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## Objective and Subjective Socioeconomic Status as Sources of Status-Legitimacy Effect and Legitimation of Income Inequality

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*System justification theory proposes that people are motivated to perceive the existing social system as fair, legitimate, and desirable. However, status-legitimacy effect, understood as the most disadvantaged living in the most unequal contexts experiencing this need most strongly, has only found mixed support in empirical works. This article presents a comprehensive test of the original reading of status-legitimacy hypothesis which implied that those with lower objective status are the most motivated to system justify and of the respecified version that posits subjective powerlessness to be the driver of undue system legitimization. Multilevel mixed-effects linear regression analysis of International Social Survey Programme modules on social inequality, covering almost 50,000 respondents from 28 countries, shows that the mean effects of both subjective and objective status are in line with predictions of economic rationality. To model contextual inequality, we distinguish between an objective measure, Gini, and perceived amounts of income differences as reported by respondents. The analysis testing contextual moderation lends support for the original reading of status-legitimacy hypothesis—the objectively, rather than subjectively, disadvantaged experience greater motivation to defend the system.*

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**KEY WORDS:** legitimacy, system justification theory, social status, subjective status, inequality

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It has long been considered paradoxical that many people of lower social or economic status support the very social arrangements which offer them only questionable utility—whether by embracing ideologies that defend the status quo, rejecting suggestions of change, or by citing justifications for existing inequalities that place themselves and their groups in further disadvantage (e.g., Hochschild, 1981; Lane, 1959).

Offering a solution to this apparent puzzle, system justification theory (SJT) proposes that people are motivated to perceive the standing social and economic arrangements as fair and legitimate

(Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) and that this motivation to be especially strong among those facing the greatest disadvantages, in particular in situations when personal and group interests are not made explicit or salient and in societies and cultures that put emphasis of meritocratic ideologies akin to protestant work ethic (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). On the other hand, evidence for a robust negative relationship between socioeconomic position and active psychological legitimization of the system, dubbed status-legitimacy hypothesis by Brandt (2013), is mixed (Brandt & Reyna, 2012; Henry & Saul, 2006). A review of related research highlights two possible reasons for these divergent findings. First, conceptualizations and measures of perceived system legitimacy vary across extant studies. While some authors theorize that heightened motivation to legitimize experienced inequality should be tied to specific dissonance-generating hierarchies (Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015; Trump & White, 2015), others assert or assume that motivation to defend the system may be satiated by legitimizing multiple system-justifying beliefs or symbols (Brandt, 2013; Jost et al., 2011; van der Toorn et al., 2015). Second, neither the original formulation of the status-legitimacy hypothesis nor any of its subsequent tests do explicitly and systematically distinguish between objective and subjective status.

In this article, we present a comprehensive test of two readings of status-legitimacy hypothesis using representative cross-cultural data gathered from three rounds of Social Inequality modules of International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) which provide a unique opportunity to distinguish between judgments and beliefs about actual levels of earnings inequalities and the values the respondents would find legitimate. Assessing whether subjective feeling of powerlessness could explain paradoxical behaviors among members of the lower strata, we put emphasis on the differences between the likely subjective and objective experiences and on differences between measures of subjectively perceived and objective contextual inequality. Thus, the present research examines whether people with lower objective or subjective status react counterintuitively within contexts which are objectively or subjectively experienced as unequal. In addition, we also open a question of whether it is overall high-levels of or medium-term changes in contextual inequality that are associated with increased acceptance of earnings inequalities among the disadvantaged.

## Theoretical Background

### *Irrational Actors*

The enigma motivating this article is that of lower-class voters endorsing right-wing economic attitudes, thus diverging from expected behavior of an economically rational voter summed up by Meltzer and Richards' (1981) well-known median-voter theorem. In general, research shows people with higher economic status expressing less egalitarian views compared to those with lower incomes and lower self-reported social positions, but the reported relationships are far from sufficient to cast people as omniscient utility monsters (Gijssberts, 2002; Kenworthy & McCall, 2008; Kuhn, 2011).

Painting a more complex picture, subjective beliefs about one's situation, rather than objective economic conditions, were proposed as drivers of economic attitudes (Kreidl, 2000; Loveless & Whitefield, 2011). For instance, Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, and Payne (2015) showed that experimentally manipulated subjective status was negatively related to attitudes towards redistribution even in cases when participants could not profit from holding such attitudes in the particular experimental game, and studies including perceptions of life-long and contextual risks show that even prospects of upward mobility lead members of lower classes to reject redistribution (Bénabou & Ok, 2001; Cojocaru, 2014). Furthermore, individuals may operate with inaccurate data, whether in regard to estimates of actual differences in wealth and incomes (Kelley & Zagorski, 2004; Norton & Ariely, 2011), potential for social mobility (Jaime-Castillo & Marqués-Perales, 2014; Kraus & Tan, 2015), or performance of the welfare state (van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012). Finally, people may

also have skewed perceptions of both the actual structure and of realistically attainable and desirable alternatives (e.g., relative deprivation; Evans & Kelley, 2017).

Moreover, actors may also value goals other than personal material self-interest (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005). For instance, dominant ideology thesis suggests that people adopt ideologies (and thus goals and values) that are pervasive in their particular contexts (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). As Castillo (2007) explains, dominant ideologies usually provide justifications and explanations for the structure and power relations that are observable within the given society, reduce the need to use force in order to maintain the standing group hierarchies (Rytina et al., 1970), and instill the “right” values and beliefs among the members of the public (Wegener & Liebig, 1995). It is then the question of adoption of the “right” values instead of “challenging beliefs” among the lower strata that social scientists are puzzled about (Sennett & Cobb, 1973).

In this regard, the rest of the article focuses on a proposition derived from system justification theory that people are psychologically motivated to perceive their social surroundings as just and fair, and thus they have a tendency to adopt justifications and explanations for the structure and power relations observable within the given society and, sometimes, even when adoption of such explanations does not conform to expectations of economic rationality (Jost et al., 2004; van der Toorn & Jost, 2014). This motivation is then theorized to facilitate the adoption of dominant ideologies as a bottom-up mechanism—complementing the top-down mechanisms of dissemination of ideology (e.g., Gramsci, 2000; Lukács, 1971).

