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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Inequality and Status Anxiety: Bad Allies of Health and Well-Being, but not for Everyone. The Role of Ideologies, Socioeconomic Status, and Economic Threat

Davide Melita[1] · **Efraín García Sánchez**[2,3] · **Guillermo B. Willis**[3,4] · **Katerina Petkanopoulou**[5] · **Juan Diego García Castro**[6,7] · **Rosa Rodríguez Bailón**[3,4]

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Abstract
Economic inequality has been proposed to be linked to lower subjective health and well-being through enhanced status anxiety, but evidence is mixed. We propose that the effects of economic inequality on status anxiety, health and well-being depend on how people perceive it and how threatening it is to them. This paper analyses the effects of perceived economic inequality—in general and in everyday life—on status anxiety, health and well-being, and the conditions under which these effects occur. Moreover, we investigate the role of status anxiety as a mediating mechanism in the effects of economic inequality perceptions on subjective health and well-being. We used nationally representative survey data from four countries and found that those who perceive higher economic inequality in their country and those who experience economic inequality in their daily life experienced higher status anxiety. In turn, the effects of perceiving higher economic inequality on status anxiety were associated with lower life satisfaction and poorer perceived health. However, perceptions of economic inequality were not equally threatening for everyone: Perceiving to live in a highly unequal country was associated with higher status anxiety only among those who endorse system-justifying ideologies. Furthermore, perceiving inequality in everyday life was associated with higher status anxiety only among those who perceived they had insufficient economic resources. Overall, the results support the importance of reducing economic inequality and status anxiety for enhancing health and well-being. We discuss future venues for a more nuanced understanding of the psychological effects of economic inequality.

Keywords Economic Inequality · Status anxiety · Life satisfaction · Subjective health · System-justifying · Ideologies · Material conditions

A large body of research has signaled that economic inequality (i.e., the distance between individuals or groups in terms of income and wealth; Peters & Jetten, 2023) has pernicious societal effects (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Stiglitz, 2012; Therborn, 2013; United Nations, 2020). Furthermore, economic inequality has negative psychological effects on

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

individuals. Higher levels of economic inequality are associated with lower levels of self-reported mental well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction and are consistently related to depressive symptoms among all individuals, regardless of their income (Oishi & Kesebir, 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2017; for different results, see also Kelley & Evans, 2017).

One of the main mechanisms involved in these individual-level psychological effects of economic inequality is status anxiety, a constant concern experienced by individuals in unequal societies about their socioeconomic status (SES; de Botton, 2004; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). When facing high economic inequality, people may feel compelled to compete for their SES, reducing their subjective well-being (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017). However, research on the relationship between economic inequality and status anxiety led to mixed findings (e.g., finding either positive, negative, or null effects), suggesting that this relationship may be subject to boundary conditions (Bartram, 2022; Delhey & Steckermeier, 2020; Melita et al., 2021; Paskov et al., 2017).

In this research, we examine the mediating role of status anxiety in the relationships between perceived economic inequality and subjective well-being and health. We also test whether this mediating role of status anxiety depends on individuals' system-justifying ideologies, subjective SES, and economic threat.

1 Economic Inequality, Subjective Well-Being, and Health

Evidence from a large body of research mostly supports the notion that economic inequality harms health and well-being (Kondo et al., 2009; Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2004). Although well-being reflects cognitive and affective evaluations of life, health encompasses physical and mental functioning, morbidity, and self-rated health—a robust predictor of mortality and healthcare utilization (DeSalvo et al., 2006; Diener et al., 2017).

However, increasing evidence suggests that the effects of economic inequality on health and well-being may depend on how it is perceived (e.g., García-Sánchez et al., 2024; Gugushvili et al., 2020; Han, 2014; Vezzoli et al., 2023). Concretely, the psychosocial model of perceived economic inequality and subjective well-being (PEISW, Willis et al., 2022) proposes that people's responses to economic inequality are better predicted by how much economic inequality people think exists in a social context (i.e., perceived economic inequality) and how much economic inequality they perceive in their everyday life (García-Castro et al., 2019), rather than by objective aggregate levels of economic inequality. Moreover, the effects of perceptions of economic inequality on well-being may depend on how people explain, evaluate, and interpret them in terms of personal consequences (Bartram, 2022; Willis et al., 2022). In this research, we extended the PEISW model to health outcomes: Perceived economic inequality may uniquely threaten health through chronic stress pathways. When individuals perceive high inequality, they internalize competitive pressures and social comparisons, triggering sustained physiological stress responses (e.g., elevated cortisol; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004).

Health and well-being have been assessed through a large variety of indicators, with cognitive evaluations of well-being and health being among the most used and robust predictors of various outcomes (Diener et al., 1999, 2017). In contrast to other indicators, such as depressive symptoms and emotional distress, cognitive evaluations of general health and well-being tend to be more stable over time, capturing the cumulative effects of daily experiences of economic inequality (Kondo et al., 2009; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Subramanian &

Kawachi, 2004). Therefore, cognitive evaluations are particularly useful for understanding the long-term impacts of inequality (Delhey & Steckermeier, 2020; Vezzoli et al., 2023). Self-rated health is a holistic measure integrating biological, psychological, and social dimensions, making it sensitive to status-related stressors (DeSalvo et al., 2006; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2004). In this research, we relied on two cognitive evaluations of health and well-being: subjective health and life satisfaction (DeSalvo et al., 2006; Diener et al., 1999). We hypothesize that *Perceived economic inequality will negatively predict subjective health (Hypothesis 1a) and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 1b).*

1.1 How Is Economic Inequality Related to Health and Well-Being? The Role of Status Anxiety

A growing body of literature has been dedicated to explaining the link between economic inequality and well-being, focusing on mechanisms such as social distance and distrust (e.g., Delhey & Steckermeier, 2020; García-Sánchez et al., 2024), relative deprivation and economic vulnerability (Osborne et al., 2019; Schneider, 2016), perceived injustice (Oishi et al., 2011; Schneider, 2016), and anger (Vezzoli et al., 2023). However, one of the main psychological mechanisms outlined has been status anxiety (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Delhey & Steckermeier, 2020; Peters & Jetten, 2023; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017; Willis et al., 2022).

Status anxiety is rooted in the fundamental human motivation to preserve or obtain a high position in hierarchical groups and societies (Anderson et al., 2015; Sapolsky, 2005): In unequal environments, individuals become highly vigilant to any threat to their self-image, which can be posed by a relatively low position in the social hierarchy (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Highly unequal environments heighten the salience and relevance of SES in daily life and promote intergroup comparisons based on socioeconomic categories (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2022; Walasek & Brown, 2019). Under these circumstances, constant exposure to hierarchy cues could increase the worry of being too low on the socioeconomic ladder and threaten perceived social esteem. Accordingly, as they are immersed in a constant rush to distance themselves from those below them and reach those above them (Fiske, 2011), individuals who live in highly unequal contexts are expected to experience higher status anxiety (de Botton, 2004; Veblen, 1934; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). This tendency to worry about one's SES may manifest as feeling scorned by others (i.e., perceiving that others look down on oneself due to SES) or as a fear of losing status and concern over the potential failure to achieve higher status (Fiske, 2011; Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Melita et al., 2021).[1] Ultimately, the constant vigilance to preserve a positive self-image driven by status anxiety could lead to chronic stress, with harmful consequences for individuals' health and well-being (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004).

