**“You are useful objects”: Economic inequality leads people to
approach instrumental others**

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Abstract

Economic inequality has been shown to increase the social distance between groups. We proposed that in more unequal societies, people's affiliation with others depends on whether a relationship partner is instrumental for self-enhancement goals. The results from four experiments supported our proposition. We found that inequality increased people's focus on the instrumentality aspects of others (Experiment 1). In a work setting, economic inequality prompted people to choose colleagues who were instrumental in achieving their performance goals as partners (Experiment 2). Moreover, the effect could be extended to situations where there is no clear benefit. Specifically, participants in high inequality contexts tended to approach instrumental people with instrumentality more than participants in low inequality contexts, and the effect was driven by self-enhancement goals (Experiments 3-4). Taken together, our findings suggest that economic inequality leads to an instrumentality orientation in social interactions, which changes how people view relationships and interact with others.

Keywords: economic inequality, self-enhancement goals, instrumental relationship, social distance

Introduction

In recent decades, although poverty rates have fallen in many countries, the gap between the rich and poor has greatly increased. For example, in the United States, the total wealth of the top 5% of adults accounts for approximately 66.7% of the total

1 national wealth (Wolff, 2017). Numerous studies have found that growing inequality
2 is related to a range of societal outcomes, including higher crime rates (e.g., Choe,
3 2008), poorer health (e.g., Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015), more gambling behaviors
4 (Freund & Morris, 2005) and school bullying (e.g., Elgar et al., 2009). More relevant
5 to our research, economic inequality affects people's social relationships (Wilkinson
6 & Pickett, 2009). In the United States, residents living in states with higher inequality
7 are less likely to engage in social groups, such as hobby clubs, church groups, and
8 public organizations (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Costa & Kahn, 2003). Similarly,
9 data from 24 European countries showed that economic inequality was negatively
10 related to citizens' civic participation (Lancee & Van de Werfhorst, 2012). In
11 addition, a recent study found that compared to those in low inequality contexts,
12 individuals in high inequality contexts perceived greater social competition and
13 thereby exhibited higher social vigilance (Cheng et al., 2021). Specifically,
14 participants in a highly unequal context expressed less interdependent self-construal
15 than those in a more equal context. In summation, previous research highlighted that
16 in more stratified societies, people have larger social distance and less interpersonal
17 interaction.

18 However, relationships are essential in daily life. Interpersonal relationships play
19 crucial roles in achieving personal goals, such as providing social support to persist in
20 goal pursuit, having access to resources and obtaining a promotion (e.g., Belmi &
21 Pfeffer, 2018; Rusbult et al., 2004; Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016). Therefore, it is one-
22 sided that prior studies mention only that economic inequality stimulates people to

1 keep away from others. In the present study, we argue that in more unequal societies,
2 people's affiliation with others depends on their instrumentality. Specifically,
3 economic inequality does not always drive people away from others, but rather allows
4 them to selectively associate with people who can help them achieve particular goals.

5 **Goal pursuit and instrumental relationship**

6 People are constantly pursuing personal goals. When a goal is being pursuing,
7 people spontaneously pay attention to ways and means to attain the goal (Aarts et al.,
8 2001; Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). To move toward a goal, an actor needs to evaluate
9 the instrumentality of various objects to the goal. Meanwhile, people's responses to
10 objects are also based on their instrumentality (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). People
11 automatically evaluated useful (goal-relevant) objects more positively than less useful
12 (goal-irrelevant) objects (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Moors, De Houwer, & Eelen,
13 2004). For instance, if individuals were hungry, they would have a positive attitude
14 about food. However, if they were not hungry, they would rate food less positively
15 (Atkinson, 1964, p. 283).

16 In addition to objects, people are considered as means in accomplishing personal
17 goals. In fact, Fitzsimons and his colleagues (2009) found that instrumentality is one
18 fundamental dimension of people's social perceptions. Similar to objects, people's
19 evaluations of social targets vary with the perception of their instrumentality for
20 personal goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010; Orehek et al.,
21 2018). People positively rate and approach those who contribute to their current goal
22 pursuit more than those who obstruct the goal pursuit. For example, students who

were activated by their academic goals perceived friends who were instrumental for achievement to be closer and more important than those who were not instrumental for the active goal (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). In sum, people tend to approach and interact with social targets who are of instrumental value for personal goals.

Economic inequality, self-enhancement goals and approaching instrumental targets

People have different goals in their lives, including self-enhancement goals (e.g., striving for financial success, status, and success) and self-transcendent goals (e.g., social bonding, seeking spirituality, and showing benevolence; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). We argue that economic inequality as a framework for wealth distribution shapes people's preferences for pursuing the two types of goals. Specifically, we considered that economic inequality increases the salience of self-enhancement goals. That is, people are more likely to strive for financial success and status in a highly unequal context.