#### *System Justification: Motivation to See the Social World as Fair*

In general, SJT proposes that people are psychologically motivated have favorable beliefs about the system in which they live in and to consider this system to be just, legitimate, and desirable (Jost et al., 2011; van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). This is motivated mainly by existential needs to feel safe, epistemological needs to reduce uncertainty and gain control of own future, and relational needs of interacting with those who share the same social system (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). System-justifying tendencies are predicted to be stronger among those in disadvantaged (or low status) positions (Jost et al., 2004), and those who perceive the system as durable and stable (Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013). Furthermore, system-justification tendencies can be elicited and heightened in certain circumstances: (1) when system is perceived to be under threat; (2) when people see themselves as dependent on the system and see the system as inescapable; and (3) when people (implicitly) feel to have little control over their lives (Kay & Friesen, 2011).

#### *Status and Support of the System: The Status-Legitimacy Hypothesis*

Building on previous work and engaging with the concept of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), Jost et al. (2003) derived further predictions inspired by SJT. The originally proposed status-legitimacy hypothesis posits that those facing the greatest disadvantages may be among the most ardent supporters of the system in place since they experience the greatest dissonance. According to SJT, members of high- and low-status groups experience different levels of cognitive dissonance because the members of low-status groups have to reconcile whether they deserve to be in a disadvantaged position and whether to continue supporting the system which put them in such a position in the first place. In order to reduce cognitive dissonance, one may opt to cede positive self or group image and bolster the legitimacy of the system. As SJT does not dispute presence and strength of other motivations, status-legitimacy effect should manifest only when (1) self-interest and group membership of the individual are not made salient and obvious; (2) the individual has a reason to believe that they are at least partially responsible for the perpetuation of the system; and (3) the dominant system-justifying ideology and stereotypes are (similar to) meritocratic and Protestant work-ethic ideas. Since

more unequal systems should present members of low-status with more dissonance to reconcile, status-legitimacy effect was predicted to be stronger in societies with higher levels of contextual inequality. This prediction, named status-legitimacy hypothesis by Brandt (2013), distinguishes SJT from competing theories of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which also expect people to utilize legitimizing stereotypes for explanations of unequal group hierarchies but, nevertheless, predict that the low-status individuals should be rejecting the unfavorable system.

The original article of Jost et al. (2003) supported the status-legitimacy hypothesis with five different studies using various indicators of objective status and support of the system. Further corroboration came from Henry and Saul (2006) who studied system-justifying attitudes among disadvantaged children in Bolivia. However, other studies failed to find conclusive evidence for the status-legitimacy effect (e.g., Brandt & Reyna, 2012; Trump & White, 2015). The most comprehensive empirical critique of the proposed status-legitimacy hypothesis was brought forward by Brandt (2013) in an analysis of samples from over 50 countries in World Values Survey data and additional 40 years worth of samples from the General Social Survey and the American National Election Study. In particular, the tested interpretation of status-legitimacy hypothesis was that measures of both objective (age, gender, income, level education, race) and subjective status (self-assessed social class) should be in negative relationship with perceived legitimacy of the system (operationalized akin to institutional trust) and that these relationships would be stronger in more unequal countries. The study concludes mostly null and negative results for individual indicators of status and puts the very existence of the supposed anomaly into question.

Two explanations were put forward in order to reconcile the divergent findings. Focusing on the dependent variable, Sengupta et al. (2015) proposed that it is only the particular social hierarchy responsible for the experienced dissonance which the disadvantaged are motivated to defend most strongly. In a study based on data from New Zealand, they found that Maori reported lower trust in government but perceived ethnic relationships within the society as more fair compared to ethnic Europeans. In a similar vein, addressing the substantive quality of measures used for system-justification attitudes, Trump and White (2015) suggest that social and political institutions utilized in Brandt's (2013) analysis do not sufficiently capture the concept which is usually operationalized via meritocratic beliefs. In their own study, they test the hypothesis that it is perception of inequality that elevates motivation to system justify. After experimentally manipulating perceived levels of (economic and gender) inequality, they fail to observe significant differences in subjects' subsequent answers on measures of general system justification and economic system justification. However, it needs to be noted that SJT does not predict motivated defense of all perceived inequalities, but only of inequalities that the individual should initially consider unjust.

On the other hand, van der Toorn et al. (2015) suggest that a possible reason behind mixed findings could be the usage of objective rather than subjective status in previous studies. van der Toorn and colleagues (including the author of the original hypothesis) thus revised the original hypothesis by clarifying that the motivation to defend the standing group hierarchy should be elevated among those who experience subjective sense of powerlessness and implicitly consider themselves not in control of changing their fortunes within a system they are dependent upon. They further speculated that using group membership to infer feelings of powerlessness might confound the relationship between disadvantage, status, and feelings of powerlessness. van der Toorn and colleagues then supported this interpretation with results from five studies, three of them experimental, which directly demonstrate the relationship between experience of powerlessness and various measures of political and economic system justification. In particular, one's perceived financial dependence on their job predicted the perceived legitimacy of one's manager (i.e., agreement that the person should strive to always follow their manager's orders) and both experimentally induced and general sense of powerlessness predicted perceived legitimacy of the social system and of governmental authorities.

### Present Research

The question arising from the discussion above is whether the presumed experienced powerlessness of the disadvantaged manifesting as a “status-legitimacy effect” appears systematically across populations and, therefore, whether SJT and a status-legitimacy hypothesis can be a useful tool for making predictions at the aggregate level. We therefore assess the theorized relationship utilizing various operationalizations of both the conditions that should lead to experiences of powerlessness and of the attitudes through which the elevated motivation to defend the system should manifest. Following Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2015) and the suggestions of van der Toorn et al. (2015), we explore potentially different roles of subjective and objective status in the formation of system-legitimizing attitudes. The original formulation of status-legitimacy hypothesis focused on the likely experiences of members of objectively disadvantaged groups (e.g., the low-income respondents in general, the Blacks in American South, or low-income Latinos in the United States). We can then hypothesize that the expected relationship in representative data should be that those from low-income backgrounds should be more likely to legitimize existing inequality. The “revised” version of the hypothesis by van der Toorn et al. (2015) specifies subjective feelings of powerlessness as the source of motivation to system justify. From this we can theorize that it should be those who self-identify as occupying low-status positions who would turn to system-legitimizing attitudes.