Some empirical evidence supports the notion that higher status anxiety leads those living in highly unequal contexts to experience poorer health and lower levels of well-being (e.g., García-Sánchez et al., 2024). Thus, we hypothesize the following: *Perceived economic inequality will positively predict status anxiety (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, we*

[1] Despite sharing the same motivational object, status anxiety and status seeking should not be confounded, as the former refers to concerns (i.e., anxiety) of failing, whereas the latter refers to desire (i.e., seeking) to achieve or maintain a high SES (de Botton, 2004; Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2021; Paskov et al., 2017).

expect that status anxiety explains the relationship between perceived economic inequality, subjective health, and life satisfaction: That is, we expect to observe indirect effects of perceived economic inequality on subjective health (Hypothesis 3a) and life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3b) through status anxiety.

Furthermore, some findings suggest that boundary conditions (e.g., SES) may moderate the effect of economic inequality on status anxiety (Bartram, 2022; Delhey & Steckermeier, 2020). In the next sections, we will discuss the role of potential moderators in the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety—namely, ideologies, SES, and economic threat.

1.2 For Whom Is Economic Inequality Related to Status Anxiety? The Role of Ideologies

Economic inequality can elicit various psychological effects, depending on how individuals interpret its personal implications. In highly unequal societies, individuals may perceive themselves to be immersed in constant competition with others for SES (Melita et al., 2021). However, how they react to this competitive climate depends on how much they perceive is at stake.

Being immersed in a competitive environment alone may not be sufficient to activate a competitive mindset regarding SES. How individuals attribute their socioeconomic position—external factors (e.g., inequality of opportunities) or internal factors (e.g., lack of effort)—can significantly influence their emotional and behavioral responses. External attributions are likely to elicit anger and motivate collective action to challenge systemic inequalities (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost et al., 2004). In contrast, internal attributions may lead to self-blame, heightened threats to personal and social identity, and potential exacerbation to status anxiety and psychological distress (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Thus, higher status anxiety could be expected among individuals who perceive higher economic inequality and tend to attribute it to internal factors.

The tendency to attribute economic inequality to internal or external factors varies significantly depending on individuals' ideological backgrounds (Osborne et al., 2019). System-justifying beliefs perpetuate the belief that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy are less competent and deserving, thereby increasing the tendency to blame low-SES groups for their circumstances (Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2003).

Meritocratic beliefs and economic system justification are particularly relevant in this context, as they play a central role in upholding economic inequality by legitimizing the status quo. These ideologies praise the rich for their success and blame the poor for their lack of effort, reinforcing the narrative that socioeconomic outcomes are deserved rather than influenced by structural factors (Batruch et al., 2023; Mijs, 2021; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017). Although this narrative helps individuals tolerate inequality, it may also heighten their anxiety about failing to meet societal standards of success (De Botton, 2004).

As primary vehicles for socializing meritocratic beliefs, educational institutions are particularly influential in shaping internal attributions of inequality. Belief in school meritocracy—the idea that academic success is solely a result of individual effort and ability—may exacerbate the effects of economic inequality on status anxiety (Batruch et al., 2023; Wiederkehr et al., 2015). By promoting the notion that socioeconomic outcomes are earned rather than inherited or structurally determined, educational systems reinforce internal

attributions, increasing individuals' anxiety about their SES and prospects for upward mobility. Although economic system justification captures general internal attributions of SES, belief in school meritocracy reflects specific narratives tied to one of the primary sources of class differentiation: the educational system.

From the previous arguments, we derived the following predictions: *The positive effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety will be moderated by system-justifying ideologies (Hypothesis 4). More specifically, the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who endorse economic system justification (Hypothesis 4a) and belief in school meritocracy (Hypothesis 4b).*

1.3 For Whom Is Economic Inequality Related to Status Anxiety? The Role of Socioeconomic Status and Economic Threat

In addition to the potential moderators mentioned in the previous section, how people react to the competitive climate promoted by economic inequality could depend on whether they anticipate success or failure in such a competition. When economic inequality is perceived as threatening (i.e., when individuals perceive or anticipate not counting on enough resources to face the competitive environment of unequal societies; Smith, 1991), it could lead people to become more vigilant about their SES and orient them to strain to avoid threats to the latter (De Botton, 2004). However, for whom is economic inequality more threatening?

Economic inequality could threaten individuals depending on their financial situation and their position in society. First, SES has been found to moderate the effects of economic inequality on individuals' status anxiety, pursuit of positional goods, and well-being; that is, subjective economic inequality has been observed to increase the pursuit of positional goods and objective economic inequality to be related to poorer mental health and higher status anxiety only among participants who were low in SES (Bartram, 2022; Du et al., 2022; Sommet et al., 2018). Second, previous research has indicated that individuals with low SES are more focused on threats than individuals with high SES, which could lead them to experience higher avoidance and fewer approach motivations in the face of inequality (Kraus et al., 2012; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2020). Third, those with less economic resources face a higher threat to their social esteem in highly unequal contexts, given they are looked down on and blamed for their situation (e.g., Heiserman & Simpson, 2017; Layte & Whelan, 2014). Ultimately, individuals with low SES, as well as those who experience financial uncertainty, could perceive they have fewer resources to face the competing environment of unequal societies, thus feeling more threatened and reacting with higher vigilance about their SES.

According to the previous arguments, we predicted the following: *The positive effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety will be moderated by subjective SES (Hypothesis 5) and economic threat (Hypothesis 6). That is, the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who have lower subjective SES (Hypothesis 5) or feel threatened by economic issues (Hypothesis 6).*

1.4 The Present Research

The present research has three main goals. First, we aimed to test the consistency of the relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety across several

countries. This will allow us to determine whether the association is held in different contexts. Second, we seek to identify individual differences or conditions under which the association between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety intensifies: That is, we tested system-justifying ideologies and economic threats as potential psychological processes that can condition—exacerbating or mitigating—the effect of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety. Third, we assess whether status anxiety may be one of the mechanisms through which perceived economic inequality may affect people's subjective health and well-being.

Moreover, this research aims to extend previous research on the relationship between economic inequality, status anxiety, health, and well-being by integrating novel elements of recent studies.

First, although objective indicators of economic inequality allow researchers to predict relevant societal outcomes at the aggregate level, subjective perceptions of economic inequality enable the investigation of its effects on individual level. These perceptions account for variability in the outcomes of people exposed to the same levels of economic inequality and help disentangle the contextual effects of economic inequality from its mechanical effects, such as those produced by individuals' objective material conditions (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Schneider, 2016; Willis et al., 2022).

Second, previous theoretical and empirical works have exposed that different measures of perceived economic inequality may yield different results (Easterbrook, 2021; García-Castro et al., 2019; Jachimowicz et al., 2022). Given that they could account for different appraisals of economic inequality, it is important to include abstract and concrete perceptions of economic inequality when estimating their effects. More specifically, daily exposure to the effects of economic inequality in people's daily lives could have a higher psychological impact on individuals than abstract perceptions of economic inequality (García-Castro et al., 2019). Moreover, as they account for different dimensions of inequality, abstract and concrete perceptions of economic inequality could independently contribute to increased status anxiety and be conditioned by different moderators. Therefore, we relied on two measures of General Perceived Economic Inequality (GPEI) and Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL) and nuanced our second hypothesis: *Status anxiety will be positively predicted by GPEI (Hypothesis 2a) and PEIEL (Hypothesis 2b).*

To our knowledge, this research is the first to simultaneously estimate the effects of general perceptions of economic inequality and PEIEL on status anxiety, health, and well-being.