This occurs because differences regarding monetary resources and their related status are highly salient in a society with high (versus low) economic inequality (Jetten et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2021). That is, people living in this type of society are constantly made aware of the economic and status distinctions between individuals (Wang et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2021). Meanwhile, people tend to make automatic upward comparisons (i.e., by comparing themselves with people placed higher in a social system, Boyce et al., 2010; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005) to determine their need level (e.g., Payne et al., 2017). Such a comparison in higher (versus lower)

1 inequality contexts naturally entails comparing oneself with a higher standard, and
2 thus people could express a higher demand in terms of money and status. In this vein,
3 individuals in societies with higher (versus lower) economic inequality could strive
4 for money and status more, showing increased motives for self-enhancement.

5 Our view is also in line with the material rank hypothesis, which argues that
6 when the gap between individuals of lower and higher economic status increases,
7 individuals tend to attach more importance to the relative ranked position related to
8 wealth and material resources and less importance to the ranked position of other
9 aspects, such as physical attractiveness and social skills (Walasek & Brown., 2019).

10 Empirical studies have also provided some preliminary support. For example, people
11 living in regions with high economic inequality were more likely to search for
12 positional goods (e.g., designer brands and luxury clothing) on Google and posted
13 them on Twitter (Walasek et al., 2015; Walasek et al., 2018). Taken together, we
14 propose that people in societies with high economic inequality could be more driven
15 by self-enhancement motives.

16 As noted earlier, when a certain goal is activated, individuals draw closer to
17 relationship partners who are instrumental for goal attainment (Ferguson & Bargh,
18 2004; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Thus, we proposed that self-enhancement goals
19 activated by economic inequality prompt people to prefer social targets that contribute
20 to goal achievement. In other words, when a person is perceived as useful for
21 improving wealth and status, they are prioritized by people in a high inequality
22 context more than those in a low inequality context. Previous research has provided

1 indirect evidence for this proposition. For example, the love of money motivated
2 people to value others' instrumental attributes for goal fulfillment and to approach
3 social targets with high instrumentality (Wang & Krumhuber, 2017). Hur et al. (2021)
4 found that under a performance incentive system making the reward-seeking goals
5 more salient, since employees perceived work colleagues as having higher
6 instrumentality, they were willing to spend more time with their colleagues rather than
7 family and friends. This is consistent with our proposal that the salience of self-
8 focused goals activates people to build connections with instrumental social targets.
9 More formally, we proposed the following hypotheses:

10 **Hypothesis 1:** Participants living in a high inequality context tend to approach
11 instrumental social targets for self-enhancement goals more than those in a low
12 inequality context.

13 **Hypothesis 2:** The effect of economic inequality on approach intention for
14 instrumental social targets will be mediated by the motive for self-enhancement.

15

16 **The Present Study**

17 Although the idea that economic inequality disrupts communal relationships has
18 received some attention (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2020; Sánchez-
19 Rodríguez., 2019a; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017; Uslaner & Brown, 2005), no empirical
20 study has explored how economic inequality fosters people's instrumentality
21 orientation in relationships. We propose that since inequality activates stronger
22 motivation to attain wealth and status, individuals place more emphasis on the

1 instrumental aspects of social relationships and tend to approach instrumental social
2 targets more.

3 It is worth noting that we focused on the subjective perception of inequality in
4 the current research. This is because people usually cannot accurately estimate the
5 objective level of economic inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011), and previous studies
6 have consistently found that subjective perception of inequality has a greater
7 predictive role in individuals' sociopsychological consequences (Davidai, 2018;
8 Hauser & Norton, 2017). Thus, the present study directly manipulated subjective
9 economic inequality and then investigated its effects on the preference for
10 instrumentality in social relationships. To this end, we have conducted four
11 experiments. In Experiment 1, we manipulated perceived inequality to test whether
12 economic inequality leads people to focus more on instrumentality in relationships.
13 Experiment 2 tested whether participants assigned to a world with high (versus low)
14 inequality would show a higher tendency to choose working partners based on their
15 instrumentality. To further enhance the robustness of the findings, Experiments 3-4
16 examined the effect of economic inequality on instrumentality orientation in daily
17 situations without a specific work task and whether the effect could be accounted for
18 by self-enhancement motives.

19 For Experiments 2-4, we preregistered hypotheses, sample size, the experiment
20 design, analysis plan and exclusion criteria (Experiment 2:
21 https://aspredicted.org/LQV_7MF; Experiment 3: https://aspredicted.org/FB5_VZS;
22 Experiment 4: https://aspredicted.org/CRD_91G). All studies provide data and

materials in the supplementary materials

(https://osf.io/vuzab/?view_only=a45fd36e9c874823a054b588222e6a0e).

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we created a fictitious society to manipulate the subjective perception of economic inequality and explored whether economic inequality alters the way people view interpersonal relationships. We predicted that participants assigned in the high inequality condition would pay more attention to the instrumental aspect of interpersonal relationships than those assigned in the low inequality condition. Since power had a significant influence on instrumentality orientation (Gruenfeld et al., 2008), we controlled for income and subjective social class (SSC) in the main analyses.