Reflecting on the findings of Sengupta et al. (2015) and Trump and White (2015), the focus is on the legitimization of income inequality as a part of the system that should generate the most dissonance among the economically disadvantaged. We consider both the explicit statements and indirect measures in order to mitigate the role of self and group interest in the answers. Finally, we also distinguish between objective and self-reported measures of contextual inequality and explore the circumstances which motivate the disadvantaged to defend the status quo. We assume that greater objective inequality should be associated with the lack of possibilities for social mobility and economic resources for members of low-status groups, thus generating feelings of dependency and powerlessness. The perceived amount of inequality should mobilize material self-interest in ways consistent with median-voter theorem, thus generating cognitive dissonance among those comparing their own outcomes with those at the top. At the same time, the perceived level of inequality should also affect personal baselines of inequality ideals via multiple cognitive biases such as anchoring or status quo bias (e.g., Trump & White, 2015).

Additionally, in order to examine the core hypothesized consequences of motivation to system justify, resistance to change, and acceptance of inequality, we also test whether change in contextual inequality correlates with acceptance of income inequality among the low-status participants.

We can then derive the following hypotheses:

*H1*: People with low objective status will, on average, accept higher levels of economic inequality when objective or perceived levels of inequality are greater (original version of the status-legitimacy hypothesis).

*H2*: People with low subjective status will, on average, accept higher levels of economic inequality when objective or perceived levels of inequality are greater (revised status-legitimacy hypothesis).

Conversely, if we expect the disadvantaged to behave rationally, we hypothesize the following:

*H3*: People with high objective status will, on average, accept greater economic inequality, and the contextual level of inequality will be negatively related to acceptance of economic inequality (median-voter hypothesis).



*H4:* People with high subjective status will, on average, accept greater economic inequality, and this relationship will be stronger in contexts which are perceived as more unequal (subjective median-voter hypothesis).

### *Data*

The analysis explores representative survey data of 46,448 respondents from 28 countries over two decades in three different years (62 country/year combinations) gathered as a part of the social inequality module within the framework of ISSP project. Only respondents without missing answers to the questions used in all of the forthcoming analyses were retained in the dataset. ISSP uniquely offers not only questions on general judgments about inequalities, but also questions asking for the respondent's estimates (or perceptions) of actual salaries earned in certain occupations, as well as for the respondent's suggestions for what people in these occupations should earn. In line with previous research, we interpret the latter to be suggestions of earnings considered just (Jasso, 2006) or legitimate for the given occupation (Gijssberts, 2002; Trump, 2013).

### *Measures of Legitimacy of Economic Inequality*

Indirect acceptance of inequality is operationalized as (log of) a ratio of a mean of earnings suggested as ideal for the two available high-status occupations (ministers and CEOs) to those of available low-status occupations, unskilled workers and shop assistants.<sup>1</sup> Similar operationalization was utilized and extensively discussed in previous research (Kelley & Zagorski, 2004; Trump, 2013). Unstandardized coefficients represent percentage changes calculated as  $e(nx*b)$  = difference in ideal inequality for "n" units of variable  $x$  in percentages. We also distinguish between ministers and CEOs to capture the distinction between representatives of economic and political systems. In this way, we aim to identify the hierarchy to be legitimized, thus conceptually following Sengupta et al. (2015).

Explicit acceptance of inequality is measured with two separate items: "Income differences in (R's country) are too high," and "Large differences in incomes are necessary for a country's prosperity" (rescaled from a 5-point scale into a 0–1 scale, where 1 suggests strong agreement). These questions are meant to tap into explicit judgments on the presence of undue income inequality and acceptance of its necessity.

### *Measures of Status and Controls*

Of the status set that should describe the total position of the individual, we will only consider objective and subjective economic positions (Merton, 1957). A drawback is that the master status may not be aligned with the economic status but with other factors, such as political identity. As is standard in income-inequality research, the main measure of objective socioeconomic status of the respondent is captured as family income expressed as a (natural log of) the ratio of reported family income of the household in relation to mean family income within each country/year (Gijssberts, 2002; Kuhn, 2011). To measure subjective status, we use self-positioning on a ladder of relative income positions ranging from 1 to 10 (rescaled as a continuous measure on a 0–1 scale). We utilized this measure of subjective status instead of self-reported class because it provides more valid observations, better resolution (10 compared to five categories), and the very word "class" potentially introduces ideology-based biases.

<sup>1</sup> $\ln[(\text{mean legitimate earnings}(\text{ministers, CEOs}) / \text{mean legitimate earnings}(\text{unskilled workers, shop assistants}))]$ .

Additionally, we control for years of education (a continuous measure as opposed to a categorical variable denoting highest achieved education) and gender (0 = male; 1 = female). To measure the potential influence of personal ideological attitudes and predispositions, we utilize preference for use of equity (working hard and doing job well) versus need (having a family or children) as allocation principles for determining salaries. Averages of both dimensions (rescaled to 0–1) were subtracted from each other (equity–need), thus creating a variable informing us about the preferred allocation principle of the given individual, with scores above 0 meaning preference for equity and scores below 0 indicating a preference for need.

### *Measures of Context*

To measure perceived contextual inequality, we use (natural logarithm of) perceived ratios of two top-earning occupations (ministers and CEOs) to earnings of unskilled workers and shop assistants.<sup>2</sup> We also control for mean perceived level of inequality within a given subsample (country-year). Objective level of contextual inequality is measured with year-relevant Gini coefficient (Solt, 2015). To capture other time-related unobserved effects, we include year dummies. Additionally, recognizing structural, institutional, and ideological legacies of state-socialism, which earlier research identified as leading to lower acceptance of income inequality among the population, we use a dummy variable denoting Eastern European countries (Gijssberts, 2002).

### **Analysis**

We test the hypotheses in a three-level multilevel mixed-effects model recognizing the structure of the data in which individuals are nested within country-years, which are nested within countries. All continuous individual-level independent variables were group-mean centered and contextual-level variables (including aggregate means of individual-level variables) grand-mean centered. However, this modeling technique still provides only one common estimate for effects of between and within influences of contextual variables (see Schmidt-Catran & Fairbrother, 2015, for a comparison of viable random-effects specifications in multilevel models). In addition, to explore potentially differing influences of changes and stability in contextual inequality, we decompose the total effect of the Gini index for each country into an over-time mean and within-country change (Fairbrother, 2014). Using this operationalization, we obtain a “within-countries” “fixed” effect of change in Gini and a “between” effect described by mean level of inequality in given countries over time. All models were estimated with maximum likelihood. The data were analyzed with mixed command in Stata 13. Finally, the question of large income differences being necessary for a country’s prosperity was only posed in two waves of the survey. A two-level model considering each country-year combination as a unique context was used in an analysis with this question as the DV. It should be noted that since the questionnaire is openly addressing issues of deservingness, economic justice, and income inequality, it is possible that motivations of material self-interest may bias the answers in favor of rational choice-based models.

