Americans on average reported lower levels of happiness, perceived fairness, and general trust in years of greater income inequality than in years of smaller income inequality. However, the inverse correlation between income inequality and happiness, perceived fairness, and general trust was particularly strong among the poorest 20% of

Americans and was absent among the richest 20% (Oishi et al., 2011, 2018). Similar results were also obtained in the World Values Survey data (Sommet et al., 2018) and in rural Uganda (Jachimowicz et al., 2020). It was encouraging to see 5 of the 7 articles in this special issue examining issues related to social position.

When interpreting the complex role of social position, Rucker et al.'s (2018) agency-communal model provides a useful framework. In a nutshell, this model proposes that individuals with social advantages (e.g., resources and opportunities; social power) would orient toward agency, whereas individuals with social disadvantages would orient toward communion. For instance, Rao et al.'s (2021, this issue) findings that participants from the higher social class were not different in their intention to help friends whether they perceive the society to be mobile or not are consistent with the idea that individuals from high social classes feel a chronic sense of agency and that their decisions are less affected by larger societal contexts. Du et al.'s (2021, this issue) findings that participants of higher SES were interested in luxury consumption regardless of larger societal contexts are also consistent with the model.

The agency-communal model provides further hypotheses building on Browman et al.'s (2021, this issue) main finding that individuals who see the gap between the richest 20% and the rest being large tend to see society as a whole as a fixed place. Individuals with social disadvantage who see the gap between the rich and the rest large may feel helpless, whereas individuals with social advantage who see the large gap between the rich and the rest may not.

The agency-communal model (Rucker et al., 2018) highlights the importance of taking into account one's position in society when examining the effect of societal inequality. Ultimately, this is a person-environment interactionist approach, in which the effect of "environment" on individuals varies, depending on one's personality, attitudes, and background attributes including race, gender, and social class.

### **Institutional Perspectives to Inequality**

While we were impressed that this special issue included many articles addressing the role of social position, and related issues such as the education gap and upward social mobility, none of the articles explicitly took an institutional approach. Wen et al. (2021, this issue) did incorporate institutional factors, however, by investigating the role of school-level and district-level wealth. For instance, they found that 4th graders' language test performance was more strongly associated with their parental SES in richer schools than in poorer schools. That is, in general, the performance gap between the rich and the

poor students was larger in schools where the average SES is higher. Moreover, the 3-way interaction showed that this tendency (parental SES being more important in richer than poor schools) was more pronounced in poorer school districts than in richer school districts. What is most surprising at least to us was that high SES students in low SES schools were performing at the level of low SES students in low SES schools, regardless of the wealth of school districts (see figure 3 in Wen et al.).

These findings are not consistent with Rucker et al.'s (2018) agency-communal model to the extent that high SES students in low SES schools in China do not seem to have any agency to improve their language scores. Without knowledge of primary education in China, these findings are truly impossible to interpret. In the U.S. there is a well-known SES gap in parental involvement with infants (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Kagan & Tulkin, 1971). High SES parents speak and read to infants far more than low SES parents. These differences result in SES differences in language development and IQ score (Bee et al., 1982). We wonder if Chinese parents of high SES and low SES also differ in these parenting behaviours. Do high SES parents spend more money on tutoring than low SES parents? Do low SES schools in China in some way implicitly “punish” high SES children? Is the reduced performance of high SES children in low SES schools due to the mismatch in home SES and school SES, or is it due to lower-SES schools having fewer learning resources available to students?

The findings from Wen et al.'s study (2021, this issue) are not easily explained by Rucker et al.'s (2018) agency-communal model. When thinking about the educational institution's role in persistent inequality, French social psychologist Jean-Claude Croizet's work is illuminating. He considers institutions such as schools to be the primary vehicles for the transmission and maintenance of income inequality across generations. That is, despite the meritocracy narrative dominant in the West, educational institutions are rife with practices that systematically discriminate against lower class children.