Method

Participants We recruited two hundred and four U.S. residents from Prolific in exchange for £0.6. Three participants were excluded from the final analysis because they failed to answer the attention check correctly. The final sample size was 201 (36 men, 160 women, and 5 ‘other’; $M_{age} = 26.01$, $SD = 8.53$). Ninety-seven participants were assigned to the high inequality condition, and 104 participants were assigned to the low inequality condition. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), assuming $\alpha = 0.05$ and 80% power, revealed the minimum detectable effect size of $f = 0.20$.

1 *Procedure and materials*

2 Participants were instructed to imagine that they had arrived in a fictitious
3 society called *Bimboola* where residents' income was categorized into one of the three
4 levels (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019a). In the high inequality condition, the
5 members of Income Groups 1, 2, and 3 had annual incomes of 13500, 7000, and 500
6 Bimboolean Dollars (BD), respectively. In the low inequality condition, the members
7 of these groups had 8000, 7000 and 6000 BD, respectively. All participants were
8 randomly assigned to the high or low inequality condition and were told that they
9 belonged to Group 2. To strengthen the inequality manipulation, participants were
10 then asked to purchase three necessities (a house, car, and holiday) they could afford
11 from a set of options. The options available for Group 1 in the high inequality
12 condition were more luxurious than those in the low inequality condition, while the
13 options in the third income level in the high inequality condition were plainer than
14 those in the low inequality condition. The options available for Group 2 were identical
15 in the two conditions. As a Group 2 member, participants were able to choose from
16 the items available to Group 2 and Group 3, but they could not afford any options
17 available to Group 1.

18 To check participants' comprehension, they were asked the following: "In
19 Bimboola, which income level were you assigned to?" (1, 2, or 3). Participants who
20 answered incorrectly were excluded from the final analysis. Then, to determine
21 whether our inequality manipulation was effective, participants were also asked the
22 following: "To what extent is Bimboola's economic distribution unequal?" (1 = Not

1 unequal at all, 7 = Very unequal).

2 Next, participants completed the adapted 10-item objectification scale to assess
3 how much they valued the instrumental aspects of interpersonal relationships
4 (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; $\alpha = 0.75$). Example items include “In Bimboola, I would tend
5 to contact a person only when I need something from him/her” and “In Bimboola, I
6 would always approach those people who are very useful to me”.

7 Finally, participants completed demographic information, including gender, age,
8 income and SSC.

9

10 **Results and Discussion**

11 *Manipulation check*

12 Using an independent samples t test, we found that the manipulation of economic
13 inequality worked as intended: participants assigned to the high inequality condition
14 ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.25$) perceived higher inequality than those in the low inequality
15 condition ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(199) = 8.17$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.20, 1.96], $d =$
16 1.15.

17 *Instrumentality orientation*

18 An ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income and SSC) revealed a
19 significant main effect of priming (see Figure 1), as participants in the high inequality
20 condition showed a stronger instrumentality orientation ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.87$) than
21 those in the low inequality condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.75$), $F(1, 194) = 4.87$, p
22 $= .028$, 95% CI [0.26, 4.68], $\eta_p^2 = 0.024$.

Experiment 1 provided initial support for our hypothesis that economic inequality made people focus more on the instrumental aspect of a relationship, after controlling for the potential influence of socioeconomic status. In the following experiments, we directly examined whether economic inequality leads people to approach instrumental targets.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we aimed to extend the findings of Experiment 1 by directly examining the effect of inequality on approach intention toward instrumental targets. In the present study, participants were asked to imagine that they would accomplish a work project with a colleague in Bimboola. We manipulated the instrumentality of colleagues by depicting them as possessing different skills. We predicted that participants in the high inequality condition are more likely to choose an instrumental colleague as their partner than those in the low inequality condition.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty-six U.S. residents were recruited from Prolific in exchange for £0.7. Seventeen participants failing to answer the attention check correctly were excluded from all analyses. The final sample included two hundred and nine participants (45 men, 160 women, and 4 ‘other’; $M_{age} = 26.92$, $SD = 9.18$). One hundred and two participants were assigned to the high inequality condition, and 107

1 participants were assigned to the low inequality condition. Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul
2 et al., 2009), a sensitivity analysis found that the minimum detectable effect was 0.19
3 (f) with a power of $1 - \beta = 0.80$ and $\alpha = 0.05$.

4 *Procedure and materials*

5 Participants completed the same task of manipulating economic inequality
6 (*Bimboola paradigm*) and the attention and manipulation check items as in
7 Experiment 1.