### *Results*

The results are summarized in Tables 1–3. In addition to the full model (Table 1, M3B), Table 1 presents selected intermediate models with computed legitimate ratios of income differences as a DV. Tables 2 and 3 present tests of the full model with different explicit statements as DVs and decomposition of contextual inequality. Compared to the simplest model utilizing only measures of

<sup>2</sup> $\ln[(\text{mean perceived earnings}(\text{ministers, CEOs}) / \text{mean perceived earnings}(\text{unskilled workers, shop assistants}))]$ .



Table 1. Suggested Legitimate Earnings for High-Earning Occupations (Compared to Suggested Earnings for Low-Earning Occupations)—Nested Model

	EM	M0	M1	M2A	M2B	M2C	M3A	M3B
<i>Structural variables</i>								
<b>Family Income</b>		.116 (.005)	.093 (.005)	.063 (.004)	.061 (.01)	.052 (.01)	.061 (.01)	.052 (.01)
Education						.01 (.001)		.01 (.001)
Gender						-.08 (.005)		-.081 (.005)
Age						.005 (.000)		.005 (.000)
<b>Subjective status</b>			.245 (.019)	.335 (.016)	.332 (.032)	.268 (.029)	.332 (.033)	.267 (.029)
Perceived Inequality (individual)				.487 (.003)	.486 (.003)	.468 (.003)	.486 (.003)	.486 (.003)
<i>Context-level variables</i>								
Equity/Need						.211 (.01)		.21 (.01)
Perceived inequality (national mean)						.444 (.044)		.508 (.04)
Gini index								
Eastern Europe								
1999		2.59 (.677)	2.48 (.667)	.705 (.409)+	.705 (.409)+	.899 (.505)+	.59 (.381)	.72 (.469)
2009						-.059 (.073)		-.02 (.061)
Family Income						.007 (.038)		-.015 (.036)
Education						-.051 (.055)		-.085 (.048)
Gender						.105 (.114)	.101 (.113)	.127 (.036)
Age						-.005 (.016)		-.001 (.013)
Subjective status						-.342 (.384)		-.419 (.362)
Equity/Need						-.000 (.008)		.006 (.007)
Interaction effects						-.078 (.384)	.268 (.245)	.124 (.333)
<i>Gini index x</i>						.577 (.277)		.288 (.224)
<i>Perceived Inequality x</i>								
Family Income								
Subjective status								
Constant	1.466 (.051)	1.46 (.046)	1.455 (.045)	1.468 (.026)	1.468 (.026)	1.507 (.05)	1.47 (.024)	1.518 (.044)
Level 1 n	48,802	48,802	48,802	48,802	48,802	48,802	48,802	48,802
Level 2 n	64	64	64	64	64	64	64	64
Level 3 n	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28
AIC	107,576.9	107,575.6	107,408.8	90,282.15	90,119.9	88,796.78	90,116.58	88,793.19
BIC	107,647.2	107,637.2	107,505.5	90,414.08	90,287.02	89,060.64	90,336.47	89,109.83
ICC country	.075 (.026)	.074 (.026)	.073 (.026)	.037 (.013)	.037 (.014)	.036 (.015)	.03 (.012)	.03 (.013)
ICC wave/country	.122 (.024)	.122 (.024)	.118 (.024)	.057 (.13)	.058 (.012)	.053 (.013)	.055 (.011)	.052 (.011)

Note. Presented are unstandardized coefficient; numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Dependent variable is legitimate level of income inequality calculated as log of ratio of suggested incomes for ministers and CEOs to suggested incomes for unskilled workers and shop assistants. Perceived inequality is expressed as a log of a ratio constructed analogical to legitimate inequality. Specification of the random part of the model: Models M0, M1, and M2A are estimated with random intercepts only; slopes for family income and subjective status were allowed to vary in models M2B and M2C and further to covary in models M3A and M3B. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .05$  are bolded. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .1$  are denoted with +. Data: ISSP 1992, 1999, and 2009.

**Table 2.** Agreement With a Statement that Large Income Differences Are Necessary for Country's Prosperity (M6)—2-Level Model; and That Income Differences in the Country Are Too Large—Nested Model (M7)