Croizet et al. (2019) observed preschool and elementary school classrooms and found that everyday practices in preschools and elementary schools are filled with activities that disproportionately benefit higher social class children. For instance, a show-and-tell encourages students from the higher class to show off their precious possessions and interesting experiences. In French preschools, teachers often engage in the “what's up?” exercise (*quoi de neuf?*). A child from a high class might talk about his excursion by TGV (a high-speed rail system in France), while a child from a lower-class might not have a story as interesting to the teacher as their higher-class peers. Preschool children from the lower

class quickly learn that the teachers do not value their experience as much as their upper-middle-class peers.

Similarly, in schools teachers often ask students to raise their hands if they know the answers. This practice creates a visual distinction between the “smart” students who know the answers and those who do not. One classroom experiment, in which students were randomly assigned to either raise their hand (visible) or not, showed that children from a lower class performed better under the “no raising hand” condition than the “raising hand” condition; the upper-class children's performance did not differ across the conditions (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017). Studies like these shed new light on sources of phenomena like the achievement gap and income inequality (Figure 2). In order to unpack Wen et al.'s (2021, this issue) complex findings, it is important to investigate whether classroom activities and teachers' teaching styles are different across schools and districts with different levels of resources.

Whereas Croizet's work focuses on early education (Croizet et al., 2019), Nicole Stephens and colleagues' work focuses on systematic biases in higher education (Stephens et al., 2014, 2019). The “show-and-tell” and “raise hand” practices that started the earliest stage of education continue and dominate college education. For example, seminar classes in the United States are filled with practices similar to the dinner table conversations of the upper-middle-class—explicitly democratic in theory, where everyone can speak their minds—yet in reality, only students who are comfortable enough to talk to professors (i.e., those from higher SES, those who have strong parental guidance on navigating higher education, or those who went to prep schools) typically dominate the seminar scenes. The mission statements of most colleges are full of metaphors evocative of independence, such as “curious minds cultivating their own paths” and “future leaders making a difference.” That is, colleges have the lofty mission of higher-class cultural capitals transmitting (presumably) democracy to students of all

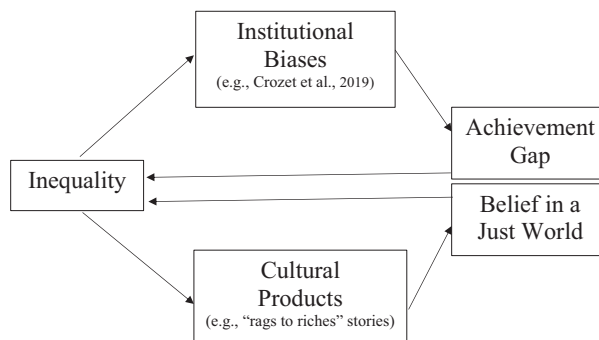


Figure 2 The institutional and cultural maintenance and transmission of inequality.

backgrounds. In reality, the practices, mission statements, and architecture that signal the superiority of higher-class culture are alienating to many first-generation college students, racial minority students, and lower social class students (Stephens et al., 2014; Trawalter et al., 2021; see Piff et al., 2018 for review).

In short, the institutional perspective sheds important light on the educational sources of income inequality, and how advantages of the higher class are perpetuated by institutions.

### **The Cultural Psychology of Inequality: Uniquely Asian Perspectives?**

We were impressed that the contributions to the current issue came from diverse geographical areas and cultures. We were disappointed, however, that these articles did not delve deeply into issues associated with culture. Culture consists of explicit and implicit ideas, rules, and norms that are transmitted from one generation to the next, and are embodied in products, symbols, and artefacts (Adams & Markus, 2004). What, then, are the explicit and implicit ideas and norms with regard to inequality? How are they embodied in cultural products?

#### **The Confucian Hierarchy**

Confucian thought that permeated East Asia throughout history is notoriously hierarchical (Lai, 1995). There is a strict hierarchy within a family (e.g., a son must obey his father). One is supposed to extend one's natural love toward their parents to the state, which has an elaborate status hierarchy, where the emperor is the supreme power. It should be noted, however, that Confucian hierarchy is characterized by harmony rather than conflict between different ranks. This is because the Confucian hierarchy works in both ways. Those in a lower rank obey those in a higher rank. But, those in a higher rank have the responsibility to take care of those in a lower rank.