Third, the research conducted so far on status anxiety as the mediating mechanism in the link between economic inequality and health and well-being involved single- or two-item measures of status anxiety (for an exception, see García-Sánchez et al., 2024), which could be limited in capturing a complex psychological phenomenon, or measures of related constructs (e.g., status seeking; Paskov et al., 2017). In the present research, a reliable and validated multi-item scale was used to directly measure participants' status anxiety (Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2020).

To accomplish our goals, we conducted a cross-sectional study based on a large-scale survey conducted across four countries. The present research was part of an international project about polarization and social inequalities in European societies (UNDPOLAR-NORFACE).

Table 1 Hypotheses and main conclusions based on results

Hypothesis	Predictor	
	General Perceived Economic Inequality (GPEI)	Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life (PEIEL)
H1a: Perceived economic inequality will negatively predict subjective health	*Confirmed*	*Not confirmed*
H1b: Perceived economic inequality will negatively predict life satisfaction	*Confirmed*	*Not confirmed*
H2a: GPEI will positively predict status anxiety	*Confirmed*	
H2b: PEIEL will positively predict status anxiety		*Confirmed*
H3a: Status anxiety will mediate the effect of perceived economic inequality on subjective health	*Confirmed*	*Confirmed*
H3b: Status anxiety will mediate the effect of perceived economic inequality on life satisfaction	*Confirmed*	*Confirmed*
H4a: The relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who endorsed economic system justification	*Confirmed*	*Not confirmed*
H4b: The relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who endorsed belief in school meritocracy	*Confirmed*	*Not confirmed*
H5: The relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who have lower subjective socioeconomic status	*Not confirmed*	*Confirmed*
H6: The relationship between perceived economic inequality and status anxiety will be higher among people who feel threatened by economic issues	*Not confirmed*	*Confirmed*

We tested all hypotheses presented in Table 1. Moreover, although not preregistered for reasons of parsimony, we also explored the full moderated mediation model for each preregistered moderator.[2]

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 5,157 respondents who were 18 + years old and living in France ($N = 1201$), Poland ($N = 1529$), Spain ($N = 1215$), and the United Kingdom ($N = 1{,}212$), and it was stratified using quotas based on gender, age, education, and region, based on Eurostat 2020 figures (see sociodemographic details in Table 2). In Poland, however, the sample only used a combined quota on gender and age based on the Central Statistical Office from Poland. Fieldwork was carried out from December 8, 2021, to January 12, 2022, using Ipsos and Pollster Research Institute online panels, a recognized international agency that provides data quality by using a reliable international panel, removing participants with more than one failure in the attention checks, and controlling for potential biases in response patterns (e.g., acquiescence). The dataset contained no missing data as participants were required to answer all questions, and incomplete cases were screened out by the pollster company during data collection. Further sampling and data details are available at https://doi.org/10.34894/IME1EY.

Using Monte Carlo simulations (Schoemann et al., 2017), we calculated that we had a 0.95 statistical power to detect small indirect effects ($B \leq -0.003$). Also, based on a simulation approach, we estimated that we reached a 0.95 statistical power to detect an interaction effect equal to or greater than $B = 0.051$ (Baranger et al., 2022).

2.2 Procedure and Analytical Approach

Our hypotheses, measures, and analysis plan were preregistered before having access to the data (https://osf.io/xtk27/?view_only=5605387d6164485fae12915ec207b0ac).

Our analytical approach was based on a regression-based framework. Thus, we performed linear regression analyses to test the association between subjective economic inequality (i.e., GPEI and PEIEL) and status anxiety (H2a–H2b). Then, we added the interaction terms between perceived economic inequality and our chosen moderators in separate models (i.e., system-justifying beliefs, SES, and economic threats: H4a–H4b, H5, and H6) because each model focuses on testing substantive different hypotheses related to the conditions under which perceived economic inequality will influence status anxiety. Specifically, we ran four models (one for each moderator), in which both interaction terms of GPEI and PEIEL with each specific moderator were added to the model with the main effects. This approach tests all interactions involving a specific type of moderator simultaneously rather than examining interactions individually. Doing so helps improve the ability to detect significant interactions by controlling for alternative interactions that can

[2] The hypotheses were numbered in a different order in the preregistration. Moreover, an additional hypothesis was preregistered but has not been included here for the sake of brevity.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and pearson correlations between the variables included in the study

	1	2		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Status anxiety														
2. GPEI	0.114***													
3. PEIEL	0.126***	0.209***												
4. Economic threat	0.433***	0.241***		0.183***										
5. ESJ	−0.058***	−0.285***		−0.017	−0.060***									
6. BSM	−0.058***	−0.194***		0.015	−0.038**	0.499***								
7. SSS	−0.408***	−0.126***		−0.071***	−0.424***	0.171***	0.102***							
8. Life satisfaction	−0.374***	−0.111***		−0.001	−0.293***	0.216***	0.189***	0.459***						
9. Perceived health	−0.162***	−0.137***		−0.019	−0.125***	0.125***	0.058***	0.199***	0.353***					
10. Political ideology	0.002	−0.196***		−0.025	−0.076***	0.280***	0.210***	0.056***	0.055***	0.058***				
11. Age	−0.208***	0.093***		−0.001	−0.079***	0.087***	0.159***	0.048***	0.066***	−0.239***	0.030*			
12. Gender [a]	0.031*	0.001		0.055***	0.027	−0.060***	−0.077***	−0.061***	0.004	−0.010	−0.059***	0.023		
13. Urbanization [b]	0.010	0.034*		0.017	−0.002	−0.010	−0.016	−0.024	−0.000	−0.056***	0.015	−0.008	0.020	
Mean (SD) France	3.09 (0.98)	3.92 (0.90)	4.04 (0.76)		3.12 (1.02)	2.95 (0.86)	3.28 (0.87)	3.07 (0.93)	7.10 (1.99)	2.86 (1.00)	5.32 (2.50)	51.03 (16.68)	52%	9%

Table 2 (continued)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Mean (SD) Poland	3.00 (0.83)	3.54 (0.75)	3.90 (0.71)	3.50 (0.93)	3.12 (0.74)	3.40 (0.87)	2.73 (1.07)	6.21 (1.97)	3.37 (0.82)	5.15 (2.54)	48.14 (15.89)	52%	2%
Mean (SD) Spain	3.04 (1.03)	4.02 (0.87)	4.09 (0.77)	3.73 (0.86)	3.06 (1.02)	3.45 (0.96)	2.91 (1.01)	7.24 (2.14)	2.77 (0.98)	4.39 (2.63)	48.91 (14.33)	51%	7%
Mean (SD) UK	2.55 (1.09)	3.79 (0.89)	3.86 (0.76)	2.99 (1.04)	2.89 (0.91)	3.28 (0.88)	3.37 (1.07)	7.17 (2.29)	2.96 (1.04)	4.91 (2.04)	50.20 (16.29)	51%	4%
Range	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	4 (1–5)	10 (0–10)	4 (1–5)	10 (0–10)	77 (18–93)		

*** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$; a Female vs. Male; b (Rural vs. Urban; *GPEI* = General Perceived Economic Inequality; *PEIEL* = Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life; *ESJ* = Economic System Justification; *BSM* = Beliefs in School Meritocracy; *SSS* = Subjective Socioeconomic Status

complement or suppress each other (Darlington & Hayes, 2017, p. 444) and leads to less biased estimates (Simonsohn, 2019; Yzerbyt et al., 2004).