	M4A	M4B	M5A	M5B	M6	M7	M8
<i>Structural variables</i>							
<b>Family Income</b>	<b>.058 (.011)</b>	<b>.049 (.011)</b>	<b>.061 (.018)</b>	<b>.049 (.021)</b>	.005 (.005)	<b>-.017 (.004)</b>	<b>.054 (.011)</b>
Education	<b>.009 (.001)</b>	<b>.014 (.001)</b>	<b>.011 (.001)</b>	<b>.008 (.001)</b>	<b>-.004 (.001)</b>	<b>-.002 (.000)</b>	<b>.008 (.001)</b>
Gender	<b>-.075 (.006)</b>	<b>-.058 (.006)</b>	<b>-.075 (.006)</b>	<b>-.087 (.01)</b>	<b>-.019 (.003)</b>	<b>.024 (.002)</b>	<b>-.088 (.007)</b>
Age	<b>.004 (.000)</b>	<b>.006 (.000)</b>	<b>.005 (.000)</b>	<b>.005 (.000)</b>	<b>.001 (.000)</b>	<b>.0003 (.000)</b>	<b>.004 (.000)</b>
<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>.262 (.034)</b>	<b>.27 (.026)</b>	<b>.302 (.074)</b>	<b>.396 (.056)</b>	<b>.142 (.013)</b>	<b>-.151 (.014)</b>	<b>.286 (.031)</b>
Perceived Inequality (individual)/CEOs	<b>.463 (.005)</b>	<b>.472 (.005)</b>	<b>.463 (.005)</b>	<b>.463 (.005)</b>	<b>.486 (.003)</b>	<b>-.024 (.002)</b>	<b>.024 (.001)</b>
M4A/ministers							
<b>Equity/Need</b>	<b>.237 (.012)</b>	<b>.186 (.012)</b>	<b>.207 (.011)</b>	<b>.216 (.018)</b>	.01 (.006)+	<b>-.077 (.004)</b>	<b>.198 (.012)</b>
<b>Context-level variables</b>	<b>.432 (.036)</b>	<b>.574 (.063)</b>	<b>.572 (.062)</b>	<b>.364 (.056)</b>	<b>-.055 (.032)+</b>	<b>.043 (.014)</b>	<b>.509 (.046)</b>
<i>Perceived inequality (national mean)</i>							
<b>Gini/Healthcare spending (M8)</b>	<b>1.28 (.532)</b>	.007 (.532)	.468 (1.001)	1.54 (.952)	<b>.798 (.275)</b>	<b>.439 (.184)</b>	<b>-.008 (.012)</b>
Eastern Europe	<b>-.002 (.079)</b>	<b>-.105 (.08)</b>	<b>-.119 (.095)</b>	<b>-.224 (.087)</b>	.069 (.047)	<b>.103 (.027)</b>	<b>-.138 (.066)</b>
<b>1999</b>	.018 (.037)	.034 (.047)	.007 (.047)	<b>-.059 (.058)</b>	<b>-.041 (.022)</b>	<b>-.014 (.012)</b>	<b>-.043 (.037)</b>
<b>2009</b>	<b>-.074 (.055)</b>	<b>-.035 (.064)</b>	<b>-.066 (.075)</b>	<b>-.093 (.069)</b>	<b>-.032 (.075)</b>	<b>-.049 (.019)</b>	<b>-.138 (.205)</b>
Family Income	.127 (.036)	.1 (.113)	.158 (.108)	.127 (.036)	<b>-.032 (.075)</b>	<b>.166 (.034)</b>	<b>-.026 (.017)</b>
Education	<b>-.001 (.013)</b>	<b>-.004 (.024)</b>	<b>.017 (.017)</b>	<b>-.001 (.013)</b>	<b>-.01 (.009)</b>	<b>-.002 (.006)</b>	<b>-.376 (.455)</b>
Gender	<b>-.419 (.362)</b>	<b>-.499 (.467)</b>	<b>-.314 (.385)</b>	<b>-.419 (.362)</b>	<b>-.266 (.26)</b>	<b>.007 (.002)</b>	<b>.002 (.009)</b>
Age	.006 (.007)	.002 (.008)	.002 (.008)	.006 (.007)	.002 (.004)	.041 (.132)	.016 (.415)
Subjective status	.124 (.333)	<b>-.404 (.52)</b>	<b>-.01 (.386)</b>	.124 (.333)	<b>.568 (.276)</b>	<b>-.093 (.099)</b>	<b>.41 (.276)</b>
Equity/Need	<b>.524 (.29)+</b>	<b>.655 (.3)</b>	<b>.39 (.305)</b>	<b>1.336 (.38)</b>	<b>-.163 (.142)</b>		
Interaction effects							
<b>Gini/Healthcare spending (M8) x</b>	<b>.052 (.15)</b>	<b>-.303 (.149)</b>	<b>.046 (.325)</b>	<b>-.075 (.261)</b>	<b>-.185 (.066)</b>	<b>.168 (.057)</b>	<b>.004 (.004)</b>
<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>-.781 (.483)</b>	<b>-.736 (.366)</b>	.959 (1.26)	<b>-.246 (.637)</b>	<b>-.449 (.286)+</b>	<b>.672 (.196)</b>	<b>.037 (.011)</b>
<b>Family Income</b>	<b>-.001 (.004)</b>	<b>-.034 (.006)</b>	<b>.008 (.007)</b>	<b>-.023 (.006)</b>	.004 (.003)	<b>-.003 (.002)+</b>	<b>-.018 (.005)</b>
<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>.158 (.018)</b>	<b>.192 (.023)</b>	<b>.189 (.026)</b>	<b>.145 (.027)</b>	.008 (.012)	.004 (.007)	<b>.173 (.021)</b>
constant	1.597 (.052)	1.342 (.055)	1.568 (.071)	1.518 (.062)	.374 (.027)	.786 (.018)	1.533 (.036)
Level 1 n	48,802	48,802	27,170	21,632	28,328	48,255	36,931
Level 2 n	64	64	35	29	38	64	51
Level 3 n	28	28	16	16	28	28	28
AIC	102,791.2	102,028.1	40,884.23	45,678.41	6,920.925	-11,211.56	70,242.29

(Continues)

Table 2. (Continued)

	M4A	M4B	M5A	M5B	M6	M7	M8
BIC	103,055	102,291.9	41,130.53	45,917.87	7,160.222	-10,895.33	70,489.28
ICC country	.04 (.015)	.02 (.011)				.056 (.022)	.026 (.012)
ICC wave/country	.05 (.014)	.044 (.009)			.05 (.012)	.073 (.02)	.44 (.01)

Note. Presented are unstandardized coefficient; numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Samples for M5A and M5B are restricted to country-year clusters with Gini below and above the sample mean, respectively. Dependent variables for M4A and M4B are analogous to the main DV, but only restricted to suggested ratios of earnings for CEOs (M4A) and ministers (M4B) to those of unskilled workers. Dependent variable for M6 is an agreement with a statement that large differences in incomes are necessary for country's prosperity (0-1; strongly (dis)agree). Dependent variable for M7 is an agreement with a statement that income differences within the country are too large (0-1; strongly (dis)agree). Dependent variable for M8 is individual's ideal level of income inequality as in models EM-M4. Specification of the random part of the model: Slopes for family income and subjective status were allowed to vary in models M4A, M4B, M5A, M5B, and M8 and further to covary in models M6 and M7. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .05$  are bolded. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .1$  are denoted with +. Data: ISSP 1992, 1999, and 2009.