In addition, in Confucian culture, hierarchy is not completely determined by heredity. Around the year 600, China introduced the national exam (科举) to select higher-ranking government administrators (until then they were held by hereditary rule). That is, the national exam opened up government access to ordinary citizens. This meritocratic system was widely adopted in Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In other words, in much of East Asia, there was a strict Confucian hierarchy in which aristocrats sat at the top. What was unique about East Asian hierarchy, historically speaking, was that there was an element of meritocracy within it.

There have not been many papers that explicitly address the cultural psychology of inequality. Some

suggestive evidence from Japan indicates that although income inequality is on the rise in Japan, the degree of income inequality is substantially smaller than in the United States (Sakamoto et al., 2012). Unlike the U.S. situation, in Japan the increase in income inequality could be due in part to the aging population (Ohtake, 2008; see Lee et al., 2013 for similar findings in Korea). Moreover, Japanese perceptions and attitudes toward inequality are quite different from those of Americans; Japanese tend to be more negative toward inequality than Americans and attribute inequality to academic backgrounds and luck to a greater extent than Americans (Ohtake, 2008). Finally, Japan has had cultural norms emphasizing equality (e.g., “wa,” see Sakamoto et al., 2012), which have long been reflected in the national healthcare system and national pension plan, suggesting that it is far more focused on the welfare of the less well off than the United States.

Given the anti-inequality attitude prevalent in Japan, it is understandable that the effect of social position in Japan is different from that in the United States. In addition to the general aversion to inequality, positions of social power in a Japanese hierarchy come with the responsibility to take care of those with less power. For instance, Americans of higher class expect that they would mostly engage in tasks that promote their own goals and are less supportive of redistributive policies that would help lower-SES individuals build wealth (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2006), whereas Japanese of higher class expect that they would engage in tasks that fulfil social obligations (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Subjective social class was more strongly associated with life satisfaction, positive affect, and a sense of purpose among Americans than among Japanese (Curhan et al., 2014). In contrast, objective social class was more strongly associated with positive relations with others in Japan than in the U.S.

The recent findings with regard to social class in Japan (see Miyamoto, 2017, for review) are consistent with earlier research on leadership by the Japanese social psychologist, Jyuji Misumi. Misumi developed the Performance-Maintenance theory of leadership, and showed that Japanese leaders could be understood by two dimensions, one focused on the performance function of leadership and the other on group maintenance (Misumi & Peterson, 1985). Furthermore, group performance in Japanese factories was highest when leaders were both performance and maintenance focused (see Shin, 1998 for similar findings in Korea).

In terms of cultural products, it is interesting to note that in Japan, manga stories about leaders are very popular, including the *Kousaku Shima* series in particular. One of the most admired bosses in the series was Kiichi Nakazawa, the competent and benevolent boss who took

extreme care of his subordinates, including Shima. It cannot be over-emphasized that manga characters like Nakazawa inspired thousands of young Japanese to become a leader like him, high in performance and maintenance concerns (see Figure 2). As such, it is important to explore the cultural psychological process of leadership and social class in the future.

### Within-Asia Variations

The majority of research on the psychology of economic inequality has been conducted in WEIRD countries (Lee et al., 2021; Ngamaba et al., 2018). However, work within the Asian context is beginning to emerge, with most focusing on East Asia. As a case in point, most of the Asian participants in studies in this issue were from China, with the exception of one Singaporean sample. While it is important to understand what sets apart East Asia from the rest of the world, it is also important to delineate within-East Asia variations in the perception of inequality.

The 2019 Oscar-winning film *Parasite* showcased a dramatic level of income inequality in South Korea. The increasing economic inequality has given rise to a fatalistic view of social mobility, especially prevalent among young generations in Korea (Han, 2016; Kim, 2021; Yoo et al., 2019). This immobility could be in part due to the high-level of educational attainment among Koreans: 98% of college-aged Korean adults have enrolled in post-secondary education (Marginson, 2018)! As a result, a mere college education is not enough to achieve upward mobility (Han, 2016). A degree from a prestigious university has become a vital ticket to upward social mobility, limiting the absolute number of individuals who can move up the economic ladder in Korea. Surveys showed that Koreans in their 20s were least likely to agree that hard work is important for success, compared not only to their older Korean counterparts, but also to their international counterparts—American, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian people in their 20s (Kim, 2021; see also Mijs, 2021).