We also conducted mediation analyses to test the indirect effect of subjective economic inequality on subjective well-being through status anxiety (H1a–H1b and H3a–H3b). Finally, for exploratory purposes, we conducted a conditional process analysis—or moderated mediation (Hayes, 2022)—to examine whether the previous indirect effect varied at different levels of the moderators included in this study. Because our study was conducted in various countries, we included the fixed effects for the country (using Spain as the reference group) to account for the potential influence of contextual variations. For robustness checks, we used a multigroup SEM analysis to examine whether our hypotheses hold in different countries.

2.3 Measures

Unless otherwise specified, all answers ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and higher scores indicated higher levels of the measured variable. A detailed list of items for each variable is available at Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/xtk27/?view_only=5605387d6164485fae12915ec207b0ac.

2.3.1 Status Anxiety

Status anxiety was measured with a 5-item scale using the Status Anxiety Scale (Keshabyan & Day, 2020). The original version of the scale was used in the United Kingdom, whereas it was translated and adapted in France and Poland, and a validated Spanish version was used in Spain (Melita et al., 2020). The mean of the five items of each participant indicated the participants' status anxiety (e.g., "I worry that my social status will not improve"; Chronbach's alpha = 0.91).

2.3.2 General Perceived Economic Inequality

GPEI was measured by averaging the scores on two items adapted from previous studies (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2022; i.e., "To what extent do you think that the distribution of the resources in [COUNTRY] is equal [unequal]? [reversed]"). Answers ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*; $r = 0.575$, 95% CI = [0.556, 0.593], $p < 0.001$).

2.3.3 Perceived Economic Inequality in Daily Life

PEIEL was measured with four items adapted from the PEIEL scale (e.g., "Among the people I know, some live in bigger and more luxurious homes than others"; García-Castro et al., 2019). We computed the average of these items (Chronbach's alpha = 0.84).

2.3.4 Economic System Justification

We computed the average of three items adapted from Jost and Thompson (2000; e.g., "Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements"; Chronbach's alpha = 0.76).

2.3.5 Beliefs in School Meritocracy

We used a short (4-item) version of the scale presented by Wiederkehr et al., (2015; e.g., "At school, children obtain the grades they deserve"). The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; Chronbach's alpha = 0.83).

2.3.6 Subjective Socioeconomic Status

We considered a single item measuring subjective income as an indicator of subjective SES. The item was "To what extent do you feel that you are able to live a comfortable life with your current household income?", ranging from 1 (*very easy*) to 5 (*very difficult*; reversed). The item was selected because it was considered the best available indicator of subjective SES in the survey.[3]

2.3.7 Economic Threat

We computed the average of two items adapted from international surveys (e.g., European Social Survey) using a response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*): "To what degree do you worry about your current financial situation?", and "To what degree do you worry about the state of the economy in your country?" ($r = 0.483$, 95% CI = [0.460, 0.500], $p < 0.001$).

2.3.8 Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an indicator of people's cognitive evaluation of their overall level of well-being (Diener et al., 1999). This was captured by the item "All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?", using a scale from 0 (*very unsatisfied*) to 10 (*very satisfied*).

2.3.9 Subjective Health

Subjective health was indicated by a single-item scale of general self-rated health: "How is your health in general", using a scale from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*) (DeSalvo et al., 2006). Life satisfaction and subjective health were moderately correlated ($r = 0.417$, 95% CI = [0.394, 0.439], $p < 0.001$).

[3] This is a deviation from the preregistration because we stated that we would compute the mean between the standardized scores of subjective income and participants' educational level, as done in previous research (Diemer et al., 2013). This deviation from the preregistration was mainly motivated by the low correlation we found between the two indicators ($r = .201$, 95% CI = [0.177, 0.229]). Indeed, researchers have been warned against the use of composite measures of SES, as they could confound the effects of different components, and have less predictive value than separate indicators of SES (Diemer et al., 2013). Moreover, the association between SES and educational attainment could vary across countries, and individuals' notions of their SES based on their educational attainment could vary both within and between countries. Finally, objective indicators of SES, such as educational attainment, are poorer predictors of psychological functioning than subjective indicators of SES, such as the item we considered in our study (Adler et al., 2000). However, all analyses were repeated following the original preregistered plan, and the results did not change our conclusions (see Supplementary Materials, Sect. 1).

2.3.10 Covariates

We controlled for the following covariates: age, gender, place of residence (urban vs. rural), and educational level. We also controlled for political ideology (using the political self-positioning scale ranging from 0 [*left*] to 10 [*right*]) because it tends to covary with system-justifying ideologies, perceived inequality, and well-being, and we wanted to isolate the unique contributions of our main predictors while minimizing bias from ideological differences (García-Castro et al., 2019; Hauser & Norton, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Jost et al., 2004).[4]

3 Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses: Measurement Invariance and Descriptives

On average, the measures of status anxiety, PEIEL, economic system justification, and belief in school meritocracy obtained appropriate statistical fit indices according to regular standards (CFI > 0.90; TLI > 0.90; RMSEA < 0.08; SRMR < 0.05, Kline, 2005). Similarly, all four measures achieved metric invariance but did not reach scalar or strict invariance (see Table S1). That is, in the four countries, the items were consistently grouped in each of the corresponding conceptual factors (configural invariance), and the factor loadings were equivalent (metric invariance). However, the intercepts and residuals of the items were not equivalent across countries (scalar and strict invariance, respectively). Even so, metric invariance allowed us to assume there was a sufficient degree of equivalence in the psychometric properties of the variables to evaluate the constructs in different countries (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics within each country, along with the Pearson correlations, of the variables included in the study.

3.2 Preregistered Analyses: Main Effects and Moderations

First, linear regression analyses indicated that GPEI and PEIEL were positively associated with status anxiety (supporting H2a and H2b, respectively; see Table 3, Model 1). Furthermore, the inclusion of the main effects of the moderators increased the explained variance in status anxiety and reduced the positive effect of GPEI and PEIEL (see Table 3, Model 2).

Second, system-justifying ideologies moderated the association between GPEI (but not PEIEL) and status anxiety. Particularly, both economic system justification and belief in school meritocracy conditioned the effect of GPEI on status anxiety (partially supporting H4a and H4b, respectively; see Table 3, Models 3 and 4). That is, the association between GPEI and status anxiety was positive and statistically significant only for people who highly endorsed economic system justification ($+1SD$, $b = 0.056$, $p = 0.003$), whereas such an association was not statistically significant for those who endorsed economic system justification to a lesser extent ($-1SD$, $b = -0.018$, $p = 0.376$; see Fig. 1, Panel A).

[4] Although it was not preregistered, we tested the robustness of the results by adding employment status as a covariate, obtaining similar results.