**Table 3.** Models M3 and M7 with Disentangled Gini

		M9	M10
Main effects		Suggested Legitimate Inequality	Differences in Incomes too Large
<i>Structural variables</i>	<b>Family Income</b>	<b>.052 (.001)</b>	<b>-.017 (.004)</b>
	Education	<b>.01 (.001)</b>	<b>-.002 (.000)</b>
	Gender	<b>-.08 (.005)</b>	<b>.024 (.002)</b>
	Age	<b>.005 (.000)</b>	<b>.0003 (.000)</b>
<i>“Subjective variables”</i>	<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>.268 (.028)</b>	<b>-.152 (.015)</b>
Perceived inequality (individual)		<b>.468 (.003)</b>	<b>.024 (.001)</b>
<i>Context-level variables</i>	Equity/Need	<b>.21 (.01)</b>	<b>-.077 (.004)</b>
	<i>Perceived inequality (national mean)</i>	<b>.446 (.044)</b>	<b>.045 (.015)</b>
	Gini (between)	.01 (.006)+	-.001 (.002)
	Gini(within)	.003 (.01)	<b>.012 (.004)</b>
	Eastern Europe	-.034 (.082)	.055 (.029)
1992 (reference)	<b>1999</b>	.014 (.039)	-.0156 (.014)
	<b>2009</b>	-.041 (.057)	-.039 (.02)+
	Family Income	.094 (.115)	<b>.162 (.04)</b>
	Education	-.006 (.016)	-.003 (.006)
	Gender	-.395 (.39)	.085 (.136)
	Age	.001 (.008)	.004 (.003)+
	Subjective status	.058 (.431)	<b>-.329 (.151)</b>
	Equity/Need	<b>.61 (.28)</b>	-1.166 (.099)+
Interaction effects			
<i>Gini (between)</i>	<b>Family Income</b>	-.002 (.001)	<b>.002 (.001)</b>
	<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>-.011 (.004)</b>	<b>.008 (.002)</b>
<i>Gini (within)</i>	<b>Family Income</b>	-.001 (.004)	<b>.005 (.002)</b>
	<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>.03 (.013)</b>	-.003 (.005)
<i>Perceived Inequality</i>	<b>Family Income</b>	<b>-.015 (.004)</b>	-.003 (.002)+
	<b>Subjective status</b>	<b>.165 (.018)</b>	.004 (.007)
	constant	1.493 (.054)	.796 (.019)
	Level 1 n	48,802	48,255
	Level 2 n	64	64
	Level 3 n	28	28
AIC		88,793.6	-11,203.34
BIC		89,083.85	-10,913.46
ICC country		.036 (.015)	.037 (.014)
ICC wave/country		.053 (.013)	.052 (.013)

*Note.* Presented are unstandardized coefficient; numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Dependent variable is legitimate level of income inequality calculated as log of ratio of suggested incomes for ministers and CEOs to suggested incomes for unskilled workers and shop assistants. Perceived inequality is expressed as a log of a ratio constructed analogical to legitimate inequality. Specification of the random part of the model: Slopes for family income and subjective status were allowed to vary in models M9 and M10. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .05$  are bolded. Effects significantly different from zero at  $p < .1$  are denoted with +. Data: ISSP 1992, 1999, and 2009.

objective status and inequality, models including subjective status and perception highlight the central role of interpretation for attitudes towards inequality (Table 1, M1 and M2A). For one, the effect of the level of objective inequality does explain a significant portion of inequality attitudes after inclusion of perceived amounts of inequality. The main effects in the full model (M3B) are largely in expected and intuitive directions. Measures of objective and subjective status are positively related to the acceptance of income inequality, as is ideological preference for equity over need. As tested hypotheses focus primarily on contextual moderation, we turn to their assessment in the following part.

The first tested hypothesis was that people in low objective status will be more likely to accept inequality in contexts that may generate more dissonance. In the model testing indirect attitudes, it is only the amount of perceived inequality that moderates the relationship between inequality ideals and objective status (Table 1, M3B). Importantly, the relationship is present for incomes of ministers and not for CEOs, which suggests that inequalities within an “economic system” generate less internal conflict and thus less dissonance to resolve than inequalities within a political system (Table 2, M4A-B). Further supporting the hypothesis is that the negative interaction effect is only present in countries with above-average (sample-wise) Gini coefficient (Table 2, M5A-B). Similarly, when explicit statements judging presence and usefulness of income differences are considered, the effect only manifests in more unequal contexts (Table 2, M6-M7). Overall, the data indicate that both higher objective and perceived inequality may lead to acceptance of the unequal status quo among those presumably experiencing the greatest dissonance (people in low objective status). However, the results suggest that there is a difference between justifying compensation of economic and political representatives (H1).

The powerlessness hypothesis stated people who consider themselves to be in low status may accept the unequal arrangements when they feel greater feelings of dependency on the system. Such emotions should be elicited more often in unequal contexts that don't offer many avenues for alternative mobility paths. People with lower reported social status were more likely to accept higher income differences in objectively more unequal contexts, albeit only for ministers and not for CEOs (Table 1, M1; Table 2, M4B). Similarly to Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 is only supported in highly unequal countries (Table 1, M5B). It is therefore possible that a certain level of inequality is necessary to generate amounts of dissonance not reconcilable without engaging in disproportionate system justification. Similar results were found when examining economic attitudes measured with explicit judgments as DVs (Table 2, M6-M7). In sum, the proposition that it is the subjective experience of powerlessness that leads people to perceive the status quo as fair is supported only in more unequal contexts, and even less so when judging the necessity of income inequality (H2).

As hypothesized in the median-voter theorem (H3), objective status, measured as family income, correlates positively with attitudes supporting greater inequality or less redistribution. Median voter hypothesis, however, receives support only at the microlevel as the overall level of inequality within a country is not negatively related to support for inequality for neither indirectly nor explicitly measured ideals (Table 1, M3). In comparison to the better off, the disadvantaged in more unequal countries are less likely to agree with a statement that income differences in a country are too large (Table 2, M7). There is also no main effect of family income on the statement that large differences in income are necessary for a country's prosperity.

A toned-down, or subjective, version of the median voter hypothesis, Hypothesis 4, was that those who believe they are the overall winners within the status quo are more likely to oppose redistribution and justify inequality. Overall, the hypothesis is supported with the main effect of subjective status being strongly significant across all models. When contextual moderation is taken into consideration, the data support the hypothesis when indirect attitudes are considered as the DV (Table 1, M3B). On the other hand, greater perceived inequality does not lead to perceived necessity of large income differences, nor to the denial of their excessive presence among those who place themselves as higher on the income ladder (Table 2, M6-M7).