8 Next, we used a work partner choice task adapted from previous studies
9 (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017) to assess participants' intention to
10 approach instrumental targets. Participants were told that in Bimboola, they had been
11 working in a company for three years. Recently, their leader assigned them a very
12 important project that is closely related to their performance this year. The project
13 requires stronger mathematics skills and logical thinking ability. Before starting the
14 project, they needed to invite a colleague to assist them. Their leader recommended
15 two employees: Eric and Ethan. Eric was described as being good at statistics and
16 data analysis but cold and unkind. In contrast, Ethan was good at literature but warm
17 and kind.

18 After participants read the vignette, they completed our dependent measure:
19 "Who would you prefer to be your partner?" (1 = Strongly prefer Eric, 2 = Prefer
20 Eric, 3 = Slightly prefer Eric, 4 = Slight prefer Ethan, 5 = Prefer Ethan, and 6 =
21 Strongly prefer Ethan). The lower the score, the greater the preference for the
22 instrumental target. To eliminate the influence of participants' own ability on choice

1 preference, they were asked the following: “How strong are your statistical skills?”
2 and “How strong is your logical thinking ability?” (1 = Not at all strong, 7 = Very
3 strong). Next, participants completed the manipulation checks on social targets: “How
4 useful is Eric to the project?” and “How useful is Ethan to the project?”. Finally,
5 participants completed demographic information as in Experiment 1.

6

7 **Results and discussion**

8 *Manipulation check*

9 An independent samples t test revealed that participants in the high inequality
10 condition perceived more inequality ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.57$) than those in the low
11 inequality condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(207) = 7.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.06,
12 1.86], $d = 0.10$. A paired samples t test showed that participants felt Eric was more
13 useful to the project ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.24$) than Ethan ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.51$), $t(208) =$
14 12.30 , $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.72, 2.37], $d = 0.85$.

15 *Instrumentality orientation*

16 We conducted an ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income, SSC,
17 perceived statistical skills and logical thinking ability) and found a predictive effect of
18 inequality on instrumentality orientation, $F(1, 200) = 5.38$, $p = .021$, 95% CI [0.08,
19 0.94], $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ (see Figure 2). Participants in the high inequality condition were
20 more likely to choose Eric (useful but cold) as their work partner over Ethan (useless
21 and warm) ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.53$) than those in the low inequality condition ($M =$
22 3.40 , $SD = 1.49$).

Experiment 2 found that economic inequality enhanced approach intention toward a more useful social target, even if they were unkind. In other words, economic inequality led people to value the instrumental aspect of social targets more than other attributes (e.g., personality). However, Experiment 2 used only one question to measure the dependent variable, which increases the measurement error (e.g., Spector, 1994). To further enhance the robustness of the findings, Experiment 3 used more items to measure our dependent variable. In addition, we further examined this effect in a daily situation without specific work tasks. Finally, we explored the underlying mechanism that leads to the link between economic inequality and instrumentality orientation.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 has four aims. First, we adopted a different paradigm to manipulate perceived inequality to increase the generalizability of our findings. Second, we used more items to measure approach intentions for different targets. Third, we corroborated the findings of Experiment 2 in a social situation where participants did not need to complete a certain task. Fourth, we examined whether the salience of self-enhancement goals would mediate the relationship between economic inequality and the preference for instrumental relationships. We predicted that participants in the high inequality condition would consider self-enhancement goals to be more important and were more likely to approach social targets with high instrumentality than those in the low inequality condition. Additionally, the motivation for self-

enhancement would mediate the relation between inequality and instrumentality orientation.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and ninety-three U.S. citizens were recruited from Prolific in exchange for £0.7. Seventy-three participants failing to answer the attention checks correctly and four participants who did not follow the instructions were excluded from all analyses. The final sample size was 216 (92 men, 122 women, and 2 ‘other’; $M_{age} = 32.66$, $SD = 12.56$). One hundred and four participants were assigned to the high inequality condition, and 112 participants were assigned to the low inequality condition. Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), a sensitivity analysis found that the minimum detectable effect was 0.19 (f) with a power of $1 - \beta = 0.80$ and $\alpha = 0.05$.

Procedure and materials

Participants were asked to imagine that they were going to immigrate to another country. We presented two pie charts depicting the wealth distributions in two anonymous countries (Country M and Country K). To avoid making assumptions about other features of the two countries because of their different levels of inequality, participants were told that these countries have similar GDPs per capita, political systems, and religious beliefs. To reinforce the manipulation, we presented the houses owned by the wealthiest fifth and the poorest fifth of the population in Country M and Country K, respectively. Then, participants were randomly assigned to Country M

1 (the high inequality condition) or Country K (the low inequality condition) and asked
2 to describe what residents' life is like in their society. After writing, participants
3 responded: "To what extent is the wealth distribution in Country M unequal?" and "To
4 what extent is the wealth distribution in Country K unequal?" (1 = A little unequal, 7
5 = Highly unequal).