Table 3 Standardized regression coefficients for variables predicting Status Anxiety

	Model 1 (covariates)	Model 2 (main effects)	Model 3 (moderator = ESJ)	Model 4 (moderator = BSM)	Model 5 (moderator = SSS)	Model 6 (moderator = economic threat)
	B (SE)	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*
(Intercept)	−0.000 (0.013)	−0.000 (0.012)	0.009 (0.012)	0.005 (0.012)	−0.002 (0.012)	−0.005 (0.012)
GPEI	0.121 *** (0.014)	0.020 (0.013)	0.016 (0.013)	0.017 (0.013)	0.019 (0.013)	0.020 (0.013)
PEIEL	0.085 *** (0.014)	0.041 *** (0.012)	0.042 *** (0.012)	0.044 *** (0.012)	0.041 *** (0.012)	0.041 *** (0.012)
Political orientation	0.032 * (0.014)	0.033 ** (0.012)	0.033 ** (0.012)	0.034 ** (0.012)	0.034 ** (0.012)	0.033 ** (0.012)
Age	−0.217 *** (0.013)	−0.188 *** (0.012)	−0.188 *** (0.012)	−0.187 *** (0.012)	−0.189 *** (0.012)	−0.187 *** (0.012)
Female (vs. Male)	0.032 * (0.013)	0.012 (0.012)	0.009 (0.012)	0.010 (0.012)	0.012 (0.012)	0.011 (0.012)
Rural (vs. Urban)	−0.008 (0.013)	−0.015 (0.012)	−0.015 (0.012)	−0.015 (0.012)	−0.016 (0.012)	−0.016 (0.012)
SSS		−0.252 *** (0.014)	−0.252 *** (0. 014)	−0.251 *** (0. 014)	−0.251 *** (0. 014)	−0.252 *** (0. 014)
Educational level		−0.058 *** (0.012)	−0.056 *** (0.012)	−0.058 *** (0.012)	−0.056 *** (0.012)	−0.055 *** (0.012)
ESJ		0.017 (0.014)	0.011 (0.015)	0.014 (0.014)	0.017 (0.014)	0.017 (0.014)
BSM		−0.001 (0.014)	0.000 (0.014)	−0.004 (0.014)	−0.001 (0.014)	−0.001 (0.014)
Economic threat		0.304 *** (0.014)	0.306 *** (0.014)	0.305 *** (0.014)	0.304 *** (0.014)	0.303 ***(0.014)
	B (SE)	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*	*B (SE)*
GPEI X moderator			0.032 ** (0.011)	0.026 * (0.011)	0.002 (0.012)	−0.008 (0.011)
PEIEL X moderator			−0.015 (0.011)	0.007 (0.011)	−0.031 ** (0.011)	0.040 *** (0.011)
Observations	5147	5147	5147	5147	5147	5147
R^2 / R^2 adjusted / ΔR^2	0.111 / 0.110 / 0.024***	0.308 / 0.306 / 0.197***	0.309 / 0.307 / 0.001**	0.309 / 0.306 / 0.001*	0.309 / 0.307 / 0.001*	0.310 / 0.307 / 0.002**
AIC	14,025.552	12,748.467	12,742.907	12,745.997	12,745.136	12,738.833

*** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$; *GPEI* = General Perceived Economic Inequality; *PEIEL* = Perceived Economic Inequality in Everyday Life; *ESJ* = Economic System Justification; *BSM* = Beliefs in School Meritocracy; *SSS* = Subjective Socioeconomic Status

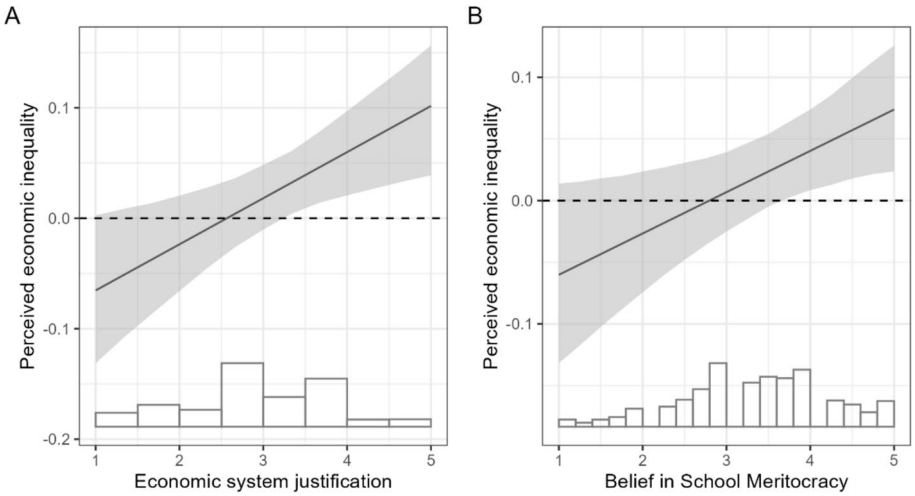

Fig. 1 Conditional effect of perceived inequality on status anxiety by economic system justification (panel **A**) and Belief in School Meritocracy (Panel **B**)

Likewise, the association between GPEI and status anxiety was statistically significant only for people who believed in school meritocracy (+1*SD*, $b = 0.049$, $p = 0.010$), but it was nonsignificant for those who believed in school meritocracy to a lesser extent (−1*SD*, $b = -0.010$, $p = 0.626$; see Fig. 1, Panel B).

Third, SES moderated the association between PEIEL (but not GPEI) and status anxiety (partially supporting H5; see Table 3, Model 5). As such, the effect of PEIEL on status anxiety was positive for people with lower SES (−1*SD*, $b = 0.095$, $p < 0.001$) but was nonsignificant for high SES people (+1*SD*, $b = 0.014$, $p = 0.532$; see Fig. 2, Panel A).

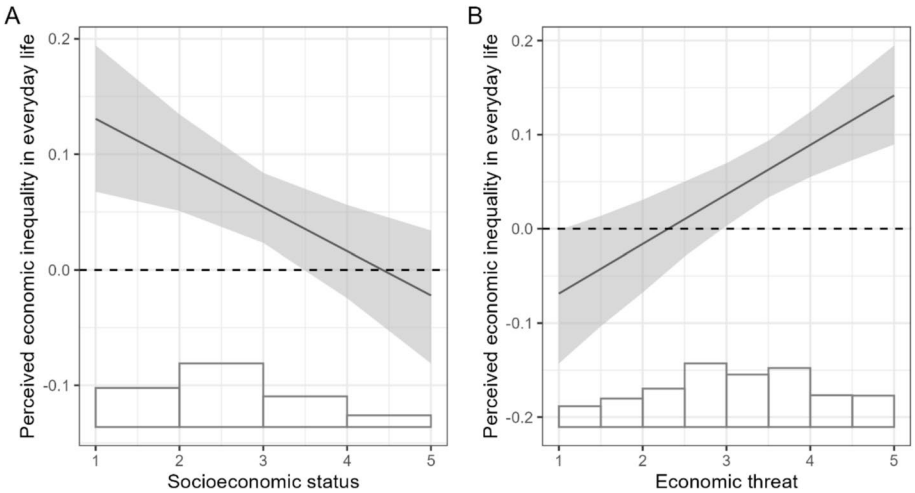

Fig. 2 Conditional effect of perceived economic inequality in everyday life on status anxiety by socioeconomic status (panel **A**) and economic threat (panel **B**)

Finally. economic threat shaped the association between PEIEL (but not GPEI) and status anxiety (partially supporting H6; see Table 3, Model 6). As such, we found that PEIEL was linked to greater levels of status anxiety for people who feel more economically threatened (+1*SD*, $b = 0.108$, $p < 0.001$) than for those who did not feel threatened (−1*SD*, $b = 0.002$, $p = 0.942$; see Fig. 2, Panel B).