Finally, we introduced a model testing the effects of both the “changes” and of the “average differences” in levels of contextual inequality (Table 3, M9-M10). The model shows that both the long term average inequality and the increase in inequality (measured between the periods when data was gathered) reduced differences in assessment of whether “income differences are too large” between those in objectively higher and lower status, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. This suggests that the effect originally proposed in the status-legitimacy hypothesis (judgment that the society is fair—or rather not excessively unfair) holds in objectively more unequal contexts as well as in societies

experiencing increases in inequality. The disadvantaged seem to adjust to high levels of inequality over time (Table 3, M10). Conversely, people with low subjective status seem to only accept relatively “long-term” levels of inequality as indicated by positive interaction between change in Gini and subjective status in Table 3 (M9).

Our findings thus corroborate the wealth of empirical evidence in which the subjective potential victims of change rally in order to protect their interests at first and accepting the novel status quo only with the passing of time.

## Discussion

The question of members of low-status groups supporting unequal social arrangements presents a puzzle that is challenging to explain within the intuitive frameworks of people behaving according to economic rationality. The SJT offers an explanation that people are motivated to have positive attitudes towards existing social systems—and even more so if such systems are putting them in a disadvantage. Various interpretations of this proposition posit powerlessness and experiences of being disadvantaged as immediate drivers of the sometimes counter-intuitive motivation to system justify (Sengupta et al., 2015; van der Toorn et al., 2015). Experimental research shows that there are multiple ways to increase the said motivation (van der Toorn et al., 2011), but most findings from comparative national samples provide only mixed support for the hypothesis (Brandt, 2013; Milojev, Greaves, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015; Trump & White, 2015).

The goal of this article was to examine the conditions under which the paradoxical effect of the disadvantaged justifying the status quo manifests and assesses whether such conditions are consistent with the predictions originally proposed by Jost et al. (2003) and clarified in van der Toorn et al. (2015). Focusing on the economic dimension of social systems, consistent with the intuitive predictions of models expecting people to behave more or less as rational actors, we found that, on average, people hold attitudes that are reasonably in line with intuitive expectations of the median-voter model and that both objective and subjective status are positively related to acceptance of inequality.

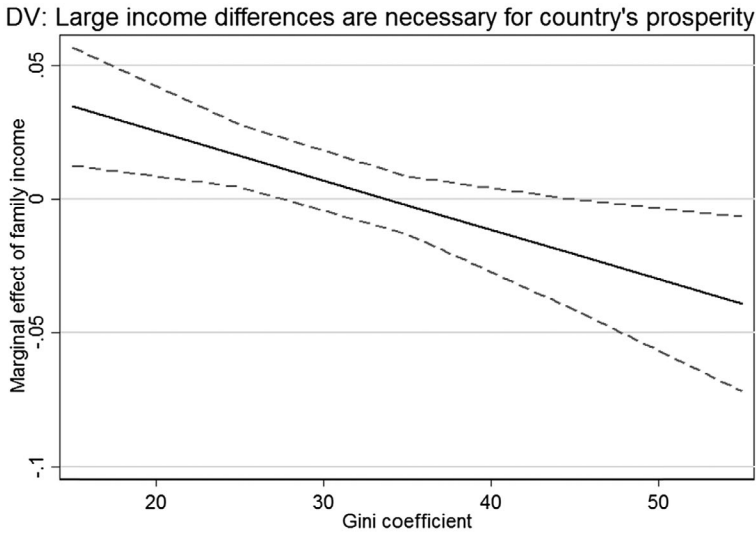
At the same time, however, and in line with predictions of the original formulation of status-legitimacy hypothesis, both objective and perceived amount of inequality moderate the relationship between objective (and to some degree also subjective) status and support for unequal status quo. In a rather clear support of the original version of Hypothesis 1, it was in the most unequal contexts where people in objectively lower socioeconomic positions were more likely than those from more affluent households to agree with a statement that large differences in incomes are necessary for a country’s prosperity (Figure 1) and least likely to agree with a statement that income differences in the country are too large (Figure 2).

Consistent with predictions of the original formulation of the status-legitimacy hypothesis, this indicates that objective status is a better predictor the status-legitimacy effect. The proposed intermediate mechanism of experiences of powerlessness and dependency may serve as a fitting explanation for obtained results. People in less unequal countries, in which levels of redistribution are presumably higher, may feel less pressured to have positive attitudes towards economic inequality simply due to redistribution already being the dominant norm in the given society. Likewise, people in countries where redistribution is greater may feel less dependent on their current low-paying jobs, thus experiencing less dependency and powerlessness vis-à-vis considerations of following alternative options. This interpretation is further supported in a model in which health-care expenditures are used as a proxy for institutionalized level of redistribution (Table 2, M8).<sup>3</sup>

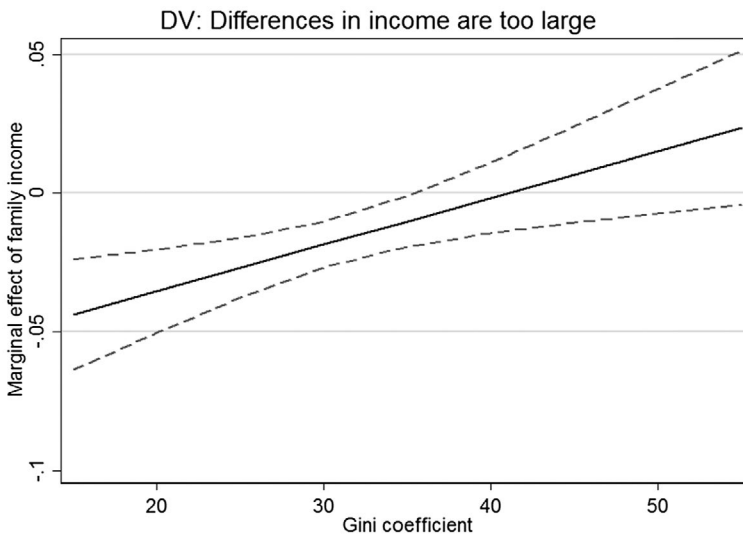
On the other hand, the general mechanism that is proposed to drive system-justifying attitudes may shed light on a seemingly opposite phenomenon, an increasing rise in popularity of populist

<sup>3</sup>Expenditures health care expressed as percentage of GDP; taken from Quality of Government databases from University of Gothenburg.





**Figure 1.** Marginal effects of family income depending on contextual inequality (Gini) on agreement with the statement that large income differences are necessary for the country's prosperity.