Although China has a level of income inequality equivalent to South Korea (<https://wid.world>), Chinese people on the whole have a very optimistic belief about upward social mobility, believing that their status will move upward in the future, regardless of whether they experienced upward or downward movement in the past (Du et al., 2021). Those living in wealthier and more unequal localities were more likely to perceive upward social mobility positively. This optimism could be due to China's economic growth as opposed to Korea's economic stagnation, in conjunction with Chinese people's strong beliefs in meritocracy.

Despite such highly optimistic perceptions of upward social mobility, Chinese people are increasingly

dissatisfied with the current level of inequality (Lei, 2020). Moreover, more and more Chinese are attributing the inequality to extrinsic and structural factors (e.g., wealthy parents and connections), contributing to the growing concern about and discontent with inequality. A cross-temporal meta-analysis of 40 studies involving 21,217 students in China showed that the level of anxiety of Chinese adolescents (age 12–17) has been on the rise, and this rise corresponds to the rise in income inequality (Xin et al., 2010). Likewise, nationalism in China has decreased, as young Chinese people perceived high levels of economic inequality (Chen, 2020).

Large nationally-representative international surveys comparing China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan also showed that Chinese respondents perceived the highest level of inequality in opportunities among the four East Asian countries, followed by Koreans, Taiwanese, and Japanese (Kim et al., 2018). Koreans perceived the highest level of income inequality, followed by the Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese. Absolutely speaking, although Japanese perceived a high level of income inequality ( $M = 4.11$  on a 1–5 point scale), Japanese did not perceive much inequality in opportunities ( $M = 2.38$  on a 1–5 point scale). Similarly, Taiwanese did not perceive much inequality in opportunities ( $M = 2.72$ ). As the perception of inequality in opportunities is closely associated with a sense of unfairness, these findings suggest that Chinese and Koreans think that society is rigged for the rich to a far greater degree than do Taiwanese and Japanese. It is therefore not surprising that Chinese and Koreans endorsed the redistribution of wealth to a greater degree than Taiwanese and Japanese. In other words, Chinese and Koreans want their governments to do more to reduce inequality than Taiwanese and Japanese (see, however, Chi & Kwon, 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020, 2021 for higher levels of perceived inequality among Taiwanese).

In a similar vein, large-scale cross-national surveys conducted between 2014 and 2016 across 14 different Asian countries directly measured a sense of fairness in income distribution (“How fair do you think income distribution is in your country?”). Findings showed that people in Myanmar, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Korea perceived a relatively high level of unfairness in income distribution ( $M_s = 1.93$ – $2.11$  on a 1–4 scale, lower scores indicating low levels of fairness perceived in income distribution), while people in Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia perceived a relatively low level of unfairness in income distribution ( $M_s = 2.53$ – $2.63$ ; Lee et al., 2020, 2021). Individuals' perceptions did not always match the objective level of inequality in their country; in fact, GINI coefficients were positively correlated with perceived fairness ( $r = .19$ ), suggesting that people in more unequal

societies perceived their country's income distribution to be fairer.

The COVID-19 pandemic halted the economic growth globally, and Asia was no exception. Although almost all Asian countries experienced huge blows to their economies in 2020, COVID-19 hit South and Southeast Asian economies extra hard (Asian Development Bank, 2021). As countries strive to rebound from the economic downturn, differential vaccine rollouts and pandemic containment performances are resulting in unequal recoveries in the region. Recoveries in Southeast and South Asian countries have been slow (Pazos & Adeline, 2021), increasing the income gap between the regions and advanced economies in East Asia even further. Understanding people's perceptions of deepening inequality in Asia in the context of a shared (yet differentially affecting) health crisis, including unique cases such as Singapore, could thus provide valuable insights into the psychology of inequality.