3.3 Preregistered Analyses: Mediations

We conducted a path analysis to test the indirect effect of subjective economic inequality on life satisfaction and subjective health through status anxiety. As life satisfaction and subjective health are theoretically and empirically related, their covariance was simultaneously estimated in the model. We controlled for political ideology, subjective SES, educational level, and sociodemographic variables, and we estimated the parameters with the maximum likelihood method by using fixed effects for countries and bias-corrected bootstrapping standard errors (5,000 bootstraps).

Results partially supported H1a and H1b: GPEI (but not PEIEL) was negatively associated with subjective health ($B_{GPEI} = -0.034$, $p = 0.020$; $B_{PEIEL} = 0.020$, $p = 0.136$) and with life satisfaction ($B_{GPEI} = -0.098$, $p < 0.001$; $B_{PEIEL} = 0.027$, $p = 0.052$), before controlling for status anxiety. Furthermore, results supported H3a and H3b: Status anxiety mediated the negative indirect effect of GPEI ($B = -0.044$, 95% CI = [−0.036, −0.027]) and PEIEL ($B = -0.052$, 95% CI = [−0.072, −0.033]) on life satisfaction, and the negative indirect effect of GPEI ($B = -0.013$, 95% CI = [−0.019, −0.007]) and PEIEL ($B = -0.015$, 95% CI = [−0.022, −0.009]) on subjective health (see Fig. 3 for detailed regression coefficients in all outcome variables, or Table S2 in the Supplementary Material).

In other words, both GPEI and PEIEL increased people's status anxiety, which in turn reduced their levels of life satisfaction and subjective health.

3.4 Exploratory Analysis: Moderated Mediations

We examined whether the indirect effects of GPEI and PEIEL on life satisfaction and subjective health were conditional on the statistically significant moderators identified in Table 3. The details of these analyses are reported in the Supplementary Materials, Sect. 2.

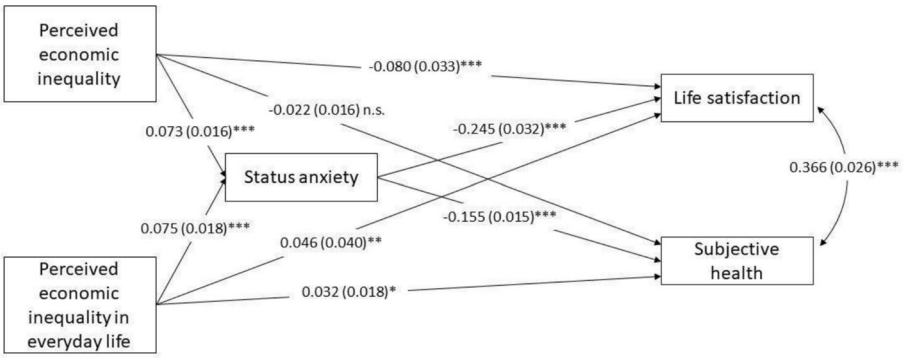

Fig. 3 Standardized regression coefficients for testing the indirect effect of perceived economic inequality and perceived inequality in everyday life on life satisfaction and subjective health through status anxiety

In brief, we found that all the indirect effects tested were conditional on the selected moderators. More specifically, the negative indirect effects of GPEI on life satisfaction and subjective health via status anxiety were statistically significant only for people who highly endorse economic system justification or beliefs in school meritocracy, whereas the negative indirect effects of PEIEL on life satisfaction and subjective health via status anxiety were statistically significant only for people with low to mean values of SES or for those with mean to high levels of perceived economic threat (see Table S5 and S6, in Supplementary Materials).

3.5 Robustness Checks

We performed a multigroup SEM to estimate and compare various nested models and test the indirect effects. When every path in the mediation model and the indirect effects were constrained to be invariant across countries, the estimated model obtained acceptable indices of fit to the data ($\chi^2[500] = 2227.961$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.926, RMSEA = 0.055, SRMR = 0.047), although a less restricted model better fit the data significantly ($\Delta\chi^2[12] = 42.878$; $\chi^2[488] = 2185.566$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.942, TLI = 0.926, RMSEA = 0.055, SRMR = 0.044), indicating that the indirect effects could be considered as robust, although not equivalent across countries (see Supplementary Materials, Sect. 3, for further details).

4 General Discussion

Throughout a highly powered study across four nationally representative samples, we found that those who perceived higher economic inequality in their country and daily life experienced higher status anxiety. That is, over and above the effects of their subjective SES, the notion of living in a country with high levels of economic inequality was associated with constant worries about one's SES, whereas the daily experience of inequality in everyday life further contributes to higher levels of status anxiety. In turn, status anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction and poorer perceived health.

However, perceptions of economic inequality were not equally threatening for everyone, as they did not exert the same effects on status anxiety for everyone to the same extent. Concretely, perceiving to live in a highly unequal country was associated with higher status anxiety only among those who held stronger system-justifying ideologies—among those who endorsed higher economic system–justifying or meritocratic beliefs. Furthermore, PEIEL was associated with higher status anxiety only among those who experience subjective economic strain—that is, among those who felt threatened by their economic circumstances or perceived to have limited economic resources to live a comfortable life.

This research sheds light on the apparently disparate findings in the literature regarding the negative effects of economic inequality on well-being by focusing on perceptions of economic inequality and testing the role of status anxiety as a mediating mechanism. Our results provide evidence in favor of status anxiety as a potential explanation for why perceived economic inequality negatively impacts health and well-being. Furthermore, we identify when and for whom perceived economic inequality is associated with heightened status anxiety.

4.1 The Effects of Economic Inequality Depend on System-Justifying Ideologies, Socioeconomic Status, and Economic Threat

In the current research, we hypothesized that perceptions of economic inequality are not threatening for everyone to the same extent. In this study, we used quota representative national samples from four countries with enough individual variability to test predictions regarding the moderating role of system-justifying ideologies and perceived material conditions on the effects of perceived economic inequality on status anxiety. At least four conclusions could be drawn from our results.

First, our results suggest that perceiving higher economic inequality in their country leads to greater status anxiety among individuals who are more inclined to justify the economic system and perceive that the educational system is meritocratic. In other words, system-justifying ideologies intensify the impact of general perceptions of economic inequality on individuals' status anxiety. People holding strong system-justifying beliefs usually attribute greater responsibility to individuals for their SES (Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2017). This, in turn, increases the perceived pressure to compete for their SES. Ultimately, system-justifying beliefs contribute to orienting people to individual responses to economic inequality, such as status anxiety. To our knowledge, these are novel findings that provide new insight into the role of system-justifying ideologies. The system justification theory posits that system-justifying beliefs fulfill a palliative function by reducing the cognitive strain of perceiving the status quo as illegitimate (Jost et al., 2004). As such, system-justifying beliefs increase well-being among people facing social inequalities (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). However, our findings provide evidence of a side effect of system justification for individuals' well-being: System-justifying beliefs imply individual attributions that blame people for their situation, which in turn make perceptions of inequality more threatening and increase status anxiety (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Therefore, when facing economic inequality, system-justifying ideologies threaten individuals' self-esteem as they anticipate being treated with scorn by those who are higher on the social ladder and blame themselves for that. Future studies could provide experimental evidence on whether system-justifying beliefs lead those who strongly endorse them to experience lower subjective well-being when they have no choice but to recognize that they live in highly unequal societies.