**Figure 2.** Marginal effects of family income depending on contextual inequality (Gini) on agreement with the statement that income differences in the respondent's country are too large.

movements across the globe. One of the often-cited sources of support for current populist and authoritarian movements is economic anxiety coupled with loss of faith and confidence in the system or in “politics as usual” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). However, in what is one of the most salient issues of the time, populism researchers studying a related question of how people come to vote for parties that seemingly aim to upend the standing order have repeatedly found economic insecurity to be an insufficient explanation for support of the populist right (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mols & Jetten, 2018; Oesch, 2008; Rooduijn, 2018). Although not directly tackling the question of “who

votes who,” our results nevertheless support SJT’s suggestions of possible reasons for why the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups would prefer stability over radical change or attempts for a return to the golden past.

Indeed, populist narratives may not be as appealing to the very worse off because they are often focused on enemies, like foreigners or corrupt elites, whose presumed corrupting influence on the society simply cannot take much away from those who do not have much to lose. In other words, and consistent with the idea that people pay more attention to potential losses than potential gains, it could be that the worse off feel less motivated to change the system because keeping it in place is not perceived as leading to further losses in their social status. Such interpretation would be also consistent with the observed moderation of this relationship by the extent of country-level inequality, simply because even the worse off in many of the developed countries enjoy benefits of the local welfare system and relative affluence compared to those from the countries with less developed welfare systems.

On the other hand, the results of this study also point to a decisive importance of subjective beliefs about both the state of the world and one’s own position in regard to the formation of attitudes towards the prevailing socioeconomic order. As our results show, and consistent with research on the role of subjective perceptions in the populism literature (Jetten, Mols, Healy, & Spears, 2017), those who think they are falling behind tend to reject increases in inequality and rising salaries among the elite. One of the explanations consistent with SJT’s perspective could be that the feeling of falling behind activates ego and group identities, and these buffer against the motivation to defend the status quo. Taken together, there are indications of a decline of the belief in the capability of the government to reign in the consequences of globalization and fairly regulate and redistribute the accrued surplus. In countries where inequalities are (at least subjectively) felt the most, those who do not see or no longer believe in possible alternatives may be motivated to seek certainty by affirmation of existing or already-known orders rather than by risking an approach oriented towards further change.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Our approach also has its limitations. The utilized data are not a true panel, thus limiting our ability to infer conclusions about effects of changes in (perceived) inequality on attitudes of particular individuals. Also, the measures of system-justifying attitudes and subjective experience of powerlessness (which was proposed to be increasing the motivation to endorse the status quo) are not without problems. First, the questionnaire openly addressed issues of fairness and inequality, something which should make self and group interest salient and thus compete with motivation to defend the system. Second, using objective or subjective status is not an ideal way of approximating likelihood of experiences of powerlessness and dissonance. Questions about the perceived ability to reach one’s goals could be devised and tested to measure powerlessness in cross-cultural surveys.

Further research could then focus on ascertaining whether endorsement of unequal arrangements and inequality-justifying attitudes are direct consequences of a limited amount of perceived general availability of options to reach one’s goals (dependency) or of perceived inability to utilize those said options (powerlessness).

Similarly, while there was some unexpected support of inequality among those with low subjective status in more unequal contexts, objective status seemed to be more clearly related to the theorized phenomenon. Subsequent theoretical and experimental work on the status-legitimacy hypothesis should address why experiences of powerlessness—presumed to be eliciting motivation to system justify among the disadvantaged—do not translate into lower self-reported status.

Finally, while we have only directly tested hypotheses related to the economic dimensions, testing the support of other hierarchies and institutions in a similar manner could help reconcile the

questions opened up by this research, such as whether people tend to defend some hierarchies more than others. If experienced powerlessness motivates not only the legitimization of status quo, but also of (unequal) hierarchies in general, it could help explain the source of the appeal that populist and strongman types of leaders have for the people who feel powerless and lacking control over their lives.

### Concluding Remarks

Overall, we found stronger support for a notion that experiences tied to objective, rather than subjective, low status may motivate people to defend experienced, unequal economic arrangements, while the interpretation that subjective status might be a better predictor of status-legitimacy effect has received only a limited support in data covering 28 countries over two decades. This presents support for the original claim of Jost et al. (2003) and its reading by Sengupta et al. (2015). However, Sengupta et al.'s reading, that it is the particular hierarchy responsible for one's disadvantaged position that will be justified, is not supported by a positive effect of interaction between perceived inequality and objective status on the assessment of differences in incomes being too large. Neither is it supported by objectively low-status respondents defending the incomes of ministers, rather than CEOs, in more unequal contexts. Such results point to people selectively defending the unequal hierarchies and institutional arrangements, but not those that might be seen as exacerbating or profiting from their disadvantaged positions.

To assess the conditions in which status-legitimacy effect manifests, we have differentiated between objective and subjective status and between objective and perceived inequality in incomes. We have explored the relationships of relevant constructs utilizing cross-cultural representative survey data. Our design has multiple advantages over previous research. First, by explicitly distinguishing between subjective and objective status, we are able to address the confusion stemming from the usage of the elusive concept of status and further clarified where to look for the feelings of powerlessness that van der Toorn et al. (2015) found to be motivating legitimization of the status quo. We show that objective disadvantage, and less so subjective disadvantage, translate into heightened motivation to defend the system in highly unequal contexts. Secondly, we utilize both indirect and explicit attitudes towards income inequality in order to assess the likely extent of acceptance of status quo among the participants. The results point to different mechanisms motivating the acceptance of inequality indirectly defined via ratios of earnings of particular occupations and agreements with explicit statements judging presence and usefulness of differences in incomes. In addition, we clearly show that earnings for top market and political occupational positions are justified differently, presumably due to generating different amounts of dissonance. Third, we model temporal changes in contextual inequality. Thus, while we can conclude that high income inequality is related to increased likelihood of injudgmentation (a tendency to see the way things are as the way things should be) among the disadvantaged, we are also able to show that the opposite is the case among the subjectively low status when income inequality increases in the medium term. Finally, we have utilized nationally representative data gathered over multiple decades from countries all over the world, thus increasing the generalizability of our findings.

The explicit attention of this study on the objective and subjective allows us to address the possible consequences of rising economic inequality for how people perceive the legitimacy of economic and political arrangements and institutions. While the puzzling tendency of some of the members of the lower strata (and recently of the shrinking middle class) to protect the status quo through support of economically right-wing parties may remain unanswered for the time being, our results bring forward the possible role of the perceived lack of options or ability to act on these (i.e., powerlessness).

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