### **A Unified Theory for the Psychology of Inequality? An Asian Perspective**

As the psychology of inequality accumulates empirical findings, it is also important to find a theoretical tool to make sense of divergent findings. Here we will briefly review and discuss two major theoretical perspectives from a cultural psychological perspective.<sup>2</sup>

**System justification theory.** The discrepancy between the objective reality of income inequality and an unfair system and the perception of a just society is at the core of the system justification theory (Jost, 2019; Jost et al., 2015). System justification theory refers to the motivational processes with which people justify and legitimize the current social, economic, and political systems they are in, even when the current systems do not benefit them (Jost, 2019). The basic psychological motivation is a belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980), that is, people fundamentally believe that the world is a just place. In this view, members of disadvantaged groups might be motivated to defend the status quo, even though it is against their self-interest. Indeed, as inequality has risen in the United States, so too has belief in a just world (Malahy et al., 2009). In addition, those who engage in system justification (e.g., conservatives), relative to those who do not (e.g., liberals), should be less affected by inequalities (Napier & Jost, 2008).

One situational moderator of system justification is perceived inevitability of a system (Jost, 2019). Therefore, people will be accepting of economic inequality to the extent that they view it as necessary, natural, or inevitable for economic development. Du and King (in press) applied system justification theory in the

Chinese context. Using a nationally representative longitudinal sample, they found that Chinese people who had system-justifying tendencies (i.e., belief that economic inequality is necessary for development) in 2010 perceived less economic inequality in 2016.

In sum, the system justification theory is one of the most comprehensive theories in the psychology of inequality. It can explain many central findings on inequality, including why people tend to underestimate the degree of inequality, why political conservatives are more likely to justify inequality than liberals, why lower-class people accept the current status quo and why revolution is rare, and why inequality persists.

The system justification theorists seem to explain the low-class individuals' system justification in terms of a sense of control (Jost et al., 2015). That is, people want to feel that they have control over their affairs and that in order to function in an unfair system they have to justify the system first to feel control over their lives. This is an explanation centred around a psychological defence. In the context of the current review, however, the same phenomenon can be explained by far less defensive mechanisms. As summarized above, one reason why poor Americans accept the status quo and sometimes hold opinions against a redistribution policy that favours them is that many of them think that they will go up the economic ladder (Kraus & Tan, 2015), and eventually get to the top 10%. This is not so much of a defensive psychological mechanism; rather, it originates in a naive hope similar to what Cheung (2016) identified among rural Chinese. Upward social mobility provides a compelling reason to tolerate inequality (Shariff et al., 2016). In the U.S., this became a cultural ethos, the American Dream, which further helped perpetuate the current unfair economic system. Another mechanism peculiar to the Confucian tradition is the naive expectation that those at the top will be protecting those at the bottom (Misumi & Peterson, 1985). Again, this has manifested itself as cultural artefacts such as *Mito Koumon* (movie, manga, TV series) and *Kousaku Shima* in Japan, which in turn might have helped perpetuate the conservative political and economic system in Japan over the last 70 years. As psychologists across the world adopt the system justification theory, it is important to consider potentially culture-specific reasons for system justification.

**Evolutionary theory.** Although the system justification theory (Jost, 2019; Jost et al., 2015) explains much of the extant findings on inequality, there are some findings that are not neatly explained by it. For instance, it is unclear how the system justification theory would explain why inequality leads to greater achievement motivation (Sommet et al., 2019) or risky behaviours



(Payne et al., 2017). Evolutionary psychologists have applied the theory of evolution that was originally devised to account for the origin, diversity, and changes of plants and animals, to explain the phenomena associated with inequality. In our opinion, some inequality findings are better explained by the evolutionary theory. For instance, evolutionary psychologists explain that lower-class individuals, in particular at times of high inequality, have such a low chance of thriving that taking a risk makes adaptive sense (Daly & Wilson, 2001). This is supported by other work that, contrary to prevailing research on system justification, finds that lower-status individuals do not in fact justify the economic systems they inhabit (Brandt, 2013). In the absence of system-justifying beliefs, people may assume that if there are no opportunities for success through traditional means, riskier approaches may be more beneficial. Existing research supports this increase in risk-taking in the face of economic uncertainty. Specifically, people resort to violence at a time of heightened inequality more often than at a time of relative equality (Daly & Wilson, 2001). People are also more likely to engage in risks in the pursuit of pleasure when inequality is high, and this is mediated by upward social comparison (Hannay et al., 2021). In addition, people, in particular persons of low SES, engage in unsafe sex and start having children at an earlier life stage at the time of inequality (Wilson & Daly, 1997).