Second, our results suggest that perceiving economic inequality in people's close reality—a closer or more socially sensitive indicator than general perceptions of economic inequality—makes them more anxious about their SES when they perceive it to be lower or when they generally feel threatened by their financial situation. That is, people's subjective economic vulnerability exacerbates the effect of direct experience of economic inequality in everyday life. Those who experienced subjective financial scarcity or insecurity anticipate an inability to face the challenge of competing for their SES. Therefore, when they experience economic inequality in their everyday life, they feel threatened and constantly worry about their SES. People from lower SES are more vulnerable and are more likely to experience daily reminders of economic inequality in their surroundings as a constant threat to their social esteem.

Third, although results partially supported our hypotheses on the moderating role of ideologies, subjective SES, and economic threat, ideologies did not moderate the effect of PEIEL on status anxiety, nor did participants perceive that economic conditions moderate the effect of GPEI. Our results suggest that different perceptions of economic inequality are affected by different processes: Abstract and general country-level perceptions of economic

inequality are conditioned by people's ideologies but not by individuals' subjective material conditions; however, daily life experiences of economic inequality, closer to people's reality, are conditioned by their perceived economic conditions but not by ideologies.

On the one hand, differences in the levels of analysis could drive these differential effects: People's beliefs about how resources are allocated in their societies moderate how they react to the perceptions about the general allocation of resources in their society but not how they respond to their daily experiences of economic inequality in their close social context (see Jachimowicz et al., 2022). Moreover, abstract perceptions of economic inequality could be more subject to ideological interpretations than concrete experiences of inequality. On the other hand, close experiences of economic inequality in everyday life could be more threatening for those who perceive themselves to be lower in SES, as those perceptions constantly trigger a sense of competition. Previous research has found that when people compare themselves more with relevant close groups, their relative material standing affects their well-being more (Alderson & Katz-Gerro, 2016). Thus, it follows as reasonable that concrete and daily experiences of economic inequality in people's close social context are more threatening for those who perceive to count on fewer material resources. Still, the effect of general perceptions of economic inequality is equally threatening for everyone along the social ladder.

These results align with previous research indicating that different indicators of inequality perceptions represent different dimensions (García-Castro et al., 2022). As such, future studies should disentangle the specific mechanism underlying each type of perception, as well as the boundary conditions under which those mechanisms operate. In this way, future studies could help to understand how and why different views of inequality can lead to different outcomes (Phillips et al., 2020).

Ultimately, the present research confirms and expands the PEISW model by Willis et al. (2022) that proposes system-justifying ideologies regulate the effects of inequality perceptions by providing evidence that ideologies and subjective material conditions work in tandem to modulate inequality perceptions and render it threatening.

4.2 The Effects of Perceived Economic Inequality on Health and Well-Being

This research confirmed that subjective perceptions of economic inequality impact individuals' health and well-being. However, although GPEI was consistently associated with health and well-being outcomes, we found that PEIEL was only indirectly associated with these outcomes through status anxiety. Moreover, the direct effects of PEIEL on subjective health and life satisfaction after controlling for status anxiety were positive and significant ($B_{\text{Subjective Health}} = 0.032$, $p = 0.018$; $B_{\text{Life Satisfaction}} = 0.046$, $p = 0.001$). The presence of direct effects of GPEI and PEIEL after controlling for status anxiety could be indicating that other mediating and suppressor effects could be intervening in parallel with status anxiety (e.g., upward and downward social comparison). These results should be interpreted with caution, as we had no previous hypotheses regarding the direct effects of GPEI and PEIEL, and these could be statistical artifacts of our analyses: That is, these direct effects are the estimated effects of GPEI and PEIEL after subtracting their shared covariance, as well as their respective covariances with status anxiety, political ideology, subjective SES, educational level, age, gender, and place of residence. On this matter, multigroup SEM analyses indicated these direct effects were virtually null (see Sect. 3 in Supplementary Materials). However, future research could investigate whether other mechanisms, such as selective attention to downward comparison or hope for upward mobility (Cheung, 2016), could be

intervening and compensate for the negative effects of PEIEL on life satisfaction and subjective health through status anxiety.

Furthermore, this research expands on previous research regarding the role of status anxiety in the effects of economic inequality on health and well-being by counting on a reliable and validated direct measure of status anxiety (Keshabyan & Day, 2020; Melita et al., 2020). In doing so, we overcame the apparent inconsistency in previous research, which conflated the notion of status anxiety (i.e., the constant concern for one's SES), with that of status seeking (i.e., the desire for higher SES; e.g., Du et al., 2022; Paskov et al., 2017), and we provided further evidence of the validity and reliability of the Status Anxiety Scale in France, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. On this matter, we obtained evidence that perceptions of economic inequality negatively affect well-being to the extent that individuals are chronically worried about SES.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present research was conducted with a large sample and counted on four representative samples from four European countries, it presents some limitations. First, the results were based on a nonexperimental study. Therefore, it does not allow causal claims regarding the relationship between perceptions of economic inequality, status anxiety, and subjective indicators of health and well-being. Several measures were taken to ensure third variables did not explain the effects we found. On the one hand, all analyses were repeated, controlling for participants' subjective SES, political orientation, and other sociodemographic features. On the other hand, the effects of two different kinds of perceptions of economic inequality were simultaneously estimated while controlling for each other. Moreover, the effects were replicated across four countries, varying in their level of objective economic inequality, as well as their cultures and their level of welfare protection. Even so, reversal causal relationships could not be discarded, as status anxiety could increase people's attention to cues of SES and economic distribution in their surroundings and their countries, causing them to perceive higher economic inequality in their country and in their everyday lives. However, the causal effect of subjective health and life satisfaction on perceived economic inequality is less plausible and would require less parsimonious explanations. Despite the correlational nature of our data, the directionality of our hypothesized model is based on theoretical assumptions previously tested in the literature, which is also a foundational part of making causal inferences about human behavior (Bailey et al., 2024). Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to disentangle whether perceived economic inequality increases people's status anxiety and whether status anxiety has a feedback effect on perceived economic inequality.

Second, the study was conducted in European countries. Thus, although these results could be extended to other countries with varying cultures and social arrangements, they should be generalized with caution. For instance, social perceptions could vary in less industrialized countries (Henrich et al., 2010). Future studies should investigate whether the effects of economic inequality perceptions on status anxiety are equivalent across cultures varying in tendency to conformity, internal attributions of individual outcomes,

justice perceptions, or moral reasoning. Moreover, some authors suggest that a hope factor could be observed when economic inequality is paired with economic growth because their expectancy of upward social mobility may foster a sense of personal well-being (Cheung, 2016; Kelley & Evans, 2017). Therefore, future studies should investigate whether our results hold in countries at different stages of economic growth and the role played by the perceptions of social mobility. Future studies should also consider cultural differences among more or less egalitarian countries, as well as collectivistic and individualistic societies (e.g., Steckermeier & Delhey, 2019; Suh et al., 2008).