6 Next, we used three items to evaluate the importance attached to the self-
7 enhancement goals. The items are as follows: "In Country M (K), I feel that it is
8 important for me to acquire more wealth", "In Country M (K), I feel that it is
9 important for me to gain higher status", and "In Country M (K), I feel that it is
10 important for me to succeed" (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.88$).

11 Participants were then told that they joined a management consulting company to
12 perform market research in Country M (K). One day, their coworker invited them to a
13 social hour. At the party, their coworker introduced two men to them: "*Those two men*
14 *are Eric and Ethan. They both work for another management consulting firm. Eric*
15 *works in market research, is competent and has many contacts in the industry. Ethan*
16 *is mainly responsible for advertising planning in the company. He is good at*
17 *designing cartoon characters and often posts them on Facebook.*"

18 After reading the vignette, participants were asked how much they wanted to
19 become acquainted with Eric and Ethan. The items are as follows: "How much do you
20 want to know Eric (Ethan)?", "How much do you want to establish a relationship with
21 Eric (Ethan)?", and "How much do you want to be friends with Eric (Ethan)?" (1 =
22 Not at all, 7 = Extremely; $\alpha_{Eric} = 0.80$; $\alpha_{Ethan} = 0.86$). In addition, we also used three

1 forced choices to estimate approach intention (e.g., “If you could only choose one
2 person, which one would you prefer to know?”, 1 = Strongly prefer Eric, 7 = Strongly
3 prefer Ethan; $\alpha = 0.96$). Since Eric was described as having the same occupation as
4 the participants, we predicted that participants in the high inequality condition were
5 more interested in building a relationship with him. Conversely, because Ethan’s
6 occupation was different from that of participants, participants in the high inequality
7 condition and the low inequality condition reported no difference in their intention to
8 approach Ethan. Additionally, we predicted that when forced to choose between Ethan
9 and Eric, participants would prefer to approach Eric over Ethan. Next, participants
10 were asked: “How useful is Ethan to you?” and “How useful is Eric to you?” (1 = Not
11 at all, 7 = Extremely). Finally, participants reported their interest for art and completed
12 demographic information.

13 ***Attention checks.*** Participants who failed to answer the following items were
14 excluded in the all analyses. The items are as follows: “Which country has a higher
15 level of economic inequality?” (1 = Country M, 2 = Country K) and “What is your
16 occupation in the company?” (1 = Advertising planning, 2 = Market research, 3 =
17 Data analysis).

18

19 **Results and Discussion**

20 *Manipulation check*

21 A paired samples t test revealed that participants perceived Country M to be
22 more unequal ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 1.20$) than Country K ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(215) =$

1 23.16, $p < .001$, $d = 1.58$. In addition, a paired samples t test revealed that participants
2 felt Eric was more useful to them ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.24$) than Ethan ($M = 4.25$, $SD =$
3 1.31), $t(215) = 9.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[2.97, 3.53]$, $d = 0.63$.

4 *The salience of self-enhancement goals*

5 We conducted an ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income, and SSC)
6 and found a significant effect of economic inequality on goal pursuit, $F(1, 208) =$
7 66.27 , $p < .001$, 95% CI $[3.04, 4.98]$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.24$ (see Figure 3). Specifically,
8 participants in the high inequality condition ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.10$) had stronger
9 motivation for self-enhancement than those in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.52$,
10 $SD = 1.30$).

11 *Instrumentality orientation*

12 An ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income, SSC and art interest)
13 found a marginally significant effect of inequality on approach intentions for Eric,
14 $F(1, 208) = 3.49$, $p = .063$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 1.95]$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ (see Figure 3).
15 Participants in the high inequality condition were more likely to approach Eric ($M =$
16 5.15 , $SD = 1.15$) than those in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.30$).
17 There was no significant effect of the manipulation on approach intentions for Ethan
18 ($F(1, 208) = 0.25$, $p = .618$, 95% CI $[-0.74, 1.24]$) or forced choices, $F(1, 208) = 0.32$,
19 $p = .571$, 95% CI $[-0.98, 1.76]$.

20 *Mediation models*

21 We conducted a bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5000 iterations to test
22 whether the salience of self-enhancement goals mediates the relationship between

1 economic inequality and approach intentions (see Figure 4).

2 *Approach intention for Eric.* A significant indirect effect of self-enhancement
3 goals was observed, $b_{indirect\ effect} = 1.05$, $SE = 0.34$, 95% CI [0.44, 1.82]. The direct
4 effect was not significant, $b_{direct\ effect} = -0.10$, $SE = 0.56$, 95% CI [-1.21, 1.01].

5 *Approach intention for Ethan.* We found a significant indirect effect of self-
6 enhancement goals, $b_{indirect\ effect} = 0.75$, $SE = 0.30$, 95% CI [0.22, 1.43]. The direct
7 effect was not significant, $b_{direct\ effect} = -0.50$, $SE = 0.57$, 95% CI [-1.62, 0.62].