The evolutionary theory can easily handle Sommet et al.'s (2019) findings on the income inequality-achievement motivation association. Evolutionary theorists have long theorized that achieving a high social status has a high survival value, and therefore that social status is of particular importance in human psychology. At a time of high inequality, status competition becomes more fierce compared to at a time of low inequality when societal resources are relatively equally distributed, and people feel more anxiety about their own social status relative to others (Layte & Whelan, 2014). In order to achieve a high status in a democratic society, one needs human capital (knowledge, skills), and mathematical modelling showed that under the high inequality condition in a democratic society, one must invest a lot in human capital to achieve a high status (Shenk et al., 2016), which explains why achievement motivation was high in a highly unequal neighbourhood in the United States (Sommet et al., 2019).

In addition, the evolutionary model of leadership also provides nice explanations for different types of social position effects observed in the United States versus East Asia (Miyamoto et al., 2018). Maner and Case's (2016) dominance versus prestige-based hierarchy model argues that a leader can govern people either through "love" or "fear." The social hierarchies of chimpanzees are maintained by physical strength or

dominance. Lower-ranking chimpanzees might not like the boss, but obey his orders, and the group maintains its harmony. In human societies, however, in addition to the dominance-based hierarchy, there is the prestige-based hierarchy, in which the leader is not intimidating the followers; rather followers respect and love the leader. Evolutionarily speaking, prestige is gained through cultural information (e.g., foreign language, superior technological knowledge). The prestige-based hierarchy idea fits nicely the Confucian hierarchy that we summarized above. Some inequality is based on dominance, while some is based on prestige. This model, then, provides new hypotheses such as the (private) dissatisfaction of citizens should be greater within a society with dominance-based inequality than prestige-based inequality, and a prestige-based leader is more concerned about their subordinates than a dominance-based leader. In a dominance-based inequality, individuals of the high social class could be agentic (Rucker et al., 2018) and even selfish, and those of the lower class are oppressed. In a prestige-based inequality, individuals of the high social class could be communal and caring (Misumi & Peterson, 1985).

Like the system justification theory (Jost, 2019), the evolutionary theory is highly useful in understanding the psychology of inequality. However, there are some remaining puzzles as well. First, evolutionary psychologists have amassed data suggesting that humans are extremely sensitive to inequality (Blake et al., 2015; Blake & McAuliffe, 2011). For instance, in an experiment in which a pair of children helped clean up blocks together, and an experimenter gave a different amount of stickers to the two children as the reward, 3-year old children (in particular boys) who received fewer stickers than their partner showed spontaneous unhappy facial expressions, suggesting that even 3-year-olds are sensitive to the uneven distribution of rewards (LoBue et al., 2011). On the other hand, many adults are comfortable with a certain degree of inequality (Napier & Jost, 2008; Shariff et al., 2016), and downright selfish and corrupt behavior (Köbis et al., 2017). How does an inequality-averse child become a corrupt adult?

It is possible to explain this from the developmental shift in the importance of survival. When children are young, they are not concerned about their own survival. They are protected. When they grow up, they need to be concerned about their own success. This changes their priorities. Another explanation is that as children grow older, they start to understand the importance of equity (reward proportional to inputs), as demonstrated by Blake and McAuliffe (2011). Eventually, equity-based morality takes over equality-based morality, that is, meritocratic beliefs that are derived from equity-based morality (individuals who contributed more should receive more

rewards than others who contributed less) could reduce sensitivity toward inequality over time. Still, going from equality-based morality to selfishness and corruption is a long way, requiring some further explanations.