Third, we relied on available measures of life satisfaction and perceived health as indicators of subjective well-being and health. These were composed of single-item measures often used in international surveys. However, future research should use more reliable measures to estimate the effects of perceived economic inequality on well-being. Also, we relied on an indirect indicator of subjective SES to estimate the interaction effects of the latter with perceptions of economic inequality. Future studies should replicate our findings with direct indicators of subjective SES and consider how various dimensions of the latter relate to subjective well-being and health (Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Finally, although all analyses included subjective SES and educational level as covariates and were repeated controlling for employment status as a robustness check, other indicators of SES have been related to perceptions of economic inequality and status anxiety, such as income and occupational class. Future research aiming to replicate the current results should include those variables to ensure the robustness of the findings.

5 Conclusion

This research extends the literature about the social psychology of inequality by showing that perceptions of economic inequality can increase feelings of anxiety about people's SES (Pybus et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017); however, at the same time, other social psychological processes can mitigate or exacerbate such a relationship. Those who hold system-justifying ideologies are threatened by personal perceptions of higher inequality in their country, whereas those who perceive themselves to have poorer material conditions are threatened by personal perceptions of their surroundings as highly unequal, leading them to worry more about their SES. Moreover, our findings provide evidence that this chronic worry leads to poorer health and lower life satisfaction.

Although our research focuses on subjective perceptions of inequality, our findings do not suggest that objective economic inequality is irrelevant in influencing subjective health and well-being. Indeed, prioritizing the reduction of objective inequality should remain a priority (Stiglitz, 2012; United Nations, 2020). Thus, policy interventions to improve health and well-being should not only reduce objective inequality but also enhance their effectiveness by incorporating measures to contain the spread of system-justifying beliefs, psychological and behavioral interventions to counteract those narratives, and measures to support low SES individuals and reduce economic threat.

Appendix

Table 4 Items wording and answer options

Variable	Wording	Values
Age	In what year were you born? –Please select an answer–	2006 … 1920
Gender	Are you..?	A woman A man Non binary Prefer not to say Other (please specify)
Education	What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?	Primary Education Lower Secondary Education Upper Secondary Education Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education and Short-Cycle Tertiary Education Bachelors's or Equivalent Level
Subjective Socioeconomic Status	To what extent do you feel that you are able to live a comfortable life with your current household income?	1—Very easy 2 3 4 5—Very difficult
Place of residence	Would you consider the area in which you live to be..?	The open countryside A village/small town A medium to large town Suburbs or outskirts of big city Big city

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Wording	Values
Political orientation	In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on a scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?	0—left 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—right
	To what degree are you worried …	
Economic threat 1	…about your current financial situation	1—Not at all 2—A little 3—Moderately 4—A lot 5—A great deal
Economic threat 2	…about the state of the economy in your country	1—Not at all 2—A little 3—Moderately 4—A lot 5—A great deal
	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements	
Economic system justification 1	Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Wording	Values
Economic system justification 2	If people work hard, they almost always get what they want	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Economic system justification 3	Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Perceived economic inequality in everyday life 1	Among the people I surround myself with, some can afford to buy a lot more and better things than others	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Perceived economic inequality in everyday life 2	Among the people I know, some cannot afford unforeseen expenses and others cope with them without any difficulty	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Perceived economic inequality in everyday life 3	I know people who can afford to save money and others who struggle to get by	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Perceived economic inequality in everyday life 4	Among the people I know, some live in bigger and more luxurious homes than others	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
	Please read each statement carefully and consider to what extent it reflects your opinion	

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Wording	Values
Perceived economic inequality 1	To what extent do you think that the distribution of the resources in [COUNTRY] is equal?	1—Not at all 2 3 4 5—Completely
Perceived economic inequality 2	To what extent do you think that the distribution of the resources in [COUNTRY] is unequal?	1—Not at all 2 3 4 5—Completely
	The following questions refer to your perception of the school system. We ask that you indicate to which extent you think each statement corresponds to the reality of how things work in education	
School meritocracy 1	Everyone has the same chances to succeed at school	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
School meritocracy 2	At school, children obtain the grades they deserve	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
School meritocracy 3	At school, students who obtain good grades are those who have worked hard	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Wording	Values
School meritocracy 4	For children at school, where there is a will, there is a way	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements	
Status anxiety 1	I feel anxious that I will be stuck in my position for life	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Status anxiety 2	I am very concerned that I won't be able to achieve my career goals	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Status anxiety 3	I worry that I might become lower in social standing	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Status anxiety 4	I am concerned that my current position in life is too low	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree
Status anxiety 5	I worry that my social status will not improve	1—Strongly disagree 2 3 4 5—Strongly agree

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	Wording	Values
Subjective health	How is your health in general?	Poor Fair Good Very good Excellent
Life satisfaction	All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?	0—Very dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—Very satisfied

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Authors'Contributions All authors made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work. All Authors discussed and approved the pre-registered hypotheses. Material preparation and analyses were performed by Efraín García-Sánchez. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Davide Melita and Efraín García Sánchez and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. Data access, resources and fundings acquisition was granted by Rosa Rodríguez Bailón. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from UNDPOLAR-NORFACE Research Project, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for the current study and so are not publicly available. All materials, data, and analyses codes that support the findings of this study are, however, available from the corresponding author, DM, upon reasonable request, and with the permission of the Principal Investigators of the UNDPOLAR-NORFACE Project.

Compliance of Ethical Standard Statement

The present research was part of the UNDPOLAR-NORFACE Research Project. Approval for the research was obtained from the relevant university Ethics Committees before data collection commenced, and all participants provided written informed consent, adhering to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Participants read the following information sheet and gave their informed consent before participating in the study:

Thank you for taking this survey. This survey is run by the University of Groningen (Toon Kuppens and Jochem van Noord, j.van.noord@rug.nl) and Sussex University (Matthew Eastebrook and Rebekka Kesberg, r.kesberg@sussex.ac.uk) and explores public opinion on politics in different European countries.
The survey includes, amongst others, questions on your political opinions, your party preference, your general health, and whether you belong to an ethnic minority. You can always decide not to answer sensitive questions.
Your answers will be processed and stored anonymously. We will not share your personal data with third parties. The researchers from the University of Groningen will share anonymous data publicly for reasons of research transparency and for future re-use by others.
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Authors and Affiliations

Davide Melita[1] · Efraín García Sánchez[2,3] · Guillermo B. Willis[3,4] · Katerina Petkanopoulou[5] · Juan Diego García Castro[6,7] · Rosa Rodríguez Bailón[3,4]

✉ Davide Melita
davide.melita@psi.uned.es

1 Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, National University of Distance Education, Madrid, Spain

2 Stanford SPARQ, Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, USA

3 Mind, Brain, and Behavior Research Center (CIMCYC), University of Granada, Granada, Spain

4 Department of Social Psychology, University of Granada, Granada, Spain

5 Department of Psychology, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece

6 Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica

7 Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES), Santiago, Chile