8 *Forced choices.* A significant indirect effect of self-enhancement goals was
9 observed, $b_{indirect\ effect} = -0.83$, $SE = 0.39$, 95% CI [-1.63, -0.09]. The direct effect was
10 not significant, $b_{direct\ effect} = 1.23$, $SE = 0.79$, 95% CI [-0.33, 2.79].

11 Although the total effect of the manipulation on instrumentality orientation was
12 not significant in Experiment 3, the indirect effect of the motivation for self-
13 enhancement between inequality and instrumentality orientation was significant,
14 which is called a suppression effect (Kenny, 2003; MacKinnon & Fairchild, 2009).
15 First, as we predicted, we found that participants in the high inequality condition were
16 more likely to want to know someone more useful to them (Eric). Furthermore, self-
17 enhancement goals mediated the link between economic inequality and
18 instrumentality orientation. That is, individuals thought that it was more important to
19 obtain material resources and succeed in a highly unequal society and thus had a
20 greater tendency to approach instrumental targets. Interestingly, we also found that the
21 salience of self-enhancement goals incurred by inequality led participants to approach
22 individuals with seemingly no direct instrumentality (Ethan). Unlike Experiment 2,

1 which had a certain task requiring strong mathematics skills and logical thinking
2 ability, there was no clear task associated with work performance in the imaginary
3 stories of Experiment 3. We manipulated the instrumentality of social targets only
4 through occupation relevance. The manipulation did not eliminate Ethan's potential
5 instrumentality (participants' assessment of usefulness for Ethan was above the
6 average value 4). Participants felt that Ethan might be functional to them in some
7 cases in the future. Thus, the self-enhancement motive caused by high inequality
8 made people want to approach anyone who have potential instrumentality. However,
9 when only one person was available, since Eric was perceived as having more
10 instrumentality than Ethan, participants in the high inequality condition preferred to
11 form a relationship with Eric rather than Ethan than those in the low inequality
12 condition. In addition, the size of the mediating effect (see Ditlevsen et al., 2005) of
13 the self-enhancement motive between the manipulation and approach intentions
14 toward Eric was larger ($|ab/c'| = 10.43$) than that toward Ethan ($|ab/c'| = 1.52$).

15 Experiment 3 reverified our hypotheses that people in a high inequality context
16 attached more importance to self-enhancement goals, and then they were more willing
17 to approach instrumental targets. However, the results of Experiment 3 raised the
18 following question: do people in high inequality environments just want to be close to
19 instrumental targets or to anyone else? In Experient 4, we explicitly created a "totally"
20 useless target to investigate this question.

21

22 **Experiment 4**

1 In Experiment 4, we created an explicitly useless target to identify whether
2 economic inequality only led people to approach targets with potential instrumentality
3 rather than anyone. In addition, we manipulated social targets' instrumentality through
4 competence instead of work relevance.

6 **Method**

7 *Participants*

8 We recruited 284 U.K. citizens from Prolific in exchange for £0.7. Seventy-three
9 participants failing to answer the attention checks correctly were excluded from all
10 analyses. The final sample size was 211 (90 men, 118 women, and 3 'other'; $M_{age} =$
11 39.41, $SD = 13.85$). One hundred and four participants were assigned to the high
12 inequality condition, and 107 participants were assigned to the low inequality
13 condition. Using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), a sensitivity analysis found that the
14 minimum detectable effect was 0.19 (f) with a power of $1 - \beta = 0.80$ and $\alpha = 0.05$.

15 *Procedure and materials*

16 We manipulated economic inequality using the same paradigm as in Experiment
17 3. Then, participants answered the same manipulation checks and three items
18 assessing the salience of self-enhancement goals ($\alpha = 0.91$) as in Experiment 3.

19 Next, participants were told that one day, their neighbor came and invited them
20 to a social hour that she was organizing on the following Saturday. At the party, their
21 neighbor introduced two men to them: "*Those two men are Ethan and Eric. They are*
22 *from the same company as me. Ethan is very competent and has many contacts in his*

1 industry. I heard that his leader thinks highly of him. Nevertheless, Eric's job
 2 performance is relatively average. In last year's performance appraisal, Eric received
 3 poor feedback and was criticized by his leader." After reading the vignette,
 4 participants responded to the same dependent variables as in Experiment 3 ($\alpha_{Ethan} =$
 5 0.91, $\alpha_{Eric} = 0.92$, and $\alpha_{force\ choices} = 0.96$). Although we did not mention the
 6 occupations of participants, Ethan and Eric, it was not hard to see that Ethan had
 7 higher abilities and more connections than Eric, which makes him seem to possess
 8 higher potential instrumental value. Thus, the more participants wanted to establish a
 9 relationship with Ethan, the more they preferred instrumental relationships.
 10 Participants then rated the usefulness of Eric and Ethan (1 = Not at all, 7 =
 11 Extremely). Finally, participants completed demographic information.