In sum, Maner and Case's (2016) theory might be particularly useful when attempting to explain divergent social position effects across societies in the future. At this point of theorizing, however, it is not clear why a respective leadership continues to be preferred over time. The dominance- versus prestige-based leadership is likely to be transmitted across generations via institutions and cultural artefacts. A cultural psychological perspective (Adams & Markus, 2004; Croizet et al., 2019) could elucidate how different hierarchies emerge and are maintained.

### Summary and Conclusion

The current special issue reports exciting new findings with regard to the perception of economic inequality (who is concerned with and affected by inequality, what cues people use to perceive inequality in everyday life), the educational origin of income inequality, and the role of inequality in luxury consumptions, prosocial behaviour, life satisfaction, and beliefs in upward and downward economic mobility. Collectively, they contribute to the emerging literature on the psychology of inequality.

While we recognize numerous advancements in the literature, we must acknowledge that the cultural psychological perspective has not been fully integrated with the notable exception of the area on social class (Croizet et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2014). Asia has unique perspectives to offer to the scientific literature on inequality. We used the Confucian hierarchy as an example above. The Confucian hierarchy prescribes the specific social role expectation that a leader needs to protect subordinates, which could explain why high-SES Japanese expect to fulfil their obligations for subordinates—while high-SES Americans expect to get to do what they want (Miyamoto et al., 2018)—and are more concerned about maintaining good relationships with others than their American counterparts (Curhan et al., 2014). Misumi's programmatic research on the performance and maintenance model of leadership (Misumi & Peterson, 1985) showed that dominance-based leadership often fails, while prestige-based leadership thrives in Japan. We further speculated how cultural products such as the manga *Kousaku Shima* and TV drama *Mito Koumon* seem to perpetuate the norm and ideal regarding a leader.

As we move forward, it is imperative to consider cultural factors, in particular how the current unequal system is being maintained and transmitted across generations, and manifests itself as new organizations and cultural products. Such a cycle of cultural productions needs to be explicated in the future. Although we focused on

Confucian traditions, other cultural traditions can shed new light on the psychology of inequality. For instance, the Indian caste system could tell us much about the cultural psychology of inequality. The Indian philosopher, Kalghatgi (1965) states that karma explains Indian psychology of inequality in that the present-day inequality cannot be understood without understanding how the past influences the present, and how the present will affect the future inequality. Indeed, research finds that karma is related to support for hierarchy-enhancing policies within the Indian caste system (Cotterill et al., 2014). It brings a different kind of time perspective to the psychology of inequality that is missing in the extant literature on inequality. Similarly, Islam has a unique tradition with regard to inequality (Gradstein et al., 2001). For example, Islam is explicit about the equality of all believers before God, that is, as a religious person, every believer is equal regardless of their social positions (Marlow, 1997). That is a sharp contrast to Islamic societies' rigid hierarchy in social positions, which requires further investigation. As the psychology of inequality moves beyond WEIRD countries (Henrich et al., 2010), it is critical to bring in unique cultural and religious perspectives. We hope that our article serves as an example for such future endeavours.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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### Data Availability Statement

This is a review paper. We do not present any new data.

### Research Materials Statement

Not applicable.

### Pre-registration Statement

Not applicable.

### Endnotes

- 1 These coefficients seem small. But, given that the perception question was concerned with a "town/city" as a whole, and a "town/city" has numerous zip codes, they are quite impressive. For instance, we live in Charlottesville, VA. We would have answered the perception question with regard to the entire city of Charlottesville (and would have said that there is a large gap between the rich and the poor in Charlottesville). But, the objective level of inequality was calculated at a much smaller level: the first

author's zip code is 22901, which is one of five zip codes within a relatively small city of Charlottesville (with a population of roughly 45,000). The five zip codes had Gini coefficients ranging from .43 (well below the national average of .48) to .56 (well above the national average).

- 2 For brevity, we regret to report that we will not review the major theoretical contributions of social identity theory (Jetten et al., 2017) and social dominance theory (Pratto et al., 2006).

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