12 **Attention checks.** Participants failing to answer the following items correctly
 13 were excluded in the all analyses. The items are as follows: "Which country has a
 14 higher level of economic inequality?" (1 = Country M, 2 = Country K) and "Which
 15 person's work performance is relatively average?" (1 = Eric, 2 = Ethan, 3 = Jeffrey).

16

17 **Results and Discussion**

18 *Manipulation check*

19 A paired samples *t* test revealed that participants perceived Country M to be
 20 more unequal ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 0.58$) than Country K ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(210) =$
 21 39.96, $p < .001$, $d = 2.55$. In addition, a paired samples *t* test showed that participants
 22 felt Ethan was more useful to them ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.23$) than Eric ($M = 3.01$, $SD =$

1 1.25), $t(210) = 15.66, p < .001$, 95% CI [3.53, 3.92], $d = 1.08$.

2 *The salience of self-enhancement goals*

3 An ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income, and SSC) found a
4 significant effect of economic inequality on goal pursuit, $F(1, 205) = 78.58, p < .001$,
5 95% CI [3.52, 5.53], $\eta_p^2 = 0.28$ (see Figure 5). Specifically, participants in the high
6 inequality condition ($M = 5.60, SD = 1.20$) had stronger motivation for self-
7 enhancement than those in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.26$).

8 *Instrumentality orientation*

9 We conducted an ANCOVA (control variables: gender, age, income, and SSC)
10 and found a significant effect of inequality on approach intentions for Ethan, $F(1,$
11 $205) = 8.15, p = .005$, 95% CI [0.43, 2.34], $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ (see Figure 5). Participants in
12 the high inequality condition were more likely to approach Ethan ($M = 4.96, SD =$
13 1.31) than those in the low inequality condition ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.05$). There was no
14 significant effect of the manipulation on approach intentions for Eric, $F(1, 205) =$
15 2.47 , 95% CI [-1.61, 0.18], $p = .118$. In addition, participants in the high inequality
16 condition tended to approach Ethan more than Eric ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.22$) than those
17 in the low inequality condition ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 205) = 3.92, p = .049$,
18 95% CI [-1.83, -0.004], $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$.

19 *Mediation models*

20 A bootstrap mediation analysis with 5000 iterations was conducted to examine
21 whether the salience of self-enhancement goals mediates the relationship between
22 economic inequality and approach intentions (see Figure 6).

1 *Approach intention for Ethan.* A significant indirect effect of self-enhancement
2 goals was observed ($b_{indirect\ effect} = 1.60$, $SE = 0.34$, 95% CI [1.00, 2.34]). The direct
3 effect was not significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = -0.22$, $SE = 0.53$, 95% CI [-1.26, 0.83]).

4 *Approach intention for Eric.* We neither found a significant relative indirect
5 effect of self-enhancement goals ($b_{indirect\ effect} = -0.25$, $SE = 0.31$, 95% CI [-0.90,
6 0.34]) nor a significant direct effect ($b_{direct\ effect} = -0.46$, $SE = .53$, 95% CI [-1.51,
7 0.59]).

8 *Forced choices.* A significant indirect effect of self-enhancement goals was
9 observed ($b_{indirect\ effect} = -1.55$, $SE = 0.34$, 95% CI [-2.28, -0.96]). The direct effect was
10 also not significant ($b_{direct\ effect} = 0.63$, $SE = 0.51$, 95% CI [-0.37, 1.63]).

11 Experiment 4 found that participants in the high inequality condition had
12 stronger intentions to approach a social target with potential instrumentality (i.e.,
13 Ethan) than those in the low inequality condition. Nevertheless, participants' approach
14 intentions toward a useless target (i.e., Eric) in the high inequality condition were not
15 significantly different from those in the low inequality condition. When only one of
16 them was available, participants in the high inequality condition preferred to approach
17 Ethan rather than Eric. Furthermore, the emphasis on self-enhancement goals
18 mediated the relationship between inequality and instrumentality orientation. The
19 findings of Experiment 4 not only reconfirmed our hypotheses but also revealed that
20 economic inequality did not make people approach useless targets.

21 22 **General Discussion**

1 It is a well-known viewpoint that economic inequality increases wealth disparity
2 between groups, which can lead to less interpersonal interaction and a larger social
3 distance (for a review, see Wilkinson & Pickett., 2017). Previous studies indeed found
4 that economic inequality is related to lower social trust, less political and civic
5 participation, and reduced membership in social organizations (e.g., Buttrick & Oishi,
6 2017; Costa & Kahn, 2003; Lancee & Van de Werfhorst., 2012). Furthermore,
7 participants in high inequality contexts exhibited greater social vigilance than those in
8 low inequality contexts (Cheng et al., 2021). However, relationships are usually
9 imperative in the process of achieving various goals (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002;
10 Brunstein et al., 1996). Thus, our findings extend prior research by introducing a
11 boundary condition to the effect of economic inequality on approach intentions
12 toward others. Specifically, we proposed that since economic inequality increases the
13 salience of self-enhancement goals, it heightens interpersonal attraction to those who
14 contribute to the goals.

15 We conducted four experiments with different methodological designs to
16 examine the hypotheses. Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that economic
17 inequality made people focus more on the instrumental aspects of a relationship.
18 Experiments 2-4 revealed that economic inequality enhanced people's approach
19 intentions toward social targets who are instrumental for self-enhancement goals.
20 Furthermore, Experiments 3-4 examined the mediating effect of the salience of self-
21 enhancement goals between economic inequality and instrumentality orientation.

22 ***Implications***

1 The current study expands and deepens our understanding of how economic
2 inequality shapes people's interpersonal relationships. Because high inequality
3 polarizes the amount of wealth of different individuals, it leads to greater status
4 concerns and competition, which undermine harmonious social relations. It is well-
5 documented that economic inequality is negatively associated with communal sharing
6 relationships (e.g., trust, civic participation; Kawachi et al., 1997; Lancee &
7 Werfhorst, 2012; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). However, economic inequality does not
8 always trigger people to ignore and withdraw from others. Our study found that the
9 instrumental perception of others to facilitate self-enhancement goals was a critical
10 factor that determines whether people affiliate with others. Specifically, people in
11 highly unequal contexts have a stronger tendency to focus on the instrumental aspects
12 of others and to approach others with potential value to achieving self-enhancement
13 goals. In sum, our study demonstrated that economic inequality reinforces
14 instrumental social relationships.

15 Our research has enriched the literature in the field of objectification. Although
16 our study did not fully examine the effect of economic inequality on all dimensions of
17 objectification, instrumentality was deemed a core feature of objectification
18 (Calogero, 2013; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Orehek & Weaverling, 2017). Most studies
19 on objectification have concentrated on the intrapersonal antecedents. For example,
20 power and the love of money increased people's tendency to objectify others
21 (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Wang & Krumhuber, 2017). In addition, men usually treat
22 women as objects to meet their sexual desires (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi

1 & Huang, 2008). In the current study, we found that economic inequality, as a
2 macrolevel environment factor, has a significant role in triggering instrumentality
3 orientation. The finding support that the role of external environmental characteristics
4 on objectification (see also Belmi & Schroeder, 2021).

5 The current study provides a novel way to understand why economic inequality
6 has detrimental influence on social capital. Because people perceive and build
7 interpersonal relationships in an objectifying way under highly unequal environments,
8 they are less willing to participate in the social activities that cannot bring material
9 returns, such as public communities and voluntary services. In addition, more people
10 acting as ‘objectifiers’ means more people experience objectification. A recent study
11 found that people suffering objectification feel less sense of control and then
12 increased aggression toward others (Poon et al., 2020).

13 ***Limitations and future directions***

14 Although the manipulation paradigms on economic inequality used in the current
15 study allowed us to effectively control irrelevant variables, they limited the ecological
16 validity of our results. Future studies should create alternative operationalizations
17 with better ecological validity to repeatedly examine the causal relationships.
18 Additionally, we manipulated the instrumentality of social targets only through skill
19 relevance (Experiments 2 and 3) and competence (Experiment 4). Future studies can
20 manipulate others’ instrumentality in different ways.

21 Future studies can explore other possible mechanisms between economic
22 inequality and instrumentality orientation. A previous study found that a society with

high inequality was perceived as having stronger norms of exchange relationships rather than communal relationships (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019b). Since the market pricing mindset emphasizing benefit-cost calculation in social relationships increased individuals' tendency to objectify others (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021), the effect of economic inequality on the preference for instrumental targets may be caused by the market-pricing mindset.

The current research was limited to the process of establishing relationships with colleagues and strangers. Hence, it is unclear whether economic inequality will affect the way in which individuals interact with close or intimate others. For example, in a more unequal society, whether people place more value on their partners' instrumentality in achieving their financial goals. Sexual strategies theory posits that when choosing a mate, women value men's social resources more, while men value women's appearance more (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Thus, we infer that in a society with high inequality, women may be more likely to choose men with more material resources. The prediction is line with the findings of a recent study which demonstrated income inequality increased women's status anxiety, and then fostered their intentions to wear revealing clothing (Blake & Brooks, 2019).

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1 **Figure 1.** Experiment 1: Objectification scale scores in different conditions.

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3 **Figure 2.** Experiment 2: Instrumentality orientation in different conditions.

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5 **Figure 3.** Experiment 3: The wealth-seeking goal and instrumentality orientation in different conditions.

Figure 4. Experiment 3: Mediation models. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Figure 5. Experiment 4: The wealth-seeking goal and instrumentality orientation in different conditions.

Figure 6. Experiment 4: Mediation models. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.